

She Married Her Choice

by averygoodun

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

I

Chapter 1 of 28

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A warning here for all who enter: this is a tale not yet complete. You have been warned.

To recap:

Five days prior, Hermione found out that an insane bill was about to become law: a law that would force her to marry a pureblood and bear him two children, stripping her powers until she had accomplished that feat. Needless to say, she was not pleased.

Dumbledore had a plan, though. He encouraged her to get married before the bill became law, as the law would only apply to single witches and wizards. She, of course, jumped at the opportunity.

Unfortunately, Ron had died just after the victory battle, leaving her loveless and alone. Not to be deterred, she interviewed about a dozen men, but only two passed her charmed test. She wasn't displeased that Remus was one of the two, but she was downright disturbed that Snape was the other one. She didn't worry about Snape's results too much, though, as he had only taken the test out of curiosity. The idea of him wanting to marry her was laughable, after all.

As the days went by, she learned that marrying Remus might be a really bad idea, but she felt as though she didn't have any other options. She wasn't willing to consider Snape because he, first of all, hadn't declared himself a suitor, but he was also mean, ugly and a horrible teacher. Then, on Friday, the night of the full moon, he lost control and slammed her against the wall after a heated exchange of another sort altogether. Both encounters with him scared her very much, though for very different reasons.

By Saturday night, Snape had apologized twice, ingratiated himself to her parents, declared he had feelings for her, and said he wanted a chance. Her mind boggled at the prospect, and she wondered if Hell had frozen over. She couldn't help thawing toward him slightly, but she was still scared.

By Sunday morning, she realized she should have given Snape a fair chance, but when she went to tell him that, she couldn't find him. So she walked down the aisle to marry Remus, regretting her choice, but following through because being married to Remus would be better than Lucius Malfoy any day. That's what she kept telling herself, anyway.

Then, just as Dumbledore was about to proceed with the ceremony after reciting the banns to a silent hall, the doors burst open, and Snape strode down the aisle, calling out his objection. A few slight miscommunications later and Hermione was standing next to Snape, happy that she had been given a reprieve after all.

She had no idea what she was getting herself into.

Chapter 1:

Hermione entered her new quarters with a sense of escape; it wasn't everyday Snape's room could be considered a refuge, but that day definitely qualified. She and Severus looked at each other for a long moment before both of them heaved a sigh of relief.

"I take it you enjoyed the reception as much as I did?" Snape asked, before sitting down with a sigh.

Hermione snorted in response. "At least you were able to hide away at the staff table. I had the glorious task of doing the rounds and explaining, five million times, that no, I was not pregnant with your illicit love-child, and that no, my grades were not a reflection of my fu-- of my sexual status!" She let out a frustrated huff and sat down across from Snape with another sigh.

"Don't exaggerate," he rebuked mildly.

"Okay, maybe it was only one million times," she said, slightly exasperated. "You could have helped out, you know."

"More than rescuing you from the clutches of a pledged werewolf, you mean?" he said with a smirk.

She glared back "If you had simply stood by my side more than half the students would have thought twice before accosting me with their stupid questions and accusations. And none of them would have dared to ask twice."

Snape's smirk grew a bit broader which served to make Hermione grind her teeth in frustration. "Is this how it's going to be? Are you going to leave me to helplessly fight both our battles while you sit back and say, 'Well, I saved you from the werewolf; what more do you expect?'"

"Of course not. After all, you're hardly helpless," he replied. At her huff of indignation, Snape's smirk grew into a smile, and he chuckled lightly. Hermione looked at her husband and wondered yet again what she had gotten herself in for.

"Why did I marry you, again?" she asked, only half joking.

He smirked yet again and said, "Because you have exquisite taste, my dear."

She chuckled despite herself. They sat there looking at each other for a few moments before Hermione realized, in a way she hadn't before, that she was married to the man before her. Snape. Severus. She and Severus would be sharing their life together. She and Snape would be sharing a *bed* together. She shivered involuntarily.

"Are you cold?" Snape asked, noticing her shiver.

She shook her head, then turned to stare into the empty fireplace. Without even thinking about it, she started rubbing her arms and sat there thinking about the situation she had gotten herself into. She didn't notice when Snape got up from his spot until she felt a blanket being wrapped around her shoulders.

"I would prefer you not lie to me, Hermione," he said. Looking up, she found herself confronted with Snape who was looking decidedly tender as he tucked the blanket around her, then gently pulled her hair out from underneath the edge.

She smiled up at him. "I wasn't lying, Severus. I didn't realize I was cold until you gave me this," she said, clutching the blanket gratefully.

He inclined his head in acceptance, then moved to sit down again. Hermione watched him, wondering what it was going to be like to live with him for the rest of her life. She wondered if she was brave enough to go through with the marriage. It wasn't final until they consummated it, so she still had time to back out if she wished. She made up her mind on the matter before he reached his seat.

Standing abruptly, she moved toward him with a plan. "Severus, I think I would like to change into something a little less..." She gestured at her skirt when adjectives failed her.

"Frothy?" he suggested with a raised eyebrow. She nodded.

"My," he stopped, suddenly looking uncomfortable. "Our bedroom is through that door. I imagine the house-elves have transferred your clothing here already."

She nodded again and feigned to move toward the bedroom, stopping halfway, and then turned around hesitantly. "Um, I think, er, would you undo me please?" she asked, turning to reveal her back lined with small, round buttons. She hadn't intended to blush, but found herself doing so as she looked over her shoulder and caught Snape staring at her form with a mixture of desire and consternation.

Swallowing, he nodded curtly and strode forward, stepping up to her back. She felt the heat radiating off him as he began to undo the buttons slowly and wondered if it was an accident the way his fingers seemed to quickly caress the newly revealed skin as they moved on to the next button. Whether by accident or design, she found herself shivering and hoping he would touch her a little more with each button.

Halfway down, she felt his lips on her spine and almost jumped, but she quickly relaxed into the tiny kisses he was trailing down her back. She nearly moaned when he reached the last button and moved his hands around her waist, holding her still as he placed one last, lingering kiss upon the small of her back, and did let a small groan escape when he removed his hands and backed away, leaving her very aware of the cool dungeon air.

Turning around slowly, she found him staring down at her inscrutably. She stepped toward him and bit down a grin as his cool demeanor was belied by a hitch in his breath.

She looked up at him and wondered if he was going to make any move. She didn't know how much longer her courage was going to last; he was wearing his mask again, and she couldn't read him.

She stood there, a foot away, looking at Severus. She took in all of his features, which were starkly revealed with his new hair cut. Even though she couldn't ever imagine thinking of him as handsome, there was an appeal to his face. She thought it was his eyes: those dark, dangerous, glittering eyes.

Her courage suddenly failed, and she backed up half a step.

"Thank you," she said and turned to go. Before she started her pivot, she suddenly found herself pulled against him.

"I know what you're trying to do, Hermione," he growled right before he captured her mouth in a blistering kiss.

She was overwhelmed by the force of his passion, but she reminded herself he was her husband. She reached out blindly for his chest, wanting to feel him, but just as her hands had reached the curve of his ribcage, his arms shot out and wrapped around her possessively, drawing her closer until there was no room left between them. She found her arms wrapping themselves around his waist, trying to pull him closer as his hands ran up and down her back, forcefully claiming all her exposed flesh as his, while he kissed her with something akin to desperation.

After an eternity he broke away, panting for breath, but he didn't let her go. "Oh, Hermione," he breathed, kissing her ear as he rested his head next to hers. She instinctively squeezed him in comfort and felt his embrace tighten as well. Confused, she buried her face in his robes, trying to hide her bewilderment at his behavior: cold and sneering one second, and the next, he's kissing her as if his life depended on it. She was actually a little bothered by his desperation, but she didn't want to hurt him by retreating. Instead she just held onto him as he clung to her.

They stood there for a minute before he relaxed his grip and backed away, his face blank once more. "Did I hurt you?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

She shook her head and smiled, unsure of her voice.

"I imagine you are developing quite a chill, exposed as you are. I suggest you find something more appropriate to wear," he continued coolly, turning away from her with effort. She watched as he looked about for a diversion, but before he could make up his mind, she closed the distance between them and took his hand in hers. When he visibly started at her touch, she bit back another grin.

"I think we should both find more appropriate attire, Severus." She tugged on his hand as she moved toward the bedroom, but he didn't move. He was looking awkward again.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable changing on your own?" he asked.

She considered her response carefully, taking his request for honesty to heart. "I might be more comfortable in the short term, but I imagine that after a couple of years, it will be more awkward and embarrassing if I still need to change in private." She shrugged. "No sense delaying the inevitable."

He looked at her again, and this time she could tell he was uncomfortable. *Is he nervous?* she thought, bemused. She didn't know how to reassure him, or even bring about the subject, so she just tugged again, and drew him into the bedroom with her.

As she looked around his bedroom she was impressed by how normal it was. No chains hanging from the walls or ceiling, no trapezes, or any other signs of weird tastes. If anything, it reminded her of her parents bedroom with the nice, sedate furniture and plain bare walls. As she spun around for the full view, she caught Snape looking at her, amused.

"Does everything meet your expectations?" he said, barely containing a smirk.

"Hardly, but it'll do," she answered dryly. Unfazed, he nodded and came toward her. Her heart sped up a little, and she realized *she* was nervous. She stood still and focused on maintaining even breaths as Snape approached her -- then walked on by.

"Hey, where are you going?" she cried, a little put out.

He looked at her as if she was mentally deficient. "To fetch my clothes. That is why you dragged me in here, was it not?"

She closed her eyes in frustration and counted to ten before opening them. Snape was looking amused again.

"Are you going to play dumb for the entire evening?" she said, barely controlling her voice.

"I have no idea what you mean," he said as he turned toward the wardrobe.

"You do too, you... you... you insufferable man!"

He remained facing the wardrobe, digging through the shelves for something. "You are under the misapprehension that I am a know-it-all, Madam. I believe it is you who holds that title."

Hermione stared at her husband's back, trying to remain calm, and failing miserably. "Ooh!" she huffed, unable to articulate further.

He turned around at the exclamation and tried to look innocent, but his lips were betraying him by twitching violently. If anything, that made Hermione even angrier.

"Didn't I tell you how much your stupid games piss me off?" she said as she reached down to tear her shoes off, sorely tempted to throw them at him, hurtling them into the corner instead.

"I believe you said that you found it disrespectful, but that was only when you were contemplating a rash and idiotic course of action. I'm sorry. I meant to say, *noble and brave* self-sacrifice," he said blandly as he undid his robes.

"And you didn't manage to infer from that statement that it annoys the hell out of me?" she yelled, trying to raise her hands up, but finding the loose bodice and dangling sleeves constricting her movements. In a fit of pique, she pulled her sleeves off harshly, not caring if she damaged the fabric, and shoved the skirt down forcefully when it decided to stand on its own around her waist. "I thought you were a master at subtlety, deception and... and all that is Slytherin!" she continued.

"Who's impugning a rival House now?" Snape mocked as he finished undoing his frock coat and tossed it casually over a chair in the corner. "And how do you expect me to infer anything when you are so straightforward and *honest* about everything?" he said calmly, beginning to unbutton his shirt.

She looked daggers at him and stomped out of her skirt. "Well, now that I know what you expect of me, I suppose I'll have to lose any subtlety I possess, for heaven forbid I confuse you by saying anything complex," she huffed.

He snorted. "Thank you for the thought, my dear, but you needn't go to the effort. Now that I know there might be a hidden meaning in anything you say, I shall keep my ear attuned to the possible by-plays. I *am* capable of change, after all."

She looked at the crumpled dress on the floor, avoiding her husband's mocking gaze. Deciding the dress deserved a little more respect than she had shown it so far, she picked up it and dusted it off gently, her anger gradually ebbing as her newfound humor returned.

She snorted as she processed what he'd said as she laid the dress down over another chair, and shook her head, grinning. "It's no trouble. I'm s--" she stopped when she turned around and found Snape standing before her in nothing but a pair of black slippers.

"Nice slippers," she said, trying to suppress her urge to laugh. She had a feeling Severus wouldn't like that.

He looked down at his feet and wiggled his toes. "Thank you. They were a Christmas present from Albus a couple of years ago. Of course, originally they were purple with gold stars..."

She couldn't help the snicker that escaped, but quickly covered her mouth to muffle it. Snape smirked impishly and raised an eyebrow, then stepped toward her, stopping within arm's reach.

"Now what games of mine were you upset about?"

She tried to frown, but her smile peeked through. "You are an insufferable man."

He moved forward by half a step. "And you are a beautiful woman." She blushed and looked away from his sincere eyes, turning her attention to the next nearest thing, which happened to be his body.

Hermione kept her face impassive as she looked over Severus' naked form. When her gaze reached his groin, however, her brow furrowed in consternation.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing.

His lips twitched up in amusement, but he answered seriously. "That is a penis, my dear."

Hermione sighed in exasperation and rolled her eyes. "I know what that is, thank you very much. I was wondering what *this* is," she said, as she stepped toward him and pointed at a small red spot just below his hairline.

He looked down at where she was pointing and furrowed his brow to match hers.

"I'm not sure. I expect it's nothing."

Hermione looked up at him with impatience in her eyes. "Well, even if it is nothing, I would prefer it get checked out before you, we, well, you know," she said awkwardly.

For a moment, Snape looked at Hermione blankly before his expression cleared with comprehension. Then he just looked offended.

"I can assure you I do not have any... any social diseases."

Hermione choked slightly before bursting into a bout of giggles. She looked up at Snape and immediately tried to quell the laughter, as he looked more angry than offended by her reaction.

"I'm sorry, Severus, it's just such an old fashioned term..." She tried very hard not to giggle again, but failed, falling back onto the bed laughing. It was only when she felt the bed dip beside her and looked over at Severus that her urge to laugh died. He looked heartbroken.

"I really am sorry, Severus. I didn't mean to offend you."

"Maybe this isn't a good idea," he said slowly.

"What do you mean?"

"It's obvious that we're not suited for each other, and I think maybe we should try to find you someone closer to your own age."

Hermione looked at him, shocked for a moment, before becoming offended herself.

"If this is only about age, Severus, I can assure you my childish tendencies won't last forever. I will grow up, and in the meantime, I will try my hardest not to embarrass you in public."

When she saw him close his eyes, her anger softened into a mild peeved state. "Severus, please look at me." He opened his eyes and turned to face her.

"Severus, I can't honestly say I love you, but then, I've only just stopped thinking of you as my cruel teacher. Give me a bit of time, and I am sure we'll be able to overcome any differences that arise, but that's only if you help me out."

Severus looked at her, his face blank once again. "We are not suited for each other."

"I don't think Ron and I were particularly well suited either, but we loved each other and tried our hardest to overcome any problems."

"I am an old man, Hermione," Severus started, but Hermione snorted at the statement.

"You are not old, Severus. You aren't even middle aged."

"Chronologically I may still be fairly young, but in experience, I believe I may be older than Minerva."

"Okay, so instead of being shiny and new, you're my knight in rusty armor," she quipped.

He looked at her for a moment, then laughed for the second time in her presence. She watched him, smiling, until he caught his breath and looked back at her. Her smile faded slightly into nervousness as she recognized the passion in his eyes.

Standing up abruptly, she walked away from the bed before facing him. His mask was back in place as he stared at her blankly.

"Severus, I think you should get that spot checked out before we start anything."

He looked down at the offending spot, and back at her, exasperation plain to see.

"As I said before, I can assure you I am not going to give you any hideous disease."

"I know, but I would really, really like to be sure."

"And even if I did, there are potions for most of them."

"You aren't exactly making the best case for yourself. Go see Poppy. If it's nothing contagious, then I promise not to bring it up again."

He looked at her for a moment more. She was fairly nervous, not knowing what he was thinking behind that cool exterior, but she was determined not to back down. She didn't know she was holding her breath until she let it out with a sigh as he nodded, summoning his robes from the chair.

"Will you take my word for it, or will Poppy need to tell you herself?" he asked, a note of resentment in his voice.

"I... I trust you to tell me the truth."

He looked at her again with his penetrating stare, then quirked his lips up slightly. "Then I will be back shortly, my dear. Please do wait up."

She laughed nervously, but felt a slight warmth toward her husband as he kissed her cheek lightly and headed for the sitting room and the Floo.

She looked around her new room and decided she might as well make herself comfortable. Putting on a nightshirt, she climbed into bed, covering herself with the cushy duvet and sighing as she felt a bit of warmth return to her limbs.

Fifteen minutes later, she heard the flames change as Severus came through. She started sitting up, but the shock of cool air made her burrow back under the covers. She lowered the sheets enough to see over the mounds of fabric just as Severus came in with a distinctly peeved look on his face.

He looked around, then caught sight of the mound in the bed. His face softened minutely before the scowl came back.

"As it turns out, I do have a communicable disease," he bit out, not moving any closer.

"Oh, no! What do you have?"

"Chicken pox."

Hermione threw back the covers and sat up, ignoring the chill, and looked at Severus incredulously. "Chicken pox?"

"That's what I said," he replied testily, still not moving closer.

"Well, isn't there a potion or a spell to cure it?"

"Unfortunately, no. There's a potion that accelerates the process, but no outright cure."

"Have you taken the potion?" she asked, and he answered by holding up a small bottle that was full of a putrid yellow fluid. Wrinkling her nose in distaste, she said, "Well, you might as well come over here and take it, then."

"I suggest you go back to your dormitory. I wouldn't want to renege on my promise, now would I?" Realizing he was staying away for her benefit, she felt another tendril of affection for her husband.

Smiling, she answered, "Oh, don't worry about giving it to me. I've already had it, and you can only get it once."

His face grew dark for a moment, then he strode forward and sat down beside her with bad grace. "You could have told me that at the beginning of the conversation."

She giggled and scooted over on the bed, making room for him. "I'm sorry. It didn't occur to me." She looked at the bottle in his hand and frowned in thought.

"How fast does the potion work?"

"I'll be free of pock marks 24 hours after I ingest this," he said, a sneer curling his lip. She wondered if he usually avoided potions and internally sniggered at the irony.

"You said it accelerates the process. Does that mean that as soon as you take the potion you'll start blooming?"

His look at the word 'blooming' had her biting back more giggles. "Yes, I will start... *blooming*, as you put it, almost immediately."

"Well, then, might I suggest you take the potion afterwards?"

"After what, Madam?" he asked wearily, as he bent down to remove his slippers.

She fidgeted, embarrassed. "Er, after we, you know, consummate the marriage."

He looked at her sharply, and she could swear he was taken aback by her statement.

"Are you sure you wish to be married to me?" he asked. "Once we consummate the marriage, we *will* be married for life."

"I was the one who asked you to marry me, if I recall correctly."

"Yes, well, as I told you at the time, it isn't proper etiquette, so your proposal wasn't valid."

"Do you really believe that chauvinistic nonsense?"

"It is not nonsense, nor is it chauvinistic! A man should be the pursuer, not the other way around. For the entirety of the chase, the man should follow the cues given by the woman, and the chase only ends when the proposal is accepted, thereby giving the woman all the power in the courtship."

"Power which dissolves when the marriage takes place, and we are relegated to the role of subservient mistress for the rest of our lives?"

"Nonsense. You'll always have complete control over household matters."

Hermione's mouth dropped open as she stared at the stranger before her. She couldn't believe she had married a man so backwards as to believe all that Regency crap. She could feel her face grow red as she outlined her argument in her head -- then she noticed the glint in his eye and the slight twitch of his lips.

"You bastard! You're purposely winding me up! Why the hell do you insist on making me so crazy?" she yelled.

"Because you're absolutely magnificent when you're angry," he said as he leaned in to capture her lips.

She was tempted to push him away, but then he tenderly skimmed his hand across her shoulder and up her neck and felt him trace a line along her face. She melted just a little more at his show of tender affection; she couldn't help but feel loved, but she also couldn't dismiss his words.

Putting her hands on his chest, she gently pushed him away and looked him in the eye. "You don't believe that nonsense, do you? All that about women?"

Smirking, he looked at her and said, "If I did, I highly doubt I would want you as my bride," then chuckled with self-satisfaction before resuming where he had left off.

Before she could object, his mouth took her words away, and his hands smoothed out any wrinkles of discontent. She closed her eyes and felt him against her, his hands caressing her gently through the nightshirt.

Just as she was becoming hot and bothered, he pulled away.

She pouted slightly until he quickly disrobed, then reached forward for her nightshirt, sliding the fabric up her torso with exquisite attention to detail. His fingers were wrapped around her back, touching her so lightly it almost tickled, while his thumbs, those delightful thumbs, circled their way up her torso.

He slipped the nightshirt off her, then continued his physical examination; his fingers delicately traced her curves as she relaxed onto the bed. When he started fiddling with her breasts, however, she inwardly groaned, preparing herself for half an hour of monotony.

The silent groan became a moan as he began manipulating her breasts, turning her skin into a sensitive ball of fluff. He brushed it just enough to set her nerves on high alert, sending out an urgent message to her center. Luckily, her center issued the proper countersigns, and communication was established.

His fingers circled her nipples; she felt her center expand as it was engulfed in blissful fire. She could feel it spreading, out of control, throughout her entire body. The blaze reached her nipples just as he took one in his mouth, his gentle suckling fanning the fire, which was quickly consuming her breasts.

He drew his mouth back, pulling her with him. Buoyed by the fires within, her chest rose off the bed, keeping her nipple safe within his care.

He slid his knee up the inside of her legs, the pressure of his thigh sending sparks flying. She moaned as his hand moved down across her belly, accentuating the heat building within her.

When his long fingers slid between her labia, she gasped at the intensity of the heat. His fascinating fingers danced gracefully around her opening before sliding back up to capture her sweet spot with relish. It wasn't long before she wanted more from him... More of him.

"I want some part of you in me!" she gasped.

Oh?" he replied coolly. "Maybe my knee?"

"Too big," she breathed, too occupied to be annoyed

"How about my fingers?" he said and promptly stopped rubbing that sensitive spot to delve within her. She started coming down, and he noticed with a smirk. "Hmm. Fingers fit, but they don't seem to feel as good there, do they? You sure you don't want me to feel you like this?" he asked innocently, as his fingers came out to rub her nub again. "Are you sure you don't want this?"

"Yes!" she gasped, as the intensity returned, but the burning was getting too intense again. She needed release. "I want this, but I need you in me!"

He continued rubbing her, bringing her closer and closer to her peak. If her eyes had been open she would have seen him smirking at her. "Well, my knee's too big, and my fingers are occupied... What else is there?"

"Use your imagination!" she cried, the intensity almost too much to bear.

"I don't think that would feel like much," he replied.

She momentarily opened her eyes enough to glare at him, but she couldn't stop a chuckle from escaping. His smirk grew wider, and she lost control. Somewhere, amidst the laughter, she could feel his hands on her, still rubbing her the right way, keeping her near the edge of oblivion. Soon her chuckles became gasps as she felt the power rise once again.

No longer laughing, she opened her eyes to look at her new husband, the virtual stranger who was conjuring passion she had only glimpsed before. Her gaze drifted over him, drinking in his form. Her progress stalled as she came to his eyes and saw every emotion laid bare. She was expecting the lust and was unsurprised by the tenderness, but when she caught a hint of fear lurking beneath, something in her heart moved toward him. She smiled gently and held out her hand, beckoning him to come closer.

He tore his gaze from hers to look at her hand. Slowly, tentatively, he reached out with his free hand and grasped hers, lowering himself to kiss her hand possessively.

She watched, completely fascinated. He held her hand to his mouth, closing his eyes tightly as he turned her hand over to kiss her palm. She could feel his mouth moving against her skin as if he were talking, but no sound escaped his lips. She was aware that he had stopped touching her, but she didn't care. She held her breath as he made love to her hand, finding herself moved by the almost painful intimacy.

His eyes remained shut as he moved her hand to his cheek and held it there, enveloped within his hand. After a breathless moment, he opened his eyes to her, baring his soul. She felt her chest constrict as he looked at her as if she was his sole reason for existence. She swallowed thickly, amazed at how much a single look could affect her.

Entranced, she watched as he lowered his gaze to her lips and then back to her hand, which he kissed gently once more. He then reconnected with her eyes and slowly guided her hand from his cheek down his neck to his shoulders, demanding her full attention.

He released her hand when she broke eye contact with him, wanting to see, as well as feel, what she was touching. She sat up to look at his skin, at all the little fissures and bumps he had collected with age and ill-use. One long, almost invisible scar ran from his left collar bone down to his last rib, almost bisecting his torso.

She looked up at him questioningly and found his mask in place once again. Deciding not to pry, she looked back down as her hand slid across his belly, and over to his thigh.

"You have wonderful legs," she whispered, suddenly aware of how quiet it was in the room. She caressed his thigh as she spoke.

"Thank you," he responded quietly, placing his hand over hers gently.

Startled by his words, as much as by his gesture, she looked up at him. He was watching her carefully, and although there was tenderness in his gaze, he seemed wary as well.

"Don't worry. I'll be gentle." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop herself. She froze, waiting for his response.

To her relief, he chuckled and leaned in for a tender kiss upon her cheek, then moved to whisper huskily in her ear, "And if I want it rough?" He retreated just enough to see her face, smirking all the while.

"Then you'll have to remove the Disillusionment Charm on the manacles lining the walls."

She smiled as he threw back his head and laughed that deep, wonderful, clear laugh of his. She moved forward just slightly so that when he brought his head forward again, she was inches from his lips, intending to pounce.

She didn't get the chance.

Moving forward with the speed of a snake, he kissed her so hard she lost her balance and fell back onto the sheets. Following her lips as if he were a magnet, he continued kissing her, his lips never leaving hers even as he repositioned himself over her.

She relished the feel of his body on top of hers, pinning her to the bed in that delightful way. She also remembered why she had been nervous, as his intensity was overwhelming her, taking over her senses and filling them with his need, his desire, his love.

She felt the love this time round. She couldn't miss it. It was obvious in the way he stroked her head gently, though he was ravaging her mouth almost violently. It was obvious in the way he held himself up just slightly, so as not to crush her too much. It was obvious in the way he was doing this for her. All of this.

She melted into his kisses, encouraging him by running her hands through his hair, along his shoulders, down his back. Her hands always seemed to end up in his hair, though. His short, oily hair, which was only barely covering the nape of his skinny neck.

Panting, he broke the kiss and rested his forehead on hers. "Oh, Hermione," he said, his voice almost breaking with emotion. She smiled up at him, trying not to think of Ron using the same words with the same intonation. Her throat constricted, and she closed her eyes against the tears. She tried to hold her smile in place, but the damage was done.

"What's wrong?" he asked, withdrawing from her.

She shook her head and turned away from him, trying to keep from crying. She could feel Snape's eyes on her and felt so exposed and vulnerable. Suddenly his weight was gone, leaving her feeling even more alone. She knew there was no stopping the tears as she turned onto her side and curled up slightly.

"I'm so-sorry," she sobbed, still keeping her eyes screwed firmly shut. She didn't think she could stand to see his contempt at that moment.

The next thing she knew she was being scooped up into his arms and deposited on his lap as he cradled her awkwardly.

"I'm sorry, too," he said, squeezing her against him slightly. He sounded so uncomfortable and pained, which only made her cry harder.

"It's, it's n-not your fault, Sev-Severus," she bawled into his shoulder.

"No, but I hate to see you feel this way."

She heaved another sob and looked up at him with red rimmed eyes, sniffing. He looked so sad, so beaten, that she only barely managed to subdue another outburst, converting it into a hiccup.

"Will the pain ever go away?" she croaked, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. She noticed him wince slightly and flushed in embarrassment.

"It fades in time. The unfortunate irony is *that* hurts almost as much."

She smiled weakly and nodded her head, still sniffing. He reached around her and procured a handkerchief from sight unseen. She accepted the cloth gratefully and wiped her eyes before blowing her nose noisily.

She stared morosely at the used handkerchief, avoiding Severus' eyes. "I'm so sorry."

"I do have other handkerchiefs, Hermione. And if all else fails, I can get this one laundered. It's not the end of the world."

She smiled weakly, but she still didn't dare look up.

"It's not fair! Everything was going so well! You were being so... You felt so good, and then I have to go screw everything up by crying, *yet again!*"

"Well, truth be told, I'd far rather you be crying before my performance than after or, God forbid, during."

She laughed with a little more feeling and looked up at him, sniffing. "I imagine I look a fright now."

He smiled gently and brushed a stray hair from her face. "Earlier today, I almost smiled because it was obvious you had been crying."

"Your empathy knows no bounds."

"I almost smiled because your red, puffy eyes were the most beautiful sight to me. It meant you had come to your senses and didn't want to marry Lupin after all. It meant you might be willing to accept me."

She smiled sadly at him, thinking of the past week. "I'm sorry."

"Mm," he replied and kissed her softly on the brow.

She shifted around on his lap and snuggled into his chest a little more, managing to elbow him only once in the process. After they had settled into a mutually comfortable position, she leaned her head on his shoulder, suddenly drowsy. "Why are you being so nice to me?" she asked mindlessly.

"Would you prefer I tell you to stop your sniveling and I dump you on the floor? I can accommodate you if that's what you wish."

"No, you arse. I like this, but at the same time, you don't seem... yourself. I never feel like I should trust you when you're being nice or charming or sensitive."

Snape snorted. "Madam! Kindly refrain from using that last word in any description of me ever again!" he said quite sharply. She looked up in question just in time to see him mask a hurt look.

She shook her head, tears filling her eyes again. "I'm sorry. It seems I can't do anything right these days. I didn't mean to hurt you, and I'm sorry I was so thoughtless."

He closed his eyes with a pained expression.

"Enough with the apologies! They are growing wearisome. And if you are about to embark on a bout of self-pity, then I probably *will* tell you to stop whinging as I shove you to the floor."

"I'll stop then," she said hastily. "I'm much too comfortable here to be so rudely interrupted." She snuggled further into his arms as proof.

He let out a sigh she couldn't interpret. "As comfortable as this is for you, my arm is going numb, and you are getting cold. I suggest we move somewhere warmer."

Hermione pouted slightly, but managed to extricate herself from Snape's lap in a timely manner. He didn't bother getting up, lifting the covers to scoot down under them. She wondered how he managed to do that gracefully.

He held the covers back for her, and she got in beside him. As soon as the duvet covered her, she realized how cold she had become and scooted up to him for warmth.

"Damn, girl!" he cried as he lurched away from her. "You really must warn a person before placing your icy feet of Death upon them!"

"S- Well, I would apologize, but you told me to quit that, so I won't," she said, trying to suppress a giggle. He grunted something that sounded suspiciously like "ungrateful wench" as he returned to his place next to her, curling himself around her, though carefully avoiding her feet. She snuggled up to him a little more, wondering how they managed to fit together so well. She sighed contentedly when he wrapped his arm around her, pulling her even closer.

"You feel good," she murmured sleepily.

"As do you," he replied, adding, "except for your feet, of course. They're simply dangerous."

She giggled slightly and snuggled closer, pressing her bum up to him, wondering why she was surprised to find him hard. Suddenly very awake, and very curious, she was overcome with an adventurous urge to tease him. She knew it was a dangerous activity, but she felt reckless.

She wiggled her bum around on him, as if trying to get comfortable. "Well, you did feel good, but there's something in the way here," she said with an extra push for emphasis. She could feel him pulling away, so she reached behind her and grabbed him, making him gasp.

"Sorry, are my hands cold?" she asked innocently, looking over her shoulder to grin at him.

"Nothing I can't withstand," he said, gritting his teeth.

"So glad to hear it," she said as she rubbed him slightly, making him gasp again. When she heard him rumble just slightly, she smirked to herself and said, "Now where to put this offending appendage so it isn't in the way?"

"I can think of two highly rated places, myself," he growled in her ear.

"Oh?" she said as she turned onto her back to look at him. He propped himself up on an elbow and loomed over her, smirking.

"Yes, although you've just covered one of the holes up."

She faked a grimace. "I didn't realize there were holes in the mattress. Maybe you should consider getting a new one."

He moved over her, still smirking. "I'll take that suggestion under consideration, but for now, maybe it would be best to properly stow away my offending appendage in the available slot?"

"Mm. That might be a good idea," she said as he slowly lowered himself onto her in a brilliant show of upper body strength. She met his lips before he finished his descent and quickly found herself melting into him once more.

His body pressed against hers as he pulled away from her lips and looked at her. He took his right hand and brushed another stray hair from her face, tracing the edge of her jaw and her neck, creating goosebumps down her arms and legs.

Before she could even moan her pleasure, though, there was an urgent knock on the door.

"Oh, for *fuck's sake!*" Snape and Hermione exclaimed in unison, turning to glare at the door.

"Ignore it," Snape said, turning his attention back to his bride. She nodded, and they unconsciously held their breath waiting for the idiot to knock again.

They didn't have to wait long. A few seconds and another round of knocks later, a tentative voice called out, "Professor?" It was a voice they both recognized and had absolutely no desire to hear at that moment.

Before Snape could even groan, Hermione had found her wand, used the Sonorus Charm on herself and started yelling. "Draco Malfoy, if you don't bugger off in the next five seconds, I promise Madam Pomfrey will NOT be able to put you back together again after I'm through with you!"

Ending the charm, she turned back to her husband only to find him smirking at her yet again.

"What?" she snapped, still royally pissed off at the interruption.

"I knew there was a reason I wanted you in the first place," he said and then claimed her mouth in a passionate kiss she gladly returned.

His touch was less tender than scorching as his hand snaked down her body. He paused to circle her breast playfully before moving on down her side and insinuating his fingers between the two of them. She gasped into his mouth as one finger submerged into her folds and curled back up, sending sparks through her nerves, rekindling the fire he'd been stoking the entire afternoon.

When he repeated the motion, only slower, she hummed into his mouth. Arching her back, she pressed her breasts into his wiry chest, noting absently how stimulating his hair felt against her aroused nipples.

His lips left hers and moved down her jaw to the tender spot below her ear. She moaned her pleasure once more, barely aware of his body sliding down hers, until he moved up again, and she felt him at her entrance.

"My wife," he whispered into her ear, then pushed into her. Her breath escaped in a gush.

He stilled for a moment; she felt his eyes on her face. She looked up at her husband, the man who was filling her body, and smiled. She wasn't sure he was the best person for her, but his eyes shone for her alone, and that moved her as much as his grand gesture had.

"Severus," she whispered back. He closed his eyes, and she felt a shiver run through him before he started moving.

He started slow, sliding in and out gently with a far away look on his face. She watched him, musing how different he looked as he made love to her.

Make love. That's what he was doing. This wasn't just sex for him. This wasn't just a contractual obligation to finalize their marriage. He was expressing his feelings as he thrust into her slowly.

She closed her own eyes and felt his body melding with hers. She moved into his tentative rocking, wanting more, and he groaned as he took the hint, thrusting into her more forcefully. Slowly, and a bit awkwardly, they found a rhythm that suited them both.

She kept her eyes closed, wanting to relish the feeling of him filling her, again and again. She forced her mind to let go of all thoughts and focus on him and her becoming one.

Suddenly, he stopped.

A little worried that something was wrong, but mostly angry that he had stopped at all, she looked up at him. He gazed down at her from above, and smirked.

"As much as I am enjoying this, I want to kiss you."

"Can't you do both?" she asked, wincing at how close she was to whinging.

"Yes, but in this position, if I kiss you continuously, I will end up with a neck cramp from hell, so may I suggest a new posture?" he said, still smirking.

She wasn't sure she liked his smirk from this angle. For a brief moment, she thought that maybe he did have manacles lining the wall and wanted to introduce her to the joys of sadomasochism. Her expression must have belied her thought, for he chuckled, got up, and sat back, leaning against the headboard.

Feeling the cold air hitting her moist flesh, she shivered and brought the blankets around her. She looked accusingly at him when he held out his hand, beckoning her to join him.

"Do you not feel the cold at all?"

He chuckled again. "Surprisingly, when I am immersed in your wonderful heat, I do seem immune to the chill." She just scowled and burrowed deeper into the covers.

"Well, isn't it lucky that I have heat for you to steal," she snapped, muffled by the duvet.

"Come now, dear, is it fair for you to accuse me of theft when all I want is to give you blistering kisses and provide you with access to my heating rod?"

She snorted at the euphemism and peeked out at him. "Oh, is that you're calling your *turgid member?*" She heard him laugh, and suddenly the blanket was ripped off her as he stood towering over her huddled body. Before she knew it, he had grabbed her hands and sat back down, pulling her on top of him.

"Shall I cast a Warming Charm, or do you think *might* be able to provide enough heat for your survival?" he asked, as he raised her up and positioned her on top of him. She sighed in answer as she lowered herself onto him, connecting them once more.

"I have no doubts of my survival, Severus," she gasped as he started moving again, forcing her to reposition for balance. "It's more about com-comfort," she added, noting how the new position offered a new world of stimulation.

"And is this comfortable enough?" he growled before clenching his teeth in concentration when she started thrusting on her own.

"Comfort isn't the word I'd use..." she gasped, then moaned, finding a particularly good angle. "What was the reason you pulled me out into the freezing air again?"

He looked at her through hooded eyes for a moment before her question sank in, then he pulled her forward to capture her lips.

It wasn't long before the cold air was refreshing, as they moved against each other with increasing fervor. Although she was enjoying Severus' kiss very much, she had to pull back for air, and as she did, she felt the most wonderful sensation.

Her world was coming to pieces, but it was sparkling with fierce beauty as she rode the pleasure. She was vaguely aware of Severus pounding into her, holding her hips, and forcing her to move, to enjoy the ride thoroughly. She was also vaguely aware of her voice floating through the chamber, mumbling words she didn't recognize or didn't want to. She also could hear Severus saying something, almost frantically. He kept repeating a meaningless phrase over and over, more breathlessly each time. Mostly, though, she was engulfed in her own universe of shattered light that was soon gone, leaving a blissful darkness for her to rest in.

She smiled as she opened her eyes, looking at her new husband. His head was resting against the headboard, and his eyes were closed. He looked as if he had just run a marathon; he was breathing hard and sweating profusely.

She leaned forward to lie against his chest, but he pushed her back with a weak shake of his head.

"Too hot," he said in explanation, then flopped his arms out to his sides, letting the cool air attack his moist skin.

She smirked slightly, but rolled off of him, surprised at her feeling of loss as he plopped out. After she had wrapped herself in the sheets, she looked over at Severus and found him watching her with glazed eyes and a small, happy smirk.

"I trust you enjoyed yourself?" he asked lazily, slurring the words slightly. She nodded contentedly.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did." she rolled over onto her side and propped her head up with the pillow. "Did you?"

He laughed for a fourth time, although this time it wasn't a hearty sound. Eyes closing again, he responded, "Yes, my dear, I believe I enjoyed that immensely."

Coming down from her afterglow a little, Hermione noticed Severus was a little pale, or rather, he was paler than usual. His skin had a slightly waxy tone to it. He was also still breathing very hard.

"Severus, are you okay?" she asked, leaning over to touch his forehead. It was hot to the touch. "Good God, you're burning up!"

He scooted down the bed till his head was on the pillow. "Mm. I'll take that as a compliment."

She smacked him lightly. "Be serious. Are you all right?"

At that he opened his eyes and looked over at her. She noticed his gaze wasn't as steady as usual.

"You needn't be concerned."

"You are my husband. Do you really expect me to just roll over and go to sleep while you're suffering?"

He closed his eyes again and relaxed back into the pillow. "It's what I'd do." That earned him another smack, this time not as light.

"Have you taken the potion?" she asked, looking around for the small bottle.

"Yes, I took it in the split second between your orgasm and mine while you weren't looking," he said, a slight bite to his tone. "Of course not, you silly girl. I'm not a masochist."

"Could have fooled me," Hermione muttered under her breath as she looked him over. He looked very ill and getting worse by the minute. She reached over him, grabbed the potion off the nightstand, and carefully undid the cork. "Here," she said to him. "Open your mouth." He reluctantly did as ordered, and she tipped the contents of the vial into his mouth then pushed up his chin.

"I suppose that won't make you feel any better, but at least it will reduce the time spent suffering." He nodded, then grimaced and wriggled about in discomfort. She watched in utter fascination as red spots suddenly started sprouting all over his body. It was slightly unreal how fast the dots appeared and how many were showing. Before five minutes had passed, his abdomen looked as if a two-year-old had attacked him with his marking quill.

He moaned again, and she looked up at his face just in time to see him cover up a wince of pain. Before she could do or say anything, though, he shot her a look.

"This is not a show, Madam. I suggest you roll over and go to sleep."

She puffed up in indignation, but she quickly thought better of saying anything back. He was ill, and with a "mild" childhood disease, at that. She reasoned that he was probably mortified she was witnessing it. She nodded, kissed his forehead lightly, and snuggled under the blankets. It would have surprised her how quickly she was able to fall into sleep, had she been awake.

Avery's Notes: There. Lemons for you (my first ever). Hopefully it wasn't a lemon. I hope you have patience, though, because, unlike *Marry A Choice*, this is a WIP. Hopefully my muse will be fairly consistent, eh? Huge thanks to my beta, Southern, though any errors are mine, mine, I tell you! No one else can take credit for them!

Southern's Notes: I am happy to see a sequel to the first story. I really enjoyed their interaction throughout this chapter and eagerly await the next.

II

Chapter 2 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Disclaimer: *Though it's lots of fun messing with these characters, they're not mine, and never will be.*

Hermione awoke several hours later to a low moaning.

"Crooks? What's wrong? Where are you?" she muttered, trying to wake up enough to find her cat.

Her eyes shot open as a deep, but weak voice asked, "Who's 'Crooks'?"

"Pro-Severus! Oh, dear, I'm so--" She stopped as soon as she turned to face her husband. He looked awful in the dim light. Even for him. His face was flushed and mottled, and he had dozens of reddish blisters from his forehead down. Even with the low light, she could tell he was still sweating profusely.

"Oh, Severus, why didn't you wake me?" she cried as she felt his forehead gingerly, trying to avoid touching any of the pustules.

He only groaned in answer, trying to twist away from her hand. "Go away, woman," he moaned pitifully when she continued to examine him.

"And leave you to die of dehydration?" She got out of bed, shivering from the cool air, and looked around for a bathroom while continuing to talk out her nerves. "I don't really want to become a widow this early on in marriage. Besides which, I'd rather not walk around school with everybody whispering behind my back about how I conquered the evil Potions master, slaying him while he slept. That just doesn't work with my current reputation. Dobby? Dobby could I get your help, please?"

There was a slight pop in the corner, and Hermione found Dobby looking at her eagerly. Forestalling any of his subservient babble, she quickly asked him to fetch some soothing cream, like calamine. He nodded and disappeared with a pop. By the time she had found the stash of towels, he had come back bearing a garish pink bottle.

Snape groaned again, and she hurried around preparing the washcloth, still prattling on. "Don't worry. I'd protest the manner of your demise to my dying day if needed. I wouldn't want everyone to think you were Samson, even though I think Delilah got a bum rap for being a clever woman... Clever women never seem to read well through history, but then again, I guess that's because history is generally written by chauvinistic men."

When she came back with a moist towel, Snape was looking very grim, but when she moved to put the cloth on his forehead, he stopped her by grabbing her wrist.

"Hermione... Shut... Up." He barely opened his lips, and she was positive he hadn't unclenched his jaw.

"I'm sorry. I'm just nervous. I've never played nursemaid before, and--" she closed her mouth with a snap as he opened his eyes just enough to shoot her a glare. "Right. Shutting up now," she said and continued her ministrations in silence. After a few minutes, Snape relaxed a little, closing his eyes as she applied calamine lotion to all of his little blisters all over his body.

Though she kept her mouth firmly shut, her mind hadn't stopped its inner monologue. She didn't know why she was so nervous seeing Snape (*No, it's Severus, she reminded herself,*) so ill, but she was. She was shocked at how miserable he looked, but she was pleased and proud he was allowing her to tend to him at all. She'd heard he was an absolute bear when it came to accepting care from others. It was nice to know he trusted her.

Five minutes later, the calamine was applied, and Severus was dozing lightly. Hermione smiled, congratulating herself on a job well done, and stood up to stretch out her back. She got back into bed and snuggled into the covers. She turned onto her side to look upon Severus, wondering why it was he loved her. Or at least she assumed he loved her. He never had actually said the words, but when they had made love, it had obviously not been just sex for him.

She watched her husband sleep and observed his features. He really wasn't good looking, but she wasn't sure she would go so far as to describe him as ugly. But then, he was asleep now, and that relaxed the harsh lines from his face. He also wasn't glaring malevolently at anyone, and that softened his features quite a lot.

The blisters really didn't help his look, though.

Shaking her head to herself, she let her eyes close as sleep overcame her again. Her last thought before falling into sleep was that he wasn't unattractive at all when he laughed.

She woke up a couple hours later to the sound of swearing coming from the bathroom.

"Severus?" she called out sleepily, this time aware of her surroundings. "Is something the matter?"

"Yes, there goddamned is something the matter! Why the hell did you apply this retched pink stuff? It itches like hell!" He came out of the bathroom and glared at her, though the effect was somewhat weakened when he stopped to cough harshly.

Hermione sat up, rubbing her eyes, looking in the direction of Snape's voice. "I thought calamine was supposed to relieve the itch. That's why I put it on you," she said slightly defensively. She frowned as he continued to cough.

"Are you all right, Severus?" she asked as she got out of bed and cautiously approached him.

"No, I am not all right, you fuck-wit!" he yelled, rounding on her. "I am--" but he interrupted himself with another cough. She watched in growing horror as he continued coughing, unable to stop. He wasn't flushed anymore, but there was a faint purplish tinge to his skin. It made him look gray.

Knowing something was very wrong, she tried to guide Severus to the bed, but he pushed her away, even as he struggled for breath. She tried to think, but her brain had stalled. She couldn't think of anything to do but watch as her husband died from asphyxiation in front of her. This was something she knew nothing about, and all she could think of was the book titles that would have helped, had she read them earlier.

Suddenly, Severus fell to his knees, still coughing and wheezing, and clutching at his chest. She heard him whimper just slightly, and for some reason, that small sound restarted her mind again.

She turned, ran to the sitting room, and looked frantically for the pot of Floo powder she knew had to be somewhere on the mantle. Finding it, she grabbed a handful and tossed it into the fire, barely noticing the flames turning green.

"Hospital wing!" she cried out, and stuck her head into the fire, regretting her quick motions when her head started spinning fiercely. Repressing the nausea, she opened her eyes and found herself staring into Madam Pomfrey's office.

"Madam Pomfrey?" she called out. "Madam Pomfrey! Are you there? I need your help *quick!*"

She heard a slight shuffle, and suddenly Poppy appeared, pulling her dressing gown closed as she bent down to squint into the fire sleepily.

"Miss Granger? The Floo is reserved for staff use only."

"Snape is barely breathing! I need your help, now!" Hermione couldn't hear Severus anymore, and she didn't know whether it was because her head was technically in another room, because he'd stopped coughing or because he'd stopped breathing. She was terrified it might be the latter.

Madam Pomfrey's manner immediately became businesslike. "Where are you?" Poppy's eyebrows rose at the location, but she briskly responded, "Well, move out of the way, then, and I'll come through."

Hermione pulled her head out of the fire and sat back on the floor for a moment until her head stopped spinning. The fire flared green, and she quickly backed up, making room for the nurse, who gave Hermione a disapproving look before heading toward the bedroom.

It was then Hermione realized she didn't have a stitch on. Nor did Severus.

Highly embarrassed now that there was someone helping Severus, Hermione looked around for something to cover herself with. Scanning the room, she found the blanket Severus had wrapped around her shoulders the evening before. Unbidden, tears started forming, and she sat down on the couch. She didn't feel as though she could face what was going on in the other room at the moment.

It had been a long week. It had been a long few months. It had been a long school career, and she was tired. She rested her elbows on her knees and buried her face in her hands, unwilling to deal with anything else at the moment. She hoped Severus was okay, but she couldn't find the energy, strength, or courage to go find out. Instead, she just sat there, letting the tears drip down her cheeks.

A while later, Madam Pomfrey came back into the sitting room just as Hermione was starting to drift off to sleep. Quickly readjusting the blanket around her, Hermione stood and faced the mediwitch.

"Is he all right? What was wrong?" she asked before Poppy could squelch her questions.

"He will be fine, amazingly," Poppy answered coldly. "You should have sent him to see me as soon as he developed the fever, as I assume you've been here the entire evening."

"Of course I've been here all evening, and if I had thought for one moment he would have gone, I would have sent him to you. What's wrong with him?" Hermione answered, starting to feel cross. How was she to know that chickenpox was so dangerous? She'd never heard of anyone dying from it.

"He developed pneumonia thanks to your foolishness."

"Pneumonia?" Hermione asked, bewildered. "I thought he had chickenpox. That's what he told me it was, anyway."

"It *is* chickenpox, but he's developed complications. He took the potion, I suppose?" She asked with a disapproving air that confused Hermione, who nodded. "Yes, well, it accelerates all aspects of the disease, including the complications, if there are any. And judging by the stress the professor has been under, it's not surprising he was at risk for some nasty ones."

"But how was I to know that?"

"I explicitly told Severus to avoid all stress and activity until his blisters had scabbed at the very least. Obviously, my instructions were not followed."

Hermione looked at the mediwitch, still slightly confused. "That may be so, but he didn't tell me that."

"Did he tell you he had chickenpox?"

"Yes," Hermione answered slowly.

"Then you should have realized he needed to avoid strenuous activities. It's not enough that he has undergone the stress he has in the last few months, looking after you as obsessively as he has, but then when--"

"Looking after me? What are you talking about?" Hermione interrupted.

"Oh, don't play innocent with me. You *know* he brewed a very difficult potion to cure you after the battle, don't you?" Madam Pomfrey asked condescendingly. Hermione nodded curtly. "Well, then I'm sure you know that afterwards he seemed to take it upon himself to make sure you were all right. He watched your eating habits, worried about your weight loss, and even looked into the potion being to blame for your general malaise. And then all this foolishness over Remus came to the forefront, and he felt he had to save you from the fate you seemed hell bent on throwing yourself into."

Here Madam Pomfrey stopped, huffing in righteous indignation. Hermione stared at her, blinking several times as she processed the mediwitch's version.

"So, I'm at fault because he chose to save me of his own volition?" she finally managed to get out when it seemed Pomfrey wasn't going to say anything further.

"From what I heard, he owed you a life debt. Of course he was going to do anything he could to save you."

An old suspicion floated into Hermione's mind, one that she didn't really want to contemplate, so she tried to ignore it.

"So you believe that Severus only rescued me because the gaes of the life debt forced him to?"

"Why ever else would he do such a thing for one of his *students*?"

"I don't know, but I do know that he didn't owe me a life debt. Ever. He owed Ronald Weasley a life debt, but that was voided when Ron died. I don't know what you might think, but I expect that my husband chose to save me because that's what he *wanted* to do, not because of an expired debt."

Madam Pomfrey looked a little taken aback at Hermione's confrontational tone but settled into a dismissive look. "If that's what you want to believe, then go ahead and believe it, deary. But next time, you'd best send your husband to me *before* he's on the verge of dying."

Hermione stepped in front of the fireplace to block Madam Pomfrey's exit. "How dare you suggest that I'd be so callous!"

Pomfrey just sniffed.

"And I guess, in your mind, I was going after Remus as an insidious plot to snare Severus? I came up with the idea for the stupid law, then went out, plotted seeds of revenge in renegade Death Eaters' minds, making sure they didn't kill me first, and then played along as Dumbledore, Minerva, and everyone else started panicking over the bill because I wanted to marry Severus fucking Snape?"

Pomfrey looked a little confused when Hermione mentioned the law, but by Hermione's last words she looked ready to explode. "Well, knowing your penchant for danger, there's few rules left to break, now aren't there?"

"Are you insane? He was my professor! Not only that, but he was the man who had never shown me an ounce of respect before this whole mess came up! Why on earth would I want to marry him if I didn't absolutely have to?" she yelled, forgetting decorum for the moment.

Madam Pomfrey retorted, "Because you know you wouldn't have had a chance with him otherwise!"

"You *are* insane. He was my *teacher*! I don't know how it was when you were in school, but not all girls dream of shagging their professors."

Madam Pomfrey visibly swelled with rage. "I don't appreciate your insinuations!"

"Well, neither do I!" Hermione yelled back.

Madam Pomfrey stormed over to the fireplace, grabbed the pot of Floo powder, extracted a handful of powder, and violently slammed the pot back onto the mantle.

"Well, I don't care how ungrateful you are or how reluctant you are to fulfill some other girl's tawdry teenage fantasy; there's to be no boisterous activities until he is fully healed. There's more to bed-rest than just staying in bed!" Then the angry matron disappeared in a twirl of green flame.

Hermione stood there, unsure whether she should be angry, amused or embarrassed, but finally the cold forced her to move toward the bedroom, mind whirling. Still clutching the blanket to her, she silently walked over to Severus, who was lying peacefully in bed. She thought he was asleep, but when she bent down to feel his forehead, he flinched.

"Severus? Are you feeling better?" she asked softly, sitting down beside him. He didn't answer except to turn his head away from her. Brow furrowed, Hermione looked at her husband, trying to figure out what was going on.

"I'm sorry about the calamine. I'd always heard it was good for chickenpox and other itchy rashes."

No response except a twitch in his jaw.

"Are you angry?" she pressed, unsure why he was ignoring her. He didn't give any indication one way or another as to how he was feeling. He just laid there, facing away from her, and feigned sleep. She shrugged, figuring there wasn't much else she could do at this point. She couldn't incite him into an argument as he was supposed to be resting, but as she laid down on the other side of the bed, she couldn't help feeling that whatever he was thinking and feeling, it wasn't restful.

"I *am* grateful, you know," she whispered, as she closed her eyes again. There wasn't much time till breakfast, but there was enough to make a worthwhile nap. "Sleep well, Severus," she said through a yawn, then drifted off to sleep.

When Hermione woke a couple hours later, Severus was soundly asleep. His blisters had crusted over, which, if anything, made him look worse than he had the night before.

Sighing, she got up and stretched, noticing her thighs were a little on the sore side. She grimaced at the realization that everyone in the school would know what she and Severus had been up to. They would probably be merciless in their teasing and taunting, and she was going to suffer the brunt of it.

It was going to be a rough day.

She shrugged and headed to the bathroom to prepare for the onslaught by enjoying a nice hot shower. After double checking that he actually had shampoo on hand, she got in and started the shower, noticing immediately that the water pressure wasn't very good. She groaned at the thought of how much time it would take to rinse her hair.

She stuck her head under the water and hummed in pleasure as the steamy liquid coated her hair, working its way slowly to her scalp. Once her hair was thoroughly wet, she applied a liberal amount of shampoo and started scrubbing.

As she lathered, her mind drifted to the night before. She hoped that Pomfrey's words had no basis in fact. She hoped that Poppy was just jealous, though Hermione laughed mirthlessly at the idea of any woman being jealous of her choice of husband. On second thought, the sex *had* been good. If Poppy and he had ever been lovers...

Her mind reeled as she started thinking about Severus' past. He really was a stranger. The only things she knew about him were his teaching and clothing styles (both severe) and that he had a surprisingly wicked sense of humor. She didn't even know his middle initial.

She wondered if he had been married before. She wondered if his parents were still alive, and if so, was he speaking with them? Would she be introduced to them? He had implied he wasn't a pureblood at dinner the other night, but was he a half-blood? She couldn't imagine him being a Muggleborn, but she supposed it could be a possibility.

Realizing she had been standing there lathering her hair for a good five minutes, she moved to rinse. Just as she stuck her head in the water, though, all the heat evaporated. She squeaked as she jumped out of the way of the cold stream, spluttering as some of the shampoo dribbled into her mouth.

Spitting the foul tasting stuff out as best she could, she stuck her hand in the water to see if it had warmed up again. It hadn't. She ducked around the water to turn the heat up, then waited on the fringe, shivering as the persistent cold dungeon air worked its way into the rapidly cooling enclosure.

After a minute of no temperature change, except possibly becoming colder, she scowled as the water pressure improved. Resigning herself to the inevitable, she got back into the freezing spray and quickly rinsed all the suds out of her hair. By the time she was done, her feet and hands had a bluish tint, and she was starting to shiver convulsively.

Grabbing a skimpy towel and silently cursing herself for leaving her wand in the bedroom, she scampered toward her night stand, trying to keep as little contact with the floor as possible. Fumbling her wand with frozen fingers, she managed to cast a Warming Charm, sighing as the warm air enveloped her. Feeling moderately better, she looked at her husband and found him still soundly asleep.

At least I don't have to worry about dressing with him watchingshe thought. She had made the first overtures the night before because it seemed a reasonable thing to do, but now that it was daylight, her modesty had returned full force.

Making her way to the wardrobe, she found her clothes and quickly put them on. When she went to get her book bag, though, she ground to a halt as she realized all her books and materials were in her dorm. At the other side of the castle. Up nine stories. Looking at the clock she realized that if she hurried, she could probably make it to the Great Hall before most of the students, anyway, though probably wouldn't be able to finish before they arrived.

She rushed into the sitting room and headed into the dungeon corridor just as she finished buttoning up her robes. Walking as quickly as she could, she was thankful it was still early enough that few students were around, making her trip that much faster.

Clutching the stitch in her side as she ascended the final staircase, she had an epiphany. She could have asked a house-elf to bring her materials down to the dungeon. Cursing once again, both at missing the simple solution and the fact that she was even considering using the poor house-elves in such a selfish and menial way, she soon found herself standing before the Fat Lady.

"Tootroo," Hermione said, still panting heavily.

The Fat Lady looked down at her and raised an eyebrow. "And where have you been all night, young lady?"

"In my new quarters. Please open up."

"Not until you give me the password."

"Tootroo!" Hermione replied, quickly getting cross.

"That was the old one. It was changed last night. Had you been in here, where you should be, you'd have known that."

"I am the Head Girl! I'm told when passwords are changed! So let me in, NOW!"

"Tch, tch," the Fat Lady scolded, trying to hide the fun she was having. "Barking orders will get you nowhere. This is what you get when you disregard school rules."

"I did nothing of the sort!" Hermione roared. "As I said, I was in my new quarters, with my new *wife*, and although my clothes were transferred down, my books and such are still here. If you could let me in with the password I know is still current, then I promise you won't have to deal with my waywardness ever again!"

The Fat Lady just raised another eyebrow. "Husband? Now you're just being silly. Students aren't allowed to marry."

"What about Harry and Ginny? They're married, and you let them in every day."

"The headmaster sanctioned their union."

"And he was the one who performed the ceremony for me! Is that not sanctioning it enough?"

The Fat Lady sniffed and looked away. Hermione ground her teeth in frustration. Just as she was considering how patient Sirius must have been to only slash the annoying painting, the portrait clicked open as a student exited the common room.

Seizing her chance, Hermione swung the portrait to the side, surprising the first year who was climbing through. Hermione muttered an apology as she dashed through the hole and hurried up to her room.

When she entered her chamber, she felt as though the wind had been knocked out of her. Everything was gone. The bookcases were empty, her ornaments and decorations were gone, even the bed had been stripped bare. She couldn't imagine a more forceful way of saying that she no longer lived there.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she tried to think of what to do now. She sat down slowly on the bare bed and looked around a bit more. The house-elves had been very thorough. It struck her then that her earlier epiphany could still prove useful.

"Dobby?" she hesitantly called. "Dobby, could you help me, please?"

A sudden pop alerted her to the smiling creature's appearance.

"Dobby would be honored to help the friend of Harry Potter, Miss! What can Dobby do for Miss Hermione?"

Hermione shook her head, trying to curb her desire to berate the elf for his subservience. "Dobby, I was wondering where all my belongings were put."

The elf looked at her wide-eyed. "Miss Hermione's things are in her new rooms. Dobby put them there himself!"

Hermione closed her eyes and asked the question she now knew the answer to. "And where did you put my books and school supplies?"

"On Miss Hermione's new desk in the sitting room." She opened her eyes to find Dobby wringing his hands. "Was it a bad spot? Dobby can go fix and put them wherever--"

"No, Dobby, that's a great spot. Thank you."

Dobby smiled beatifically, then popped out of sight.

Hermione's shoulders sank. She was going to be late for breakfast. Getting up wearily, she gave her room one last look, then closed the door on it, feeling like she had left a part of herself in there, never to retrieve.

She made her way back to the dungeons as quickly as she could, though she felt as if hurrying was pointless. If she dawdled enough at least she would be able to miss breakfast completely and avoid the gossip for that much longer. The problem was, she was hungry.

She was surprised how few people there were about, though as she descended into the dungeons she met a fair few Slytherins on their way up to the Great Hall. Most of the younger ones she passed just stared at her in awe, but the older students gave her leering looks and snickered openly to her face.

"Bout time someone put you on a leash, Granger," she heard a shrill voice shout out. Turning around, she found herself face to face with Pansy Malfoy, who was resisting the almost frantic pull of Draco's tugs. "I'd wager Snape will have you waiting on him in no time, just like a house-elf."

Not in the mood for a pointless argument, Hermione just shook her head pityingly at the girl, and said "Yeah, I'm sure that'll be the case. Ask your husband how likely that is, Pansy. I'm sure he'll agree with you." She then turned and continued her descent. She heard Pansy continue her taunting calls, but she refused to rise to the bait any further. If she hurried, at least she wouldn't be the last one in the Great Hall.

When she reached the door to Snape's rooms, however, she realized she couldn't remember the password. He had said it once, loud enough for her to hear, but she had been so exhausted and annoyed by the reception, not to mention nervous about what was to come, she had only been half listening.

She closed her eyes and concentrated, focusing her mind on the memory. Unfortunately, all she kept coming up with her thoughts at the moment, not what Snape was saying. After five minutes, she ran out of patience and kicked the door.

"Mother of Merlin!" she yelled, as she felt her toes object to the hard object they'd been slammed into. "Goddamn mother fucking piece of puke with cherries on top, please, for the love of Circe, open the ruddy door!"

Not surprisingly, nothing happened. She pounded her fist on the door halfheartedly, then turned around and slid down to the floor. She sincerely hoped that this morning was not a harbinger of what the rest of her life was going to be like. She didn't want to become a potty mouth.

Suddenly, the door behind her disappeared, and losing her support, she fell gracelessly onto the floor with a thump. Opening her eyes cautiously, she found herself looking up at Severus in his dressing robe. He looked torn between a laugh and a scowl.

"Have you no memory?" He finally managed to sneer while offering her a hand up.

Hermione rubbed her head as she scowled fiercely but accepted the proffered boost. "Normally, I do, but last night I guess my mind was on other things. What's the password again?"

"Perhaps if you ask nicely, I'll tell you." Snape had moved over to the couch and sank into it wearily. Hermione felt a pang of remorse for waking him.

"I'm sorry for my foul mood, Severus. It's just been a lousy morning so far, and I'm going to be late for breakfast." She paused to look at the clock and groaned, "I am late for breakfast, and... I'm sorry I woke you."

Severus waved off her apology distractedly and then replaced his hand on his eyes as he leaned his head back. "You didn't wake me. Although, even if I had been asleep, I'm sure I would have heard your stream of invective even if you hadn't raised your voice to such a shrill level."

Hermione flushed slightly at his rebuke, though she had her back to him as she searched for her books, finding them right where Dobby had said they would be. Stuffing them in her book bag, she turned to view her husband critically.

"How are you feeling this morning?" she asked, placing her hand on his forehead.

He tensed up momentarily, then relaxed with a slight sigh. "I'm alive."

She caressed his forehead lightly, weaving her fingers around the scabs still marring his skin. "Well, please rest. I expect Madam Pomfrey would flay me alive if you came down with so much as a sore throat."

He snorted weakly. "Mm. Too late."

"Well, the outlook of my day keeps getting better and better," Hermione half-groused. "Just please don't overdo anything. You scared me silly last night."

"You were already silly," Snape croaked out. Hermione gently whapped him on the top of his head, then kissed the spot tenderly.

"I've got to go if I want any breakfast. Take care of yourself."

He grunted, briefly raising his hand in a dismissive wave. Just as she was about to leave, he called out hoarsely, "Tin Man."

Confused, she turned to look at him.

"The password," he explained simply. Her lips twitched at such an uncharacteristic password, but thinking about it, she realized it was perfect. She nodded and headed out for breakfast.

Avery's Notes: Things will get better, but remember that Hermione's week from Hell hasn't finished yet. The week officially ends Tuesday evening, and it's only Monday morning. *evil grin*

SW69's Notes: The phrase, you can't win for losing, comes to mind here. Hahaha... I wonder what else will be thrown their way before they are able to find peace. Great story so far!

III

Chapter 3 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Disclaimer: The characters all belong to Ms. Rowling and her shareholders, however, special credit goes to President Bush and his speech writers. I blatantly stole and adapted a portion of his 2004 State of the Union address for the Minister's speech. Anything else you don't recognize is probably mine, however.

III.

Hermione stood near the top of the dungeon stairs looking across the entrance to the Great Hall, which was positively teeming with students. It seemed as if everyone in the castle was there. She wished her stomach would stop protesting because then she could just go hide in the library until it was time for class.

Her stomach chose that moment to make a particularly loud groan.

Sighing, she trudged up the last step and crossed the empty Entrance Hall. She was perversely glad that the enchanted ceiling was stormy and gray, as it suited her mood far better than a sunny day would have. As luck would have it, though, the moment she entered the room the clouds drifted apart, and a ray of sun lit upon her standing in the doorway.

"As if I needed a grand entrance," she muttered, trying to keep the irritation out of her face as gradually everyone in the hall turned to watch her progress.

What had been a dull roar quieted down so that the whispering Slytherins had to lower their voices even further. Hermione was surprised they weren't taunting her yet, and, looking over, was surprised to see them regarding her warily. All of them, not just the first years. Looking around to the other House tables, she noticed that all of the students' faces were a mixture of awe, fear and, in the case of the Gryffindor table, glee. Quickening her pace slightly, she made her way over to an empty spot beside Harry, still aware that everyone was watching her.

"Morning," she muttered quietly to her friends as she sat down. She could hear the whispers starting all around her, not confined to the Slytherin table anymore, as her friends greeted her back.

"So you survived, then?" Seamus asked rather loudly. "There was a pool going on whether we'd see you again. Alive, that is."

Hermione scowled at Seamus, but noticed the rest of the hall was paying close attention. "Well, as you can see, I'm still hale and hearty. Though I am rather hungry."

Harry and Ginny blushed along with Hermione as several people laughed loudly, and a few catcalls were thrown her way. Hermione closed her eyes in mortification and wondered if she would ever regain the ability to keep her mouth shut. The less she said, the better.

"So did Snape survive?" Seamus continued incorrigibly. Hermione looked up at the staff table and realized suddenly why everyone had been staring at her so intently. She wondered what was going through their minds, positive that it wouldn't be the truth. Her first thought was that Severus was going to be upset about this turn of events, but then, he had to have considered it a possibility when he strode up that aisle. Maybe he hadn't been simply teasing her when he started walking away.

"So did he?" Seamus asked again. Hermione realized she'd been staring blankly at Snape's empty spot and immediately turned to focus on Seamus.

She shook her head disdainfully and said, loudly enough that the entire hall could hear, "Of course he's alive." Lowering her voice slightly, she added, "He's just resting."

Half the boys within hearing range started choking on their pumpkin juice. Hermione realized a bit late how that must have sounded. She quickly amended, "Madam Pomfrey ordered him to take it easy."

Silence descended on the Gryffindor table as everyone turned to stare at her, some with forks halfway to their open mouths. Then Neville started laughing, and everyone turned to their neighbor to discuss the new gossip. Soon, the exaggerated news that Professor Snape had been placed on "bed rest," thanks to the Head Girl, had spread throughout the hall. Hermione noticed that she was getting a lot more looks from the male population than she ever had before.

Closing her eyes once more, Hermione determined to never say a word in public again. There was always too much collateral damage. Thinking about how Severus would react, she shoved her breakfast to the side and hid her face in her arms. The day just kept getting better and better!

"Cheer up, Hermione," she heard Harry say, as she was patted on the back. "At least people now know there's more to you than schoolwork."

She raised her head to glare at the Boy Wonder. "I liked my relative obscurity, thanks! And how do you think Severus is going to take this view?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, really, he should be pleased. I mean, he's now the envy of half the school population." Hermione raised her eyebrow at the same time as Ginny, making Harry back away slightly. "I'm just saying that's how it's going to play out."

Hermione looked around the hall again, and, sure enough, she noticed boys kept looking in her direction.

"Well," Hermione said with a sigh, "he may now be envied, but this is Snape we're talking about! He's so contrary that you have to insult him before he accepts a compliment."

"Oh, really?" Ginny said, leaning forward with an interested look. "Do tell."

"No! I'm not going to talk about Severus. I have to live with the man, and I want to make that as easy for me as possible."

Ginny held up her hands. "All right, no need to get huffy! I wasn't really expecting you to say anything. I'll admit I am curious about him, but I would never invade your privacy. You know that!"

Hermione nodded, taking a sip from her pumpkin juice. Just as she was about to explain her bad mood to Ginny, the morning owls came swooping in. A large barn owl dropped the morning edition of the Daily Prophet in Hermione's arms, narrowly missing her plate of eggs.

"I'm sorry," she said as she reflexively opened the paper. "It's just been a bad morning so far, and I don't really expect it to get much better, especially with everyone still reacting to--" She cut off as her eyes skimmed the headline.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked, sensing the mood shifting yet again.

With a grim face, Hermione started reading the article aloud, not bothering to keep her voice down.

"The Ministry passes the Equality Reform Act in a bold move to improve relations between differing factions of the Wizarding population."

"So they passed it then?" Harry asked, looking grim as he loaded his spoon.

Ginny snorted. "I should have known they'd know how to sugarcoat bile. Do they manage to gloss over the nastier bits?"

"Yes," Hermione said, responding to both Harry and Ginny's observations. "Listen: 'Last night in an unparalleled display of diplomacy, the Ministry passed a striking new law designed to ease the tension between purebloods and those of Muggle descent. In the past, the differing backgrounds have resulted in occurrences of public disagreement--'"

Hermione cut off as Harry snorted into his porridge. "That's one way to describe Voldemort's uprising, I suppose."

Hermione smiled tightly in acknowledgment, but her attention was still on the article, her face a mixture of revulsion and awe.

"What else do they say?" Ginny asked tentatively.

"The Minister gave a press conference this morning, and they've given the transcript of his speech," Hermione said, trying not to sound as ill as she felt.

Ginny, seeing her turn slightly green, grabbed the paper from her hands and skimmed it for herself.

"Really, it's a decent example of political doublespeak," she said, though she too looked as if she'd swallowed a slug.

Hermione glanced up at Ginny and noticed that half the table was looking at the three of them.

"Well, what does it say?" Harry asked, trying to see the article around Ginny's arms.

"Well, here's what our lovely Minister has to say on this lovely new day," Ginny continued, loud enough for the onlookers to hear.

"As we gather today, hundreds of witches and wizards across the world are celebrating our recent success in the war on the Death Eaters. Hope has been brought to the oppressed, and we've delivered justice to the violent and made Britain and the Wizarding world more secure. However, the battle against prejudice and violence against those of non-magical antecedents continues unabated."

Hermione and Harry snorted in unison.

"Each day, Aurors are tracking rogue Death Eater threats; arithmantists are examining Portkey usage; the men and women of our new Department for Protection and Equitable Treatment are patrolling our treatises and papers. And their vigilance is protecting the Wizarding world."

Wizards are proving once again to be the best people in the world. The Wizarding society is growing stronger.

"I suppose that's to engender the purebloods' pride," Hermione cut in. Ginny shot her a grin that was identical to her twin brothers' smiles.

"Today, members of the Wizengamot can take pride in the great works of compassion and reform that skeptics had thought impossible. You're raising the standards for Hogwarts, and you are giving our Squibs more status and equality in the great world we've forged."

"Ooh, has Filch seen this yet?" Seamus said, looking around the room with exaggerated zeal. A few people sniggered, but they quickly quieted as Ginny continued.

"We have faced serious challenges together, and now we face a choice: We can go forward with confidence and resolve, or we can turn back to the dangerous illusion that rogue Death Eaters are not plotting and Muggleborn haters are no threat to us. We can press on with societal growth and reforms in equality and integration, or we can turn back to old policies and old divisions."

"I don't see what's so bad about that," Neville said. "It's not like reform isn't needed."

"Yes, but what kind of reform do they really have in mind, Neville?" Hermione retorted.

"It is tempting to believe that the danger is behind us. That hope is understandable, comforting --and false."

"And you're not the one who faced Voldemort, you bag of stink sap," Harry muttered under his breath.

"The prejudice has continued. The ideals of the Death Eater continues to plague and mar the civilized world. And by our will and courage, this danger will be defeated."

"Inside Britain, where the war began, we must continue to give our Aurors and Department of Protection and Equitable Treatment personnel every tool they need to defend us. And one of those essential tools is the new Equality Reform Act, which allows those of Muggle descent to better share privileges the purebloods have enjoyed"

throughout the ages."

"Which privileges are they talking about, anyway?" Hermione said, looking at Ginny as if for an answer. The other girl shrugged.

"The Equality Reform Act is designed to ease the tension of transition by making concessions to both sides. It was agreed that those who suffered persecution under pureblood extremists will be compensated by society with certain rights denied them throughout the last few years. Under this law, Muggleborns and half-bloods will be able to raise their families without fear of prejudice in the Wizarding world. Those of non-magical antecedents will be honored for helping make the Wizarding world stronger than ever by raising the next generation of witches and wizards much as their ancestors did.

"The children to come will never need to know prejudice as they will all be raised to know their magical roots. They will be steeped in the histories of both the Muggle and the magical world as they grow up with pureblood privilege.

"As a society, we will secure new friendships and become stronger for our new bonds. We will defeat the prejudice of the past and become stronger for the efforts we've made. We will raise our children without fear of misplaced loyalties, for we will only need to be loyal to ourselves.

"The responsibility of the future is upon us, and we are forging our path with the promise of equality."

By the time Ginny finished, everyone within range was silent, hanging on every word. The younger children were looking confused at the sudden mood shift.

"Hmm. Notice he didn't mention anything about powers being stripped or--"

"Oh, but he did, Harry!" Hermione protested. "Those of non-magical antecedents will be honored for helping make the world stronger than ever by raising the next generation of witches and wizards *much as their ancestors did*! Why else do you think he brought up Muggle ancestry?"

"They can't be saying what you think they're saying. That would be mad!" Neville interjected. "The whole of the Wizarding world would object."

"The whole world?" Ginny asked, looking pointedly at the Slytherin table. "I can think of a few people who might want to control how the next generation is brought up, can't you?"

Neville nodded but looked skeptical.

"Neville, the reason I married Professor Snape was because Lucius Malfoy had his eye on me. We don't have proof, but we suspect Malfoy is behind this law. I would much rather be forced to marry someone I respect than that lizard."

"You knew about this beforehand?" Lavender asked, looking frightened. "You didn't say anything!"

"We weren't allowed to," Ginny said, startling a few people. "What, did you really believe Harry and I were allowed to get married as a reward for services rendered?"

"But why were you let in... Why weren't we all told?" Lavender continued, starting to look a bit panicked.

"Because we were counted as the prime targets," Hermione replied. "It was assumed that if the bill became law, we would be the ones to receive marriage contracts before anything could be done to rescind the law."

"So you're all safely married, but what about the rest of us?" Parvati exclaimed.

"Relax. Neville was right. The majority of the people will see this as the asinine attempt to gain power it is and will revolt. I'd be surprised if the law isn't overturned before the year is out. All you have to do is keep a low profile and you'll be fine," Harry said with a smile, which was only partly returned.

"So, okay, that explains why you married Snape, but that doesn't explain why you shagged him to the point of passing out," Seamus said possibly a little louder than he intended, as he flushed slightly when the hall erupted into a cacophony of laughter, shrieks and catcalls.

"I never said he passed out, nor did I imply it was sex that did it. That was your own dirty mind coming to its own conclusion!" Hermione huffed, far more embarrassed than she wanted to be.

Seamus' eyes grew big, and his lips started twitching convulsively. "You didn't hex him, did you?" he half shouted over the din, which suddenly quieted. The entire hall turned their way.

Hermione, very aware of everyone's eyes on her, swallowed, and shook her head.

"Can you even imagine me hexing a teacher, let alone Professor Snape?" she asked, determined not to catch Harry's eye. Seamus shook his head slowly, but he continued to stare at her with a growing look of awe.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione gathered her books. She hadn't had much to eat, but all she wanted was to get out of the spotlight that seemed to be trained on her in the hall.

"I need to get out of here," she muttered to Harry and Ginny, who both nodded in fervent agreement. They all gathered their things and stood up in unison.

"And now," Ginny intoned to the watching crowd, "we make our grand exit. Be sure to follow all gossip protocols and wait until we're ten steps from the door before raising your voices."

A few snickers met Ginny's speech, but Hermione barely noticed, all her attention was on how to get through the day and then survive the night.

XXX

By the time lunch was being served, Hermione wanted nothing more than to curl up beside Moaning Myrtle's toilet. At least there she'd only be pestered by the weepy ghost. However much she wanted to avoid the student populace, she wanted to avoid Snape's quarters even more. It wasn't that she was afraid of how Severus would take everything, even with him being an utterly miserable git when sick; it was how the student population would view her retreat. It had been made clear many times that morning how all the boys' perceptions of her had changed during breakfast. A few of the leers she received between classes had made her look down to see if she was still clothed.

Therefore, she was greatly relieved when Ginny pulled her out of the queue for lunch and herded her into a quiet passage on the fourth floor. Ginny gestured to a niche, and they settled in for the lunch hour.

"I thought you might be a little tired of the talk," Ginny said as she produced a cold chicken sandwich from her book bag. Seeing Hermione's bemused expression, Ginny went on. "I bopped down to the kitchen first. No offense, but I figured it would be better to go before catching you. I think the elves secretly play 'pin the wart on the witch' with your image."

Hermione knew Ginny was joking, but she wasn't sure how to react to the jibe. She stayed silent.

"I didn't mean that, you know," Ginny said after a moment. Hermione looked up to find Ginny looking at her with a serious expression. "I'm sure the elves have forgiven and forgotten your efforts to save them from themselves."

Hermione smirked. "Considering Dobby is the only elf who doesn't shriek and Disapparate when he sees me? I have my doubts on that front."

Ginny dutifully laughed. "Well, in that case, I'm doubly glad I went to the kitchens before getting you. I never would have been able to find the chocolate mousse with all the elves Disapparating away."

Hermione's eyes widened at the mention of the dessert. "You didn't."

"I did," Ginny said, reaching into her bag and produced a bowl of chocolate heaven. Hermione's peeved expression melted away as Ginny handed her one of the spoons. Closing her eyes to savor the first bite, she sighed as the chocolate dissolved on her tongue.

"You," Hermione said, taking another spoonful and raising it to Ginny in a toast, "are my very best friend."

Ginny rolled her eyes and said, "Cupboard love."

"No, seriously. Harry never would have thought of this. I mean, yes, he'd be there behind me, awkwardly patting my back in sympathy, but he wouldn't ever be able to think of something so obvious."

"You're right there. I love him dearly, but..."

"Exactly. He means well, but..."

The girls looked at each other and rolled their eyes in unison, giggling as they did so.

"So how about Severus?" Ginny asked. Then seeing the warning glance Hermione sent, she explained. "Would he have thought of something like this?"

Hermione backed down with a sigh. "Probably not, but I really don't know. It's not like we've had a lot of time to get to know each other yet. We've hardly had one evening. I have no idea how well he knows me, and I'm sort of scared to find out."

"Why?"

"Because... Well, I'm pretty sure he loves me." *I hope he does*, she added internally. "He said he developed feelings for me since Ron died. But... how long has he loved me, really? I mean, can a person go from loathing to loving in so short a span of time? And if not, then what sort of man have I married?"

Ginny inspected her spoon carefully for any remaining specks of the pudding, thinking carefully.

"Would you prefer him to have fallen in love with you knowing nothing about you but your grades and looks or knowing something about your personality beyond the books?"

"I don't know. In theory, I'd like him to love me for who I actually am, but in reality, how could he get to know me without, well..." Hermione shook her head resolutely. "Never mind. He is my husband now, full stop. All I can hope for is that he won't come to hate me if I never return his sentiments."

"Is he that bad?" Ginny asked, frowning.

Hermione looked up, slightly shocked at the question. "What? No, he's... It's just... I..." She wanted to tell Ginny what Madam Pomfrey had said. She wanted Ginny to reassure her that she was being silly to believe that Severus Snape, Slytherin Extraordinaire, would do something so selfless (and stupid) as to marry her to fulfill a nonexistent life debt. But that niggling of doubt kept her from saying anything for fear Ginny might agree with the nurse.

"I understand. Really, I do. I just hope that you do give him, and yourself, a chance."

"I am. It's just that, well..." Hermione faded out, weighing her words carefully. "Last night Severus was sick. That's why he was ordered to rest. He was really very ill, and, well, he's not a very nice person when he's sick."

Ginny snorted, then started coughing, trying to keep from laughing. "You say that as if he's nice when healthy! But come on, you can't judge him from one night when he was sick. That's like judging him based on his teaching record."

"And that's all I know about him, really. Just as all he knows about me, presumably, is based on my student record. Yes, we know a few more little details than we did a week ago, but on the whole, we're starting as teacher and student. Not exactly the kind of relationship I wanted."

"So you regret marrying him?"

"No! No, that's not it at all. It's just the reality of everything is sinking in, and then breakfast made everything so much worse... and I'm still trying to wrap my mind around this situation. I'm trying to justify to myself taking this route when it wasn't offered to Lavender, Parvati and the rest of them. What if they get petitioned before the law is overturned? They could have been forewarned and found better alternatives."

Ginny looked at Hermione sharply, as if examining her for parasites. When she continued, Hermione asked, "What? Do I have something in my hair?"

"No, I'm looking for signs of Polyjuice. You obviously aren't Hermione Granger. She would see how stupid that statement was before it left her lips."

Hermione frowned and opened her mouth to protest, but Ginny cut her off.

"You didn't take the easy route, Hermione. You didn't have an easy route to take. It was either scale the cliff face with Snape, Remus or some other wizard, or jump off the cliff with Malfoy. You didn't have the option of waiting like Lavender and the rest probably do."

"But--"

"But nothing. Your life is shitty right now, but at least you've got a husband who loves you, even if he is a sourpuss. It could be ten times worse, and that's not even considering Malfoy as an option."

Hermione sighed in frustration. "I know that, but... Do you have any idea how he's going to react to the rumors going around now? I don't. I can imagine how Professor Snape would handle the situation very well, but not Severus. The fact that I know Professor Snape better than my husband is scaring the living daylights out of me now that the adrenaline is tapering off."

"Think of this as an early learning experience?" Ginny said unhelpfully, shrugging her shoulders. Hermione rolled her eyes and settled back down to eating her mousse. They sat there in companionable silence for a few minutes before Ginny cast a Muffliato and asked the question that had been nagging at her since breakfast.

"So, how is he, anyway?"

Hermione looked up distractedly. "Come again?"

"How was he?"

"He had chickenpox. He should be feeling much better by now, though."

Ginny raised her eyebrows at that, but she shook her head. "I didn't mean that. I meant--"

"Do you honestly think I'm going to answer that question?" Hermione interrupted hastily.

Ginny shrugged. "It was worth a try. Being your *bestest friend ever*, I thought you'd tell me *something*."

Hermione laughed, and soon the girls were giggling together, subject dropped, while they polished off the last of the chocolate mousse.

XXX

Dinner couldn't come fast enough in Hermione's mind. She could feel everybody's eyes on her, even if they were keeping their voices down here in the library. She hadn't been quite so lucky in class. By the end of Arithmancy, Professor Vector was openly glaring at her as if she were willfully making everyone stare at her and whisper. It was very frustrating; it wasn't as if she welcomed the attention, and it annoyed her as much as it did the teachers. Of course, she hoped that was why the professor had been glaring. Hermione didn't want to contemplate having to deal with two jealous women for the rest of the year. Especially not the teacher of her favorite subject.

She also did not want to think of how many possible lovers Severus had taken among the staff. She almost wished that she could revert back to seeing Severus as only a teacher, a sexless human whose only purpose for being was to educate. Almost. She felt a smirk tug on her lips as she thought about the previous night. There were definite advantages to knowing Severus was **not** a sexless being.

Looking up, she noticed some of the students were leaving for dinner. She shoved her textbooks back in her bag and joined them, anxious to not be the last person in the hall again.

Adjusting her pack on her shoulder once more, she heaved a sigh of relief, seeing only a smattering of people in the Great Hall. She instinctively looked up at the staff table, but only Dumbledore and McGonagall were there. She couldn't decide whether it would be better for Severus to miss this meal or not.

She took her place at the Gryffindor table and helped herself to the food that started appearing. There seemed to be no reason to prolong another meal. Besides, she was getting curious about Severus' health. The twenty-four hours was nearly up.

Before long, the hall had filled up. Harry and Ginny had split up, for once, to sit on either side of her, and she was immensely grateful for the buffer. If anything, the leers were getting worse. She had no idea how to counteract such behavior, but she decided ignoring it was probably the best option at that point.

Suddenly, the noise in the hall dropped. Looking up, Hermione saw everyone watching the staff table, specifically the man in black who had just walked in. He still didn't look healthy and was moving almost sluggishly for him. The teachers he walked by were greeting him happily, although he only nodded curtly, as was his style.

Feeling like someone was watching her, Hermione shifted her attention to Professor Vector and caught the witch giving her a sour look before quickly shifting her attention back to her meal. Hermione closed her eyes, inwardly groaning at the prospect of dealing with a jealous nurse *and* teacher for three more months.

The babble of the hall soon rose again, but Hermione failed to notice the increase of glances she was receiving. She was concentrating on finishing her meal so she could escape. Before she made much progress, however, Hermione felt a tap on her shoulder. Looking around, she found three Ravenclaw boys she recognized from Quidditch, leering at her unpleasantly. Hermione felt the tension level of all the Gryffindors around her go up.

"So, Granger, or I suppose it's Snape now, isn't it? I see your husband is still alive, but he doesn't look very well, does he? To me he looks rather peaky."

Hermione felt Harry go for his wand, but she put a restraining hand on him. This was her fight. Well, hers and Severus', but he had made clear that she could fight all their battles for them.

"And what business is it of yours how Professor Snape looks?"

The boys laughed unpleasantly. "Is that what you call him? Granted he isn't really the type for a pet name, now is he?"

She gritted her teeth. "Whether I call him Severus, Sugar, or Rabid Bunny of Love is none of your business. In fact, is there any business you do have here?"

Everyone in the area had choked slightly at her last choice of name, but the boys standing before her recovered quickly.

"Well, considering how old your *Rabid Bunny of Love* is and how he looks after just one night with you, maybe you need someone--"

"Or maybe more than one someone," another boy cut in.

"A little younger and stronger with a little more... endurance."

Hermione, Harry, Ginny and half the seventh year Gryffindors were standing and aiming their wands at the three boys in no time flat. The leader barely blinked, though the others looked a little nervous.

Still looking smug, the leader said, "Well, if you ever change your mind..." He turned away and came nose to very large nose with none other than Snape himself.

The boy lost a little of his confidence at that point.

"Mr. Jacobs," Snape drawled casually, making the boys wonder if he had overheard anything "I was musing earlier today about the more impressive students at the school." The boys relaxed slightly. "Your name, I'm afraid, didn't come to mind immediately, but maybe I have underestimated you." Jacobs looked as if he couldn't decide if he should be worried or pleased. Snape didn't make the decision easy for him. He backed away a step and fingered his chin thoughtfully. "Tonight you have exhibited an extraordinary sense of decorum, coming to give my wife congratulations on our marriage." Jacobs relaxed slightly and started to grin in an almost charming manner. Snape took the opportunity to smile back indulgently. "I hear that not everybody has been so thoughtful as you've been tonight. You really should be commended for such... tact."

Hermione felt Harry about to speak up, but she quickly grabbed his arm to hold him back. She didn't know exactly how Severus was going to eviscerate the jerk, but she knew interfering at this point would be a bad idea.

Snape relaxed his shoulders slightly and appealed to the boy with an air of camaraderie. "In fact, I was wondering if you might help me with something." At this Jacobs did let his guard down and positively preened. "I was wondering if you would tell me why you thought it a good idea to come over here and proposition my wife in front of not only me, but the entire school?" Snape's tone had turned dangerous, and he advanced on the boy menacingly. It didn't take long for Jacobs to realize he was in very serious trouble.

"S-sir?"

Snape's voice had become a whisper so quiet Hermione could barely hear him. "Do you think me stupid, boy?"

Jacobs eyes went wide, and he shook his head tentatively.

"With words, boy!" Snape barked loudly, making half the people around jump.

"N-no, s-sir."

"Do you think I'm blind?" Snape asked, once again barely audible in the silent hall.

The boy shook his head again, looking about ready to pee himself.

"Were you aware that the woman you were so kindly offering your services to was married?" Jacobs nodded minutely. "To me?" A cowering nod followed.

Snape backed up and crossed his arms, looking at Jacobs and his cohorts with utter disgust. "Ten points from Ravenclaw," he paused long enough for all the Gryffindors, though especially Harry, to tense in objection before adding, "for each word said to me, and twenty more for each word you said to my wife." Snape sneered nastily. "I suppose for your House's sake, I'll be generous, though, and only make it one thousand points from Ravenclaw."

The boys nearly fainted, then Jacobs did the silliest thing Hermione could imagine. He looked up to the staff table for support from Professor Flitwick, Professor Dumbledore, Professors McGonagall, Sprout, Vector, Hooch, or any of them. Professor Flitwick simply looked at them very disappointedly. "Twenty more points for being so stupid as to imagine you'd receive help from your Head of House. You're a Ravenclaw. You should know better." The boys wilted visibly, but they remained where they were until Snape shot them a look that very clearly said, 'Get out now while the going is good.'

Hermione felt a smug look taking over her face, realizing that having Snape for a husband might have some benefits besides the sex. Then he turned to face her.

He looked murderous.

"As for you," he said, still barely audible, "I expected better from you than to willfully and maliciously spread rumors. A hundred points from Gryffindor, and a detention which we will discuss in my office right NOW!"

He stepped back and stood there in his domineering pose, glaring at her. She felt her face redden; she was both embarrassed and furious that Severus was treating her like this. It would have been bad enough in private, but in the Great Hall for everybody to witness it was damn near unforgivable.

She opened her mouth to speak, but she stopped as he raised an eyebrow mockingly. She knew then that if she said anything, he would have no compunctions about verbally lacerating her in front of everybody, their marriage be damned. It made her stomach sink to confirm he thought so little of her.

Screwing her mouth shut and clenching her jaw, she bent down to pick up her bag. She felt Harry stiffen at her capitulation, but thankfully he stayed silent, probably due to Ginny. When she stood up, she found herself looking at the receding image of her husband as he walked to the doors in his usual stiff manner.

She was tempted for a moment to sit back down and ignore his demand, but she knew that would only make things worse. Everyone would stare at her like they were doing now, and as it was, it was very uncomfortable.

Without a word to her friends, she raised her chin and followed Snape with as much dignity as she could. The hall was silent as everyone watched her take the long walk; even the teachers were watching her. She kept her head high and expression closed. There was no need for everyone to see how angry she was, nor make this a public battle.

Once the door to the Great Hall closed behind her, however, she looked around and didn't see him. She stopped her progress and mulishly leant against the wall. If he had assumed she would follow his unfair orders without a thought, he was seriously mistaken.

After a minute, she heard his sharp footsteps coming from the dungeon stairway. When his head appeared, she noted with some satisfaction that he was furious.

He stood by the stairway and beckoned her with a finger, which she looked at pointedly, then met his eyes and raised her eyebrow curiously.

"Hermione," he hissed dangerously, "when I ask you to do something, you are to do it. Now come to my office."

"No," she said raising her chin a little further in defiance.

"What?" he snarled and started toward her.

"If you ask me to do something, then I might choose to comply, but as it is, you are ordering me around, and I respectfully refuse."

Snape's face paled with rage. "Respectfully refuse, madam?"

Hermione nodded, jaw still clenched. "Yes, although if you make an issue of it, I imagine it won't be respectful for much longer."

"At this point, you have surrendered your right of refusal. Now come!" he said, grabbing her wrist and pulling her forward with a jolt. It took only a moment before Hermione found her balance and her wand.

"*Incendio!*" Hermione shouted aiming her wand at Snape's sleeve. He dragged her forward two more steps before he felt the fire reach his skin. Letting go of Hermione with a yelp, he quickly extinguished the flames, and then he turned to her with his wand drawn, snarling with rage. Hermione was prepared though and already had her wand aimed at him. She felt as angry as he looked.

"How dare you hex me?" he whispered angrily.

"How dare you treat me like that?" she replied.

"Deserving respectful treatment went out the window when you started those completely unacceptable rumors!"

"Why would I start ANY rumors about you, me, or us? Not only do I have to deal with you, but I have to live in this school, too!"

Snape opened his mouth to reply when he was cut off by a voice by the front doors.

"Severus, *Hermione*. The two of you are settling into married life swimmingly, I see."

"Stay out of this!" Snape and Hermione shouted in unison. Neither bothered looking at Lucius, as they were still busy glaring furiously at each other.

"No, I'm afraid I must interrupt. After all, Severus, if you harm my intended, I will be extremely displeased. As it is, I find it quite rude how you stole not only my idea, but my bride."

"I won't even pretend to understand the twisted way your mind has been working lately," Snape spat at Hermione, going back to their argument and ignoring Lucius. "You've made it clear enough that..." He shut his mouth with a snap, cutting off what he was going to say. "You've made it perfectly clear in the last week that your senses have gone on vacation. For all I know, this is your way of ensuring you emerge from this scandal unscathed."

"Severus, I expected better from you. Especially after all the years of support and understanding I sent your way," Lucius drawled, anger starting to filter through his calm facade; his fingers were tapping the head of his cane.

"Unscathed?" Hermione said, astonished. "Unscathed? Do you have any idea how demeaning it is to walk down the halls feeling like every bloody boy in the school is undressing me with their eyes? And how the hell would starting rumors about myself help me stay *unscathed*?"

Lucius started pacing on the outskirts of their argument, tapping his cane on the floor in annoyance. "Severus, I am very disappointed in you, and--"

"*Not now*, Lucius," Snape snapped. "*Your* respect doesn't suffer," he continued to Hermione.

"You really do have a twisted definition of respect if you think that's what the students are feeling toward me right now! Any real respect I had *earned* was shot to hell when you made me look like an errant first year in there!" she yelled, pointing toward the Great Hall.

"Severus, I am *trying* to speak with you," Lucius snarled.

"And I am *trying* to understand how she can defend hexing me?" Snape shouted, still looking at Hermione.

Slipping his right hand into his pocket, Lucius growled, "Sev--"

"I am your WIFE! I am not your student. I am not a house-elf. I am not someone you can push around and intimidate. How you behaved in there disrespected me on a basic level, and I will not stand for that! You *will* treat me as an equal, or I *will* leave you!"

Lucius brought his wand out and aimed it in Snape's direction. "Severus, will you kindly shut the harpy up so I can kill--"

"**STUPEFY!**" Snape and Hermione shouted in unison, pointing their wands in Lucius' direction without taking their eyes off each other. The spells hit him squarely in the chest, the force of which threw him back several feet. He landed awkwardly at the doors of the Great Hall, narrowly missing the feet of Professor McGonagall.

Hermione and Severus lowered their wands and looked at each other a moment longer, realization of what they had been doing, and where, sinking in. Slowly, as one, they turned to look in the direction of the Great Hall.

Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall stood in front of the doors to the Great Hall in exactly the same angry pose with exactly the same powerful energy crackling off them. Their mouths were both turned down in identical scowls.

"Professor Snape!" McGonagall exclaimed after what seemed to be an eternity. "I am appalled, shocked and appalled, by your utter lack of decorum! I have not been so ashamed of you since you took that Mark!" Hermione saw Snape wince slightly at McGonagall's tone and felt a small wave of sympathy for him. McGonagall was almost as scary as Dumbledore when angry.

"And you, Mrs. Snape! Mrs. Snape, I expect you to look at me when I'm talking to you!" Not recognizing her married name, it took Hermione a moment to register that McGonagall was talking to her.

"Sorry, Professor, and, er, it's Ms. Granger. I'm not changing my name."

"What?" Snape exclaimed.

At that moment, Dumbledore started coughing, and Hermione heard him hurriedly disappear into the small room beside the hall. McGonagall, meanwhile, just stood there looking between Hermione and Severus. Her face was inscrutable, but Hermione felt the disapproval emanating off her.

She looked back at her husband. "I said I'm not changing my name. I like it. I see no reason to change it," she said, raising her chin defiantly. She was almost amused by the shocked and outraged look on Snape's face, but she was too angry to care about his feelings on the matter. She had not gotten married to give up her independence, quite the opposite, and he knew it.

A snort brought both of their attention back to McGonagall who still stood there, but was having a hard time keeping her composure.

"Whatever be your names, I strongly suggest that next time you argue, you do it somewhere you won't collect an audience!" Professor McGonagall then squared her shoulders and left as quickly as she could while levitating Lucius' unconscious body toward the infirmary. Hermione thought she heard another snort from her, but by then her attention was on the mass of students staring at them. Some were on the stairs, some were peeking out of corridors, but most were crowded around the doors of the Great Hall, which had been thrown open at some point without her noticing. All of the students were staring at her.

Hermione had known breakfast would be bad. She had known everyone would be looking and gawking at her. She had known they would talk, and there would be rumors. But this, this was mortifying.

"Madam Sn-- *Ms. Granger*, may I suggest we continue our dialogue elsewhere?" Snape's cold voice broke through her embarrassed haze, and suddenly the expressions of all the students hit her. They were looking at her with complete awe. For some reason, she found this hilarious and quickly suppressed a giggle. She turned to face Snape and found him giving her the hardest glare she'd ever seen, which only added to her humor.

Stifling her giggles, she smoothed her features out and said, "Now, Severus, dear, this really isn't the best time to make me laugh. I thought we had serious matters to discuss."

She felt the tension in the air rise as everybody held their breath, waiting for Snape's reaction. Snape stood there looking at her. The glare hadn't receded, but there was something else as well. Something she didn't recognize. She waited for a few heartbeats, then raised her eyebrow just slightly.

The collective gasp from the crowd could barely be heard over Severus' laugh. They watched in amazement as he took a bemused Hermione by the hand and led her off into the dungeons, his chuckles echoing through the corridors.

Severus was still chuckling when they reached the entrance to their rooms and still holding Hermione's hand. She was shocked silent by his behavior; he had never shown his humorous side to the students before. Even the headmaster didn't know of him laughing much. However, Hermione couldn't figure out for the life of her what he found funny about the situation or even her flippant response.

She followed along passively, trying to figure out everything, including what she was feeling. She was still really angry at him embarrassing her in the Great Hall like that, but his laughter was calming her down a little, reminding her that Severus wasn't a complete bastard. On top of that, she was berating herself; she should have seen the outburst coming. She should have foreseen everyone's reaction since breakfast. She realized now that she should have paid attention to her instincts and stayed out of sight. It might have saved her and Severus both a lot of humiliation.

Severus' laughter faded slightly when they arrived at the door, and as he whispered the password, something in the tone of his voice made her realize how mortifying the situation must be for him. Her anger faded quite a bit as she put herself in his shoes.

Not that he was going to get away with treating her like that.

She felt him leading her forward again, and as she came through the door, she decided she might as well be the first to apologize; it had been partially her fault, after all.

He released her hand as soon as they entered their chambers and turned to close the door.

"Severus, I--" The words died in her throat when he turned to face her again. All the laughter was gone from his face, replaced by white rage.

"Yes, *darling wife*?" he asked in a tone that sent cold shivers down her back. "You were going to say something?" He took a step forward, and she instinctively backed up. "Perhaps you were going to tell me how you aren't to blame for the rude and lascivious things being said about us." He took another step toward her, and she shrank back

further, becoming frightened of his anger. "Perhaps you were going to accuse me of marrying you just to shame you as you so richly deserve!" She tried to retreat further as he stepped forward again, but she found herself against the wall. She swallowed nervously as he put his arms on either side of her body, effectively pinning her in place, then leaned in. "Perhaps you were going to tell me why the fuck you married me if you think so little of me."

She swallowed again and shook her head in what was little more than a shiver, then flinched as he pounded his fist against the wall beside her ear. "God damn it, Hermione!" he cried, then shoved himself away from her to start pacing the room, shooting her dark looks every few steps.

"How could you do that to me?" She started to protest as her heart rate normalized, but he held up his hand. "How could you be so naïve as to give them a chance? I thought you had a brain in that head of yours!"

"What was I to do?" Hermione asked, exasperated. "Avoid them for the entire day and let their imaginations really run away with them? If I had, they would be talking about how you have me chained to the bed, doing anything from whipping to raping me! I admit that I made a couple of bad decisions in the words I used this morning, but what was I to do, stay silent?"

"**YES!**" he roared forcefully. "You were to go to the hall for breakfast, sit there, look pretty, healthy, and blithe, and say absolutely *nothing*. Then they would talk, yes, but after a while, they wouldn't have anything to go on, so they would lose interest! With your few ill-chosen words, you have effectively guaranteed the entire school population will talk about us for the rest of the fucking year!"

Hermione closed her eyes as she accepted the truth of what he was saying. The extent of her stupidity crashed down on her; she was thoroughly ashamed of herself. She felt him still staring at her angrily, and suddenly her knees started shaking under her weight. She slid to the floor gracelessly and rested her head on her knees.

"Hermione--"

She held up her hand to him, feeling as though she would break if he berated her further at that moment. He sighed, and then she heard the slight scrunch of the sofa as he sat down.

Taking a deep breath, she looked up. He was sitting on the couch in nearly the same position she was in: leaning forward and resting his head in his hands, tugging on his hair.

"Severus, I'm sorry I've created a monster of this mess. I *wasn't* thinking. I was flustered and nervous, and you know how my mouth runs off when I'm nervous." She exhaled shakily. "I really am sorry I've made this situation worse, but you have to admit that them thinking me a sex goddess is better than a lot of things they could think. At least this way you're the envy of all the boys."

Snape snorted mirthlessly and shook his head and looked up at her hollowly. "What good is it to be the envy of schoolboys when I don't have the respect of my wife?"

"Severus, I--" she stopped, not knowing what to say.

He snorted again. "Of course words fail you now," Hermione barely heard him mutter. They sat there silently for what seemed like hours, each in their own world of thoughts.

"Do you really think I don't respect you?" Hermione finally said, breaking the silence. He looked up at her slowly.

"I haven't seen any evidence of it beyond the token respect given to all authority figures. I foolishly led myself to believe that you were different from the other students because you did show at least a modicum of interest and admiration." He snorted yet again and then said dully, "I suppose I should apologize for putting you in such an untenable situation. If I hadn't believed in you, I never would have offered my hand."

Hermione drew in a breath as if she'd been slapped and blinked rapidly to try and ward off the tears forming. She looked down again, wanting to hide her tears of shame from Severus.

She sat there for a moment, trying to manage her emotions. Finally, in a small voice, she asked, "Why *did* you offer to marry me?" and looked up.

He raised his head and stared at her wordlessly. There was something in his look that was forbidding, but she pressed on anyway.

"I need to know if you married me out of an obligation. I... I just need to know."

He continued staring at her for a few more moments, and she steeled herself not to squirm under his gaze. "And what if I did? Would knowing my motivation help you deal with this situation in a more respectable manner? Would the knowledge make you more mature?"

She bristled at his tone. "It very well might, as at least then I could be secure in the truth of the matter. Right now I feel like I'm being pulled five different directions, three of them by you. Last night you went from making me feel like a goddess in your eyes to a helpless little girl who can't do anything right. Then today you go out of your way to make me look, feel, and act like a stupid first year." Hermione sniffed, hating the fact that she was becoming emotional. She wanted so much to be mature, cool and logical; bursting into tears would not help that image. "I need to know how you see me so I can at least define your expectations of me and react accordingly."

Snape's eyes were glittering strangely as he responded, "Why do you think I offered?"

"Don't try that trick again, Severus. I need to know your side. I need you to trust me on this."

His face contorted into a hard sneer. "Trust you? You tell me I need to *trust* you on this topic? Why should I do so? My question is as valid as yours, or are you going to accuse me of not respecting you again?"

Hermione felt affronted. "I'm not going to accuse you of anything right now. I want to know where you're coming from *before* making any more judgments."

"And why don't you trust *me* on this? My question relates to this problem as much as yours, if not more. And frankly, I think you have shown remarkably little trust in me so far. Far less than I've shown in you."

"Trusting my life in your hands isn't enough?" Hermione huffed.

"Not when I'm your last resort."

Both of them were breathing hard in their ire as they tried to stare the other down. Slowly, the context of Snape's words were placed in Hermione's mind, and she promptly blanched.

"You heard everything?" Snape almost smiled as he nodded languidly, though the expression was far from pleasant. "Well, then, you see why I need to know the truth."

"And do you not see why I need your answer first? Or am I to simply trust you blindly in the face of everything, *your words included?*"

Hermione looked away, clenching her jaw. She knew he deserved an answer, but she didn't want to give it, as much for his sake as hers. Finally, when she couldn't bear the feeling of his eyes boring through her any longer, she yielded.

"I don't know. When I married you, I wanted to, and did, believe that you loved me. I thought that was the only logical answer to your actions. But before that, and since

Madam Pomfrey's attack last night, I couldn't see why you would try to save me if it didn't involve a life debt or such. I *hope* your reason was you loved me."

"But you *believe*?"

Hermione clenched her eyes closed, forcing a thin stream of tears to flow down her cheeks. She whispered, "I don't know."

"You mean that you don't know whether I view you as a desirable woman or an annoying child? You don't know whether I love you or can barely stand you? You honestly believe I'm capable of being your suitor simply to appease my sense of honor?"

Hermione, eyes still closed, nodded. A second later, a crash snapped her eyes open, and she saw Severus standing with his back toward her, panting. The tea service lay shattered against the far wall, presumably where he threw it.

After a minute, his breathing evened out, and she heard him speak, though his voice was barely audible.

"If that is what you believe, then I should be honored you deigned to even consider me." He turned around, and although his mask was back in place, he couldn't conceal the fury radiating from his eyes.

"If you hold such high esteem of my character as to believe that I, the heartless git of the dungeons, could willingly give up my peace and solitary existence for the sake of honoring a debt, then I should take my hat off to you and bow," he said acidly, then mockingly acted out his words.

"Stop it, Severus," Hermione half pleaded, half demanded.

"Stop?" he asked, walking toward her. "Stop what? Stop telling you how indebted I should feel for your dubious attentions? Stop offering you the respect you so little deserve?" He stood towering over her, and then in one smooth motion, he grabbed her hands, pulled her up from where she'd been sitting, and pressed her tightly against himself. "Or perhaps you mean I should stop talking," he said menacingly, then stooped to kiss her roughly, holding her arms as he ravaged her mouth. This kiss held none of the desire she had felt with previous kisses, none of the love. This was pure, unadulterated malice, and she felt ill from it.

Rallying herself, she forcefully pushed Severus away from her and watched as he calmly wiped his mouth. Though tears of anger and humiliation were blurring her vision, she could still make out the smug look on his face, the dark triumph in his eyes.

Before he knew what was happening, she had slapped his cheek as hard as she could, then was out the door, not daring to wait for any reaction he might have.

Avery's Notes: Another day down (mostly). The next chapter covers the rest of Monday, then it's on to the last day before the week from Hell is over.

Thanks go to my lovely beta SW_69, though any mistakes you see are mine.

Southern's Notes: I am chewing on my nails over here. Yikes! Bring on the next chapter!

IV

Chapter 4 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Warning: This chapter contains a scene of sexual assault. It isn't terribly graphic, but if you are sensitive about that sort of thing, please don't read. If that's the case, email me (through the [contact] link) and I will send you a friendlier version (this chapter is kind of vital to the plot).

IV.

Hermione reached the stairway out of the dungeons before she realized she didn't know where to go. All she knew was that she wasn't going back to Snape. Not only was she afraid of him, but she was also afraid of what she would do to him.

She quickly ran through her options, realizing with a grimace there weren't many that were viable. She could go to the Great Hall to meet up with Harry and Ginny, but most likely they had already left for the common room.

The common room was an option, but she didn't trust herself to stay quiet if questioned. As angry as she was with Severus, she didn't really want to badmouth him to the student body. He was her husband, after all, for better and for worse. The other bad thing about the common room was that come bedtime she would have no place to go, unless she wanted to explain her situation to all and sundry.

The library was attractive, but, again, where would she go when it closed? She went through her mental inventory of all her favorite nooks and crannies in the castle, and kept coming up with the cold, hard fact that there wasn't a single place for her to sleep, other than her marriage bed.

Hearing someone coming down the stairs, Hermione retreated to the nearest door and, fortunately, found it unlocked. Quickly and quietly, she looked around and, finding nothing but a dark, barren room, closed the door to the corridor. She breathed a sigh of relief as she heard the footsteps fade without pausing at her door.

She waited until the footsteps were no longer audible, then reached for the handle and pulled. And pulled again. The third time she pulled on the handle, she put all her weight into it, but the door stubbornly remained where it was.

Panting slightly, she let go, then withdrew her wand and cast an Alohomora without any results. She tried again, this time using a stronger unlocking spell she'd come across the previous year, but it didn't work either. Growing concerned, she wracked her brains for some spell that might get her out of the room.

Casting a Lumos, she looked at the hinges, but they seemed to be in good order; they hadn't squeaked when she'd entered the room. She then peered at the latch, but couldn't see any problems there either. Extinguishing the light, she cast an unsticking charm, a greasing charm, a release charm, and finally a purging hex, all to no avail. Cringing at the destruction she was about to wreak, she backed up a few feet and said, "*Reducto*," but nothing happened.

She cast the Lumos spell again and studied the door, trying to discern the problem. The longer she looked at the door, however, the more it looked like a perfectly ordinary wooden door, which should open when prodded.

Shrugging, she stepped up and tried the handle again. It didn't budge. Crossing her arms in frustration, she turned around to lean on the door, hoping that she had just imagined it opening into the room. Unfortunately, the door offered her back sturdy support.

Letting her shoulders droop, she gave up and slid to the floor. All she could hope was that someone would walk by fairly soon and that they would hear her.

After taking five minutes to sulk fruitlessly, she raised her wand to illuminate the room a little better. It was fairly odd to find a windowless room that didn't have torches lining the walls, but it seemed like every other dungeon room otherwise: dank, dark and moldy.

Sighing, she got up to examine the door once again but, finding nothing, she returned her attention to the room itself. There was a pile of straight-backed chairs on one side of the room, and on the other side there was a bulky form covered with a dingy cloth. Edging forward, she examined the cloth-covered object, noting the years of dust that had accumulated.

Lifting the dust jacket slightly, she peeked underneath to see... nothing. Whatever the cloth was covering seemed to be invisible. She tentatively reached out to touch whatever she couldn't see, but by the time her shoulder was even with the edge of the cloth, she still couldn't feel anything. Invisible and intangible. Interesting.

Intent on examining the non-object closer, she was lifting the cover when she heard voices from the corridor. Not caring who was on the other side, she ran over and started pounding on the door, yelling for help.

Pausing for a moment, she waited to see if the people had noticed her, but all she heard were indistinct voices getting fainter.

"No!" she yelled, pounding on the door again. "Don't go! I'm in here! Please, help me get out!" She kept pounding on the door for a minute more, but she knew, even before she stopped making noise, that the people were gone.

Frustrated, she kicked the door as hard as she could and promptly yelped, sitting down gracelessly to hold her damaged foot. Tears of pain filled the corners of her eyes, and as she tried to soothe her toes, images came to mind of slowly dying -- withering away in the horrible, cold, damp, stuffy room. She tried to shake those thoughts away, but a quiet voice inside her head pointed out that at least she'd be reunited with Ron if she were never rescued from the room.

Shoulders slumping, she gave in to her tears, crying as if it would heal her soul, as if it would give her the strength to continue living. She cried as if her life depended on it. And, in a way, it did. After several minutes of shameless self-pity, the sobs quieted to sniffles, and the sniffles gave way to sighs. Slowly, Hermione came back to reality, and her mind started working on solving her problem.

"Okay," she muttered to herself. "I'm in a locked room without a window and no obvious way out. It would seem hopeless, except that there aren't any skeletons in here. I really doubt I'm the first person to find myself trapped in here..." She stood up, wincing when she tried to put weight on her foot, but started exploring the room again, this time more methodically.

"There has to be an exit somewhere," she murmured, inspecting the walls carefully. She went over the walls, feeling for any inconsistencies or abnormalities in the rough stone surface. She felt along the cracks, painstakingly looking for junctions that might open under pressure revealing the hidden exit she knew had to be there somewhere.

Thirty minutes later, she had reached the cloth-covered non-object again. By this time her foot was hurting so fiercely that she was nearly dizzy, so she sat down beside the object.

Carefully, so as not to cause any more pain, she unlaced her shoe and gently pried it off, wincing as her swollen toes nudged the tongue of her shoe open a little further. Making a face, she took a breath and gently eased off her sock, rolling it down her calf and stretching it open to allow her heel through. Her breath hitched slightly when her swollen red and purple toes were revealed. She reached out to touch her big toe tenderly, whimpering when her toenail rocked independent of her toe, lancing her entire foot with pain.

Closing her eyes, she tried to concentrate on the spell to fix the damage, but was interrupted by a slight click. Eyes shooting open, she looked immediately to the door, which was, by some wonderful miracle, opening to reveal the dimly lit corridor beyond.

Tossing aside her sock, she made a joyful noise and scrambled to her feet, trying to ignore the fresh wave of pain and nausea as she put weight on her injured foot. Staggering slightly as she took a few steps forward, she was looking down at her feet as the person at the door became visible. When she looked up, she staggered again, but this time backwards.

"Malfoy!" she gasped, fear stabbing her in the gut at the animalistic way he was smiling. He was watching her carefully, and she knew he was prepared for any movement; he would not be caught off guard this time.

She stayed as still as she could, forcing herself not to step back as he started moving forward. She kept her eyes on Lucius, particularly on his wand hand, but she also kept an eye on the door as he moved into the room.

"My dear Hermione, you have no idea how pleased I am to find *you* were the one tapping upon the door."

"Tapping?" Hermione twitched forward when Lucius turned back toward the door, though somehow never taking his eyes off her. "That's all you heard was tapping? I was pounding, and don't close the door!" She tried to run forward as she saw the door swing back to the threshold under Lucius' guidance, but stumbled when her bare foot hit the hard floor. Not able to catch herself, she fell to her knees and looked up just in time to see the door click shut, enclosing the room in darkness once more.

Anger surging through her, Hermione quickly raised her wand, prepared to cast a protection charm should Malfoy throw a hex.

"That was incredibly stupid, Malfoy, even for you." She listened intently as he started moving, his shoes making small clicks on the stone floor. She had hoped he would cast a Lumos or conjure a light of some sort, but it seemed he preferred the darkness.

"My dear, is that any way to talk to your rescuer?"

"Rescuer, my foot! Try opening that door now that it's closed."

She heard faint taps as Malfoy walked toward the door, then stillness. She then heard him mumbling some spell, and she surreptitiously cast a Shield Charm just in case he wasn't directing his wand at the door. When she heard him emit a slightly frustrated sound, she knew he had found she was right.

"See?" she said, knowing how childish she sounded, but well beyond caring.

"Well, this is not exactly the way I envisioned this evening turning out, however, I don't see it as the travesty you do. After all, I'm locked in a room with Mrs. Severus Snape. My dear friend's new wife. Now I have ample opportunity to get to know you, to understand why he was so intent on persuading me you would be a bad match for me."

"Severus had to persuade you that we'd be a bad match? I'm flabbergasted you thought otherwise," Hermione said, gritting her teeth painfully before adding, "Oh, and it's Ms. Granger."

He chuckled. "Oh, you underestimate your charms, my dear. I'll admit that I haven't always viewed you as so... delectable, but since poor Narcissa died, and this *awful* law went into effect... Well, I've had to keep my eye open for someone suitable, now haven't I?"

"Oh, Lucius, I'm afraid you misinterpreted my astonishment. I have no doubts about my desirability," Hermione lied, adopting a sickly sweet tone. "I was astonished you thought *yourself* worthy of me."

Hermione's retort was met with five seconds of dead silence. Then Lucius laughed politely from a different part of the room.

"Yes, Severus was right, wasn't he, when he called you 'spirited.' It is a shame you chose him. It would have been a delight to find out exactly how feisty you are."

Hermione shivered slightly at the underlying tone in Malfoy's voice. She continued to be vigilant. "Trust me, Lucius, *dear*, when I tell you there's no way I would have chosen you. Ever."

"Hmm. Tell me, my dear," Lucius continued after a few moments of silence, "how are you and Severus getting along? Did you resolve that lover's quarrel? I would hate to think the marriage is suffering so soon. But of course, choosing unwisely--"

"I'm surprised you are being so solicitous about our marriage, Malfoy. I suppose I should be touched that you're so interested in a match you forced."

Silence once more, then, from a bit further away: "A match I forced, you say? You give me too much credit. It was all Severus' idea."

Hermione frowned at what he was implying. "How so?"

"Why, he was the one who pointed out how lonely life would be without a partner to share it with. He sent me a rather moving condolence letter after Narcissa died, you see. He emphasized how a life not shared was a life wasted."

"At first I thought he was simply being a bit unpleasant, you know, his usual self, but that night as I lay in my empty bed I realized how true his words were. Narcissa had been my light. Not only had she been there for me through the dark years, but she had also bore me a beautiful and loving son to continue our line."

"I realized how fortunate I had been and how unfortunate Severus was. Here I was selfishly mourning the loss of my wife when Severus was pining away in the dungeons, not even aware of how miserable he was. I realized I had to help him. I had to help *all* the lonely souls who didn't know what joys they were missing."

"So you came up with the idea of forcing marriage on us all?" Hermione said, trying to decide whether she should be impressed by his story or appalled by the idea that there might be some truth to what he was saying. If Severus' maliciousness had started the entire mess, she thought homicide might be justifiable.

Lucius laughed. "No, no, no. I merely suggested to a few friends that what this world needed was a bit more love. That all we needed was to find a way to help everyone get along a little better."

Hermione huffed, galled by the man who was wandering around in the darkness. "And forcing us into marriage and having children is a very good way to do that. I don't see any disagreements or resentments occurring because of it."

She heard Malfoy snort quietly. "Just because you were hasty in your decision and are unhappy as a result doesn't mean that everyone will suffer horribly. After all, there's only one Severus Snape in this world."

"How true," Hermione said. "After all, if there was more than one of Severus, then there would probably be other doppelgangers as well, and not everyone is as good as Severus is."

Malfoy laughed. "I don't know that I have ever heard anyone describe Severus as 'good' before. It is refreshing to know that not everyone reviles my friend."

"No, not everyone reviles your friend, Malfoy. After all, he's proved his worth time and again, unlike other people we know."

Lucius snickered. "Your attempts at subtlety are really atrocious, my dear. If you plan on living amicably with Severus, you will have to work on that."

"Thank you so much for the advice, Lucius. I'm so glad to know you care."

"Of course I care, my dear. After all, my friend may have bested me at my own game, but I would hate to see anything happen to you. You are much too... dear to let wither away."

"You're too kind," Hermione said, her voice flat. She was vaguely surprised when Lucius didn't continue the conversation but let the silence fall upon them like a blanket. Hermione received no comfort from it, though. A silent devil was somehow much more threatening than a talkative one.

The silence continued for what seemed an eternity, though it was probably only a few minutes. Hermione felt herself getting drowsy, although her foot was throbbing fiercely and her bum was nearly frozen. When her head started falling as she drifted off to sleep, she realized that talking with Lucius was her only option because falling asleep around him would be unforgivably stupid.

"Why is there that ridiculous clause in the law forcing Muggle-borns to give up their powers?"

"Forcing Muggle-borns to give up their powers? Where did you get that ridiculous idea?"

"The... I have it on good authority." She mentally chastised herself, wondering if it was indeed safer to keep talking to Malfoy when she was so tired. She had almost let it slip that Dumbledore had been leaking information.

"Well, that 'good authority' is exaggerating wildly," Lucius drawled.

"Oh? How so? What does the clause actually say?"

"I believe the clause you are thinking of is the one that educates our society on the finer points of Muggle culture and heritage. What better way to educate everyone than by example? And who is better qualified to give such an example but those who were raised in Muggle society? It's all to foster better understanding and cooperation."

"Wouldn't it be better to force those who have never been exposed to the Muggle lifestyle to live by example, as they're the ones who would benefit the most?"

Malfoy laughed again. "That may be so, but I know from experience that very few purebloods would agree with such reasoning, and it would put us back to square one."

"Ah, and those of us with Muggle backgrounds will be more than happy to show all of you purebloods how noble it is living without magic. We'll be thrilled, I know."

"I don't see why not. It gives you the opportunity to show us a different view, change our prejudiced ways. What could be more exciting and noble than that?"

"Coaching and helping you figure out the complexities of Muggle life through your own experience comes to mind."

"But we purebloods would wither away without our magic. We would be fish out of water, floundering around in desperation and drowning in the experience."

"Better than drowning by dunking," Hermione muttered under her breath. Audibly, she said, "If it were voluntary, and anyone could choose to live without their powers, then it might be rewarding. As it is, it is just another way to subjugate the scapegoats of society. After all, without Muggle-borns, all purebloods would be able to live in perfect harmony, right?"

Lucius gave another overly polite laugh. "Ah, to have the clear sight of youth again."

"I was being facetious," Hermione spat, knowing he was goading her, but losing control of her temper. Pain always made her cranky.

"Really?" he said in mock disbelief, his voice coming from the direction of the door as he continued moving around. "Hmm. I'll have to remember that children are capable of rudimentary forms of sarcasm."

"Oh, shut it, Malfoy," Hermione snapped.

She was surprised, but relieved, when he complied, until a few seconds later when he spoke from only a few feet away. She hadn't heard him moving.

"Now, now. That isn't very polite. Maybe I was wrong about you and Severus being so poorly matched. Maybe you do have some *common* traits."

Shivers went down her spine knowing he was close to her, too close.

After a few seconds, Hermione quietly asked, "Why me?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand your question, my dear." Lucius said, a hint of humor underneath his drawl.

"Why did you target me?"

"You have a rather high opinion of yourself, don't you?" Lucius drawled, no longer concealing his amusement.

"Well, I don't believe your story about wanting to spread love throughout the world, and all evidence seemed to be pointing at you focusing your attentions on me."

He chuckled. "Yes, to the egocentric, all things seem to point toward themselves, don't they?"

Hermione bit her tongue, trying to keep her temper. He chuckled ominously. "I'll take your silence as assent," he said quietly, still too close for Hermione's comfort.

"I remember Severus when he was near your age -- so full of himself and his power," he said, confusing Hermione for a moment by the change of topic. "As I remember, he enjoyed showing off how dangerous he could be; he had no subtlety at all. Clever? Yes. Powerful? Yes. Versatile? No. His manner and technique was so crude it advertised his humble origins more than his ratty clothing did.

"Ah, but he was a fast learner when he came under my tutelage. I opened the world up to him by teaching him, refining him."

Great job you did, too, Hermione thought bitterly. Suddenly her breath caught in her throat as she felt something brush her arm. She nearly jumped when she felt his breath on her ear.

"I gave him the world," he whispered menacingly, tickling her ear lobe. She cringed, trying to retreat away from his mouth, but found herself leaning into his hand, and then, all of a sudden, she was unable to move at all.

"Ah, ah, ah..." he admonished darkly. "I'm not finished yet." She felt him leaning toward her, plucking the wand from her immobile hand, and she mentally shuddered as his hand cupped her shoulder, his fingers caressing it idly. "Allow me to explain thoroughly.

"I gave Severus an education in manners and introduced him to all the right people. I made sure he had the tools necessary so he wouldn't have to struggle once he was beyond the confines of Hogwarts. I gave him a bright future, and what did he do?" Lucius had found her ear again and was nuzzling it with his nose as he whispered more and more softly. "He threw it all back in my face. He took everything I taught him and used it against me.

"At first I thought I was just being bested by my apprentice; he's a very ambitious fellow after all. I decided to enjoy the competition; nothing keeps one on one's toes like a rival. He and I vied for the Dark Lord's attention and approval with increasing ferocity. I never took the game seriously as I was confident of our Lord's favor. Intelligent, powerful and skilled Severus may be, but even under my tutelage he was unable to grasp the finer points of socializing. He has always had an uncanny knack for... annoying people. I was confident the Dark Lord would continue to view me as more valuable as I was far more adept at maneuvering in society's more important circles."

Hermione wondered if he was even aware of her presence. His explanation was becoming more involved than she ever would have expected. Lucius' fingers were traveling down her arm, constantly drawing mindless circles with his nails. Suddenly he stopped.

"Then the Dark Lord was felled by Potter. The game we played became a matter of freedom. As you probably know, I came forward immediately as I was guilt stricken by what I had done under the Imperius Curse. I know some people doubted the validity of that claim, but I was a devoted father and seemed an upstanding member of society, so they gave me the benefit of the doubt. Several others followed my lead and with my corroboration were freed as well."

The circling fingers resumed, meandering up and down her upper arm carelessly.

"I thought Severus would follow my lead as well, so imagine my surprise at finding that Severus had been Dumbledore's spy! He had played his role so well that even Dumbledore believed him innocent. Severus outmaneuvered me quite thoroughly. I was impressed. As soon as it was agreeable to do so, I called upon him as a friend rather than a protégé. Our meetings were infrequent, but we kept regular contact by owl.

"Then the Dark Lord returned. Suddenly, Severus and I were thrown back into our friendly competition, but the dynamics had changed. We were now playing as equals."

Hermione was listening raptly, though she was wondering why he was being so careless with what he told her. His confession would be very damning when they were rescued. Then it hit her: He had no intention of letting her live. This was his evil overlord speech. She had to figure out how to get away before he finished.

"At first it was fun. We both had to prove our loyalty all over again, and the game became who could be the most creative in currying favor. I must say I was once again impressed with Severus' displays of ingenuity. He had, in the course of his teaching, honed his talent for annoying people into an art of manipulation."

Though still listening to every word, Hermione had started going through every nonverbal spell she knew that might release her, but without her wand nothing worked. Suddenly Lucius stopped and smoothly wrapped his hands around her arms. He leaned forward, and she could feel his breath tickling her ear again.

"You should have seen him, Hermione. Smooth as ice, he would guide people into his traps, none of them noticing until the damage was done. The Dark Lord took immense pleasure in watching Severus, as did I. There was no trace of the awkwardness he had as a teenager. He had honed his malevolence into a weapon and a powerful weapon at that. He had become a master of undermining confidence, and the Dark Lord saw that it was good."

She was momentarily distracted from her meditations when his movements started again, only now his entire hand stayed in contact with her flesh. Her stomach started roiling as his motions became more intimate, not confined to her arms, but roaming over her shoulders, neck and collarbone. She immediately worked to control her nausea as she didn't know what would happen if she threw-up while under a Petrificus Totalus.

"It was fun until two years ago when the Ministry fiasco occurred. I was imprisoned, and soon I found from correspondents that the Dark Lord was vastly displeased with me. My correspondents told me how Severus had used his considerable talents to undermine my position with the Dark Lord.

"Severus effectively made that cold, miserable rock my safe haven. If I escaped back to the fold, the Dark Lord would have killed me. Meanwhile, Narcissa was writing telling me how Severus was keeping the majority of the Dark Lord's wrath away from her and Draco. She praised Severus for his nobility and loyalty. She told me how much we owed him. How much she owed him."

Lucius' voice had turned very bitter, and he almost spat the last phrase. Hermione briefly wondered whether Narcissa was yet another witch Severus had bedded, but quickly pushed that thought away.

"It was a very long year and a half before Potter killed the Dark Lord again. I spent that time carefully reconstructing everything Severus had said and done over the course of our brotherhood and came to a most startling conclusion: The Dark Lord had been deceived. Severus had successfully lied to the Dark Lord and was betraying us all to Dumbledore."

Lucius paused again, both his hands and speech, as if figuring where to go from there.

"When I figured out Severus' true allegiance, I realized the only way for me to hope for freedom was to betray the Dark Lord and my brethren. I wrote to Dumbledore requesting an interview, which, by some miracle, he granted.

"When he came, I told him my decision and answered every question he asked. I told him everything I knew. *Everything.*"

He squeezed her shoulders almost painfully to emphasize the word.

"I even told him of Draco." If his mouth hadn't been so close to her ear, she wouldn't have been able to hear that confession. She was startled at how much pain there was behind it.

"The meeting went well, but I was to be disappointed. I expected immediate leniency. I had hoped to be freed from Azkaban, even if only to be put under house arrest, but there was no such outcome. I was told that if my information proved useful, my case would be reevaluated after Voldemort was defeated.

"I took the news with my usual grace. I told Dumbledore that it didn't matter whether I was free or not, I just wanted to help rid the world of the Dark Lord. I don't know whether he believed me, but in the end it didn't matter.

"That meeting took place two months before the end. The day after Potter *saved the day*, I received a letter from Draco.

"He wrote to tell me how Narcissa had been gravely injured. It seems that news of the interview with Dumbledore was somehow revealed, and so when things started going wrong for the Dark Lord all the blame was placed upon my shoulders. He decided the best way to take his anger out on me was to attack Narcissa. I'm sure he would have enjoyed killing Draco more, but unknown to me, my son had defected and was well protected.

"Dumbledore had refused to place Narcissa in a safe house because she was still an active Death Eater, but he had assured me she would be watched. By the time Dumbledore's men had figured out Narcissa was being attacked, she was in a very bad way.

"Draco placed all the blame of his mother's torture at my feet. It seems that Severus thought it his duty to tell my son about my conversation with Dumbledore. He told Draco how I valued my own freedom more than the life of him or Narcissa, never mind that Draco had turned from the Dark Lord before my confession. In Severus and Draco's mind, I had knowingly condemned Draco since I didn't know he had turned.

Draco told me, in no uncertain terms, how he no longer considered himself my son. I had betrayed him and killed Narcissa. That letter was the last communication between us."

Lucius was silent, and Hermione was mildly torn. There was no mistaking the pain behind the words, but at that moment Lucius' hand was resting perilously close to her breast. If he had been sitting across the room and hadn't literally made her a captive audience, she might have felt sorry for him.

Lucius sighed and seemed to shake off his melancholy, for his next words were devoid of emotion.

"I hadn't been sure until then, but I could not see any other motivation for Severus telling Draco about my betraying him than because Narcissa was attacked. My faithful correspondent had told me how Severus and Narcissa were frequently seen together. She was known to visit his residence at all hours of the day or night. She was always vocal about defending him if someone dared to besmirch his honor. Before Draco's letter, I had excused all of that as Severus maintaining his station and placing himself where he could collect the most information.

"Draco's letter cleared my illusions, and I saw it for what it was.

"I must admit that I would have gladly torn Severus limb from limb at that moment, but seeing as I was still incarcerated, that would have been difficult. As it was, my case went up for review a week later and by then my jealousy had waned. I realized I was being frightfully disloyal to think Narcissa would betray me like that."

Hermione guessed from his tone that was not his real conclusion.

"Happily, the review found my sentence drastically reduced and nothing more serious than a rather large fine imposed." Hermione mentally snorted, knowing that all of Lucius' belongings and wealth had been confiscated. "My information had turned out to be vital." Hermione inwardly snorted again, knowing his information had led to two arrests, nothing more. "I was released a week later.

"I was very excited to be free, and my first thought was to visit Narcissa. She was still alive at that point, though only barely hanging on. Sadly, I was only able to visit with her twice. She died the night after my second visit.

"I was completely grief stricken. I had lost everything in the world. My wife was dead, my son had disowned me, my friends, with the exception of Severus, were either behind bars or dead, and all my respect and social standing had been stripped away.

"I seriously considered killing myself at that point. I don't know what stayed my hand besides my foolish pride, but I decided to sleep on it. That night I had a dream. I dreamt that Narcissa came down as an angel and whispered words of love and devotion. She... Well, I needn't tell you all of the dream, but I woke up convinced of her faithfulness. It was that morning that I realized how much I owed Severus for his constant friendship.

"That morning I met with some friends and discovered the wizarding world was in a bit of an uproar. My friends were bemoaning the fact that the Mud-ggle-borns were blaming the purebloods for the entire war while the purebloods were blaming the Muggle-borns and how the birthrate was down and this and that. That's when the idea struck me. Not only would a law enforcing marriage and procreation help unify the Wizarding world, but it would also help Severus out of his lonely lifestyle. My friends thought the idea brilliant.

"So you see, my dear, dear Hermione, you had absolutely nothing to do with the creation of the law. No, you were merely the cherry on top."

Hermione somehow repressed an urge to gag as Lucius flicked her nipple deliberately.

"I hadn't even thought about you until that detention I witnessed. You remember that, surely? I didn't know Severus had a detention to oversee, and I had stopped by to chat with him, reminisce and such. When our chat was interrupted by your detention, I decided that was no reason to cut our visit short."

A weight lifted off Hermione's shoulder at that revelation. She'd thought Snape had deliberately invited Lucius to the detention as part of her punishment. She thought it had been his sick joke to let Lucius ogle her and not do a ruddy thing. She was extremely relieved to know Severus wasn't that sadistic.

Her relief was short lived, however, when Lucius' voice dropped an octave as he wrapped his arms around her, grabbed her breasts, and said, "And I was very glad he agreed.

"Once I had seen you, I remembered you. I recalled you from the Department of Mysteries. You were the clever one. Vivacious. *Spirited*. During that detention, I couldn't help but stare at you. I noticed, however, that my staring made Severus uncomfortable. I assumed it was because of my recent loss, so I thought to reassure him Narcissa was still in the forefront of my mind."

Lucius brushed her ear again with his lips and whispered, "It didn't hurt that talking about her might get me a little sympathy from you."

Hermione wished she was able to move, if only to shudder. Any sympathy she might have felt for him in the past had fled when he started touching her without permission. Fondling her while she was under the Full Body Bind encouraged only antipathy. She knew she needed to break free of the spell. She didn't know how she'd do it without her wand, but there had to be a way, somehow.

His hands were moving around her front again, abandoning her breasts as he headed lower. Hermione wracked her brain for something that could help her, trying to think hard enough to block out the feeling of his hands as they crept past her navel. But when he started speaking again, nothing could block out his words.

"I decided to ask after you a short while later, see what his reaction was. If he had been interested in you, then I would have happily backed away. After all, my main goal was to relieve him of his solitude, and if he had a witch in mind already, well, that would make everything so much easier, wouldn't it?"

"But when I inquired, he was disdainful. I was left with the distinct impression that he thought you were the most obnoxious person on the planet."

Tears of disappointment joined the tears of humiliation as his fingers reached her pubis and started curling under while his other hand slid back up her torso. She cursed Lucius again and again in her head for putting her through this and for good measure cursed Severus as well. If he hadn't been such a git, she wouldn't have run off, making it unlikely she'd be in her current position.

"Seeing as he wasn't interested in you, I felt free to consider you mine," Lucius continued. "I imagined what I would do with you, the lovely Hermione Granger, once the law was passed and you accepted my proposal. I imagined how you would feel against my skin, how you would react to my touches and caresses. I wondered how long it would take before you became devoted to me." He stroked her through her robe, and she pushed the bile back down once again. She was afraid he would just tip her over and rape her right there, but then his hand stilled.

"I became enamored with you. It was silly, irrational and unlike me, but I wanted to feel you around me. I wanted to make you *scream*."

Hermione desperately wanted to point out she was screaming. She was screaming for him to stop, screaming for someone to help, screaming at herself for being so stupid as to lock herself into a room, and she was screaming for not hexing Malfoy on sight when he opened the door.

"But then Snape kept bringing you up in conversation. He kept trying to dissuade me from pursuing you, which made me think I had misread him yet again. When I pushed him for a solid reason to abandon you, he told me you were the one who cursed Draco." His voice was no longer a seductive drawl, but had turned into an ugly growl. "You, who helped foil our simple plans and sent me to prison; you, who helped make me pond scum in society's eyes; you were the one who cursed my only son into a gibbering wreck. It was only then, my dear, that you captured all of my attention."

Hermione winced, knowing it would do her no good to explain, even if she were able to, how sorry she was for cursing Draco. She'd had no excuse to lose her temper over a mere insult, even if it had been in poor taste on Draco's part to criticize Ron in such a way after his untimely death.

He removed his hands from her, and backed away, lighting his wand as he did. Hermione wasn't sure whether she should be worried or relieved by his retreat, but was answered soon enough when he pushed her rigid form over so that she lay there awkwardly, one leg standing straight up while the other was bent close to her chest, leaving her rear completely vulnerable. She would have rolled onto her side due to gravity, but he gripped her upright leg and held her steady. He then leaned over her bent leg so she could see his cold eyes glinting in the dim light.

"The fact that you're Harry Potter's friend is delectable. The fact that you're a Mudblood is *delightful*. And while giving Severus a dose of his own potion is most gratifying, what makes taking you absolutely perfect is that you thought yourself powerful when you tore my son apart, but you can do nothing at all to stop me now, proving, once and for all, that you are nothing. You are a nonentity. You are a mere pawn in the game Severus and I play. You, *my dear*, are nothing more than a Mudblood."

He retreated out of her sight once again as she struggled futilely with the bonds of the curse. She exerted her leg muscles, trying to kick out, trying to flail against his oncoming attack, but she remained frozen. Not about to give up, though hopeless that she could escape, she continued trying to coax her muscles into moving. She was surprised when his light went out, and suddenly the curse was gone.

Her tensed leg shot out connecting with his thigh and forced him back a step or two. It wasn't much, but it was all she needed to roll over and scramble to her feet. The adrenaline was coursing through her system at such a rate that she didn't even feel her injured foot screaming in protest.

She moved away as quickly as possible and nearly panicked when she felt a tug on her robe, fearing he was going to yank her back into his grasp. Inspired by the fervent wish to escape, she quickly plucked at the buttons holding her robe together, and slipped out of it just as he tugged forcefully. Hermione sped forward until she met the wall, then turned and held herself ready.

She waited for his next attack, listening with all her might for some indication where he'd be coming from. After a few seconds of dead silence, she began to wonder what he was planning and shivered accordingly. Her eyes were adjusting to the darkness, and she kept them peeled for any sign of movement. When he still hadn't made a move or a sound after half a minute, she wondered if something was wrong. When nothing happened for a full minute after that, she became aware of the breeze on her bare arms.

A breeze?

Deciding to risk the vulnerability, she turned around and blinked. She wasn't in the room anymore. From what she could tell, she was in a very cramped, rough, cave-like corridor. At least, she hoped it was a corridor. There seemed to be a very dim light coming from around a corner, and she hoped that the space continued beyond that.

Stumbling in the near darkness, she limped forward cautiously. She nearly fell over when she scraped the side of her injured foot on a rocky outcropping and wished she had her wand so she could heal the poor appendage.

Forging onward, she cursed silently as her head scraped a jutting rock. Soon, she was around the corner and sighed in relief. In the distance she could see a small torch. It illuminated the corridor just enough for her to navigate around the rocks.

Unfortunately, the corridor seemed to be getting smaller, though the path was wider and had become quite smooth. She crept forward, worried less about scraping her foot than dodging the jutting rocks by her head every other step. She was so busy avoiding hitting her head that she didn't see the cliff's edge until she'd already stepped over it.

Avery's Notes: First off, let's all give Southern a huge round of applause for putting up with my inability to use commas properly. She deserves a medal for that. Or chocolate. Chocolate might be appreciated more. ;-)

Secondly, I have revised chapter 2 slightly. Poppy's attitude makes a little more sense with the subtle changes I made. Sorry for the goof!

Thirdly, I posed a question on my LJ that I'll repeat here. I originally said this would be a "short-ish" sequel, and it still has some hope of being "short-ish" if I wrap it up in a couple of chapters. (It is possible.) Or I could be a complete and utter liar and make this 10+ chapters longer.

So far the responses I've received have been for "longer," but I'll put it to you, dear readers, as well. Longer (more angst, character development, tension and general pigheadedness) or shorter? Same end result either way. Thanks!

Southern's Notes: Yikes! I "love" this Lucius...if you know what I mean. Wow. Very nice.

V

Chapter 5 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

V.

Hermione woke up feeling as though she'd been used as a squeaky toy by a sphinx. Groaning, but carefully not moving, she let herself adjust to consciousness, wondering why she was so very sore. Her whole body was unhappy, her legs were both achy and stung as if Crooks had scratched her repeatedly, her back felt bruised and stiff, and her head... her head felt like a bomb waiting to go off it was throbbing so much.

She kept her eyes shut, wondering how her teachers would react if she decided to simply take the day off. She would go down to the infirmary for a proper excuse, but she didn't feel like she could walk that far. She thought that eventually Harry or Ginny would look in on her, wondering why she wasn't around, and they would be able to explain to her teachers that today would be a loss for her.

She quickly thought of the classes she would be missing, trying to remember if there were any important assignments due or tests being given. The only thing she remembered she needed to do was to find a way to stop that ridiculous bill from becoming law. For some reason she felt as if she were running out of time. She didn't know why she felt that way, but she had a niggling suspicion that Lucius Malfoy had something to do with it. She frowned slightly and grimaced from pain as her head throbbed harder for the movement.

Lucius Malfoy... She remembered him watching her intently during that detention, but that was no reason to assume that the end was near.

Then everything came rushing back. The entire week, from the meeting in the Headmaster's office to the wedding on Sunday to her fleeing Snape's quarters to Lucius Malfoy nearly... And then her fall down that impossibly deep hole. She'd tried so hard to stop herself, but she had only ended up with scraped hands and knees.

She opened her eyes and was not surprised to find herself shrouded in darkness.

Sighing as heavily as her bruised ribs would allow, she set her teeth and sat up, groaning as every muscle in her body, as well as quite a few bones, objected. After what seemed an eternity, she found herself sitting upright, trying to catch her breath. She also was trying to quell her nausea as her head started spinning and pounding even more fiercely. The word concussion flitted through her mind briefly, and she decided it might be a good idea to rest for a little while.

After only a few moments, her sight had adjusted, and she found herself in a very dimly lit cavern. Wondering how she could see anything at all, she slowly looked around and found an opening in the cavern walls that was less dark than the surrounding area. Hoping that it might be a sign of inhabitation, she was just about to call out for help when the idea struck her that the bowels of the castle would be a fantastic hiding place for a colony of unregistered vampires. She decided silence might be the better option until she had gathered more information.

She slumped in on herself, trying to ease some of the more serious pains. When she found herself drowsing, she decided it would be best to get moving. She had no idea where she was, but she figured she would never, ever be found where she currently sat. She didn't have much hope for being found at all, but she assumed that by moving she'd at least keep her mind off of her unfortunate fate.

Sure enough, as she slowly levered herself upright all thoughts but one fled. The pounding in her head turned into a jazzy drum solo. She quickly lowered herself back to the ground, hoping to staunch the urge to throw up. She'd never been that fond of jazz.

After a few minutes, the drum solo receded into the background noise it had been before. Relieved, though far from happy, Hermione tried to think of what she could do.

She was seriously tempted to just give up. All she would have to do was lie down and go to sleep. Most likely she would lapse into a coma and slowly starve to death. It would be a relatively easy way to die.

And it wasn't like she had a wonderful life to look forward to. Although she was a medal-bearing war hero, she was married to a man who didn't give a damn about her, her peers thought she was a floozy, and she was a failure at adulthood. She couldn't even stop crying long enough to attempt at being mature!

She tried not to sniffle.

It's so very tempting to just give in, she thought. If I died, then Severus would no longer be in such an untenable situation, I wouldn't have to worry about Malfoy, and everyone would be perfectly happy. Well, except for Harry. And Ginny. And McGonagall might miss me, too.

Her mind drifted back to Harry again, and she realized with a sharp pang (that had nothing to do with her body) that she needed to survive for him. She hadn't been the only one to lose a best friend when Ron died. If she died too, he would have lost his other best friend. Unable to do that to him, Hermione set her jaw, resolved to make it out of there.

Instead of trying to stand again, she decided that crawling might be the way to go. Slowly, she put one hand in front of the other, gritting her teeth each time her raw hand connected with the ground, no matter how gently. Her hands almost distracted her from the pain in her foot as she dragged it along, finding it took less energy to bear the constant pain than to lift her foot and deal with the sharp shock when her it reconnected with the ground. The difference was negligible, but every bit helped.

After only a few feet, she stopped to rest, lowering herself until her head was resting on her forearms. Still uncomfortably queasy, she rested until she started drowsing again, then starting crawling again. Continuing that pattern more times than she could count, she finally reached the small opening in the cavern wall. Completely exhausted, she knew she needed to rest, so instead of staying on her knees, she managed to get herself into a sitting position and gingerly leaned against the wall.

As she sat there, her mind drifted to Severus. As she found out more about him, their situation became more and more puzzling. He ran hot and cold so quickly that she didn't know what to expect from him. He had seemed genuinely concerned when he'd rescued her from Remus and genuinely contrite the next day when he saw the bruises. And then, on their wedding night, when she'd started crying, he hadn't scoffed or yelled but had held and soothed her. And then the sex... It had seemed so tender. He had seemed tender.

But then, only a few hours later, he'd been calling her a fuck-wit and trying to push her away. She could easily have blamed that on him being so sick, but why hadn't he warmed up later? Before the whole Great Hall fiasco, that is.

And how could he accuse *her* of being immature when *he* tried to use his power as a teacher to control her? She knew he was mortified and insulted by the gossip going around, but that didn't give him permission to act like such a dick. Or he could have at least saved such behavior till they were in private.

She wasn't sure why, but the memory of Ron sulking at the Yule Ball suddenly popped into her head. Ron had been such a prat that night, but that was only because he'd had feelings for her he wasn't willing to admit to. The thought of comparing Ron and Severus seemed ridiculous, even if their behavior was a bit similar. Severus had sent the message loud and clear that she was nothing more than an obligation with a few side perks.

Her heart heavy with that thought, Hermione decided it was time to move again, and the resulting pain washed away the objections her logical side was trying to raise.

She somehow maneuvered herself onto her hands and knees again and started the slow process of exploring the opening. She was a bit surprised, but very happy, to find that it seemed to be a tunnel. She was disappointed, however, to find the light wasn't from torches, but from glowworms that inhabited the tunnel's ceiling.

More bothered by the unearthly light than reassured, Hermione continued her slow process of crawling then resting, though the resting was happening more and more frequently. She felt more winded after only a few feet than she had before, and it worried her. It also worried her that the path never seemed to straighten out, so she could never see what was beyond the next curve. It felt like she was going in circles - so much so that she expected to see the entrance to the big cavern again.

After what felt like hours, Hermione thought the tunnel was getting smaller. She still had plenty of room to crawl, but she suspected she wouldn't be able to stand. The tunnel still refused to straighten out, though.

It wasn't too long before she knew the tunnel was getting smaller. She was certain that if she'd had the energy to sit up in a kneeling position, she would have hit her head. A little further on she was pretty sure she could feel bit of web or something brushing across the top of her head every now and again, almost as if it was catching her hair and tugging. She tried keeping her head further down.

It was only when the tunnel had narrowed even more, so that she wasn't able to raise her head up all the way, that she noticed the light had changed. It was no longer the blue-green ethereal light of the glowworms, but a warm yellow that was reminiscent of the torchlight throughout the castle.

Hoping she wasn't becoming delirious, she forged ahead, one slow inch after another, resting frequently. Her body was numb; she was vaguely aware that she might be going into shock, but she kept moving, hoping that whatever was casting the light at the end of the tunnel wasn't going to run her over. She had made her decision and wasn't going to give up now. She was so close. All she had to do was keep moving.

She didn't know when she lost consciousness, but when she woke up, she felt worse than ever. She didn't have the strength to raise herself onto her hands and knees, so she just laid there, helpless and breathless. She closed her eyes again, not wanting to stare at the rock any longer. She tried to think of something motivating, something that might get her moving, but the sound of pots and pans was distracting her. Then she processed what her ears were telling her.

She was hearing pots. Clanging pots. Lots and lots of clanging pots.

Opening her eyes again, she exerted all the effort she could muster into inching forward, trying to see beyond one more bend, and at last she was rewarded. The tunnel straightened out and ended with a blindingly bright view into a room. Not another cave, but a room!

Relieved beyond measure, Hermione tried calling out, but found her voice was nothing more than a whisper thanks to her parched state. Trying again, she managed a very quiet croak, but it hurt more than she could tolerate to stress her lungs and throat like that. Giving up the idea of getting help by shouting, she realized her only other option was to crawl.

Still not strong enough to lift herself up, she scooted across the rough surface, thinking of how she was shredding the remains of her clothing. Slightly bemused by her random thoughts, she finally made it to the tunnel's opening and peered out.

She had been correct in her assessment; it was a room. It was, in fact, the kitchen. She watched as house-elves rushed here and there below her, charming vegetables into pots of water, making sure the ovens' fires were burning at the right temperature, squeezing cooked pumpkins into pitchers as if they were oranges and adding the spices that made the juice tolerable. She wasn't sure whether it was the motion or her concussion that was making her so dizzy.

With one last supreme effort, she edged forward enough to get her head out of the hole, where hopefully one or another elf would see her, should they look up. Unfortunately, she didn't have the strength to hold her head upright, so her head flopped over the edge, and waves of her knotted, frizzy, brown hair cascaded down the wall like furry tentacles, blocking any view she might have had.

It wasn't long before she heard a high pitch scream and felt something prickly and bendy slapping her hair and head.

"Out, out! No furry creatures allowed in here!" She heard an elfish voice squeak in between another round of slaps. It really wasn't helping her headache any, truth be told.

Knowing she had the attention of at least one elf, Hermione made the concerted effort to raise her head, only to get slapped harder.

"Ger' off," she croaked, barely audible, but loud enough that all movement, all hustle and bustle in the kitchen, stopped, and Hermione could feel the eyes of a hundred house-elves staring straight at her.

Then the whapping continued with renewed vigor.

"I's not care whether you speak or not. NO fuzzy creatures in kitchen now!" the elf squeaked again anxiously.

"I's not... I'm not a fuzzy creature!" Hermione tried to exclaim, though it came out rather weak and whiny. "I'm a student. Need help."

Once again, all movement stilled, and the only noise Hermione could hear was the burble of pots simmering on the stoves. She decided to risk looking up again and found herself looking at a very scared looking elf holding a large bristle broom of the non-flying variety. The kind of broom she wasn't afraid of, usually.

She let her head rest against the stone wall again as she tried gathering the strength to move an arm out so that she might shift her hair to the side for a better look. Before she even tried to dislodge her arm from underneath her chest, though, another high pitch squeal rent the kitchen atmosphere.

"Is that Miss Hermione? Is it really Miss Hermione, Harry Potter's friend?" She recognized that voice. Suddenly all need for worry and tension was released; she was saved.

"Hi, Dobby," she croaked, thinking that there was no better feeling in the world at that moment than being lowered from the tunnel by numerous elfin hands. She soon found herself lying on the floor looking up at two dozen large, curious eyes against a backdrop of huge ears, all quivering nervously.

She tried to smile, but she was too tired to manage anything more than a grimace. Her attention was drawn to Dobby when he started wringing his hands.

"Dobby is glad Miss is here and all right. Miss' been missing for so long everyone was afraid Miss ran away or was kidnapped by evil Mast- Malfoy. Everyone has been most upset. Mr. Harry Potter looked for you on his map, but even he couldn't find you! I's then told to look for you everywhere in the castle, but I's failed them." Here Dobby paused and seemed to wilt, giving Hermione a chance to interrupt.

"Dobby, cou' ge' s'me water, pl'se?" Hermione's throat was so dry it was painful to talk.

Dobby perked up, looking somewhat alarmed, relieved and hopeful all at the same time. "Of course, Miss! Dobby will get you water. Dobby will be right back!" And with that he disappeared, Disapparating his way out of the growing crowd of curious elves.

As soon as he was gone, Hermione heard another familiar voice say, "Is Miss all right?"

By sheer force of will, Hermione looked over, and, to her surprise and delight, found a very clean, well-adjusted Winky surveying her. She tried to smile at the elf, but again was only able to manage a small grimace.

"Winky!" she whispered. "Look good."

Hermione wasn't sure what emotion it was that quickly passed over Winky's features, but soon she found the small being kneeling beside her.

"Is Miss all right? Miss doesn't look all right. Miss looks like Miss needs help."

Hermione relaxed and nodded slightly, feeling a sense of relief now that she was in the small, capable hands of the Hogwarts' house-elves. She looked up at Winky who was observing her closely. Winky was just about to say something else when Dobby returned.

"Here, Miss," he said while magically propping Hermione up so she could drink from the glass he was holding. She sipped at first, slowly moisturizing her throat until she was able to drink more greedily to satisfy her overwhelming thirst.

After drinking the entire glass, Hermione felt marginally better. She felt like she might survive in any case. Unfortunately, she felt enough better that she tried raising herself up further and promptly found herself winded from what felt like a rib digging into her lung.

Normally Hermione liked putting on a brave front. She had not been doing a wonderful job of that the past week, but she had been trying. As she fell back onto Dobby's magical boost, Hermione didn't even think about covering up her discomfort, she was in so much pain.

While she was conscious that relaxing would be her only comfort, she couldn't stop herself from writhing involuntarily in a vain attempt to avoid the muscle spasms. She scrunched her eyes shut and gritted her teeth, trying to force her body to stop moving, trying to force her breath into a calming rhythm, trying to keep from sobbing because she knew that would only make things worse. Eventually, she was able to relax minutely, and slowly the pain started to recede.

Still panting shallowly, she opened her eyes to find all the house-elves looking at her nervously; Dobby wasn't the only one wringing his hands. Dobby was looking at her with his huge green eyes opened so wide that she was surprised they weren't popping out. She wanted to tell him to fetch someone or to take her to Pomfrey, but she wasn't about to risk talking.

Surprisingly, Winky voiced her silent request. "Dobby, go fetch Harry Potter!" Dobby straightened, nodded, and Disapparated in an instant. Hermione closed her eyes once more, though this time with relief, until Winky started speaking again, this time with a strange tone to her voice.

"Miss needs our help?" Winky asked, looking down at Hermione innocently.

Hermione nodded minutely, trying to smile once more.

"Miss needs our help, even though Miss insists house-elves be given clothes?" Hermione felt the collective gasp as much as she heard it. All the elves took three steps back from her, and they were losing their friendly demeanor at an alarming rate.

Hermione decided that, in the interests of surviving long enough to continue the fight for house-elf rights in the future, she needed to be demure on this point; she shook her head slightly.

Winky scowled down at her. It appeared she wasn't finished.

"Miss needs to make up her mind. If Miss isn't needing help, why did Miss nod when I asks her if Miss needs help?"

Hermione felt her headache getting worse again. She opened her mouth to explain, but Winky forestalled her.

"No, Winky thinks this is a clever trap. Winky knows all about you. You is a clever witch. You thinks a lot. You probably thinks up a plan where you seems in need of help, but really you's luring us innocent house-elves into taking clothes!" The other elves all took another nervous step back. They were looking at Hermione with horror mingled with revulsion and were starting to mutter amongst themselves.

"No," Hermione croaked desperately. "I'm not faking. I need help. *Please!*"

Her entreaty seemed to work, as the revulsion faded on a few elves' faces, though the nervousness seemed to have staying power. One elf, the elf that had been swatting her with the broom, took a tentative step toward her, but was halted by Winky.

"Itsy, Miss does not need our help."

Itsy looked dubious. "But we's sworn to serve and protect all of Hogwarts. If Miss asks for help, we needs to give her help!"

"Maybe you isn't aware of who Miss is. Miss is the one who hid clothes in Gryffindor three years ago. Miss thought it better for us to leave Hogwarts, to have no masters to serve! Miss thinks we is *overworked!*" That last accusation brought another round of gasps from the gathered elves, and the muttering became louder.

Hermione could see everyone's expressions darken as their eyes darted over to her prone form, and she realized then just what a precarious situation she'd landed in. Itsy was the only one who looked at Hermione without rancor, though she was obviously nervous.

The mutterings were quickly becoming ominous, and Hermione looked to Itsy for help.

"We cannot harm her!" Itsy yelled over the growing noise. Everyone stopped talking for a moment, looking first to Itsy, then at Hermione, and then back to Winky, who didn't seem to be phased in the slightest.

"She's not our master to serve. We's can do anything we wishes," Winky proclaimed.

"But Master Dumbledore said we's not to hurt the students!" an elf in the background said.

"Miss is married to Mister Snape! Miss isn't a student anymore! No, Miss is special. We's going to help her like she wants us to. Miss wants us to declare our independence!" Winky cried passionately.

The crowd had mixed reactions. Some, those looking at Hermione with the most loathing, seemed intrigued; others looked more concerned, and some even looked scared.

"We's not wanting independence!" one of the scared elves said.

Winky looked at the dissenter and smiled warmly. "We's not declaring independence of Master or Hogwarts; we's declaring independence of Miss! Miss wants us to have the rights of wizards. Miss wants us to be happy! Miss wants us to refuse service if we's wanting to!"

"It's asking, who here wants to serve Miss? Who here is wanting to risk clothes to help Miss?" A grumble was rising in the crowd, and Hermione could feel the crowd's energy turning against her.

"Miss wants us to take time off! Miss wants us not to serve! Miss wants us to be *paid!*" Winky paused dramatically while looking around at the horrified elves. "Not only is Miss a threat to each of our jobs, Miss is a threat to elfish values!"

The short crowd started muttering dangerously, and soon a quiet chant had started. It only took a few seconds before it was loud enough for Hermione to hear clearly.

"Hey, hey, ho, ho, there ain't no way we's going to go! Hey, hey, ho, ho, this evil threat has got to go!"

Led by Winky, all the elves except Itsy were turning on Hermione and slowly approaching. In the back of Hermione's mind, she wondered at the change Winky had gone through, not only in demeanor, but social status, but she was quickly distracted by the rebellious elves that were closing in on her, power radiating off their small bodies as they started surrounding her.

Not only was Hermione dead tired, but she was also now afraid of saying anything for fear of inciting the elves' wrath even more. Instead, she looked up at Itsy imploringly. Itsy was rocking from foot to foot, looking anxiously from Hermione to the rallying crowd. She was nibbling on her lower lip much like Hermione was prone to doing when she was nervous or indecisive.

Finally, Itsy made up her mind; she stopped rocking and looked down at Hermione with sorrowful eyes. "I's like to help, Miss, I really would, but Winky is my roommate. I's afraid to..." Itsy tapered off, looking at the chanting crowd nervously. "I is sorry." And with that, Itsy abandoned Hermione's side, slipping away through the narrowing spaces as the other elves closed ranks.

Hermione had thought she had worn out her adrenal glands, but the fear and panic washing over her was proof to the contrary. She tried to move, aware there was nowhere to move to, but even the adrenaline wasn't enough to help her exhausted body out. All she could do was lie there and wait as the angry elves descended. Not wanting to watch the blows that were about to fall, she closed her eyes.

Suddenly, a loud pop rent the air. Hermione cracked one eye open, and to her immense relief, saw Dobby standing over her looking rather confused. His sudden appearance startled the crowd into a temporary silence.

"What's happening?" Dobby asked worriedly, looking around at the gathering elves.

"Get out of the way, Dobby. We's dealing with Miss properly," Winky said with menace.

Understanding flooded Dobby's face, and he took a quick assessment of the crowd encircling him and Hermione. Worry turned to fear and before Hermione knew it, she was floating upright, supported by Dobby's magic.

"You cannot harm Miss! We is not allowed to harm anyone!" Dobby cried, trying to guide Hermione toward the exit, even though the way was blocked. "You is going to get in bad trouble!"

"Miss is a threat! Miss has got to go!"

And then the chant started up again, the squeaky voices carrying far more threat than any Death Eater Hermione had ever met.

"Hey, hey, ho, ho, this scary witch has got to go! Hey, hey..."

There was scarcely two feet of space on any side of the endangered pair. Hermione looked down at Dobby, who took one last desperate look around, grabbed Hermione by the wrist, squeezed his eyes shut in concentration and Disapparated them away.

Avery's Notes: Huge thanks go out to Southern_Witch_69 for her amazing patience. This chapter has been a bear for her! Anything wrong you see is my mistake.

Before you repeat Canon!Hermione's favorite phrase at me, remember that house-elves~~can~~ do something like Apparation inside Hogwarts. (CoS & HBP both have evidence of it.) I'm just going to assume that in an emergency they can take a human along with them. Their existence is to serve, right?

Although I used the New Zealand Glowworm as inspiration, the glowworms that lit Hermione's way are pretty much unrelated except for the almost fake looking light they emit. For a picture of what New Zealand Glowworms [*arachnocampa luminosa*] look like en masse, check out this picture: <http://www.waitomocaves.co.nz/glowworm-caves-boat-ride/362/Bioluminescence.aspx>

Southern's Notes: I have a dang chant in my head. "Hey, hey, ho, ho, what's up next? I want to know." Poor Hermione! If it's not one thing, it's another. I hope she finds peace soon. Hehe!

VI

Chapter 6 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Warning: This chapter contains some brief uncomfortableness along the same lines as chapter 4.

VI.

Dobby and Hermione appeared in the middle of the infirmary with a loud crack that reverberated around the room. Hermione, who was still looking down at Dobby, noticed he seemed rather drained from the effort.

"Miss Granger?" an astonished voice said, making Hermione look up. It only took a moment to realize two things. One, Madam Pomfrey was looking at her as if she were the Dark Lord back from the dead... again. It was as if she'd never seen a severely injured, nearly naked student Apparate into the infirmary before.

The other thing Hermione realized was that Dobby's magic was obviously no longer holding her up because the floor was racing toward her quite maliciously. She landed with a crunch and thought she heard her nose pop. She was hurting so much she couldn't isolate any single source of pain anymore, so she couldn't gauge whether her nose was broken or not.

It didn't take long before Pomfrey snapped out of her shock and responded to her, but to Hermione, it felt as if ages had passed. Everything was so hazy; it was like viewing

life in slow motion. In the fog. With the mute button pressed.

As her body was lifted and set upon a bed, she could see, barely, that Madam Pomfrey was talking, but she couldn't hear anything besides a loud, persistent hum. She wasn't too worried about it. She was kind of relieved to get a break from one sense, seeing as her nerves were getting stretched to the limit.

She thought about it and realized she didn't feel any pain anymore. She knew her head should be hurting something fierce, but all she was aware of was that persistent hum. It was so very distracting. She decided that being distracted was a good thing at that moment.

Her foggy sight was obscured by a blue haze, and suddenly the hum was gone. Suddenly her head felt fine. Suddenly she was aware that the rest of her body was in agony. She suddenly wished for that hum to come back again.

"Mrs. Snape! Can you hear me? Mrs. Snape, you need to look at me. I need to make sure I've healed your concussion completely." Madam Pomfrey was nearly shouting, and Hermione winced from the noise. She looked at the matron and willed her to lower her voice. Now that the hum was gone her hearing was just fine.

She was surprised to find Pomfrey looking relieved when she got eye contact. The last time she'd seen Madam Pomfrey, she was pretty sure the mediwitch had wanted to strangle her, but considering her life was in her hands at this moment, she was glad to have the witch's compassion.

"Well," Pomfrey said with a sigh, "I believe I've healed all the damage there. You are very lucky to be alive, young lady!" she tutted, waving her wand over Hermione's body. Her scowl became more and more pronounced as she progressed.

"Should I even ask what happened to you?" Pomfrey finally asked after completing the scan.

"Oh, you know me. I was just looking for more trouble," Hermione quipped bitterly, though her voice was too tired for much bite. The words were enough because Pomfrey turned an interesting shade of red and pointed her wand at Hermione's chest.

Mentally sighing, Hermione reflected that baiting a temperamental person while defenseless might not be the best idea. She closed her eyes expecting the worst, but let out a breath of relief when the only spell that hit her was a Healing Charm. Soon the pain in Hermione's chest eased substantially and breathing became easier.

Without taking her eyes off of Hermione's injuries, Pomfrey said, "I must apologize, Mrs. Snape. When you Flooed me the other night, I was unaware of the law. All I knew was that you and Severus were married under highly irregular circumstances that didn't reflect well on either of you." Hermione pressed her lips together to prevent herself from saying anything antagonizing. "I assumed, judging by Severus' mood when he came by for the diagnosis, that he was not pleased to be in such a situation. And when you Flooed... I behaved in a completely unprofessional manner, and I'm sorry for everything I implied."

Hermione relaxed a little more, partly because of Poppy's words, partly because the pain in her leg was receding. Starting to feel a bit sleepy and happy, she decided that Poppy might not be so bad after all.

"Well, I would like to accept your apology, Madam Pomfrey, but seeing as I'm not Mrs. Snape, that might be difficult." Hermione watched Pomfrey for a reaction, and sure enough, Poppy went from looking confused to flustered to angry quite quickly. Before she could retort, though, Hermione winked and said, "My name is Ms. Granger now."

She had expected Madam Pomfrey to scowl and berate her for being such a smart-arse, but instead, the matron burst into giggles.

"Ooh, I expect Severus took that well, didn't he?" she managed to say between giggles. "Or have you told him yet?"

Smiling foggily, Hermione related the scene in the Entrance Hall the previous evening. Poppy laughed in all the right places, though she did frown a bit when Hermione revealed that both she and Snape had hit Lucius with Stunners. She was a Healer, after all.

After the giggles had died down to a comfortable silence, Hermione realized that she might actually like Madam Pomfrey.

"I think I'd like it if you called me Hermione," she said through a big yawn.

Madam Pomfrey graced her with a large, toothy smile and said, "Thank you, dear. And please, call me Poppy." Hermione smiled back, rather stunned at how different this confrontation had gone from what she'd expected and commented on that.

"Yes, well," Poppy said almost sheepishly, "I'm afraid you caught me at a bad moment that night. I had only gone to bed fifteen minutes before you Flooed, so I was a little... on edge, shall we say?"

Hermione giggled at the understatement. "I've never seen you react so... I don't know, so harshly before," Hermione observed as she closed her eyes, allowing the feeling of her body mending to lull her further into a relaxed state.

"I must admit that I have a bit of a soft spot for Severus." Hermione's eyes popped open, her suspicions renewed.

"You... you like him a lot, don't you?"

Poppy smiled at her. "Of course I do! He's the most challenging patient I've ever had, constantly keeping me on my toes. Keeping him healthy is damned difficult, too, especially with his retched allergies. I can't seem to find a potion that he'll tolerate for more than three treatments before he breaks out in hives." Poppy shrugged while waving her wand over Hermione's foot, righting the damage done. "It's frustrating, but the challenge is invigorating.

"Of course, getting him to submit to treatment is also fun," Poppy said, sending Hermione a wink and a sly grin, "though I don't necessarily envy you having to live with him. I'm always happy enough to send him back to his rooms after I get him sorted out."

"So... You don't, er, that is..." Hermione felt the blood rushing to her face and decided, Gryffindor or not, she wouldn't ask Poppy whether she'd had a relationship with Severus. It was just too embarrassing.

Poppy, however, seemed to know what was going through Hermione's head and started chuckling. "I'm not the only one making assumptions, hmm?" she said and laughed a little more when Hermione turned an even brighter red. "Rest easy, child. He's all yours. I'll admit that I've wished my husband had a voice like Severus', but otherwise, I'm very happy with Mister Pomfrey."

Hermione thought she was relieved, but embarrassment was overriding most emotions at that point. That and sleepiness.

"Truth be told, I feel a bit sorry for you and Severus," Poppy continued. "I'll grant that you probably have a personality to withstand his, but you two have a hard road laid out. I'm not sure I know what Albus was thinking, forcing you to make such an enormous decision so quickly. I certainly can't approve of putting you in such a stressful situation!" She sighed, adding, "Of course, if any of you had known that stupid law was going to be repealed so quickly, you probably wouldn't have put yourselves in this situation in the first place, now would you?"

Hermione hummed in sleepy agreement until the words sifted through the fog; she shot straight up and stared at Poppy aghast.

"What did you say?"

Poppy recoiled slightly from the sudden energy Hermione was exuding. "Which part, dear?" she asked cautiously.

"The part about the law being repealed."

Poppy's mouth made a small 'o' as realization sunk in. "Oh, dear, you haven't heard, have you? The evening the law was announced, a large group of protesters invaded the Ministry, and the Minister was forced to repeal the law immediately. They say it was the largest protest ever seen in the Wizarding world. I heard the Ministry was also being swamped by Howlers."

Hermione sat there soaking up the information for a moment. She had married Snape for nothing. She had placed herself in dangerous and unhappy situations for nothing. She'd nearly suffered a nervous breakdown for no reason. Dumbledore had made her worry, kept her busy researching, and then he made her give up hope for nothing? He'd recommended she make a drastic, irrevocable decision, and it was all for nothing?

Hermione was only barely aware that she was moving. She was only barely aware of Poppy's objections to her movement. All Hermione was conscious of was the rage she was feeling, and the need to find an outlet for releasing it.

She had made it halfway to the door when she found herself under the Petrificus Totalus once again, and this time she wasn't in a stable position. She started to fall forward, but was stopped by another incantation of Poppy's.

It took a moment, but soon Hermione was facing Madam Pomfrey in all her sternness. "You are in no condition to leave the hospital yet, madam. I don't care how angry you are at Severus; you need your rest right now."

She waved her wand, and both spells dissipated. Hermione stumbled forward, barely catching her balance. Before she could straighten up, she felt a firm hand on her arm and looked over to see Madam Pomfrey staring at her sternly.

"Save the tirade for later. Your bones may be healed, but that doesn't mean you're ready to face the world yet!"

Hermione tried to think through the red haze. As calmly as she could, she said, "I'm not going to go on a tirade, ma'am. I just realized that no one knows I'm safe. I'm sure Harry and Ginny are worried, and Severus might be, too," she added as an afterthought. "I wouldn't want to keep them worrying for any longer than necessary."

"That's all well and good, but I can Floo the headmaster, and he'll let everyone know. In fact, I should do that right now if I want to catch him before dinner." She let go of Hermione and headed for her office.

"Stop!" Hermione called out, a plan forming. Madam Pomfrey did stop and turned to face Hermione. "If I promise not to overexert myself, may I go down to dinner? I want to surprise everyone. Please?"

Poppy looked at her shrewdly for a moment before sternly shaking her head. "You aren't going anywhere until you've rested. You are exhausted, dehydrated, and on the verge of a complete physical collapse. You aren't leaving this ward until you've had at least eight hours of sleep and several restorative potions, young lady!"

Hermione and Poppy stared at one another for a moment before Hermione capitulated. "All right. I just wanted them to know I was okay, and it's easier to allay people's worries if you're standing before them rather than hearing it second hand."

"It would not ease their worries to see you faint dead away, and that is what would happen right now." Poppy crossed her arms and glared at Hermione repressively, using a quick gesture with her chin toward Hermione's bed.

Sighing, Hermione turned to climb into her bed when her eyes came upon Dobby lying in a cot in the corner of the room. Concerned, she diverted her course, making her way over to his bed. She felt Poppy's presence at her shoulder.

"Is Dobby going to be okay?" she asked worriedly. He didn't look good. He laid there completely limp, like a large rag doll. He was paler than usual and his breathing... She'd never noticed his breathing patterns before, but the quick, shallow breaths he was taking now didn't bode well.

"I think so," Poppy answered softly, "but he used up a lot of his energy transporting you here. Hopefully all he needs is a lot of rest, but even elves have their limits."

Hermione nodded silently as guilt washed over her. She reluctantly turned when she felt Poppy's hand gently guiding her back to her bed. She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at her feet dangling an inch off the floor, willing herself not to cry.

It seemed that she had brought nothing but trouble to everyone around her. Ron had died on a mission to avenge her. Severus had risked his life to save her from Remus Friday night, and his pride when he married her. She wished she could say she was worth the risk, but at this point, what had she given him in return? Now Dobby. Dobby who was nothing if not faithful and cheerful, always willing and eager to help. He was lying on that bed unconscious because of her.

She was so wrapped up in her self-pity that she started slightly when the bed dipped beside her and an arm draped across her shoulders comfortingly.

"Now, now, dear, don't feel too bad. He'll probably be fine. And if he doesn't make it, he'll have died saving a witch's life. That is every house-elf's ideal demise. But I wholly believe he will make a full recovery, so don't fret." Hermione nodded without looking up.

"I suggest you change into these," Poppy continued, handing her a pair of flannel pajamas. "They should be more comfortable than what's falling off you."

Hermione chuckled halfheartedly and accepted the clothes. She looked up and smiled wanly when Poppy started drawing the curtains around her for privacy. "Thanks, Poppy."

"You're welcome, dear." Poppy replied softly looking at her a moment more, then smiled and closed the curtains completely.

Hermione changed languidly; she felt as if her body was made of lead. Climbing into bed with a little difficulty, she somehow managed to drag the incredibly heavy covers over herself and relaxed down into the soft pillow.

She closed her eyes with contentment, happy to be safe, sound, and out of pain. She felt herself drifting off, enjoying the slightly dizzy feeling as her consciousness handed the reins of control over to her subconscious.

Then she heard his voice.

"Madam Pomfrey, I was wondering if you've seen Hermione. She seems to have gone missing."

"Oh, Severus, I was just about to send a note your way. She's through that curtain over there."

Hermione heard footsteps coming closer. She opened her eyes and saw a shadow behind the curtain, a perfect silhouette of a man standing there. The curtain twitched, and she saw four graceful fingers curl around the edge. With slowness that bordered on painful, the curtain was drawn back to reveal a surly man dressed in black.

They looked at each other for a moment before he smirked wickedly and stepped inside the curtained area.

"My dear, dear Hermione. You've had me worried something dreadful. I've been looking for you all over the castle. I sent everybody looking everywhere for you, but there was no sign of you anywhere. It's been most disconcerting."

Hermione cringed at his simpering tone. She would have preferred him to yell, curse, or insult her outright rather than offer her such false comfort. She tried to sit up, but found she didn't have the energy to move the blankets.

He must have seen her struggling, for he came over to her bedside and stood over her ominously.

"Are you a bit weighed down at the moment? Here, let me relieve you of this burden." He lifted the blankets off, revealing her naked body. She tried to sit up again, but found herself unable to move at all.

Severus stood there, taking in her form with his cold gray eyes, and licked his lips suggestively. When his eyes had thoroughly devoured her form, he met her gaze. His smirk grew into a cold smile that sent shivers of fear down her spine.

"Now, where were we before you decided to run off?" he purred, reaching out to tweak her nipple. She tried to struggle against his touch, but she was utterly and completely helpless. She couldn't even blink.

His hand went from her breast and wandered down her torso. Soon he was touching her below her navel, and his fingers curled under her pubis. She tried to scream as he stroked her, but no sound came out. His other hand reached over and grabbed her shoulder, shaking her. She tried to struggle, but the hand on her shoulder was insistent, and the shaking was getting firmer.

"Hermione!" he said urgently, licking his lips once more. He smiled again, and his fangs were glistening in the candlelight.

Hermione shot up out of the bed, screaming and struggling, desperate to get away from the monster she'd married. She fought wildly: scratching at whatever she could get her nails on, kicking fiercely at everything, and continuing to scream.

It took a moment before she realized the voice calling her name was Poppy's, and there wasn't a man anywhere in sight. She stopped flailing immediately and turned to look at Poppy with huge, wet eyes.

Poppy was watching her carefully, concern oozing off her. When Hermione took a deep breath and relaxed, Poppy released a sigh of relief and offered Hermione a tender smile.

"You were having a nightmare, dear," Poppy offered soothingly, stroking Hermione's forehead in a calming motion. Lie back down and relax; there's a good girl."

Hermione complied, though she was still shaking and panting with fear, adrenaline racing through her system. Poppy continued to stroke her forehead and hair in a sedate rhythm, bringing her down from her terror slowly but effectively.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Poppy said after a little bit. "I should have realized you might need a potion for dreamless sleep. I'll go get it for you right now." Poppy made to leave, but Hermione grabbed onto her hand and clung to it desperately.

Knowing she was being unreasonable and that it was only a dream, Hermione still shook her head at Madam Pomfrey and pleaded for her to stay.

Poppy furrowed her brows, but soon smiled warmly, nodding. "Of course I won't leave you, dear." She pointed her wand at the closed curtain in the direction of her office. Soon a small bottle came zooming toward them, flying neatly into Poppy's outstretched hand.

Giving the bottle a cursory glance, Poppy offered it to Hermione. "Drink this, dear. You'll not have anymore nightmares tonight."

Hermione let the mediwitch tip the potion into her mouth and swallowed the purple concoction. Almost immediately her shaking stopped, and she relaxed into the bed again, relishing the warmth that was spreading throughout her body.

Smiling up at Pomfrey lazily, she said, "Thank you, Poppy. I feel better now." She closed her eyes, enjoying the gentle thrum her body was experiencing. She was surprised she didn't feel sleepy yet, but figured she was still too wound up from her dream.

She concentrated on regulating her breathing, letting her body relax into the bed. After a minute or so, she heard Madam Pomfrey get up and leave. For a brief moment she panicked, but then her sense kicked in, and she relaxed into her breathing techniques again.

It was only a dream, after all. And it wasn't even the real Severus she had dreamed of. Lucius had attacked her, and the dream was simply using that attack as a metaphor for her current situation. It wasn't Severus. Severus' eyes were dark. It wasn't Severus. Severus was not a vampire. It was not Severus! Her mind was simply replaying everything that had happened over the last forty hours or so. She felt powerless, and that's why she'd been unable to move.

Unable to lie still, she quietly got up and started pacing around the bed, hoping that the movement would shake her feeling of helplessness.

She started analyzing her dream, rationalizing that doing so would help calm her down, but instead, she found herself thinking about why she felt so powerless. It wasn't as if her choices had been taken from her. She had chosen to avoid the impending law. On Dumbledore's advice. True, she had chosen to take his advice, but he had presented it as her only option.

It was odd; in the past Dumbledore had always erred on the side of caution and trust. He usually believed in people too much and was too late giving advice that would save so much pain and trouble. He usually sat back and observed without getting involved. Why had he chosen this time, this law, to become proactive?

She was just glad Snape had risen to the occasion. She didn't know why she had been so reluctant to consider him over Remus. Looking at it logically, Severus was obviously the better choice. They might be antagonistic toward each other for the rest of their lives, but at least she wouldn't go crazy. Or at least she wasn't guaranteed to go crazy.

She just hoped, once again, that Severus hadn't done it out of an obligation. He had done so much for the Order. Everyone had risked a lot during the war, but his job had been so dangerous. If he had ever been discovered, he would have died a horrible death. It was not fair for him to be saddled with her after all he'd done.

Then a horrible thought came to mind. What if Dumbledore had taken advantage of Lucius' plotting and planned to "reward" Severus with a wife?

She paused in her pacing for a moment and then shook her head, dismissing the idea immediately. Dumbledore wasn't that callous. It was obvious to the entire world how much Snape detested her, and if he had wanted to reward Severus that way, she was sure he could have found a more suitable candidate for him.

But, then, why did Snape show up for that interview? He said he'd been there out of curiosity, but what if the headmaster had coerced him? What if Severus had married her not out of an obligation to Ron, but an obligation to the headmaster?

She shook her head again. Dumbledore would not do that. He wasn't one for rash actions. Except for marrying her and Snape off, along with Harry, Ginny, Draco and Pansy. That wasn't rash at all.

Hermione could feel her blood pressure rising as she thought more about it. Dumbledore had been foolish to think the population of the Wizarding world would accept such an unfair law, especially after dealing with the terror of Voldemort and the Death Eaters for so long. Surely Dumbledore didn't believe that the people would bow to the insanity so easily. After all, didn't he always believe the best of everyone?

It seemed almost too convenient. Dumbledore's lack of foresight and trust, combined with the happiness weddings supposedly entailed... It seemed as though Dumbledore was never finished plotting, playing with people's lives, and futures. It was possible he'd become callous through boredom.

Hermione started seething. She suddenly felt constrained by the curtained area and peeked out to find the ward empty. She resumed pacing back and forth, unconsciously doing laps of the room while she thought.

She could see it now. Dumbledore had looked upon all his helpers with a beneficent air thinking he knew better than they did for what they all needed. He'd wanted to reward them all for their hard work, so he decided to use Lucius' revenge for his own purposes and make sure his loyal and devoted helpers were conveniently ensconced

in relationships, thus ensuring their happiness and bright future.

He played up the danger, knowing all the while that if the law did pass it would be met with outrage. He didn't deny that people would find it loathsome, but he downplayed the time it would take for a repeal. He made it seem as though there would be enough time for all of the people who were in the most danger to be propositioned, and thereby trapped.

She found herself at the infirmary door and, on an impulse, opened it and walked out. She needed more space. She wandered mindlessly and didn't realize where she was heading until the hum of students dining in the Great Hall met her ears. She frowned at the closed doors and came to a conclusion: Dumbledore had efficiently conned them all using the same techniques of manipulation he'd used on Harry and against Voldemort!

And on top of that, he'd had the temerity to twinkle merrily at her during her miserable wedding! The bastard!

Grinding her teeth, Hermione grabbed the door handles and pushed with all her might. The doors flew open and banged against the walls loudly, causing all noise and motion to pause as everybody looked her way.

She didn't care if everyone was staring. She didn't care what they thought of Hermione Granger coming into the Great Hall dressed in flannel pajamas. All she cared about was letting Dumbledore know exactly what she thought of him and his machinations.

She stormed up the main aisle of the hall and quickly found herself in front of the Staff Table. She didn't notice anyone besides Dumbledore, who was looking at her with unconcealed relief. She stood there glaring at him. Anger coursed through her, and she felt the power building around her. She was aware of her hair standing on end as the crackling energy spun about her, enveloping her in a shield of power.

And still she glared at Dumbledore. She noticed his relief was giving way to concern. She narrowed her eyes in concentration, trying to come up with the words to say everything she had wanted to shout at him, but nothing was forthcoming. She was so consumed by anger that all her words and even thoughts had abandoned her. All she could do was stare at him.

As her anger peaked, she felt a wind brewing around her, manipulating her hair into undulating strands that writhed and coiled about her like snakes on Medusa's head. She smiled grimly at the thought. As if in reaction to her smile, Dumbledore paled, and she could sense his alarm grow.

She decided that nothing needed to be said. She raised an eyebrow in a fair imitation of her husband's sarcastic expression and turned abruptly to leave the hall. The energy was still clinging to her as she moved toward the doors, and she could sense the students nearest her path edging as far away from her as they could.

She made it through the doors and willed them to shut behind her, smiling as a satisfying slam met her ears. She headed toward the staircase, her anger evaporating as she walked, but just as she reached the first stair, her head started spinning, and she noticed for the first time how shaky her legs were. She reached for the balustrade, but as her arm went out, everything else went black.

Avery's Notes: Unfortunately for you, Snape and Hermione, Spring has come, and with it a million different projects are begging for my time. Updates may be less frequent for a while. Sorry. I promise I will not abandon this fic. Honest! (Please don't hurt me.)

And huge thanks (with chocolate Easter bunnies on top) go to Southern for being a wonderful beta!

Southern's Notes: Well, that was a bit better for her, at least. The "dream" had me freaked out for a moment... until I realized what it was. I hope Snape is around in the next chapter! I want them to talk and see how he feels about all that's gone on! Take your time, dear! It's worth the wait.

VII

Chapter 7 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Hermione felt as if she was floating and falling at the same time. It was as if her body would fluctuate its gravity field. One moment she was heavy and falling down, the next moment she was weightless and the slightest breeze would lift her up. All the while, there was an intense underlying rhythm. She was aware of other sounds, but they were dull in comparison to the drumbeat.

After struggling to open her eyes, all she could see was black. In the back of her mind, she was dimly bothered by that, but the objection was so faint it was easily drowned out by the quickening beat. The rest of her was languidly enjoying the ride, not concerned at all about where she was going or what was happening.

Soon the motions evened out into a gentle rocking; she found it very soothing and rather hypnotizing with the beat. It reminded her of the dance club Ron had dragged her to before everything went to hell, except this was making her feel sleepy rather than sexy. Combining a sigh with a yawn, Hermione settled herself into her dark surroundings and was gently rocked to sleep.

She woke up slowly, gradually letting her senses give their reports. Wherever she was, it was bright. She scrunched up her eyes a little bit, not quite ready to give up the cool darkness. Meanwhile, she let her other senses work, trying to figure out the puzzle of where she was.

Even though it was quiet, she could sense that at least one person was in the room with her. The slight tingles on the back of her neck made her think that someone was watching her. She tried to relax, keeping her breathing as steady as possible; there was no sense revealing she was awake until she knew whether she was in hostile territory or not.

Quickly reviewing all that had happened, she prepared for the worst because knowing her luck, Lucius Malfoy had found a way out of the locked room just in time to kidnap her after the incident in the Great Hall.

Steeling herself to find a blond man leering at her, she cautiously opened an eye. Although her vision was blurry, she could tell the person watching her was not Malfoy. The dark, messy hair made her smile in relief, and she let her eyes drift shut momentarily.

"You're awake, then?" a voice that was definitely not Harry's said.

Her eyes shot open, and she focused more clearly on the person by her bed. After a blink or two, the sleep had dissipated, leaving her vision clear enough to make out a somewhat familiar face.

"I... Nott?"

He smirked in amusement. "Denying it won't sell your case, I'm afraid."

Hermione huffed and sent him a mock glare, but the relief of finding herself in the hospital wing made her grin. Her grin faded as the confusion mounted.

"Why are you here?" she asked rather tactlessly. Realizing how blunt her question was, she continued, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude, it's just that... Well, er..."

He grinned as she stumbled over her apology, shaking his head at her embarrassment.

"Don't worry. I know what you mean." She could hear laughter in his voice, although she couldn't decide if the laughter was at the situation or at her. "We decided that you needed to be watched to make sure you didn't do anything else to potentially get yourself killed."

"We?" she asked, frowning.

"Yeah, we. Professor Snape, Madam Pomfrey, Potter, Weasley and myself, though Madam Pomfrey was the instigator. We were all pretty worried about you last night."

Hermione continued frowning, not sure whether she should voice her confusion as it would be fairly tactless to question his reasons for being concerned. Fortunately, he continued without her needing to comment.

"Professor Snape had to prepare for classes, so I filled in for him. I wanted to see how you were anyway, so..." He trailed off, slightly bashful, and then cleared his throat. "And since I didn't want to brave the lion den to fetch Potter or Weasley, here I am."

She nodded, still not feeling any sort of illumination. The questions she had in her mind must have shown on her face, for he chuckled again. She found that it was a rather pleasant sound, although nowhere near as deep as Severus'.

"Next time you decide to show off your stupendous powers, try stopping short of using all your energy," he said with another grin.

She looked at Nott closely. "Why... I still don't understand why you care. I don't mean to be rude, but you've never given me any notice before."

His grin shifted into a bemused expression. "That isn't... Didn't the Professor tell you about...?"

"Tell me what?"

Nott suddenly looked a little sheepish, which only piqued Hermione's curiosity. She felt a grin forming, but tried to suppress it for the sake of politeness.

"Er, well," Nott said, rubbing his neck self consciously, "he got the wrong impression a couple of months ago. See, you were... I was... Merlin, I'm not sure what to tell you. If I state it plainly, it'll give you the wrong impression, and..." He stopped to sigh before running his fingers through his hair nervously. She decided to take pity on him.

"I promise to let you explain if you need to."

Nott nodded and relaxed back in his chair, though he was rubbing his neck nervously again.

"Professor Snape thought I was stalking you. Well, to be honest, I was kind of stalking you," he said, rushing on when her eyes grew large, "but it was just to get a word alone with you. I never intended any harm."

She was tempted, despite her promise, to call for Poppy, but when she looked at him, she could tell he was sincere. She also figured that Severus probably wouldn't have left her alone with Nott if he had believed Nott to be a threat. Probably.

She offered a tiny smile and nodded for him to continue.

He smiled in relief and sank into his chair a little more. "See, back in late January, I found out about the idea for the marriage law."

"Wait a moment," Hermione interrupted while he was drawing breath. "You knew about the plan since January? Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"I, well, I didn't think it was serious, or at least I didn't think it was a serious threat. Mr. Malfoy came up with the idea, and well, I thought it was just one of his sick jokes. And I assumed that even if he planned to go through with it, he wouldn't be able to afford the support necessary." He shrugged apologetically. "By the time I found out it was serious, it had already gone to committee, so I figured Dumbledore would know about it."

Hermione nodded, taking in this new perspective. So Lucius hadn't just been winding her up. She shivered involuntarily, now unsure which part of Lucius' speech had been truth and which had been manipulation.

Nott noticed her shiver and misinterpreted it. "I'm sorry. I should have known better than to bring this up. I would leave, but I think Madam Pomfrey would skin me alive if I left you alone without her permission, and she's gone off to--"

Hermione raised her hand and waved him quiet. "Don't be silly," she said, smiling gently. "I would be more upset not to know the story behind your 'stalking' me."

He blushed a bit, but bravely swallowed and carried on; his words were a bit rushed, as if he was still very nervous.

"See, my mum invites Mr. Malfoy over for tea every bloody--oh, sorry, excuse my language--every Sunday. They've been doing so since before I was born, and a little thing like Mr. Malfoy being a convicted psychopath wasn't going to stop her from continuing with tradition."

"Anyway, back in January, just after Mrs. Malfoy died, they had their usual meeting, and Mum wrote me afterwards with a bit of information. She told me Mr. Malfoy was planning a bit of fun with Mudbloods." He stopped here with a grimace, realizing what he'd just said and to whom. Hermione waved the comment aside, motioning him to continue.

"Er, anyway, she told me all about the rudimentary plans for the marriage law, probably expecting me to be amused. My father would have been." His tone was that of distaste, and Hermione remembered that this shy boy was the son of a Death Eater. It was difficult to reconcile the two ideas. "Needless to say, I was not amused."

"Anyway, by the time it was in motion, I had guessed that Mr. Malfoy was trying to revenge himself on Potter, yourself and a few others." Nott stopped, rubbed his neck and started blushing again. Hermione pretended not to notice his embarrassment, though she did wonder at it.

"Well, I figured that Potter, if he was able to defeat the Dark Lord, he'd manage to take care of himself and Weasley. Draco didn't have anything to worry about, and Professor Snape is far, far scarier than Mr. Malfoy could ever hope to be," Nott said, the last part holding a hint of pride.

"And that left you."

Hermione didn't know whether to be amused, offended, or confused. Did he have a secret crush on her that she'd failed to notice? Did he really think she wasn't capable of taking care of herself? And why did he care in the first place?

He smiled sheepishly. "I've been watching you for a while. First because you were Potter's friend, then because you were top of the class, and then because you were..." He sighed with the same look on his face that Harry had worn around her for the last few months. "You went from being a force to be reckoned with to a shell. It was..."

disconcerting.

"I didn't care so much as... as I was intrigued. To be honest, I was a little disappointed to find you were so weak. When my father died, my mum remained her usual self. To think that the person I'd been competing with was broken so easily made me question my standards. And, really, it made me think about you even more.

"Then Mr. Malfoy came up with that plan, and I realized you were... Well, maybe not helpless, but you were the one who would be the easiest prey." Nott stopped again, frowning. He suddenly looked up at her, his face earnest and grave. "I might have been disappointed in you, but at some point it occurred to me that you weren't really broken, that you'd just withdrawn a bit. And I knew that if Mr. Malfoy decided to go after you, he... you..."

Hermione shivered again, though Nott didn't seem to notice.

"I knew all I had to do was warn you, and you would figure something out."

Hermione almost snorted, remembering how useless she had been, but refrained as Nott continued. "I started looking for an opportunity to talk with you alone. But, well, you were never alone. Potter and Weasley were always close by. So, I started following you."

Some dim memory flared in the back of Hermione's mind. "That night in the corridor when Snape, er, Severus accused us of an indecent rendezvous... You weren't there by happenstance?"

Nott smiled faintly and shook his head. "No. That was my first attempt to talk with you. I'd been watching for an opportunity all week--then Professor Snape showed up.

"It's funny," he said after a slight pause. "I thought it was strange how Professor Snape was acting that night. At the time I would have sworn he was trying to get a rise out of you, but now I wonder." Nott smiled thoughtfully to himself before looking back at Hermione. "I tried a few other times, but Professor Snape always seemed to arrive just in time to interrupt. It was getting so frustrating that I tried the open approach."

Hermione blushed slightly. "Oh, I remember that. I'm sorry I was so rude."

Nott dipped his head in acceptance. "It was a lot less than I was expecting, really. I was actually rather surprised you refrained from hexing me. Of course Draco does exaggerate, especially where certain Gryffindors are concerned."

Hermione blushed a little more. Nott seemed to notice her discomfort and hurried on, a little uncomfortable himself.

"Anyway, after one or two more attempts, Professor Snape became fed up and asked what I was doing. I told him." For some reason, Nott started blushing profusely.

Hermione guessed Snape had been rather harsh on him, and he was reliving the experience. She nodded encouragingly.

Nott swallowed a couple of times. "I told him about Mr. Malfoy's plans and the impending law, and... and told him my observations about you."

Hermione was starting to worry about Nott, as he seemed to be getting redder by the moment and was refusing to meet her eye. "I told him I was prepared to offer my hand, if necessary."

Ah.

"You were prepared to save me from Malfoy yourself?" Hermione immediately asked, disbelief coloring her voice.

Nott nodded silently.

"Why?" The question was out of Hermione's mouth before her sense of etiquette caught up.

Nott squirmed a bit in his seat, as if wishing he were anywhere but there.

"I, er, I..." he began, but stopped and sighed heavily.

"I'm sorry, Theodore. That was a tactless question. Forget I asked that."

Nott shook his head slowly, though he still looked very uncomfortable. "You do tend to ask the pertinent questions," he admitted, giving her an admiring look.

Hermione was floored for a moment. He was attracted to her intelligence? Ironically, she didn't think before blurting, "I doubt Professor Snape would agree."

Nott looked at her strangely, and it was her turn to blush. He shrugged. "I don't dare conjecture about Professor Snape's thoughts," he said, but continued observing her closely.

"I, er, that is..." Hermione stuttered, but stopped when Nott waved the subject aside.

"Don't worry. I won't infer anything. After all, you are one witch I do not want to annoy!" he joked.

Hermione bit her lip to keep from saying anything further; she'd said more than enough already. When he winked playfully at her, however, she couldn't help smiling a little bit. They both chuckled a little, remembering the previous evening's display, and their laughter petered out, leaving a companionable silence neither chose to interrupt.

After awhile, Nott said, "I'm not really sure why."

Hermione was a bit surprised he was returning to the previous topic.

"I suppose I, well..." He sighed again, but he continued before Hermione could cut him off with a change of subject. "You set the bar. I've been competing against you for nearly seven years now, and well, somewhere in there I started wondering who you were, who you are, behind the grades. I was curious."

"Marriage seems an awfully drastic way of finding out what a person's like, don't you think?" Hermione teased, wanting to lift the tension again.

He laughed but was rubbing his neck again. "I suppose so, but better than finding out at the funeral," he said with a wry grin.

She smiled grimly, conceding his point. "So, why didn't you, er, offer?" she asked after a moment.

"Oh. Professor Snape objected. He, er, he explained the flaws in my plan to me. He seemed to think Mr. Malfoy might not take it kindly if I interfered with his plan."

Hermione stared at Nott, mind whirling. Theodore would have been an option had Severus not interfered. That didn't mean she would have chosen him, necessarily, but another option would have been nice.

Oblivious to her roiling emotions, Nott suddenly grinned and added, "He promised that he'd find someone suitable to save you."

Hermione could have growled.

Nott finally sensed her mood change and asked, "Is everything okay?"

"No," she replied angrily, calming herself when she saw Nott retreat skittishly. "I'm sorry. I'm not upset with you. I'm just angry because... I'm not angry at you," she finished lamely.

Understandably, Nott looked confused. "Am I missing something?"

"Yes, but please don't ask. It's... I'm not comfortable discussing it."

Nott nodded acceptance but looked uncomfortable as Hermione tried to rein in her anger.

How dare he manipulate my life like that! Hermione thought. Snape playing with her the previous week had been bad enough, but warning others away from her was too much. An awful thought crossed her mind.

"Did you get invited to the meeting last Tuesday?" Hermione asked, startling Nott. He nodded, offering her a half smile.

"Yeah. I was happy to hear Professor Snape took my request seriously, but was sorry I had given Dumbledore my excuses when Blaise came back from the meeting telling us what a spitfire you were, confronting Professor Snape as you had. He was impressed. He'd never thought you were worth a second look before."

Hermione snorted. "Well, I imagine his orientation had something to do with that."

Nott looked at her quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"Blaise is gay... isn't he?"

Nott shook his head slowly, bemused. "Not to my knowledge."

Hermione furrowed her brows, concentrating on remembering her interview with Blaise. She'd received the distinct impression that he had been there only on Dumbledore's request. She distinctly remembered him implying he wasn't interested in girls.

Hermione exhaled forcefully, as if someone had punched her. "That *bastard!*" she muttered under her breath, a smidgen louder than she intended. Nott's eyebrows shot up, and he regarded her curiously.

"Why did you think he was gay?" he asked with amusement.

"Because he gave a damn good impression of it at the interview! He made sure I knew he was there only because he needed to be in Dumbledore's good graces!"

Nott's bemused expression intensified. "I wonder why he did that."

"Oh, I have no doubts as to why!"

Nott was starting to look alarmed. Hermione tried to calm herself down but thoughts of Severus going from candidate to candidate trying to scare them off kept hacking away at her efforts.

"Blaise can be a bit of a prankster. He loves giving people the wrong impression of himself. He thinks it's great fun to keep everyone guessing. Maybe he got called away before he could come clean?" Nott queried nervously.

"Oh, I expect Blaise wasn't about to recant the impression he gave. What did he tell you about the interview?"

"Er, that you weren't interested."

Hermione harrumphed angrily, but was startled when Nott started pleading.

"I know Blaise can be a bit of an... a pain, but I wouldn't take it personally. If he had a good reason, then..." A look crossed Nott's face as he put the pieces together. "Oh."

"Indeed," Hermione spat, anger lacing the word.

Nott looked like he was about to say something, but at that moment the curtain was pushed back to reveal Harry and Ginny. Nott shut his mouth with a snap and got up, looking warily at Harry before turning back to Hermione.

"I expect there's a misunderstanding in there somewhere, Hermione," he said, adding, "I may call you Hermione, mightn't I?"

The request was just absurd enough that Hermione's mood cracked a little, softening her features. "Of course you may. It is my name after all."

Nott smiled, gave her a short little bow, before turning to Harry and Ginny, giving them each a respectful nod. "Po--Harry, Ginny," he said, much to Hermione's surprise. She was just as surprised to see Harry giving Nott a smile back. Ginny was smiling as well, though it seemed to be somewhat melancholy.

The three of them watched in silence as Nott left. Harry sat down in the chair while Ginny motioned for Hermione to scoot her legs to one side of the cot.

"So," Ginny said casually, "you seemed a little upset at dinner last night. Was something bothering you?" Hermione snorted. "So?" Ginny pressed when Hermione hesitated. "What was all that about anyway?"

"Er, well, I had just found out that the marriage law was repealed, and I guess I didn't take the news very well," Hermione hedged. Ginny gave her a look, and she relented, telling them what led to her storming the Great Hall. By the time she finished, Ginny was laughing, and even Harry, who had been looking oddly pale and tense, was smiling.

"Madam Pomfrey said something about a paradoxical reaction to the sleeping draught, but maybe she had something up her sleeve the whole time," Ginny joked. "She could have given you the wrong potion, I suppose. Maybe an anti-inhibitor or something?"

Hermione laughed and shrugged. "I doubt it. She examined the bottle before giving it to me, and I doubt she'd pretend to make up and be friends just to lower my defenses."

Ginny and Harry chuckled. "No, I doubt that's the case," Ginny said. "She was furious when you were brought in last night. Shocked and furious."

"She refused to leave you alone in case you woke up and decided to leave again," Harry said, smiling. "Ginny and I took the first two watches until Snape was free. And I guess Nott took over for him at some point."

Hermione nodded as she paused. "What's the deal with you and Nott anyway? You seem to be on good terms very suddenly."

Harry and Ginny looked at one another first before looking back at Hermione. "Well, he did put a bit of effort into catching you last night," Ginny explained. "It's difficult to be rude to someone who's just saved your best friend from a nasty head trauma."

"He caught me?"

"Yeah," Ginny said, nodding. "He even started to carry you up here before Snape came and claimed you."

"Claimed me?" Hermione asked, not sure whether she should be amused or offended. It seemed that was her reaction to most things where Severus was concerned.

Ginny rolled her eyes and scowled. "You know what I mean. He probably decided that as your husband it would be more appropriate if *he* carried you here, rather than some random teenager, especially the way all the boys were acting on Monday."

Hermione raised her hands in submission and nodded. "I know what you mean; it's just the way you said it made it sound like I was a lost article of clothing or something equally insignificant."

Ginny snorted. "You might have been lost, but judging by the way Snape reacted, you are anything but insignificant to him," Ginny said.

"Oh?" Hermione had a difficult time imagining Severus reacting in any way other than calmly in public--when she wasn't around. "How did he react?"

"Well," Ginny explained, "when he first figured out you were missing, he was pretty much the same as usual, though he did seem a little more... tense, I guess you'd say, but it seems redundant to describe him as more tense." Hermione's lips quirked up. "But when Nott came up and told us that Lucius Malfoy had been seen wandering around the dungeons the night before, I swear Snape started panicking."

Harry snorted. "If you can call raising both eyebrows and taking a breath 'panicking.'"

Ginny crossed her arms and turned to him. "How about the way he practically raced to the Headmaster's office?"

"I was keeping up with him just fine and was only barely out of breath at the top of the stairs."

"Hmph!" Ginny said, scowling quite fiercely at Harry. "Well, he certainly seemed concerned to me, and judging by Dumbledore's reaction, he thought Snape was concerned as well."

"And I think that had as much to do with Hermione being missing at the same time as Malfoy!" Harry said mulishly. "After all, *we* were concerned, and that had nothing to do with Snape 'panicking.'"

As Hermione watched the little spat, a knot formed in her stomach. It was strangely similar to watching her parents argue; she irrationally felt as though she was the cause, but she pushed those feelings to the side, knowing she was being silly. Instead, she wondered what had caused so much tension in such a short amount of time.

Ginny looked as if she was about to make a biting comment, so Hermione decided it was time to interrupt.

"So, you guys were looking for me?"

Both Ginny and Harry's heads snapped toward Hermione, the argument temporarily forgotten.

"Of course we were looking for you!" Harry exclaimed. He leaned forward earnestly. "When you didn't show up at breakfast, we were both worried, especially after the fight between you and Snape the night before. We were worried--"

"*You* were worried," Ginny interrupted bitterly.

Harry shot her a look, then continued, "Fine, *I* was worried Snape had done something to you."

"Whereas I was certain that Snape wouldn't dare do anything to you, and seeing as he looked perfectly healthy, I figured he hadn't even tried," Ginny retorted.

Hermione couldn't help the slightly amused expression from emerging, though it faded quickly as her friends started glaring at each other.

"What is going on with you two?" Hermione finally asked. "Why are you arguing about Snape of all people? It's not like either of you is married to him."

Her attempt to lighten the atmosphere backfired as Harry's glare hardened, and he stood up.

"I need to get my books. I'll be back a little later." Then he left. Hermione watched as Ginny followed her husband's progress through the room, a shadowy mask slipping in place. When Harry had exited the infirmary, she gave a sorrowful sigh and turned back to Hermione with a wry smile.

"Sorry about that. I..." Ginny trailed off as she searched for words, but none seemed to come; she shrugged and moved over to the chair. After a minute she let out a sigh and said, "We were really worried about you, and, well, we've been under a lot of stress. I think you going missing was the last straw for Harry."

"What do you mean 'the last straw'?"

"I mean that..." Suddenly Ginny's face crumpled, and she looked away from Hermione, her hand covering her quivering mouth.

Hermione sat up and reached out to her friend, patting Ginny's knee. She stayed that way until Ginny had sniffled a few times and looked over at her with a watery smile.

"I'm sorry, Hermione! Here you are in the hospital after dealing with who knows what, and I'm bawling my eyes out all over you." She sniffled. "Great friend I'm being."

Hermione chuckled and leaned back against the pillows. "Don't worry about that. I've recently become an expert on crying all over friends. Do you want to talk about it?"

Ginny shook her head as she rummaged in her pockets for a handkerchief. "It's silly. I don't know what's happening to me."

"Well, has there been any undue stress in your life recently?" Hermione asked lightly. "Or have there been any traumatic events or turmoil affecting you?"

Ginny giggled slightly, though she still looked on the verge of tears.

"Does it have anything to do with Harry?" Hermione probed gently.

Ginny nodded mutely, wiping her eyes.

"He lost it when we found out you were missing. I've seen him upset before, but this was..." Ginny sighed and shook her head. "I know it's silly to think that I alone am Harry's world, but I thought I might be able to help him at least a little."

"Did you pat him on the back, tell him to buck up and then leave to do something else?"

Ginny looked more offended than amused. "Of course not! I was by his side the entire time offering my support." Ginny stopped, realizing Hermione had been teasing her. She smiled briefly, but a bitter, melancholy look took over. "But it wasn't me he wanted."

"What do you mean? I think Harry would die without you."

"I'm not so sure. He seemed... He looked like his world had imploded. I..." She paused for a second, as if changing her mind.

"He's mad at Snape because he was convinced Snape did something to you. I tried to reason with him, but at my first word of defense for Snape, he rounded on me saying I was betraying you! Can you imagine? I swear he's more stubborn than a sphinx where your husband is concerned."

Hermione smiled. "Welcome to my world. I've been trying to convince Harry that Snape isn't evil personified for six years now. But I thought Harry had mellowed where Severus was concerned. After all, if it wasn't for Harry, I wouldn't have even considered him."

"Friday happened. When Snape attacked you in Potions, I guess it made him wary, and then the way Snape treated you at dinner on Monday... I guess it restarted all his old grudges."

"Well, we'll just have to reprogram him, now won't we?" Hermione said after a moment, offering Ginny a thoughtful smile. She knew this wasn't Ginny's real problem, but she wasn't going to push her friend.

"Who, Harry or Snape?" Ginny asked, a glint of humor back in her eye. Hermione laughed, soon joined by Ginny.

"What's so funny?" Harry asked, peeking around the curtain. He still had an air of tenseness about him, but he didn't seem as angry anymore.

"Oh, we were just agreeing that that our husbands can be insufferable arses," Hermione said boldly, though trying to remain good-natured. She didn't realize she was holding her breath until Harry smiled his rueful grin at the both of them.

"Well, at least Snape's in the doghouse, too," he muttered. As soon as he said it, he closed his eyes and tensed up, waiting for the explosion.

Hermione and Ginny watched Harry's reaction for a moment before they caught each other's eye and started laughing. They laughed even harder when Harry looked at them as if they were crazy. Soon he had relaxed enough to grin sheepishly. Hermione was relieved to see him stand behind Ginny, resting his hands on her shoulders in silent apology. She was even more relieved to see Ginny reaching up and patting his hand forgivingly. They looked the part of devoted couple once again. All was right in the world.

Smiling to herself, Hermione was shaken out of her musings when she thought she heard the infirmary door close. Looking over, she couldn't see anyone. She turned to ask Harry and Ginny if anyone else was in the ward, but she was distracted when Harry asked, "So where were you anyway? You didn't show up anywhere on the map."

Taking a deep breath, Hermione told her friends about the locked room and how Lucius joined her. She went through the events methodically, telling them how Lucius had explained his motivation for creating the law, why he wanted revenge on Severus and finally why he had chosen her. She also told them how Lucius had placed her in a Full Body Bind, though she carefully omitted the nature of Lucius' attack. As she talked, she realized that Lucius' actions only made sense if Severus actually cared for her. The attack was probably aimed as much at Severus' supposed affair with Narcissa as it was for her cursing Draco.

"And then he must have released me because I suddenly was able to roll away and escape. I still don't know how I got out of that room, though."

Both Harry and Ginny stared at her for a long moment as if expecting her to go on, but Hermione's throat was getting sore from all the talking.

"So it was all Snape's fault?" Harry said with a grin that was balanced between friendly and spiteful.

"Harry!" Ginny cried, twisting around to glare at her husband.

Hermione laughed and rolled her eyes. "You could say that, but it's a really simplistic way of looking at it"

"I was just teasing, you know," Harry said, as much to Ginny as to Hermione. Hermione smiled and nodded while Ginny continued to watch her husband suspiciously.

Hermione was about to reassure Ginny when, suddenly, the bell rang. Ginny looked at her watch, startled.

"Oh, no! I'm late for Transfiguration! I have to go." She stood up, and Harry handed her 'his' book bag with a grin. She gave Harry a quick peck and leaned over to give Hermione a hug. "I'm so glad you're okay!" Hermione didn't even get the chance to smile back at Ginny before she was gone, running toward the door without looking back.

Hermione and Harry looked at each other and smiled. "There's a quiz today," Harry said apologetically.

"You forget who you're talking to, Harry," Hermione teased. "If I had realized the time, I would have been pushing you out the door myself. Speaking of which, don't you have a class to go to?"

"And leave you unguarded? Madam Pomfrey left strict instructions that you were not to be left alone. I may have faced Voldemort a few times, but I'm not stupid, Hermione." Seeing Hermione bite her lip in concern, Harry added more seriously, "Besides which, Snape excused me from this morning's class. I think even he's afraid of Pomfrey."

Hermione relaxed knowing Harry wasn't skipping class. "Well, she can be rather, er, forceful," Hermione said, grinning.

Harry didn't grin back, though. He was looking strained and pale again and was staring at her intensely.

"What happened, Hermione? You told us about Lucius, but that was two nights ago. Where were you yesterday?"

Hermione's grin faded into more of a grimace.

"I don't know how I got out of that room, but I found myself in a crude corridor of sorts. It was really dimly lit, but I could see enough to know it continued. I followed it a ways, but I was, er, so intent on keeping my head clear of the rocks, I, er, sort of didn't see the gaping hole at my feet."

Harry looked at her dumbfounded. "And you just fell? Why didn't you cast a Net Spell or something?"

"Lucius had taken my wand, remember?" Hermione shrugged. "I tried slowing my fall manually, but only got badly scratched in the process. I must have hit the bottom pretty hard because I have no idea how long I was lying there. When I woke up, I was in this big cavern, and I was a little on the sore side."

"Madam Pomfrey said you were in really bad shape when you first showed up last night, but she didn't tell us you'd fallen."

"I hadn't told her. I'm not sure she asked," Hermione said before she remembered her answer to the question Poppy had indeed asked. But that reminded her of someone else. "How is Dobby, doing?"

Harry's face darkened. "We don't know yet. Pomfrey expects him to wake up anytime now, but until he does, she won't know how badly drained he was. Did he really Apparate you here?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. I owe him my life, Harry."

She was startled to see Harry tearing up, though he was trying to keep his upper lip stiff.

"What's wrong, Harry?" she asked with concern.

"I thought I'd lost you yesterday. When Nott told us Malfoy was around--" Harry stopped talking on a choke. Hermione hadn't seen him so emotional since Sirius had died, and even then, he'd been more withdrawn than weepy. It was startling.

"I thought you'd been taken from me as well. I..." He had to stop again, and Hermione reached forward to grab his hand.

"Harry, when I woke up in that cavern, I really wanted to die, but when I thought of you... I forced myself to keep going because I didn't want to cause you any more pain!" Hermione sniffed, trying to hold back tears of her own. "You've lost so much, so many friends and family, I didn't want to add one more to the list."

Harry tried to smile as he hastily wiped his eyes. He sniffled a few times as he offered her a feeble yet very warm smile.

Clearing his throat, he grabbed her other hand and said, "You know I love Ginny and the Weasleys, but you're my family, too."

Hermione nearly lost control of her tears at that point, but somehow she managed to smile up at Harry and gave his hands a squeeze. "Well," she croaked, "now you know that I'll do anything for you, little brother."

His smile lit up the room. "And I hope you know I'd do anything for you, sis." They each laughed wetly as they sniffled.

Their little emotional encounter was cut short, though, when a tall, black shadow made his way into the curtained area.

Snape looked at the two of them coldly. "Dear me. Am I interrupting?"

Hermione was rather impressed at how quickly Harry's demeanor went from soppy to threatening. She sometimes forgot how powerful Harry could be, and she guessed Severus did as well, for he raised his eyebrow rather quickly, though otherwise remained unmoved. Harry's hands twitched in hers, but she gave him a warning squeeze, letting him know he better behave.

"Of course not, Severus," Hermione said, mustering a smile. She had forgotten how angry she was at him until she saw him standing there. It didn't help that a few extra charges had been added against him since they'd last met. Even if he had scared away the competition because he cared for her, she felt he could have gone about everything in a much more mature way. He was supposed to be the adult after all. "I'm glad you're here."

Still glaring at Snape, Harry said, "Shouldn't you be teaching?"

"Harry!" Hermione warned. Snape just sneered.

"Shouldn't you have manners, Potter? I should dock your House points for such impertinence, but for my wife's sake, I'll refrain. This time."

Harry's glare only intensified, which seemed to amuse Snape.

"Er, Severus, don't you have a class to tend?" Hermione asked in as mild a tone as possible.

"No. Dumbledore was kind enough to fill in so that I could come tend to you, *my dear*, as any good husband should."

Harry's hands tightened fractionally each time Severus made reference to their relationship, and Hermione was sure Severus was doing it to annoy him. That annoyed her.

"How kind of the Headmaster," Hermione said, forcing her voice to remain even. Severus tore his eyes away from Harry to glance at her. She wasn't sure, but it looked like an amused smirk was hiding underneath the sneer.

"I imagine he thought you would appreciate the gesture. I daresay he wants to be on your good side once more."

Yes, that was definitely a smirk. Much to Hermione's surprise, Harry joined in, thawing slightly. The two men shared a moment before Harry nodded suddenly.

"Well, now that you're here to keep watch, I guess I better go. I have some homework that needs finishing." Harry turned back to Hermione and smiled. "Rest up, sis."

Hermione smiled back. "Will do."

With that, Harry left, casting only a slightly mistrustful look at Snape as he passed. Snape, for his part, refrained from making his sneer any worse. Hermione was rather proud of the two.

Severus remained standing at the foot of the bed, his face sinking into a scowl. He was staring at her feet as if they were a portal to some mysterious, unattractive world. She decided to let him continue his thought process wherever it would lead and closed her eyes. She was feeling a bit drained.

She figured she must have drifted off because when he spoke she started. Opening her eyes, she found him still standing at the end of the bed, but he was now observing her.

"How are you feeling?"

Hermione was surprised by his question, even if it was asked emotionlessly. She forced herself to remember that he did care about her. "I'm feeling much better, thanks."

He nodded, but for some reason his face darkened at her answer. "Where did you go the night before last?"

Hermione sighed. She knew it was too much to expect an apology from him for his part of their fight, but she hadn't expected him to still be angry about it.

"I managed to lock myself in a room near the dungeon stairs."

"I see," he said, smirking. "And you were not able to extract yourself?"

She scowled at him. "I tried. The door was impervious to all spells. Even Reducto."

Snape smiled rather nastily. She wasn't sure whether he was smiling at her inability to get herself out of a seemingly simple situation or the situation itself. Either way, he was not exactly endearing himself to her.

"I see," he said smoothly. "If it was so impervious, how did you managed to get out?"

Hermione was not pleased at his mocking, and her anger was starting to build again. "I'm not sure."

"How can you not be sure? I would think it would have been obvious to you."

"It was dark, and I was a little distracted at the time."

"You weren't able to cast a simple Lumos in the midst of your distraction?"

"I didn't have my wand on me."

"You cast a Reducto without a wand? My, your wandless magic skills are increasing, aren't they? I'm impressed."

Hermione had forgotten that she hadn't explained Lucius' presence to him yet, so she tried to remain calm. It was difficult, though. "I had a wand to begin with. Malfoy had taken it by then," she explained. Snape raised an eyebrow, but didn't seem surprised.

"Lucius?"

She nodded, biting her lip. She didn't want to go through that encounter again.

"I see. And how did Lucius get into the room?"

"The same way I had. And before you ask, he closed the door before I was able to get there."

"Was it a very large room?"

"No, I had a broken foot." He raised his eyebrow again, but didn't ask, for which she was mildly grateful.

"Why didn't you--"

"Hex him? I've been asking myself that as well. I suppose I was just a dunderhead."

Snape's lips twitched, but he still seemed to be in a bad mood. "And the distraction?"

"Distra--? Oh. I was, er, avoiding Malfoy."

His face darkened again, though Hermione was fairly certain his anger was at Malfoy this time, not her. She suddenly became very tired. She knew he was going to ask her about the encounter, and she didn't want to tell him. At least not at that moment. She just wanted to go to sleep.

She was surprised, therefore, when Severus drew back with a determined look on his face. "It seems you are tired. I will leave you to rest."

He then turned on his heel and stalked out of the curtained area, leaving Hermione alone on the ward. For a moment she was confused at his odd choice of questions. Or rather, she was confused by the questions he didn't ask. She wondered what to make of it, but before she could think it through, she found herself getting very drowsy.

The last thought she had before drifting off into sleep was that Poppy was going to give Snape hell for disobeying orders.

Avery's Notes: And so begins the rest of Hermione and Snape's life. I'll warn you that things aren't going to go smoothly for our couple, but at least they're now on the road (though it's more of a badly cleared dirt path at this point).

Thanks go to Southern for her awesome betaing skills. And for making me giggle. I always appreciate a giggle. :-)

Southern's Notes: I'm happy to see that she's on the mend again and that Snape has finally shown up! She frustrates me, however, with the way she misconstrues every single thing someone says. Maybe another visit to the house-elves is in order? Teehee.

VIII

Chapter 8 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Avery's Note: **blush* I am so sorry, Caeria! A scene from her marvelous story, "Pet Project" was the inspiration for Hermione going all scary in chapter 6, and I forgot to credit her! My humblest apologies, Mistress Caeria. Please don't hate (or hurt) me.*

Also, I solemnly swear I didn't steal from Southern's hilarious fic "Like Sands Through the Hourglass" for a scene in here. It was a zeitgeist, I suppose (great minds thinking alike and whatnot). If you haven't read her fic yet, then what are you here for? Go read it. Go! Shoo!

And finally, thank you, friends, for your encouragement and help. I'm doubtful I would have got through my block from heck without your gentle nudges.

Hermione woke up slowly, her dreams dogging her as she struggled into consciousness. Fortunately, they weren't nightmares, but they were nagging, worrisome dreams that left her uneasy.

Opening her eyes cautiously, she quickly shut them again. The afternoon light was filling the infirmary, and she needed more time to adjust to the brightness. Finding herself squinting, she consciously relaxed her face, smoothing out her muscles and skin.

While watching the inside of her eyelids, her mind started working again, and she found herself torn on the subject of Severus. He obviously did care about her, she couldn't deny that any longer, but his method of wooing left a lot to be desired.

If only he had been forthright about his feelings she thought, smiling at the ridiculousness of such an idea. Wishing for Severus to be emotionally open and forthright was like hoping the Ministry of Magic would make intelligent decisions.

Her smile faded as she thought about Severus' courting tactics. She needed to find out his side of the entire story before jumping to any more conclusions, but she wasn't sure whether she could trust him. He hadn't lied to her as yet, but he had deliberately omitted some important facts. She hoped that he'd only influenced Theodore and Blaise, but what if he'd tried scaring all her would-be suitors away?

That reminded her of the conversation she'd overheard between Severus and Remus. What if that wasn't the only confrontation he'd had with any of her suitors? Or worse, what if he'd deliberately timed it so that she would overhear it, knowing she'd chosen Remus?

Ready to start yelling at her sneaky bastard of a husband, Hermione realized that she might be jumping to conclusions again. She was also not giving him the benefit of the doubt. He was her husband. He loved her, or he at least cared for her very much. He deserved her trust. She would refrain from hexing him until he was proven guilty.

Suddenly, Hermione became aware of whispering nearby. Cracking an eye open, she found her mouth turning up in a smile.

"Professor McGonagall!" she slurred sleepily. "It's good to see you!"

"It's Minerva, dear," the professor said as she turned from her conversation with Poppy and smiled fondly at her star pupil. "It's good to see you as well, though I expected to see you busy with Severus."

Poppy sniffed angrily. "I'm going to have to have a word with that boy! It was inexcusable for him to wander off like that, leaving Hermione alone!"

Hermione smiled at Poppy's protectiveness and laughed when she remembered her last thought before drifting off to sleep. The other women looked at her curiously.

"Sorry, it's just when Severus left, I fell asleep thinking he was getting himself in trouble with you."

Minerva let out a cough that sounded suspiciously like a laugh while Poppy looked torn between amusement and mortification.

"Well, I take the safety of my patients very seriously, and knowing your penchant for trouble, it"

"I didn't mean any offense, Poppy, really! I'm grateful for your protective measures, even if they aren't really needed. I just was amused to see I was right and, well, hopeful I can be a witness to the lecture you give him?"

Poppy laughed at that. "I'm afraid I'd have to restrain myself if you were around, dear, so maybe it would be better if he was on his own?"

Both Poppy and Hermione giggled conspiratorially, but Minerva failed to join in, looking rather pensive. It didn't take very long for the other witches to notice.

"Minerva, dear?"

Minerva looked at Poppy and then at Hermione, a frown creasing her brow. "When did you say Severus left?"

Hermione was still smiling as she answered, "It was this morning sometime. It couldn't have been much past ten."

Minerva's frown deepened, and Hermione's smile faded in concern. "What's wrong, Pro-Minerva?"

"If Severus hasn't been here... Albus covered all his classes today, so he wasn't teaching..."

Hermione felt a stab of worry, but then brushed it aside. "He is a Slytherin, so maybe he thought to take advantage of the day off. Did you check his rooms?" Hermione knew it was an obvious question, but she preferred to work on the "it's better to ask a stupid question than assume everyone knows what they're doing" plan. Dealing with Harry and Ron over the years had given her a vast appreciation for how simple oversights could lead to mountains of unneeded trouble.

"Yes," Minerva answered rather tartly. "I checked his room, his office, the staff room, as well as his favorite corridors to haunt."

Hermione gave Minerva a shrewd look. "All on your way here, I imagine?" she asked.

Minerva sniffed and tried not to look as if she'd been caught. "Well, I didn't want to interrupt you newlyweds."

Hermione and Poppy both choked back their laughter, making Minerva grin. "As a matter of fact, I had business to attend to before coming here, though I really did expect Severus to be here tending to you."

This earned her another snort of laughter from Hermione, but instead of grinning, Minerva scowled. "The boy does care for you, Hermione," she said almost defensively.

Hermione immediately schooled her face into something more respectful. "I know that, I really do, but the thought of Severus 'tending' to me, or anyone for that matter, is... is..."

"Rather ludicrous?" Poppy finished.

Hermione nodded, trying to hold back the grin she felt building within.

Minerva rolled her eyes and sat down, shaking her head. "Yes, well, perhaps you had better work on your Snape-ish. By 'tending,' I simply meant that he would be here to look after you, not that he would be your mother hen."

That image got both Poppy and Hermione giggling again, which did nothing for Minerva's humor.

Seeing this, Poppy leaned over and stage whispered to Hermione, "I think I'd best leave you two alone so that you might have a chance at the serious discussion she wants." Standing up, she cast a professional eye on her charge and added, "I'll come by soon, though, to check you over properly. You might even be allowed to leave today." She gave Hermione a suspicious look, as if doubtful of Hermione's ability to stay healthy outside the ward, gave an exaggerated sniff and left.

Minerva sat down on the chair next to the bed and observed Hermione intently before asking, "Where have you been, Hermione?"

Hermione went over the story once again, starting with how her argument with Severus ended. She hadn't felt comfortable telling Harry and Ginny about that, but for some reason it seemed to spill off her tongue as she talked with Minerva. McGonagall, for her part, simply sat and listened with little judgment.

Hermione did skim over Lucius' attack and was embarrassed when Minerva looked at her sharply, lips pursed, as if she'd guessed the truth. Hermione knew it wasn't sensible to feel guilty over the attack, but the feeling was harder to push away than she had anticipated.

She also left out most of the house-elf rebellion. She decided all Minerva needed to know was that Dobby saved her from a life-threatening situation at great personal risk. She ended with taking the sleeping potion and her paradoxical reaction. Minerva accepted the story without any questions, save one: "Hermione," she asked thoughtfully, "do you believe that a mere paradoxical reaction could create such power?"

"Er," Hermione hesitated. She hadn't thought about her little temper tantrum as anything but the Dreamless Sleep Draught backfiring. "I hadn't thought about it," she replied honestly.

It was obvious Minerva was trying to refrain from rolling her eyes. "So I gathered," she said tersely. "However, judging by your Potions scores, I would have thought you'd know the limits of a paradoxical reaction."

Hermione shrugged, slightly embarrassed, though very interested. "I've been thinking about other things."

Minerva chuckled. "Of course, dear."

"So, if it wasn't the potion, what was it?"

"Have you ever heard of the Force?"

Hermione snickered. "Of course I have. You'd have to be an elitist pureblood not to!"

Minerva looked shocked and a little offended. "Really? I rather thought only a few people knew about it."

Hermione sobered, though she still had the urge to laugh, especially as she envisioned Professor McGonagall standing before her saying, "Use the Force, young Granger."

Shaking the image away, she thought quickly.

"Well, maybe it's a different Force. The Force I know is from a Muggle movie series, so it's very possible that we're talking about two different subjects."

Minerva nodded in understanding, offended look dissipating. "Of course. I wouldn't be surprised if the Muggle version is based upon lore of the real Force, much like how they mythicized unicorns and other magical creatures."

Hermione nodded.

"When I was very little," Minerva continued, "my father told me about the Force, explaining that very few witches or wizards ever learn to harness it, and of those few, only a fraction of them ever learn to control it. It was one of his realms of study, you see. At that time he was fascinated with how intertwined life and death are, and the Force, well, as he said, 'There is no death; there is the Force.'" Minerva sighed slightly, a distant look in her eyes, and then snapped back to attention.

"The Force, he told me, is an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us, penetrates us and binds the universe together. My father explained how some ancient scholars thought of the Force as a sentient entity, almost like an Earth God, while others were more inclined to think of it as a tool to be manipulated for their use like basic magic is for us.

"The Force, however, can only be usefully harnessed by a minority of wizards who are described as 'Force-sensitive.' These witches and wizards are able to tap into the Force to perform acts of great skill and control its various embodying powers."

Hermione stared wordlessly at Minerva, hoping that the older witch was simply joking, even though the professor showed all the signs of being sincere. Her disbelief must have shown, for Minerva paused and asked, "Are you all right, dear?"

"Oh, I'm just wondering when you're going to tell me about the light and dark side of the Force, warning me how easy it is to be seduced into the dark side by fear, hatred and love of power."

Minerva looked shocked again. "How did you know?"

If McGonagall's face hadn't been so sincere, Hermione would have been certain she was the brunt of a joke, but as it was, there were certain aspects of the story that didn't add up. One being that Minerva McGonagall would have been told this tale at least fifteen years before George Lucas was born.

"That's the premise of that Muggle movie I mentioned, almost word for word."

"You mean that Muggles know all about the Force?"

"Er, yes," Hermione said apologetically. "Star Wars was very, very popular."

"Star Wars?" Minerva asked faintly, though it seemed more to herself. "That sounds familiar."

"Well, I imagine you've heard students quoting lines from it at one time or another. The first three movies have been re-released, and a new movie will be coming out next year. I'm hoping it's as good as the original trilogy, but it's been a long time since Lucas has made one of these movies, and if rumors are true... Are you all right, Minerva?"

"George Lucas?" Minerva asked, attention suddenly focused on Hermione.

Hermione nodded her head slowly, and Minerva narrowed her eyes, staring through Hermione with a crafty look.

"Ooh, that man is going to pay," she muttered so quietly Hermione almost didn't hear her.

"Pardon?" Hermione asked, rather alarmed at the dangerous glitter in her mentor's eye.

Minerva started and looked at Hermione as if she'd forgotten she was there. "Nothing, dear. Well, anyway, it seems you have the same gift my father had. I sincerely hope you use it for the betterment of our society, rather than for selfish reasons."

"The Force... it really exists?" Hermione asked disbelievingly.

"Knowing my father, I should have guessed he would make up a tale for me; however, whether or not it is called that, and has those particulars, I do believe you possess a power most of us do not."

Hermione furrowed her brow. The thought running through her mind was that Minerva had to be wrong. She knew she was intelligent and had a knack for learning, but to be 'one with the Force'? She stifled another giggle.

Minerva got up, startling Hermione with the suddenness.

"I've taken enough of your time, I expect. I do need to speak with Severus, so if you see him, please let him know."

Hermione nodded, still assimilating everything Minerva had told her with her knowledge of popular Muggle culture.

"Oh, and *Ms. Granger*," Minerva's lips twitched as she said the name, "please do try to refrain from public displays, whether of affection or otherwise. It isn't in anyone's best interests."

Blushing, Hermione nodded, knowing that neither she nor Severus were likely to fight in public ever again. At least not in Hogwarts.

Minerva nodded. "Also, you'd best expect the Headmaster at some point, Hermione. I'm sure he'll want discuss last night's events with you."

Hermione grimaced at that thought and waved good-bye. She barely had two minutes to herself, though, before Poppy came bustling in, matronly guise well in place.

"Well, now that you've probably exhausted yourself talking with your guest, I'd best check you over," Poppy said with a sniff.

Hermione giggled, suddenly realizing Poppy had as wry a sense of humor as Severus did.

"You aren't nearly as strict as we students think you are, are you?"

Poppy smiled blandly and raised her eyebrows. "What exactly are you insinuating, young lady?" Before the previous night, Hermione would have blushed at Poppy's tone, but now she caught the gleam of humor in her eye.

"Only that you're probably a lot nicer than everyone gives you credit for."

"'Everyone' being Mr. Potter?"

Hermione laughed. "Yes, him too." Poppy merely continued to smile benignly, though a faint smirk was crinkling the edges of her lips.

"Well, I must insist you keep rumors about me to a minimum, Ms. Granger. I have a reputation to uphold, much like every other Hogwarts staff member."

She raised her wand and chanted a soft incantation, signaling the start of the exam.

Hermione, however, wasn't paying attention to the glowing wand. "Are you implying that Argus Filch is really a pleasant fellow who only jokes about using whips and chains as punishment?"

Poppy chortled. "Oh, goodness, no. Argus is a surly bastard if ever there was one, though he does make a good banana daiquiri."

Hermione choked on her laughter mingled with disbelief. "You're kidding!"

"Of course I am, dear. There's no such thing as a good banana daiquiri."

Hermione stared at Poppy for a long second before deciding Poppy was jesting, though she wasn't certain about that. In the end, she decided the wisest move to make was to change topics.

"So, how am I doing?"

Poppy looked at her sternly over her spectacles. "Considering you have done your very best to kill yourself in the last month or two, I would say you are doing remarkably well. So well, in fact, that I'll let you sleep in your own quarters tonight as long as you swear a wand oath that you will eat a decent supper and actually rest."

That reminded Hermione that her wand was probably still in the locked room. Hopefully Lucius hadn't done anything to it. She forced herself to smile up at Poppy, who continued to frown. "As soon as I get my wand back, I will gladly swear that I will follow your orders to the tee, although I'll have you know that I had every intention of following your instructions last night."

Poppy's face softened into a good-natured smile. "I won't blame you there, child. I have a sneaking suspicion you will be as difficult a patient as Severus is, though hopefully less frequent. Speaking of whom, when you see him next, you will tell him that I would like to have a word, won't you?" Poppy said with a wink.

Hermione smirked knowingly and nodded. "Of course."

Poppy shook her head as she tapped Hermione's chest lightly, her wand glowing spring green for a moment.

"You are one lucky witch, Ms. Granger," Poppy said as she withdrew, ending the examination spell. "You seem to have scraped through everything with nothing more than a little fatigue. However, I insist you rest for the next week. No more battles with villains, falling off cliffs or other such nonsense, understood?" Poppy looked at her so sternly, Hermione had to remind herself that this woman had just joked about Filch's daiquiris.

"I am not joking, Hermione," Poppy continued, guessing Hermione's thoughts. "You are to stay out of trouble for one week. I trust you can manage that small amount of time?" Hermione nodded dutifully. "Very well, then. I'll let you off of the wand oath... this time. After you eat a good lunch, you are free to leave." She conjured a lovely hot meal, which set Hermione salivating, and then left her to devour her first meal in days.

After a while, Poppy returned and nodded in satisfaction, seeing only a few crumbs left. She gave Hermione's shoulder a comforting squeeze before offering her a warm smile. "Now go give your husband hell."

Hermione smiled back, though her mind was racing ahead, plotting out the best course towards the inevitable confrontation with Severus.

"Thank you, Poppy. I do promise to be as good as I possibly can be." Madam Pomfrey narrowed her eyes at that proviso, but Hermione raised her hands in self-defense. "As long as circumstances are kind to me, I will be as boring as porridge. I promise."

Slightly mollified, Poppy nodded, handing her a clean robe to change into. "Well, see that you steer the circumstances in your favor, dear. I really don't want to see you again for any reason other than the occasional afternoon tea."

Hermione smiled before going to the lavatory to freshen up and change. She relished the feeling of the warm water as she washed herself down, feeling as though it had been a month since she'd last bathed. It still boggled her mind that so much had taken place in only two days. *Well, really it's been eight days*, she thought as she buttoned up her fresh robe. All it took to change her life completely was eight days, four of which barely mattered.

Shaking her head in astonishment, she left the lavatory and looked around the room for Poppy. Just beside Poppy's office, her eyes stopped on the neatly made cot where Dobby had lain.

Before she could call out for Poppy to ask about Dobby's fate, she heard an excited voice say, "Hermione!" Turning toward the door, she found herself encased in a hug.

"Oh, it's so good to see you up and *normal* again!" Ginny somehow managed to say while squeezing Hermione tightly. "I was so worried you had turned into a superwitch and weren't going to have time for us peons anymore because you'd be too busy saving elves and righting wrongs!"

Hermione was nonplused, but when Ginny withdrew, she was sporting a teasing grin. Hermione rolled her eyes, but grinned back.

"Don't worry, Ginny," Harry said as he joined the two. "I'm sure she'll have plenty of time for socializing *and* saving the world with her new stupendous powers."

Hermione rolled her eyes again, but decided to change the topic quickly before the ribbing got under her skin.

"Harry, do you know how Dobby's doing?" she asked, looking at the cot again. Harry followed her eyes and then looked back at her smiling.

"Yeah. He seems just fine. In fact, he told me Dumbledore's made him chief supervisor of kitchen affairs. Dumbledore seemed to think he needed a reward for saving you."

"Oh, that's great! He must be so happy!"

Harry grinned. "Er, yeah, you could say that. He was only bouncing off the walls."

Hermione grinned back. "Oh, I'm so happy for him! He deserves it!"

"Eh, you're just saying that because he saved your life," Ginny joked. "Now, I don't know about you, but I'm feeling a mite peckish. How about we invade the kitchens?"

A shiver of dread made its way down Hermione's neck at that suggestion.

"Er, actually, I was wondering if you two would come with me to pick up my wand. I left it in that room the other night, and if Lucius is still in there, I really would prefer not to approach him defenseless."

Harry gave her a long look, sensing her apprehension.

"Are you sure you're okay going back to that room? I could go by myself. It would be no problem."

Hermione shook her head, smiling. "No, it's okay. Besides which, I want to check out that thing under the dust cloth. If it's still there."

Harry nodded, and they headed off to the dungeons. Hermione took the opportunity to question Harry over all the classes she'd missed, hoping she hadn't been left behind.

"Don't worry, Hermione," he replied, laughing. "All we're doing is revision, and I don't think the teachers have caught up to your revision schedule yet, so I don't think you have anything to worry about."

Hermione scowled, but let the subject drop. She'd talk to her teachers privately. Hopefully they hadn't given her zeroes for the days she'd been gone. Although Severus might have...

"Oh, no," she groaned in sudden realization. "I've married my teacher."

Ginny laughed. "And you've just realized this? Harry, I think we better take her back to Madam Pomfrey. I think she must have hit her head harder than we suspected."

Laughing, Harry and Ginny both made to turn back, but Hermione was quick to explain.

"What I meant was that... how am I going to have a chance of an equal relationship if he's still grading my papers? Not to mention that any grades I get from now on could be called into question. I... What am I going to do?"

Both Harry and Ginny shrugged unhelpfully. "I expect you could get excused from Potions without a big fuss," Ginny offered.

"And risk failing that NEWT?" Hermione protested, offended.

Harry burst into laughter, and it was obvious Ginny was trying not to. "I'm sure that if you took your NEWTs right now, you would get straight O's, Hermione. I think there are more serious things to worry about."

"Like being married to Snape," Harry added, still chuckling.

Hermione and Ginny both glared at Harry, unimpressed by his humor. "Harry"

"I'm just pointing out," Harry hurriedly interrupted, "that living with the bas... er... living with the man for the rest of your life might be a more pressing concern than worrying about a test you are sure to pass."

Hermione noticed Ginny was still glaring at Harry suspiciously, but then her attention was drawn to the door behind the couple.

"We're here," she said, startling the two out of their dynamics.

Harry whipped around, wand drawn, while Ginny turned around more slowly; she too had her wand ready.

"I think we need a plan," Hermione said, staring at the benign seeming door. "One of us should wait out here, just in case the door gets closed. I'm almost positive it can be opened from the outside since Malfoy got in after I had been trapped."

The others nodded, looking serious.

"Well, Ginny and I can go in..." Harry faded out as Hermione shook her head.

"No, Harry. I need to go in there." She smiled at him reassuringly. "It's only a room."

"Yeah, a room that almost killed you!" Harry protested.

"The room did nothing of the sort! It was getting out of the room that almost killed me."

"Oh, and that's reassuring?" Harry asked, getting angry.

"That's why you two are here!" Hermione said, getting angry herself. "If we do this right, we'll be able to neutralize Malfoy, get my wand and be out of there without any problems. It's not like we'll be shutting ourselves in there!"

Harry looked unconvinced, making Hermione sigh in exasperation.

"Look, Harry, I'm more than happy to let you go in first, seeing as you're the one with the wand, but relegating me to the hall when I am the one with the experience of the room seems rather"

The door slamming shut cut her off, and they both turned to find the door looking just as it had before, only Ginny was no longer in the corridor with them.

"Ginny!" Harry yelled, running for the door without a second thought. Hermione followed on his heels, hoping Lucius hadn't hexed her friend.

They burst through the door to find Ginny lifting the mysterious non-object's dust jacket. She looked up quickly, startled, and only the look of horror on her face alerted them to the door quietly rebounding off the wall and slamming shut.

"Oh, hell," Hermione said succinctly. Ginny's wand was illuminating the chamber dimly, and they could plainly see the displeasure on her face.

"What were you two thinking rushing in here like that?" she cried, putting her free hand on her hip, looking very much like her mother.

"We thought you were in danger! How could you just come in here without any thought to how dangerous it could be? I mean, Malfoy could have..." Harry cut off and looked around the chamber frantically.

"He's not here, Harry," Hermione said, having checked the room even as the door was closing.

"Of course he's not!" Ginny said. "Do you really think I would just walk in here without casting a Detection Charm first?"

Harry looked a bit abashed while Hermione felt ashamed that she hadn't thought of that herself.

"Honestly!" Ginny huffed, gathering steam. "You guys must think I'm an idiot. You didn't even consider that I, too, have a wand while you were arguing out in the corridor!"

She rolled her eyes as both Harry and Hermione squirmed at her chastisement.

"And now, thanks to your 'concern,' we're all in here, and the door is shut. Which means that we aren't going to get out of here any time soon. Thanks for coming to my rescue, guys."

Harry cleared his throat, searching for the right thing to say, while Hermione had her eyes on the floor, searching for her wand. She gave a cry of despair when she spotted half of it a few feet away from the non-object.

Rushing over, she picked up the shattered vinewood delicately, desperately restraining tears at finding the dragon's heartstring hanging limply from the core.

"Oh, Hermione," Ginny said softly, putting an arm around her. "I'm so sorry."

Hermione sniffed but shook her head. "It's silly, really. Why should I be upset over this? I should have realized that Malfoy would do something to it after I escaped."

"It's your wand, though," Ginny said. "My wand is kind of like an extension of me."

"I suppose I can always try to Spellotape it back together," she quipped and then nearly choked on the memories of Ron. Ginny's arm tensed for a moment, making Hermione curse herself for her thoughtlessness.

"I'm sorry. I guess we should have gone to the kitchens after all," she said with a slight shudder. Ginny looked at her strangely, having felt the shudder, but said nothing.

"Well, I guess we'd better find a way out of here then," Harry said.

Ginny agreed immediately, but Hermione hesitated. "I would like to find the other half of my wand first. I know it's useless and silly, but..."

The others nodded, nothing more needing to be said. They fanned out, casting as much light on the floor as possible. Hermione was the one to find it after only a minute or so, but she was surprised by what she found next to it.

"I've got it," she said, turning around. "And I've also got Malfoy's and Severus' wands."

Harry and Ginny looked at her incredulously.

"Malfoy and... Why would Snape's wand be here, and why would he or Malfoy abandon their wands?" Harry asked, confused.

"I'm not sure," Hermione said slowly, an idea starting to form, "but I'm guessing Severus came down here to check out the room, although I can't say why."

She looked around the room again, carefully noting where everything was, and then walked to where Lucius had trapped her.

"I was here," she muttered under her breath, "and he was there... I rolled this way, got up and ran..."

She traced out her path of escape until she reached the wall. She put her hand up against the stone and wasn't surprised when it felt solid beneath her fingertips. She knelt down and placed the wands on the floor before she felt the wall again.

This time she was disappointed when the stone remained intact.

She turned around and found Harry and Ginny staring at her, bemused.

"I think the reason I was able to escape was because I didn't have my wand on me. It's the only thing that makes even a little sense. I know that it was around here somewhere that I ended up as I ran from Lucius, but he did grab a hold of my robe, so my path could have been diverted." She gestured to the entire wall, from the non-object to the chairs. "And seeing as Lucius' and Severus' wands were laying here, I'm guessing the exit is nearby."

The others nodded, reluctantly putting their wands on the floor and approached the wall. Hermione took the section nearest the non-object and slowly started running her fingers over the stone as she worked her way towards the cloth-covered distraction.

She was disheartened that she reached the non-object without finding any trace of the exit. She knew she was right; it had to be around. Wondering if it might in fact be behind the non-object, she lifted the cloth to check out the possibility when Harry tripped and fell through the wall.

Hermione and Ginny looked at each other, amused and confused. Fortunately, Ginny saw where Harry was working and approached the area cautiously. When she put her finger to the wall, she shuddered as her finger sank into the surface.

She was about to step through, but Hermione stopped her.

"Wait," she cried. Ginny stopped and looked at her expectantly. "Maybe we should test first to see if we can take our wands, just in case." She handed Ginny her wand. Ginny took a step forward, felt the wall, and frowned.

"Nope," she said with disappointment, putting her wand back on the floor. She tested the wall again, and found to her relief that her finger still sank through the surface.

Hermione nodded, not surprised, but disappointed.

"Well, I don't know if it'll work, but if we can take some supplies with us, it'll make the descent down the cliff much easier," she said, grabbing Severus' wand and conjuring a long bit of rope and three Muggle torches, which she was relieved to find worked.

Hermione handed Ginny the rope and one of the torches, which she accepted happily, though she was looking at the torch curiously.

"Slide that button up to make it work," Hermione explained. When Ginny did so, she jumped slightly.

"Mad," Ginny muttered, giving Hermione a grin. "Well, here's hoping," she said and walked through the wall.

Hermione let out the breath she'd been holding as the conjured items disappeared along with Ginny. She conjured a few other tools, clutched them to her chest, and followed Ginny.

Without fear rushing through her, she noticed the sensation of walking through the wall. It wasn't as if there was nothing there, which was what she expected. It was soft, like walking through a film of bath bubbles, quickly caressing her before she reached the other side and was ensconced in the cool air. She immediately turned around and touched the wall, curious to find it solid again.

"You all right?" Harry asked, noticing her expression when she turned to face them. She gave him a quick smile and a nod, trying not to show her nervousness.

"Where do we go from here?" Ginny asked, poking her way around the nook, shining the torch on the ground.

"Along here," Hermione said, pointing to the path she had taken only a couple nights before. Turning their torches in that direction, they all started making their way towards the dim light around the corner.

Hermione was amazed at the difference traveling the corridor with a clear head, light and an unbroken foot made. She was astonished she had missed the edge of the cliff in the first place when they finally came upon it. Shining her light around, she noticed that the path did indeed continue on the other side of the gap. She wondered if it also ended up in the kitchens.

She put the equipment she'd been carrying down and started arranging it to what looked logical.

"Um, Hermione, what are you doing?" Ginny asked nervously, eyeing the harnesses, clips, rings, gloves and miscellany.

"I'm trying to remember how all this goes for rappelling down the cliff side."

"You know how to rock climb?" Harry asked, rather amazed.

Hermione flushed, though the dim light hid it quite well. "Er, no, but I saw a really interesting documentary on it a couple of summers ago. It had a novice training to climb Half Dome out in America, and they were pretty thorough in their explanations."

"Did you research rock climbing afterwards?" Ginny asked, nervously.

Hermione bit her lip. "Er, not as much as I planned to, what with staying at Grimmauld and everything."

"So... so how confident are you that you know how this works?" Harry asked, and Hermione could feel his unease.

"Fairly. You could try climbing down without any safety equipment if you're really nervous about it."

Harry swallowed and shook his head. "No, I... it's fine."

The way his voice shook said otherwise, though. She found it rather amusing that he could face a dragon, a bevy of Death Eaters and then vanquish Voldemort, but was nervous about going down a cliff that she'd survived falling down. When she looked up at him to reassure him, however, she saw he was watching Ginny, who was beyond nervous. She was looking at the rock climbing equipment with undisguised terror.

"Where does this path go?" Ginny asked, tearing her eyes away from the artifacts and gazing down the dimly lit corridor.

"I don't know," Hermione said, coming up with a plan. "I expect it goes to the kitchens, though. In fact, would you be willing to go explore that path while Harry and I go down to the cavern? If it does end up in the kitchens, you could ask Dobby to fetch our wands for us."

Ginny nodded, but Harry stilled with a sudden thought.

"Dobby," he shouted, his voice echoing throughout the corridor. They all waited a moment, hardly breathing in anticipation. After a moment or two, Harry yelled for Dobby again, but there was no reply. He shrugged, looking at the girls. "It was worth a try, although I expect you'd already tried that, hadn't you?" he asked Hermione. She mumbled something incoherent as she busied herself with the ropes and tools, knowing she wasn't fooling anybody.

Ginny examined the tiny ledge connecting the two sides of the hole, not looking pleased with the prospect of edging along it, though she seemed more receptive to that idea than rappelling down the cliff using Muggle implements.

"Well, I'll be off then. Good luck," she said, giving Harry a quick kiss and a smile.

Harry murmured something in her ear, causing her to smile cheekily at him before putting one foot on the ledge.

Both Harry and Hermione watched breathlessly as Ginny took one minuscule step after another. It seemed to take hours for her to cross the smallish gap, her white knuckles belying her fierce grip on the finger-holds the vertical face provided. Finally, she stepped onto the other side's solid surface, and everyone let out a shaky breath of relief. Hermione noticed that Harry was trembling as he waved good-bye to his wife. Ginny blew him a kiss, grinned and set off into the unknown, leaving Harry and Hermione to face a nerve-wracking descent.

"Shall I go first then?" Harry asked, inspecting the equipment with a worried frown.

"How about if I go first? You'd be more likely to support my weight and lower me down if the knots or equipment fail. If that happens, you can follow Ginny to get help."

Harry didn't look happy about her being the pawn, but eventually agreed. He helped her into the harness, checked the ropes, and double-checked the knots securing the rope to a nearby stalagmite. Both of them put on their gloves, and Hermione looked over the edge, butterflies rioting in her stomach.

"Well, here goes nothing," she said, securely tucking her torch into her pocket before she knelt on the edge and felt for a toehold to start from. After a couple of false starts, she found something she could put her weight on, and gradually did so, looking relieved. Never letting go of her firm grip on the rope, she made her way down, careful to never let her speed exceed her comfort zone. It made for a very slow descent.

Finally, she reached the cavern and had no footing left. Screwing her eyes shut, she let herself down the remaining twenty feet of rope, wishing she had made the rope ten feet longer. Relief flooded her when her feet slammed into the ground after her freefall and nothing more serious than her knees buckling occurred.

She looked around and in the dim light saw a motion at the other end of the cavern. Edging toward it, she took her torch from her pocket and flicked it on. The sudden light didn't even faze the two men who were in the final stages of a brutal fistfight. Both men were clearly in bad shape, though Lucius looked a little worse for wear.

Hermione nearly jumped when she felt a hand on her shoulder, but looking around, saw it was only Harry; he had obviously been more comfortable rappelling than she had. He was staring over her shoulder, an amused look on his face as he watched the two grown men swing clumsily at each other, their limbs drooping with exhaustion. Hermione decided it was probably best to break up the fight.

"I wish I had my wand," Harry muttered quietly.

"So do I," Hermione admitted. "It would make it a lot easier to break up the fight."

Harry snorted. "I was thinking about conjuring some crisps and a lawn chair."

Hermione turned to give him her best glare, but in the dark it went unnoticed, though she could sense his amusement.

"However, if you think it's best to break it up, I suppose we'd better do so together," he added, trying to be serious.

Hermione was reminded forcefully of the Weasley twins, and she was grateful she didn't have to deal with that attitude all the time.

They walked over to the two men who didn't notice their approach until they both were drawn back by more energetic arms. Lucius and Severus had been fighting silently, probably having no energy to spare for words because they put up very little resistance. Lucius actually collapsed onto the ground, moaning slightly even as he fought for breath.

Severus wasn't doing much better, however. Hermione could feel him trembling as she held him, and he offered no resistance but leaned into her heavily. She hastily took a step back to brace herself for his weight.

"Have any objections to sitting down?" she asked, struggling under his weight.

He shook his head, and together they managed to make it to the ground relatively smoothly.

She was disconcerted when he leaned against her, but she leaned back, glad to be able to offer him some support, even if it was of a purely physical nature. It was an odd feeling, being protective of Snape, but at the moment, all her anger could wait. At that moment, he needed a shoulder to lean on, and that was what she would give him.

It was actually rather endearing.

"I think Lucius' leg is fractured, and I'm sure his arm is broken," Severus said after a long silence. "He needs medical attention soon."

"And you don't? You look like you've been through the wringer a bit yourself."

"Nothing fatal, I assure you, madam." He almost sounded like himself, although there was a breathy quality to his voice she didn't like.

"Yes, well, both of you will be getting medical attention as soon as Dobby arrives with our wands because I seriously doubt Harry and I would be able to lug the two of you up out of the tunnel."

Snape sighed. "Yes, I remember you saying something about a tunnel..."

Hermione frowned. She didn't remember telling him about her trip out of the cavern. She didn't remember him asking her.

She was about to ask him about it when there was a loud thump nearby.

"Harry Potter, sir?" came an excited voice from the darkness. Both Harry and Hermione shone their lights over at the smarting elf who was holding three wands. Hermione guessed he'd come down the hard way. "Mistress Ginny Potter gave Dobby the message of you needing these wands."

Harry nodded, striding over to where Dobby stood rubbing his bum. As if in response to Harry's absence, Lucius chose that moment to revive slightly, catching Dobby's attention. The change in the elf's demeanor was startling and not a little alarming.

"Is Lucius Malfoy bothering Harry Potter, sir?" he asked, his eyes never leaving Lucius' prone form. "Dobby told Lucius Malfoy he was never to touch you again."

Hermione shivered at the intensity of Dobby's tone; it reminded her forcefully of her adventures in the kitchen two days before. She had the urge to edge herself backwards, but Snape's weight, and the trust that Dobby wouldn't hurt her, kept her in place.

"No, Dobby, he's not bothering me," Harry responded. "He's not a threat right now."

Dobby narrowed his eyes as Lucius opened his. If Hermione hadn't been so nervous about Dobby's radiating energy, she would have laughed at Lucius' cowering as he recognized Dobby.

Dobby advanced on him a few steps, and Lucius tried to back away, though his body wasn't cooperating.

"Lucius Malfoy knows not to touch Harry Potter or Harry Potter's friends?" Dobby didn't ask so much as threaten.

Hermione observed Lucius as he gulped and nodded his head nervously.

"Lucius Malfoy will not bother the good wizards and witches." Lucius quickly agreed, eyes wide as the house-elf took one more step toward him.

"Good," Dobby said and then stepped back to smile beatifically at Harry.

"Harry Potter will let Dobby know if the bad wizard is trouble?"

Harry nodded, smirking at Malfoy. "Of course I will, Dobby! You'll be the first to know."

Dobby straightened his back, and his smile widened. "Dobby is honored to help Harry Potter and knowing Harry Potter is trusting Dobby so much!"

"Of course I trust you, Dobby. You've been a big help to us all."

Hermione inwardly shuddered at how reverentially Dobby was gazing at Harry, but knew better than to speak her mind. *Maybe sometime later I can talk with Dobby and try to explain the intricacies of freedom to him*, she thought ironically.

Dobby bowed to Harry, then handed him the wands. Harry gratefully took his from Dobby's hands.

"Ginny?" he asked, not finding her wand among them.

"Mistress Ginny is saying she is waiting for you in your common room. Dobby fetched her wand first, sir."

Hermione wasn't sure, but she thought Dobby had flicked his eyes at her as he said that, and she wondered what the ramifications of the house-elf rebellion were, exactly, if Ginny wasn't waiting in the kitchen for them.

Before she could wonder, Harry was hovering over her, handing her both Lucius' and Snape's wands. She looked to see why Severus wasn't taking his and found him unconscious.

She smiled ruefully, accepting both wands, and tucking Snape's into one of his pockets.

"Dobby needs to get back to his new job, sir. Does Harry Potter need Dobby for anything else?"

Harry replied in the negative, and a loud crack saw Dobby disappear. Hermione wondered why he came in the way he did if he could leave magically, but she didn't get long to think about it.

"Well," Harry said into the silent chamber, interrupting her thoughts, "I guess we'd better get these two up to the infirmary."

Hermione nodded, flicking Lucius' wand to conjure a stretcher for Severus, gently levitating him onto it, while Harry did the same for Lucius, though taking much less care with his charge, who had quietly passed back into an unconscious state.

Hermione pointed her torch around the cavern and quickly found the tunnel entrance, which was much smaller than she remembered now that she was able to walk upright.

Harry noticed the cramped quarters as well, commenting, "Er, Hermione, I thought you said the tunnel got smaller toward the end."

"It does. I guess being on hands and knees gives one a different perspective on size," she said, carefully maneuvering Severus around the first bend.

The trip went much faster than she remembered, though when they neared the kitchens it became a struggle to fit the stretchers through the space without hitting any rocks. Hermione was more concerned about that than Harry was, but even Harry was worried about whether Lucius would fit through the small hole.

With the help of a muttered spell or two, they did manage to extricate themselves from the tunnel. Hermione had thought Severus was asleep, but as soon as his stretcher touched the floor, he pried himself up into a standing position, raising an eyebrow at her challengingly when she opened her mouth to protest.

She closed her mouth, but couldn't help giving him a displeased look. He was trying to conceal how he was leaning against a table for support, but she saw through his abnormally feeble attempts at subterfuge.

As she climbed down out of the hole, her thoughts were diverted from Severus as she noticed the eyes of many elves on her. She felt as if the kitchen walls themselves were focusing their attention on her unwelcome presence. She had no choice but to continue, but once on the floor, she hurriedly helped Harry float Lucius through the vent hole and then helped Harry down so she could hurry their progress through the kitchen and out into the safety of the castle.

Severus was moving so slowly it was painful to watch, but she tried to wait patiently. After three agonizingly slow paces, however, she stepped up to offer herself as a crutch, which she was surprised he accepted. Unfortunately, it didn't speed their progress any.

She looked around the kitchen, gauging the hostility level of the elves. She was certain that they were all looking at her, though they were keeping their distance. For how long was anyone's guess, and she didn't want to be around to find out, so when Harry stopped to ask one of the elves for a quick snack, dinner having already finished, Hermione almost cried.

"Harry, I'm sure Ginny has food waiting for you in your room. Right now we need to get Severus and Lucius up to the hospital wing!" She wasn't pleased to hear the note of anxiety in her voice, but hoped Harry would interpret it as concern for Severus' well-being.

Harry did give her a searching look, but quickly shrugged and continued on his way, gratefully accepted the apple an elf handed him as they neared the door.

Harry got to the door first and held it open for her as she helped Severus through it. If she hadn't been so concerned about the elves literally stabbing her in the back, she would have been more concerned with how Severus was putting more and more of his weight on her. Once they got to the stair base, though, it became obvious that Severus wouldn't make it to the infirmary on his own steam, so she stopped.

"Severus, I think that if we continue this way, we'll both have died of old age before we get you the help you need. I need to conjure another stretcher."

He turned to look at her coldly.

"I have suffered enough indignities since marrying you, I believe. I do not need to be seen floating about the corridors like an invalid on top of everything else!"

Hermione took in a sharp breath and bit her tongue fiercely.

"If you are so worried about your standing at this school, trust me, no one is ever going to outrank you as bastard supreme. First years will continue to have nightmares about you, prefects will dread running into you on patrols, and the fear of your wrath will deter all but the most persistent troublemakers. Now get on the damn stretcher!"

Hermione felt that strange power again as the air coalesced around her. Severus took a step back nervously, but was otherwise unmoved.

"You, madam, are still in need of lessons on the art of intimidation if you think one of your power displays is going to influence me."

Hermione felt the breeze strengthen, but tried to calm herself. If this *was* like the Force, drawing on it in anger was a bad, bad thing. Slowly the static charge in the air reduced, and the unnatural breeze faded away.

After a few moments, she was calm enough to say, "Severus, I am not trying to intimidate you. I am trying to reason with you. Think of it this way, would you rather have everyone see you on a stretcher, or passed out, helpless, on the floor somewhere?"

His only answer was to narrow his eyes at her. She was just about to magically force him into the stretcher when Harry tried pitching in.

"Professor, surely you've heard all the talk about Hermione since last night? No one is going to think less of you for being on a stretcher because everyone is in awe that you're brave enough to marry her!"

Hermione and Snape shot Harry identical glares, making Harry back off quickly.

"I was only trying to help," he muttered, turning his attention back to Lucius, who inconveniently continued to remain unconscious.

Hermione turned back to find Snape looking at the gurney with loathing.

"What if Hermione Disillusions you once you're on the stretcher? That will keep the majority of the attention on me and Malfoy, rather than you," Harry suggested idly.

Hermione was surprised to see Severus was thinking the suggestion over. After what looked to be a bitter internal battle, Snape finally nodded curtly, making his way over to the stretcher. Hermione sighed and smiled at Harry in thanks while raising the gurney to ease Severus' transition. He gave her one last suspicious glare before laying himself down.

Once he was completely prone, Hermione tapped him with the promised Disillusionment Charm, noting how the air seemed to bend around him, concealing both him and the stretcher to the inattentive eye.

"I'm only doing this because I must be in far worse condition than I initially thought. If one of Potter's ideas seems to have merit, I must be seriously concussed," Severus complained to the room at large.

Hermione bent over the area where she knew Severus' head was.

"You're only cranky because he thought of it first," she teased quietly.

She was pretty sure she could see him scowling at her and straightened quickly to hide her smirk from him.

"I do not get 'cranky,'" she heard him mutter. She thought he might have continued telling her off, but they entered the main corridor just then, and he chose prudence over defense.

Avery's Note, Redux: If you hadn't guessed, the non-object is a literal Plot Device, magically designed to create distractions. It's infused with a Confundus/Conjuring Charm that, once activated (such as raising the dust jacket), conjures a diversion, usually with unwelcome results.

The next chapter (originally part of this chapter) is in my beta's figurative hands right now, so another update will be coming soon!

And as always, big enormous thank yous to my beta supreme, SW69. She puts up with so much crap, it's incredible she continues to beta for me. Also, thank you, Keladry for adding your skills to the mix! I'm sure all of you readers know that if there are any mistakes, they are my responsibility alone. Don't blame the betas!

Southern's Notes: I really enjoyed Dobby in this chapter! Hehe! Who needs a bodyguard when you can have a Dobby?

IX

Chapter 9 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

"Poppy?" Hermione called as they entered the infirmary, though it was hardly necessary; Poppy emerged from her office in her usual prescient way even before Hermione had finished.

The matron came out, took one look at the situation, and scowled.

"What have you done to him?" she asked, checking over Lucius. She took over for Harry and floated him to the nearest bed.

"Nothing he didn't deserve, Poppy," Severus drawled as he sat up and Hermione cast the countercharm.

Poppy turned around, startled.

"Oh, Severus, I didn't see you there!" She stopped, scowling again. "And what have you been up to? Is this what you left your wife's bedside for, to go pick a fight? You..." She obviously wanted to say more, but pursed her lips together firmly, waved her wand and floated a protesting Severus to the bed next to Lucius'.

"Oh, don't even start complaining, young man!" she chastised. "You should have known better than to go out and pick a fight."

"Pick a fight? Poppy, he attacked Hermione! He was the one who picked a fight," Severus exclaimed, then straightened his shoulders into a less defensive pose. "Besides which, if Hermione's experience was any indication, Lucius needed to be rescued from that horrid room."

Hermione caught sight of Harry, who was watching the scene in fascination, though obviously amazed. To see Snape being chastised, and being defensive over it, was probably like revealing Voldemort to be a fan of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle. It shattered some serious illusions.

Hermione was aware that Severus would not like to be seen like this, by Harry especially, so she covertly caught Harry's attention and motioned for him to join her in the hallway. He followed, though with another astonished backward glance at the arguing pair.

"She called him 'young man'!" he said with a slightly dazed look.

"Yes, well, he is younger than she is."

Harry looked at Hermione, bewildered. "It doesn't surprise you?"

"Er," Hermione stalled. "It's not that I'm not surprised; it's more that I think I know both of them better than you do."

Harry looked at her wide-eyed, shaking his head. "But it's... it's *Snape!*"

"Who has been Poppy's patient since he was a student. Do you think she'll ever stop calling you 'young man'?"

"Okay, but then why are you calling Madam Pomfrey 'Poppy'?"

Hermione shrugged. "It's, er, a long story, and I would tell you now, but I expect Ginny is anxiously awaiting news of your safety."

Harry nodded and made to leave, but before he turned, Hermione grabbed his arm. "Harry, please don't mention any of this to anyone, except Ginny, of course. I don't know Severus very well, but I have gathered that he's very prickly about his privacy."

Harry nodded, though looked slightly hurt. "I wasn't planning on it. I may not like him, but I'm not going to spread gossip about *your* husband."

"I figured you wouldn't, Harry. I just needed to be sure."

Harry nodded tersely, but shot her a grin. "Besides which, this is too precious a memory to spread about. It's like seeing Malfoy turned into a ferret." He then winked and ran off toward Gryffindor Tower.

Not knowing what to think, Hermione stood there for a few moments before silently reentering the ward. She was interested to see that Madam Pomfrey had finished her ministrations and Lucius had woken up. He and Snape were bickering quietly. She approached Severus' bed stealthily, though both men seemed to be so absorbed in their argument that she probably could have stomped in on a hippogriff and been unnoticed.

"How dare you!" She heard Severus hiss at Lucius once she had gotten within hearing range.

"I was merely following your example, Severus. After all, as your lovely wife so amiably pointed out, you are such a *good man*."

Hermione was intrigued to see where the argument was heading, so she conjured a comfortable chair and settled down, feeling only a few pinpricks of her conscience as she did so. She was in plain sight after all. She was still wondering whether she should interrupt, or at least let them know she was sitting there when Severus said, "I'm warning you, Lucius. Do not even mention Hermione."

"Tch, tch. So sensitive. I remember being that protective of Narcissa at one time," Lucius drawled with mock sentimentality. Hermione shivered and tightened her grip on Lucius' wand.

"You had no right to accost her like that."

"No right? I could just as easily say you had no right to accost my wife like you did."

Severus opened his mouth, but quickly shut it, an angry flush spreading over his face.

"So you don't deny it!" Lucius said, trying to sit up in his anger, but slouching back down painfully. "I can't believe I trusted you!" he gasped.

"I don't deny that trusting me was a foolish thing to do, Lucius, but you're more foolish than I thought if you believe that of Narcissa."

"Narcissa was weak, especially when it came to Draco," Lucius spat.

"My, my. And here I thought *you* two made such a lovely couple. But perhaps you had reason to suspect her being faithless? Maybe you identified with Laius for some reason?" Severus suggested nastily.

Lucius reared up, no longer even pretending to be calm.

"How dare you?" he hissed, even as he was gripping his side in pain. "How dare you suggest such filth!" he wheezed, still breathing hard.

"Now, now, Lucius," Severus replied with a nasty smirk, "there's no need for such dramatics. I was only voicing a rogue thought. I would never believe such 'filth' of Narcissa or Draco."

Hermione wondered whether she should intervene, as Lucius' face became a livid red as he stared at Severus hatefully. But just as she started raising her wand arm,

Lucius calmed down.

"Is that how you justified it?"

Severus sighed in exasperation, bringing his fingers up to massage the bridge of his nose in a very familiar way. "Justify *what*, Lucius? If I am to defend myself against your dubious claims, I need to know what you've deluded yourself into thinking."

"But, Severus, old friend, if I tell you what I suspect, you might never reveal your other trespasses."

Snape nearly growled, but spoke in his nearly civil tone. "Did I betray the brotherhood? Yes. Your claims against me there are well justified, but that is not something I will ever apologize for. Did I lie to you about my role, betraying some foolish notion of friendship that goes beyond rationality? Again, the answer would be yes. I didn't trust you, Lucius. I never have. Did I take advantage of your absence to lure Draco away from your path? Yes. Again, I will not apologize for doing something his father should have done for him: secure his safety! If that had the side benefit of lessening the bond between the two of you, so much the better."

Lucius interrupted with another growl. "How can you possibly think rending a father and son bond can be a good thing?"

"Lucius, look at yourself then and now. You swore fealty to a madman intent on ridding our world of some of our brightest, which would result in us becoming a cesspool of inbreeding. The likelihood was that had Voldemort succeeded, we would have ended up little better than Muggles after only a few generations."

"You are more deluded than I suspected if you believe Mudbloods like your wife add anything to our world," Lucius interjected.

Hermione observed Severus closely, but saw he was smiling at Lucius pityingly.

"If your prejudice blinds you to logic, then so be it, *old friend*. You'll find your lack of reason is not going to be regarded highly without your fortune to back it up."

Lucius scowled at the Potions master, then turned away, looking decidedly sulky for a moment. Snape must have noticed because a feral grin crossed his face, though it was gone in an instant.

"Then, *dear friend*, you were in prison, which was the only thing saving your pathetic life from the wrath of your master. What kind of an example does that set for a boy? Do you really believe I was the driving force behind Draco's disgust in you? I think not. It was your foolish actions and delusions that started it. You raised him to be ridiculed, and when you were no longer there to tell him what to think and how to behave, and he finally had to think for himself, surprise, surprise, he found that your teachings were faulty. Your beliefs and behavior put him into the humiliating position of having to kowtow to Potter, of all people."

"The Dark Lord would have accepted him with open arms!" Lucius objected.

"Long enough to kill him!" Snape shot back. "Which brings us to your 'weak' wife." Snape smiled evilly. "Did I entertain your wife many a night in your absence? The answer is again, yes."

The effect was immediate. Lucius lunged out of bed more quickly than Hermione thought possible. She had raised her arm to bind him when he stopped moving very suddenly. Hermione noticed Severus discretely aiming his wand at the blond wizard, and with a quick flick of his wrist, Lucius was back on the bed.

"Now, now, Lucius. You asked, and you shall hear. Narcissa came over to my place many times, but not for the reasons you obviously assume. You should be ashamed of yourself to think that. She would never have been unfaithful to you... *with me*. You know as well as I do that Narcissa valued beauty very highly. That was the reason she married you after all."

Snape looked at Lucius lying immobile on his bed and smirked. Slowly, he got up and moved towards Lucius, careful to keep his wand trained on the blond.

"But she did come to me because she needed me." Snape let that statement hang in the air for a few moments. "She needed me to protect Draco in his father's absence. She needed me to help her evade capture. She needed me for fucking... *errands*."

Snape towered over Lucius threateningly. He was positioned so that both his and Lucius' faces weren't visible, but Hermione could guess at the derisive expression he must have been gracing Lucius with.

"As much as I thought you a fool to remain faithful to the Dark Lord, I still considered you my friend, Lucius. I took your son under my wing as requested by your wife. I made sure the Order kept an eye on Narcissa for her own safety. I even fetched her some of the more dubious herbs she requested, even though being caught with them on my person could have been quite troublesome."

"I never touched her, though. She was *your* wife."

Snape backed off and returned to his bed, never turning his back on Lucius. It was at that point he noticed Hermione for the first time. He subtly startled, but quickly graced her with a wry smile and motioned for her to come to him.

Not sure what to expect, Hermione dutifully rose and approached Severus who put a protective arm around her shoulder and smiled down at her. He then turned back to Lucius with a fierce expression.

"You *were* my friend, Lucius. Killing Narcissa was the beginning of the end, and don't even try to deny it," he added quickly when Lucius blinked angrily. "Before you visited her, she was finally on the mend. You killed her needlessly, Lucius." Lucius closed his eyes, pained, but Snape was merciless and continued.

"Any friendship we had was over the moment you threatened Hermione, and when you attacked her, you made me your enemy."

Hermione shivered at the intensity of his words and was a bit dismayed by the fear that was filling Lucius' eyes. She reminded herself to not push Snape too far.

Lucius wrenched his eyes away from Severus and focused on Hermione. She wasn't surprised that all the fear turned to anger as he locked eyes with her. She had caused him an awful lot of trouble, one way or another.

"SEVERUS!" a voice called angrily. Snape's shoulders hunched fractionally, and he turned around to face an appalled Poppy Pomfrey.

"You get back in bed this instant! You know as well as I do that any weight on your hip during the healing process risks deformity!"

Snape nodded and then used Hermione as a support as he slowly and painfully levered himself back into bed. Hermione hadn't been aware that he'd been in any pain as he confronted Lucius, but now saw his face was drawn from the exertion.

"Ms. Granger" Poppy started, but Hermione held up her hand.

"I really wasn't aware of his injuries, Madam Pomfrey! If I had been, I would have forced him back to bed immediately!"

Poppy rolled her eyes. "Yes, I'm aware of that. I was going to ask you to watch over your husband to make sure he doesn't do anything more foolish."

"Oh. Of course," Hermione said, thankful she wasn't going to get reamed out again. Once was enough for a lifetime.

"As for you," Poppy said, turning back to Severus with a very stern look on her face, "seeing as this is the third time you've been silly enough to disobey my strict orders today, you are hereby confined until I deem you healthy enough to leave!"

Snape paled slightly. "Poppy, be reasonable!"

"Reasonable, my arse! One more word of protest, and I will give you something to make sure you stay put!"

"But"

True to her word, Poppy summoned a bottle from her stores, read the label, and forced it on Snape.

"Don't make me bind you," she growled as he tried evasive maneuvers.

He continued struggling until he saw Hermione watching. He immediately stopped resisting and opened his mouth, shooting Poppy a resentful glare. Once he'd swallowed the potion, Poppy smiled at him and patted his cheek.

"Now I can be sure you'll rest like a good boy."

If anything, Snape's look became more malevolent, and Hermione had to smother a grin. Then Snape's glare mellowed, and his frown softened. He looked around the room dazedly, and when his eyes rested on her, he smiled.

"Hermione!" he said, sounding almost happy. "I'm so happy to see you."

Hermione looked up at Poppy, who was now tending to Lucius.

"Erm, Poppy, what was that?"

"Hmm?" Poppy said as she looked up from Lucius to Hermione, then followed Hermione's worried gaze to Severus. "Oh, it's just a strong Calming Draught, dear. Don't worry; he'll be fine."

"But, er, did you have to give it to him?" Hermione asked, growing more worried by the moment as Severus started humming something that sounded suspiciously like "I've got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts" while placidly looking at Hermione's breasts. "I doubt he would have gotten up again."

Poppy laughed, though not unkindly. "This is not the first time I've had to confine him to a bed in this manner, dear. I expect you're right about him not getting up again, but he wouldn't get any actual rest. He'd just sit there pouting and grousing for the entire night, draining himself further. With this potion he'll be able to rest and heal properly, so that in a few hours, he'll be fit to grouse for England!"

Hermione was shocked when Severus chuckled at the jibe. She looked at Severus again, who was gazing at her with unabashedly soft eyes. It gave her the collywobbles; that was not Severus.

"Er, well, I can see the why you'd want to give him the potion, but shouldn't he agree to it? Isn't it, er, unethical to force treatment on a patient?"

Poppy looked up, frowning. "Normally, yes, but Severus signed an agreement to allow me to tend to him as he required. It was a necessity of the war, you know."

Hermione bit her lip, frowning. "But the war is over. Shouldn't he be allowed to heal or not heal as he chooses?"

"Hermione," Severus said before Poppy could say anything else, "it's fine. I feel fine. It's a lovely feeling actually."

"Maybe it is the end of the world as we know it," Hermione muttered to herself and was startled again when Severus laughed rather loudly, then started singing the R.E.M. song off key.

Closing her eyes to adjust to this new reality, she opened them as she thought of how defenseless Severus was in this mellow state.

"Okay, Poppy, if he says it's fine, it's fine, but I'm not comfortable about Lucius being here with him when Severus is in such an... unguarded state."

Poppy looked between the two men and nodded crisply.

"Well, considering Mr. Malfoy will be in Auror custody very shortly, I suspect they will request he be dosed with a Calming Draught as well. If you'll watch these two, I'll go Floo the Ministry to see what they want done."

Hermione nodded, and Poppy went off.

"Why are you so worried, Hermione?" Severus asked sweetly.

"Because you aren't eliciting any fear in me right now."

Snape frowned slightly. "And that's bad?"

Sighing, Hermione turned to face Severus. "No, it's not bad under normal circumstances, but well, I don't like being around Lucius."

Severus "ahhed" and nodded knowingly. That reminded Hermione of something he said earlier.

"Severus, in the cavern you said something about me mentioning the tunnel, but I don't remember telling you about it."

"You didn't," he admitted freely, smiling. "I overheard your entire conversation with Pooter, er, Potter. I didn't really like it, truth be told."

"Didn't like what?"

"It really hurt when you said it was only thoughts of Potter that kept you going."

Hermione recoiled slightly, not expecting that admission. "I'm sorry, Severus. I..."

He waved his hand lazily, as if brushing flies away from his face. "I understand, Hermione. I really do. It's okay."

"No," Hermione replied, "it's not okay. But I don't know what to do to make it better."

"Oh, that's easy," Severus said, grinning. "You could love me."

Hermione's chest tightened painfully. Severus was looking at her so beseechingly, so *innocently*, that the request took her breath away.

"I'll try. I really will." She smiled at him hesitantly. "The thing is, right now, I'm very angry with you."

He looked genuinely concerned at that. "Why?"

"Well, this morning when I woke up, Theodore was watching over me, and well, we talked, and he told me about you warning him off."

A look of comprehension overtook Severus' features, then sorrow. He didn't say anything, though.

"Did you?"

"Did I what?" he asked carefully.

"Did you warn Theodore off?"

He looked upset, but he nodded. Hermione drew in a shaky breath.

"Why?"

"I didn't want to see either of you hurt."

"But..." Hermione was finding it difficult to talk as her throat started closing. She drew in another shaky breath before continuing. "Did you warn off Blaise Zabini and any others as well?"

Severus closed his eyes, a pained look on his face. He nodded minutely after a moment.

"Why?" she cried plaintively. "Why would you do that?"

He opened his eyes and looked at her intently.

"I dissuaded Blaise and the others because by then I realized my feelings for you. I knew it was the only way I had a chance to protect you like I'd promised."

Her hasty conclusions were right. She suddenly felt ill, so she forced that thought to the back of her mind. "But you didn't marry me just to uphold your promise."

He shook his head, smiling slightly. "Still not sure about that, are you?"

Hermione looked away. "No, I'm sure. I can't see you chasing down Lucius wandless just to protect me." She offered him a half smile, which he returned with interest.

"I'd do it again, you know."

She nodded, keeping her head low to hide her face. She didn't know whether he meant he'd chase after Lucius again, or scare away her suitors again, but she was beginning to think it was unfair of her to question him while he was under the influence of this potion. It felt wrong.

Suddenly, she felt his hand under her chin, lifting her face up.

"What's bothering you?" he asked, wiping a stray tear off her cheek with his thumb. "Why are you so sad now?"

She tried to smile at him. "I just realized how unethical I'm being, questioning you when you're like this."

He smiled back. "It's what I'd do." He offered her a slow wink. "Besides, I'm not under any compulsion to answer. It wasn't Veritaserum Poppy gave me after all."

His hand was still on her cheek, and she involuntarily leaned into it, cherishing the warmth he was offering so freely.

Closing her eyes, she admitted very quietly, "If you were like this all the time, it would be easy to love you."

His hand stilled, and she squeezed her eyes closed further, not wanting to see his hurt expression.

"I'm sorry," she said, pulling away from him. "I shouldn't have said that." She looked around the room to keep herself from seeing him.

His hand covered hers gently, prompting a quick look at him in surprise. He didn't seem upset, as she'd expected, but mischievous.

"Well, when I'm being a particular pain in the arse, you could always drug me back into this lovable form," he suggested, a smile tugging on his lips.

She smiled, shaking her head at his audacity. She sniffled slightly and looked around for a tissue, finding one on the table between the beds. When she returned to his bedside, he looked pensive.

"What's the matter?"

He looked at her carefully. "Would you do something for me?"

"Depends. What do you want me to do?"

"Kiss me?"

Hermione was startled by the request, but her eyes immediately dropped to his lips. She licked hers unconsciously.

"Why?"

"To make up for the last one," he said, offering her a sad smile.

Remembering their last kiss, she frowned, not relishing the idea. But looking over at him, seeing his preternaturally soft eyes gazing at her so lovingly, she decided it was a good enough reason for her. She bowed down and pressed her lips to his. He kissed her back very tenderly, and she soon found herself lost in a spine-tingling kiss as their lips melded to each other's, softly exploring without delving too deep.

It was a very innocent kiss, though not exactly chaste. When she reluctantly parted from him to straighten her protesting back, she felt as if she wouldn't be able to walk straight. She opened her eyes and found Severus lying back, touching his lips with a very content look on his face.

When he opened his eyes, they were almost twinkling, and she was sure he was going to profess his love, but Poppy came round the curtains at that moment.

"Well, the Ministry has given me instruction to dose you, Mr. Malfoy." Poppy turned to address Hermione. "Ms. Granger, would you be so kind as to stand guard while I unbind him?"

Hermione nodded, standing up. She found she was right about the inability to walk, though concentrating seemed to make it easier. It was only a few steps to Lucius' side, and she aimed his own wand at him very carefully.

Poppy unbound him, and although he started glowering immediately, he didn't move otherwise. He even swallowed the potion without protest, glaring at Hermione the entire time. It took only seconds for the potion to activate, and soon his glare became more of an annoyed grimace.

As soon as that happened, Poppy backed up and cast a simple Confinement Charm, preventing Lucius from leaving the bed. She checked Snape over quickly and then nodded to Hermione with a wink.

"I'll be in my office. Call if you need anything, dears."

Hermione had the distinct impression Poppy had seen the kiss. For some reason that she preferred not to think about, Hermione was not bothered by that. She looked down in time to see Severus smiling up at her, relaxing back into the bed with a satisfied air.

She took the moment to observe him in the same way he was observing her and found she didn't mind his face at all. His nose was big, true. His hair was greasy as well, although with it short it simply looked like he'd added too much hair gel. She decided she really did like the new haircut; it accentuated his fine cheekbones, which really did frame his face nicely. And the best part was that when he decided to smile, like he was doing at the moment, he couldn't hide behind that curtain.

"You're smiling at me," Snape commented.

"Oh, well spotted, Severus. Has marriage really made you so mundane?" Lucius muttered under his breath, reminding Hermione a bit of Kreacher. Both Hermione and Severus chose to ignore Lucius.

"Am I?" she said, smiling a little more.

"Oh, please," Lucius grumbled.

"Yes." Severus paused a moment, his face growing serious. "Does this mean you've forgiven me?"

Hermione's eyebrow rose on its own, and she noticed Lucius perk up. "For what?"

"Hmm," he said, eyes narrowing dangerously, though his relaxed grin belied his mood. "Trying Slytherin tactics on for size, are you?"

Lucius snorted unbecomingly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hermione said innocently.

Lucius snorted again.

"Questioning me while I'm in a very pleasant frame of mind, sneaking around in plain sight, smiling beguilingly while I'm incapacitated, and then using my own techniques against me... I must say, my dear, you have learned from the best."

Lucius cut off Hermione's giggle by laughing derisively. Hermione shot him an irritated glare before turning back to Severus. "Well, it's good to know that no matter how relaxed you are, you're still terribly arrogant."

"What he is, is a lying son of a" Lucius started, but Snape cut him off, admitting: "Oh, I'm a bastard as well; don't you doubt it. I just find you to be a... softening influence."

Hermione waited a beat for Lucius' interruption, but none was forthcoming.

"That's nice to know. Maybe I'll be able to tame the wild beast without drugging him first?"

Lucius snickered at the thought while Snape smiled at her, though it had an edge to it that made her shiver.

"Are you really sure you want to tame me, my dear?"

She shook her head. "No, but it might be nice if you weren't such a paranoid bastard all the time."

He clutched his heart in mock pain. "You slay me with your words, Madam."

Lucius made a gagging noise, losing all pretense of maturity.

Growing serious, Severus added, "So have you, or will you, forgive me for my latest misdemeanors?"

Hermione frowned. "I don't think I want to talk about that right now."

Snape's eyebrow rose. "Your Gryffindor nobility is preventing you from taking advantage of me?"

"No," Hermione said. "First, I'd rather not discuss it where we're going to be interrupted every few moments by Lucius' childish ploys, and secondly, I'd rather talk about it with the Severus whom I'm married to, not this wonderful, relaxed stranger."

Severus frowned. "It was only a Calming Draught, Hermione. This *is* me, just without the edge."

"Maybe so, but your edge is very sharp, and I've already been sliced a couple of times." Hermione paused, trying to think her words over carefully. She hated hurting this Severus; it felt ten times worse than hurting the normal Severus because it seemed as if he was such a nice guy. He didn't deserve the same caution and reticence the normal Snape did. "I'd rather duel upfront with all weapons visible than wait for a surprise attack."

Lucius looked from one to the other expectantly, gauging both their reactions, but was disappointed when Severus seemed to accept her case. He nodded silently before looking away, making Lucius choke in disbelief.

"What are you thinking, Severus?" he asked, outraged. "How can you lie there and idly accept this girl's terms? Where's your pride, man?"

Severus looked over at Lucius with a raised eyebrow.

"Pride?" he said, his voice on the verge of laughter. "You, who have been resorting to the tricks of a five-year-old, are questioning me about my pride?" He shook his head and turned back to Hermione, obviously amused.

"I was wondering something," he said to Hermione, ignoring Lucius' angry spluttering. "When we were in the kitchens, you seemed... I was under the impression that you were nervous. Why?"

Hermione fidgeted, torn between wanting to be honest and wanting to hide that little portion of her adventure from everyone.

"The house-elves probably scared her away," Lucius muttered snidely.

If Hermione could have controlled one thing in her body at that moment, it would have been her blood flow. She desperately didn't want to blush, but felt the uncomfortable heat covering her entire head nonetheless.

Lucius guffawed loudly, pointing at her. "I was right! See how red she's getting?"

"Oh, like you're one to talk, Malfoy!" she shot at him with a glare.

Severus raised his eyebrow in disbelief while Lucius just laughed harder.

"Come now, Lucius, you underestimate Hermione. It would take more than one house-elf to scare her. It would take an entire house-elf rebellion!"

Hermione fidgeted, blushing even more fiercely.

"There was a house-elf rebellion?" Snape asked, disbelievingly, though there was a hint of humor in his voice now. "The house-elves rebelled against *you*?"

Hermione avoided his eye and nodded, completely embarrassed. She was expecting another mocking statement, but what she heard was Snape's melodious laughter adding itself to Lucius'.

She looked at Snape, mortified.

"Well, at least you can claim success in your efforts for spew," he said between chuckles.

Hermione glared at him. "It is not *spew*! It is S.P.E.W., the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare!"

Lucius howled with laughter, nearly doubling up on his bed. "*Spew*!" he said, trying to catch his breath but failing. "And here I thought your wife was supposed to be smart, Snape!"

Snape's laughter increased, his body shaking with mirth. "She even made buttons with the word emblazoned across it!" he explained to Lucius.

Lucius did double up at that, tears leaking from his eyes. "That's..." he panted, trying to talk, "that's too perfect!"

Snape nodded in agreement, not even trying to talk. Hermione looked between the two, her anger building along with her mortification.

"What's going on, here?" Poppy asked accusingly from behind Hermione, causing Snape and Lucius' laughter to increase even further. That was the last straw for Hermione. She couldn't bear to hear Poppy's laughter added to theirs, so with one final hurt look at Severus, she turned and stormed out of the room.

Avery's notes: Laius was the father of Oedipus Rex.

Huge thanks to Southern for her awesome betaing skills! But, of course, any mistakes you see are purely my own.

X

Chapter 10 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

It took a surprisingly short amount of time for Hermione to calm down enough to visit all of her professors to apologize and gather assignments. She hadn't cried, raged or otherwise expended her emotions, and she knew, intellectually, that she would need to eventually, but there were more important matters to deal with first. Like homework.

Most of her professors had balked at giving her make-up assignments. Vector had been quite nasty about it, but Hermione had persisted, and eventually she had enough work to keep her busy till the end of the weekend at the very least.

Smiling, she entered the library for the books necessary to complete her new Charms research essay, ruthlessly burying any thoughts when the term 'avoidance technique' crept up.

She'd just gathered the last book she needed and was about to head off in search of some light reading when someone tapped her on the shoulder. Battle instincts kicking in, she dropped her books, spun on her heel, and just barely refrained from hexing an extremely frightened Theodore Nott. After a brief pause to collect her breath, she lowered her wand with an apology.

"I am so sorry, Theodore! I... Well..."

Theodore was shaking slightly as he backed up, but he shook off the apology with a faint voice. "No worries, Her-Hermione. It was, er, impolite of me to touch you."

He knelt down to pick up the books she'd dropped while she looked at him, bemused.

"Erm, I think it's more of a social faux pas to hex before looking than it is to touch without asking. Well, at least an innocent touch like that," she added darkly.

Nott looked up at the change in her tone, but didn't comment. Instead he said, "Er, is that a new wand?"

She looked down at the wand still in her hand and blushed. "Oh, yes, you could say that. My wand got broken, so this is a loaner until I get a chance to replace it."

Nott frowned, looking at the wand more closely. "You know I'd swear I've seen that wand before... Is it a professor's wand?"

Hermione shook her head slowly, and knowing he'd place it eventually, she admitted, "No, it's actually Lucius Malfoy's. He was the one who broke my wand, so I figured it was only fair to use his in the meantime."

Nott looked at her warily, though not unkindly. The scrutiny made her blush.

"Er, well, won't he miss it?" he asked tentatively.

"I... well, considering he'll probably be going to Azkaban before the day is out, I'm guessing it won't matter if he did."

Nott's look intensified. "Azkaban? What did he do? And how did he get caught?"

Hermione felt her traitorous lip tremble, and she sat down heavily from her kneeling position. Resting her head in her hands, she cursed her bad timing. She hadn't shed a tear while pacing the empty corridors or facing her professors, but confronted by a friendly peer, she suddenly felt the urge to become a bloody hosepipe again. It was ridiculous.

"Er, it's okay. You don't have to answer," Nott said from closer than Hermione remembered him being. She looked up and found him hovering over her very awkwardly, as if he wanted to offer his shoulder to cry on, but was afraid of being hexed for it. She wanted to laugh, but thought it might be taken the wrong way.

"Lucius attacked me the other day," she answered after composing herself. "Severus took it upon himself to catch the bast...him."

Nott gave her a piercing look, but carefully said nothing. Instead, he sat down next to her, leaving a comfortable amount of space between them. He looked around as if for a distraction and spotted the pile of books. Picking up the tome on top, he smiled at the title.

"The Resonance and Amalgamation Within Transfiguring Charms?" he read in an amused voice.

She sighed, bracing herself for some comment on how Quidditch was a far superior pastime than reading theoretical texts that went far beyond the required course load. Therefore, she was surprised when Nott looked at her with an admiring smile and said, "Now I understand why I never caught up with you if this is the kind of text you use as reference material." He softly drew a finger over the engraved lettering in an almost reverential way.

"I never would have thought to look up the underlying relationship and how it relates to the theory..." he continued, looking at her with a touch of awe. "I always thought you were smart; I didn't realize you're brilliant."

Hermione felt her cheeks grow warm. She looked down at her hands as she tried to shrug off his admiration.

"It's not brilliant; it's logical. I mean, it's obvious there's a connection between the two arts, and if we're to really grasp how to use charms and transfiguration to their fullest, we need to explore and understand that connection. Although I must say that that text is overrated because it barely even mentions anything about..." She noticed Nott was smiling at her as if he was trying very hard not to laugh out loud. "What?"

"Nothing."

Hermione rolled her eyes and would have put her hands on her hips had she been standing. "You're laughing at me, aren't you?"

Nott shook his head. "No... Well, I suppose I am. I just find it amusing that you can't even see how brilliant you are. It might be a matter of basic logic, but it takes a certain caliber of mind to make the leap beyond the last theorem to the next without stumbling about on false premises."

Hermione looked at Nott as if for the first time. She must have stared for a bit too long because he shifted uncomfortably.

"What?" he asked.

"You're following what I say."

"Yes..." Nott agreed with her statement slowly, as if waiting for a punch line.

"I don't have to translate?"

Bemused, he shook his head. "Why would I need you to translate? It's not as if you're speaking Mermish."

Hermione felt a slow smile growing. "Would you, by any chance, be interested in studying together?" she asked, excitement making her voice breathy.

Nott was smiling so brightly that he practically lit up at the suggestion. "Are you serious? Who wouldn't want you as a study partner?"

Hermione opened her mouth to start listing her various friends when a shadow fell across the pair. Looking up in unison, they saw Madam Pince looming over them with an expression slightly less bitter than usual.

"The library is closing," she said without any bite. Although Madam Pince had never been as sharp with Hermione as she had been with Harry and Ron, she'd never been so peaceable before. Looking over at Nott, Hermione noticed he wasn't flummoxed at all.

"Thanks, Madam Pince," Nott said with a smile while getting to his feet. The librarian nodded curtly and went to chase off any other lingering students.

Nott extended his hand to help her up, which Hermione gratefully accepted. They bent down to collect her books and soon had made their way out of the library.

As soon as they were out of Pince's earshot, Hermione said, "I've never seen Madam Pince be so... so nice."

Nott shot her a sly grin. "You just haven't been hanging about with the right people, I suppose."

She scowled at him. "And who are the right people?"

His grin became more pronounced. "Slytherins."

She rolled her eyes, but couldn't suppress an amused grin of her own. "Is that so? Well, then, between you and Severus, I should be in her good graces in no time."

His grin took on a slightly fixed quality for a moment, but he quickly recovered.

"I suppose so. As it is, you have two of the three necessary traits a person of quality should possess."

"Oh? And those traits are...?"

"Well, you respect books, both intellectually and physically, and you enjoy learning."

"And the trait that I'm lacking?"

"You're one of those brash Gryffindors. She detests noise."

"That's not fair! I am not noisy!" Hermione yelled, her voice echoing in the corridor. At Theodore's nervous grin, she bit back any further response, wanting to pout at his successful baiting. Unfortunately, she was unable to suppress a wry grin.

"Touché, Mr. Nott," she said, bowing her head in his direction. "Although, I will say in my defense that I have never yelled or otherwise made a racket whilst *in* the library."

"I never said you had," he replied, set at ease by her smile.

They walked in silence for a while, not quite comfortable with it, but neither knowing what to say. As they approached the dungeon stairs, Hermione decided to be proactive.

"So, what classes would you be willing to partner with me for?"

He looked at her, an eager smile on his face. "Do we have to narrow it down?"

She laughed lightly. "I suppose not, but I don't recall ever seeing you in Runes, so you might not get much benefit from studying that with me."

He rolled his eyes. "And I suspect you'd prefer I not practice Divination with you, though you might be able to help with my Muggle Studies... if you'd be willing, that is."

"Divination?" Hermione asked, slightly aghast. "You take Divination?"

Nott nodded and smiled ruefully at her expression. "I take it you're not a fan."

"Um, no," Hermione responded as tactfully as she could. "I think Firenze is a better teacher than Trelawney, but I still think the subject matter is rather woolly."

Nott laughed. "Of course it is! It's the nature of the beast! That doesn't mean it doesn't have its uses!"

"Oh? And what uses are those?" Hermione challenged.

Nott stopped, put the books he was holding, as well as those she was carrying, down, and took her hand in his. He looked it over carefully, tilting it this way and that to see it better in the dim light.

Hermione watched him as he concentrated, feeling a slight shiver as he took his finger and ran it along one of the lines in her palm.

Looking up, Nott smiled at her. "See this line? It's the heart line. Yours is pretty straight, meaning you tend to think about love more than feeling it. And the way it extends all the way to your index finger," he traced the path with his finger, "means that you're very choosy about who you deign to even *think* about giving your heart to." He looked up at her with a saucy grin. "Of course, I could have figured that out just by the way you went about things last week."

Hermione blushed, and Nott tactfully moved onto a different subject. "And this is your head line. Judging by yours, you tend to think long and hard about everything, but you aren't really receptive to new ideas." He looked up at her in surprise. "That's certainly not what I expected," he said, nearly laughing. "Well, as you say, Divination is rather woolly."

Hermione, however, wasn't laughing. She was thinking about how she always felt lost when her books failed her. She thought about how difficult it was for her to think of Snape as anything but the nasty teacher he had been, even though she had seen evidence that there was so much more to him. She shook her head slightly.

"Yes, well, all you've told me isn't really Divination, now is it? You've just told me what kind of person I am. If a doctor, or Healer," she added at his confused look, "can tell if you're sick by looking at your throat, then I suppose you could tell what I'm like by looking at my hand. But telling me the future from my hand seems a little more far fetched."

Nott took that as a challenge. "I was only telling you the basics, though." He concentrated on her hand, pressing here and there with his thumbs before smoothing the skin out in a sweeping motion. He examined it very closely, and when he looked up, he seemed troubled.

"You tried to kill yourself?" he asked. Hermione narrowed her eyes, wondering if Snape had told everyone about her stint on the Astronomy Tower.

Her voice was rather hard as she said, "What did Snape say?"

"Snape?" Nott looked confused. "You mean Professor Snape knew about..."

Hermione scanned Theodore for any signs of falsity, but found only disturbed confusion. Releasing a sigh, she answered him. "Yes. He found and stopped me. I don't think I would have actually gone through with it, though."

Nott furrowed his brows and looked down at her hand again. Hermione felt her stomach roiling, wondering if it was from hunger or the intimate information Nott was uncovering.

He looked up again, and although his eyes were still troubled, his face had relaxed slightly.

"Well, although you've gone through very hard times lately, everything is about to change. Love will force her way into your life through the crack you've made, no matter how hard you resist, and when you do accept her presence, everything will change. It will be painful, but it will be very good for you and those you love."

Hermione snorted. When Nott gave her a questioning glance, she explained. "That is exactly what I mean about Divination being woolly. I don't mean any disrespect, but considering recent events, that is exactly the sort of reading I would expect to receive, focusing on love and how it will change my life. In fact, you've just described my past week!"

Nott was shaking his head. "No, this is what's to come. The past is there, too," he pointed to an area of her hand, "but that was just opened the door for what will be."

Hermione looked at him, feeling very uncomfortable. She saw he was sincere in his belief, but it was something she couldn't share.

"Well, I suppose I'll see, now won't I?" She smiled tensely. "If cupid pays a visit and attacks me, then I will most definitely concede that you are right, but until then, I think maybe Divination is a subject we'd best avoid."

Nott smirked at her response and nodded. "Agreed. Charms, Transfiguration, Arithmancy and Muggle Studies?" He said the last one hopefully. Hermione's smile warmed up, and she nodded.

"Of course I'll help you with Muggle Studies. Why are you taking it, anyway?" she asked as she knelt down to collect her books. Nott promptly took half the pile from her without asking.

"Well, with the Dark Lord gone, there's going to be some need for acclimatizing Muggle-borns into our society, and it seems reasonable for us to meet them halfway."

Hermione nodded, impressed. "That's definitely true, but... well..."

"But why would I bother?" he said, stopping to give voice to her question. She stopped as well and nodded, watching him as he pensively searched for an explanation.

"My father, as I'm sure you know, was a Death Eater. He believed all the cra...all the nonsense the Dark Lord spouted without even thinking about how Voldemort was playing on his prejudices." Nott's face went hard with disgust. "He became nothing more than a stupid pawn in Voldemort's game." Nott paused and looked at Hermione appraisingly. "I want more than to be a pawn."

Hermione and Theodore looked at each other for long moment and then Hermione nodded.

"Well, it's nice to know you're smart enough to learn by example," she said as she started walking again. Glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, she saw a pleased look cross his face and smiled.

The rest of the trip to Snape's quarters was taken up with arrangements for when and where to meet. As they came to a stop in front of Snape's door, Hermione smiled at Nott.

"Well, thank you for carrying my books for me," she said as he gave her back the pile he'd held. "And I'm looking forward to Saturday."

He nodded, fiddling with his cuffs nervously. "Thank you again for agreeing to..."

"No, thank you!" she said, cutting him off. "You have no idea how nice it will be to have someone to actually discuss class work with, instead of me being the honorary teacher." She smiled and added, "Besides Muggle Studies, that is."

He grinned and nodded. "Well, I guess I'll see you later, then," he said, giving an awkward wave before leaving.

Hermione juggled her books while unwarding the door and then entered her quarters. Once inside, she put the pile of books down on the nearest horizontal surface with a relieved sigh and turned on the lights before making a beeline to the bathroom.

Once nature's call had been answered, she came out and looked around the bedroom. Her eye was immediately caught by a mound of white in the corner. Focusing on it, she realized it was her wedding dress, still lying on the chair where she'd placed it on Sunday.

Slowly walking over to it, she fingered the fabric absently, her mind boggling at the fact that she'd only been married for four days. And of those four days, she'd only spent one night in her husband's chambers. Her wedding night. *Their* wedding night.

She frowned at the thought, but was distracted by a knock on the door. Glancing at the clock, she wondered who would be knocking on Snape's door after ten, and then she had the horrible realization that he was head of Slytherin and there might be a student in distress.

She rushed to the door but upon opening it found not a frenzied Slytherin, but the headmaster beaming down at her.

"Professor Dumbledore! I wasn't expecting you; although, if you're here to see Severus, he's currently..." She trailed off as Dumbledore raised a peaceful hand.

"I am aware of Severus' internment, my dear. I am here to see you."

"Oh," she said rather lamely before remembering her manners and inviting him in.

They settled themselves in the living area, she on the settee while he claimed the armchair by the fireplace.

He seemed to be looking at her expectantly, but it took her a moment to remember her manners, yet again.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Professor. Would you care for a beverage?"

He smiled merrily at her and nodded. "Yes, that would be lovely, Ms. Granger. In fact, that reminds me... Poppy said something about making sure you ate, so may I ask if you've supped tonight?"

Hermione had forgotten about dinner. However, now that the topic had been brought up, she realized she was very hungry indeed.

"No, I never did have supper. In all the excitement, I simply forgot."

Dumbledore nodded understandingly. "Yes, meals are easily forgotten in the midst of our trials and tribulations, aren't they? Well, as I would rather not be on the receiving end of Poppy's displeasure, may I presume to conjure a meal for you?"

She nodded bashfully and gratefully dug into the lovely stew that appeared, forgetting about her offering him a drink until a mug of hot chocolate appeared in his hand.

"Oh," she said in between mouthfuls, "I'm sorry. I forgot."

"Quite understandable, Ms. Granger," he said, gesturing for her to continue eating. "You've had a rather long and wearing week."

Dumbledore looked around the room. "Ah, so your belongings were transferred here without any problems, I see. Good, good." He sipped on his cocoa again, and they lapsed into silence while she finished her meal, savoring all of it to the last crumb.

Wiping her mouth with the serviette, she smiled at Dumbledore gratefully.

"Thank you, sir. I haven't had many meals in the last few days, and that was absolutely delicious. I apologize for my bad manners."

"I believe it is I who owe you an apology, Ms. Granger," Dumbledore said, setting his hot chocolate down and somberly looking her in the eye. "Despite appearances, I am not omniscient, but in cases like this, I wish I were. I am sorry your trust in me has put you in an unhappy situation."

Hermione stared at Dumbledore wondering what she should do. It wasn't the apology she wanted, but it was probably as good as she was going to get, and being on friendly terms with the headmaster would almost certainly be a good idea, especially if they were living in the same castle.

"Apology accepted, sir."

Dumbledore's grave expression softened.

"Thank you, my dear." He paused to take another sip of his cocoa. "There is another matter I wished to speak with you about," he continued. "It has occurred to me that it might be seen as inappropriate for you to be Severus' pupil, especially as it is known he is slightly less than objective when it comes to you."

Hermione snorted at the understatement. "The same could be said of Harry, sir, though for different reasons, of course."

Dumbledore twinkled. "Yes, you are correct there, except of course, Severus' opinion on Harry isn't likely to result in Harry getting better grades." Hermione chuckled in agreement. "I doubt Severus would ever consider grading you differently, but propriety must be observed, so I have removed you from the seventh year Potions schedule."

Hermione bit her lip, but nodded; it was only fair. It was possible she could still manage to pass her NEWTs without the extra few months of in-class review, and she might even be able to convince Severus to help her as a private tutor. She didn't relish the idea, but it was better than failing her Potions NEWT.

"However, seeing as it was my machinations that has put you in this position," Dumbledore continued, "I feel it only right if I am the one to help rectify the situation. Therefore, I offer you my services as a tutor, if you wish."

Hermione stared at him completely gobsmacked. "Sir?"

Dumbledore smiled kindly. "If you wish, I can arrange my time so that your class schedule will remain the same. Two classes a week, is it not?"

Hermione nodded, dumbfounded.

Dumbledore took advantage of her silence to add more to his offer. "Before you accept or decline, however, there is something else I wish to speak with you about. Your display, last night..."

Hermione blushed and interrupted. "I'm so sorry about that, sir. I was a bit, erm, overwhelmed with everything. I just... I thought it was just the paradoxical reaction to the

Sleeping Draught, but McGonagall says... Well, it doesn't matter. I'm terribly sorry about that, and I will try my hardest to never let that happen again."

Dumbledore sat back with an amused look on his face.

"A paradoxical reaction, you say?" She could hear the laughter beneath his voice. "I have seen potions go awry, madam, but never have I seen a counter-reaction quite that powerful."

He paused to observe her critically for a moment. "You said Professor McGonagall corrected your assumption?"

Hermione nodded hesitantly. "Yes. She told me a tale her father had told her about 'the Force' and the basic premise of a popular Muggle movie series. I'm not quite sure how her dad could have known about it so long before the film's writer was even conceived, but she outlined the philosophy of the movies quite accurately."

Hermione stopped talking, realizing she was starting to babble. Dumbledore was laughing, and she wasn't sure that was a good thing in this case.

"She remembered that?" he chuckled to himself. "Oh, dear. Well, that does explain the glares she was giving me over dinner, as I assume you told her about the movies?"

Hermione nodded, a little overwhelmed by the information she was inferring. Was he the one who had told McGonagall the tale? If so, that meant... Minerva was Dumbledore's daughter? Her expression must have belied her thoughts, for Dumbledore looked at her and chuckled yet more.

"Yes, Minerva is my daughter. She's my youngest of four."

"But... How does everyone not know this? They... I never came across that information in your biographies. I haven't even seen reference to you being married!"

He chuckled yet again. "Gear, my wife, insisted she be erased from the records. She didn't want the children to be caught up in the war..." He paused, suddenly looking sad and very old. "And by the time I was done fighting, she was no longer around to reverse the erasure."

"But," Hermione persisted, "wouldn't your children have shown up? And that seems an awfully drastic measure to take..."

"Gear was right in hiding our relationship, Ms. Granger. My firstborn, my only son, went by the name Dumbledore, and he had barely begun school before he was targeted. After that, Gear insisted we change the girls' names to protect them. It wounded my pride, but I found wounded pride to be much more bearable than suffering three more broken hearts." He offered her a soft smile she found heart-wrenching. "And in the long run, it has proved beneficial for my daughters not to be linked to me. Minerva would never have achieved her position here had our relationship been widely known, for example."

Hermione nodded, though she couldn't refrain from frowning sadly. "I gather your son was erased, as well?"

Dumbledore nodded sagely. "Only from public records, though. He will never be erased from my memory."

"But enough about me, my dear. I believe we have deviated from the subject," Dumbledore continued, his voice regaining its earlier cheer. "Your little display last night indicates you are on the threshold of great things. If you choose to, I can train you in managing your new path."

"What is this 'path' exactly?"

He smiled. "It is not unlike the "Force" I told Minerva about, although it is a bit simpler, and a bit more complex, than that. To give a quick summary you have unlocked the power of your soul."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but found she hadn't a clue as to what to say. "Sir?"

"I do not know what exactly you went through during your absence, Ms. Granger, but my guess is that at some point you made a decision that required a great amount of faith and a great amount of love."

"If that's what's required, then wouldn't most of the Order..." She trailed away as Dumbledore shook his head.

"No. Although war does breed courage, very rarely does it foster pure love."

"But, if it's based on love, why does my power increase when I'm angry? I haven't felt it surge at any other time."

Dumbledore looked at her kindly. "Anger is not unrelated to love or faith, child. However, the reason it is only apparent with your anger at this stage is because your reigning emotion of the moment is probably anger, as you are entitled for it to be. However, allowing yourself to harness and use this energy only through anger would be limiting your horizons tremendously."

Hermione continued looking at the headmaster, but this new tidbit of information was overwhelming her.

"I still don't understand, sir. Why me? Am I the only one? What will happen, and how is it going to affect my schooling?"

He chuckled at the last question, gathering what her priorities really were. "You are not the only one to find yourself in this situation. I would not even dream of mentioning it to you if I did not have some experience in it myself. There are a few others throughout the world as well, and I believe that Harry has the potential."

"Why only potential? He was willing to sacrifice his life for everyone else's."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Harry's decision was forced upon him. He made a noble choice, but it wasn't made for love alone."

Hermione wanted to refute that but reviewing his role in the war, she found that Harry's insecurities were as much a part of his decisions as his heart was. She nodded, halfheartedly accepting Dumbledore's claim.

"To return to your questions," Dumbledore continued, "what will happen and how it is going to affect your life, those are for you to decide. If you choose to let me guide you, you will have the chance to slowly gain mastery over yet another aspect of your magic. If you decide you'd rather not have the responsibility that comes with great power, then..." He spread his hands, indicating he didn't know.

"And as for why, I do not know for certain, but my guess is that everyone has this potential within them. I doubt you have been singled out by some cosmic being, despite how everything may feel at the moment. You have simply stumbled upon a door and its key that most never see, let alone dream of opening."

Hermione bobbed her head, thinking about the feel of the energy that surrounded her the previous night. She hadn't felt alarmed at the power. It had been comfortable wielding and tapping into the power. It had made her feel surer of herself than she had felt for a long time, while it was happening.

If what Dumbledore was suggesting was true, then there was more power to be gained. The thought simultaneously elated and terrified her. She was thrilled that there was yet more to learn, and the possibility of mastering wandless magic and beyond was very exciting. But the thought of having such power... She gulped at the image of Voldemort as he had been on the battlefield. There was no denying he had been very, very powerful, and he'd made such a mess of things by abusing that power.

She looked up at Dumbledore with trepidation and was surprised when he beamed at her.

"Ah, I see the ramifications are beginning to occur to you. Good, good."

"Good?" Hermione asked. "Correct me if I'm wrong, sir, but you've just told me that I could be as powerful as Voldemort, and that's good?"

"With training you could be far more powerful than Tom, my dear," Dumbledore calmly corrected.

"More powerful than Voldemort? How can... Power corrupts, doesn't it?"

Dumbledore smiled benevolently. "That is what your training is for. You wouldn't be learning how to expand your powers for many years. At first you would be learning how to control yourself. But beyond that, there is a protective edge to this magic, once invoked. You called it through love, and through love it is most powerful."

"But the road to Hell is paved with good intentions," Hermione murmured.

"And if that is the case, then the ends most certainly do not justify the means," Dumbledore replied. "Do not mistake me, Ms. Granger. The danger of abusing the power you now wield is great; you will always have the choice to use it indiscriminately, but it is a *choice*."

Hermione's stomach clenched as she thought. How good was she at resisting temptation? How good was she at remaining in control of herself. She snorted at that, thinking about the past few months. All she knew was that she needed more time to think about it.

"May I give you my answer on Friday, sir? Or is the Potions tutoring dependent upon my accepting the other training?"

Dumbledore twinkled. "The tutoring offer stands with or without your acceptance of the other training. And there is no need to rush your decision. I dare say this is a far more important decision than who to marry, and I would like you to be positive of the course you want to choose."

He got up and waved his hand, banishing the dirty dishes. "Now, I believe it is past my bedtime, so I will bid you goodnight and see you Friday morning."

Hermione walked him to the door. As he was leaving, he turned to her and said with a serious undertone, "May I offer you one piece of advice, whether you decide to train or not?" Hermione nodded. "Allow yourself to feel everything as it happens, but do not revel in any one emotion. You will find it easier to control yourself and your magic that way."

Hermione nodded again, taking the advice to heart. "Thank you, sir. I will try my best."

Dumbledore's eyes lit up, and he grinned mischievously. "Do or do not. There is no try."

Hermione gaped after him as he left with a chuckle echoing throughout the corridor.

Avery's Notes: Sorry for the lack of Severus, but the next chapter will be rather Severus intensive. I hope you'll forgive me.

Southern's Notes: It's not very often that I see AD and MM placed in a father/daughter situation. It's refreshing. As far as everything else, I'm joining the mob with my pitchfork and chanting, "Severus. Severus."

XI

Chapter 11 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Warning: This chapter starts out rather grisly and gets ugly fast. There is a point to the darkness, and I swear it isn't just for the hell of it, but if you're sensitive, I suggest skipping it.

Hermione was walking down a dungeon corridor. She didn't know how she had gotten this far down in the dungeons, but she was curious to see what there was in the bowels of the castle. Besides mold and spiders, that was.

So far, there was nothing. The corridor was completely blank, just stone walls stretching out in front of her, fading away into the gloom. There weren't even any doors to break the monotony. Just boring gray stone after boring gray stone.

Suddenly, she spied a door on her right. Smiling at the change, she went toward it, but got distracted by a door appearing on her left.

She was a bit confused as she was pretty sure there hadn't been a door on the left before, but it was a magical castle after all. Doors were known to disappear, so why not appear as well? Besides, it could be the wall masquerading as a door, mocking the door across the hall.

She tried the handle, and it turned without a creak. Suddenly, she found herself in the middle of a room, looking around in awe. It was a throne room. Everything in the room was gilded, glinting in the airy light. It nearly blinded her.

She heard a noise behind her and turned, feeling her lungs fail at the sight before her.

Harry, Severus, Ginny and Theodore were lined up on the golden wall, shackled. They were emaciated, almost corpse-like. The only way she knew they weren't dead was the constant trickle of blood oozing out of the welts that crisscrossed their bodies like a horrible parody of clothes.

Hermione rushed forward to help her friends, wincing when she saw how the metal was eating through their flesh, one chafe at a time. They were all looking at her, silently beseeching her to do something. She hurriedly pulled out her wand and undid all the shackles, freeing them, banishing the shackles and chains for good measure.

She expected them to be happy, or at the very least sigh with relief, but their reaction was to cower further into the wall away from her.

Confused, she held out her hands to help them up, but they all crept further back, pushing against the gilded wall so that it stretched against their gaunt backsides. She watched in horror as, one by one, each of her friends pushed through the golden veneer, cracking the surface until four large tears were formed, swallowing each body in a cascade of blood.

Hermione watched, suppressing the urge to gag, as the blood behind the gilt seeped down into the places her friends had been and began pouring out over the floor,

creeping toward her. Reaching for her like a grotesque hand.

She backed away but found the room had shrunk; her back hit the wall too quickly. She looked for a way out...there had to be a way out if she had gotten in...but the golden walls glinted evilly, blinding her to any exit.

Casting her eyes to the floor again, she saw the fingers of blood pause for a fleeting second before attacking her robes.

She tried to shinny up the walls, but they were too slick to offer any retreat. Too soon, the blood was climbing up her robe, drenching her in a sickly stench, dyeing her black robes red. She needed to get away from the blood that was gliding up her skin, trying to find some way into her. She felt the blood calling to her, serenading her as it crept up her body toward her mouth.

She finally thought to call for help and screamed with all her might.

As her scream reached fever pitch, the blood came to a halt and quivered. Suddenly, the room shattered and shards of gilded glass flew about, breaking up the space around her. Hermione ducked down into a ball, trying to protect herself from the sharp edges, covering her ears to shield herself from the piercing wail that filled the void.

And then she was standing in the corridor again. She turned around, still breathing hard, but it was exactly as she remembered it from before.

Sighing with relief, she leaned her forehead against the cool stones, trying to calm her heart down. The stones embraced her head, comforting her, leeching the horror from her brow until the vision of her friends' skeletal forms faded to a mere ghost of a memory.

Finally calm, Hermione looked at the pair of doors again.

I'm dreaming, she thought. *This has to be a dream.* She looked down the hallway again and wished for more light. Sure enough, seven torches lit up in the area surrounding her, eradicating the eerie shadows where she stood.

Well, if this is a dream, and I know it's a dream, then my choices are to either wake up or explore some more she reasoned with herself. *If I wake up, then I'll either be awake for the rest of the night, or I'll go back to sleep and probably have another nightmare, and next time I might not know it's a dream, so I would be more scared than if this continues to be a nightmare. At least here I can reassure myself that it's only a dream. I can always wake myself up if it gets bad.*

Mind made up, she grasped the door handle in front of her and pushed. The door opened with an ominous creak, revealing a dark room. As soon as she stepped through the door, a torch lit up, revealing stone steps leading up in a spiral.

With a sense of foreboding, Hermione started up the stairs, trying not to flinch each time a torch flared to life just ahead of her. It didn't take long before the stairs ended in a very small corridor that led to an ancient wooden door. The door looked too old to exist in one piece. Looking at it a bit closer, she saw it wasn't wood at all, but webs. Layer after layer of gossamer threads constantly weaving themselves together. It looked terribly delicate, but when she touched it, it felt more solid than the castle's front doors.

She reached for the door handle, knowing instantly that she wasn't going to like what was beyond the door, but curious all the same. Taking a deep breath, she exhaled slowly and quietly pushed the door aside.

At first she was relieved to see how dim the lighting was. No golden walls were harboring a secret blood lust, and that was fine with her. She caught a flicker of movement in her peripheral vision and turned toward it. Squinting, she realized how exposed she was. It might be a dream, but she didn't want to suffer any more slings and arrows. She'd had enough outrageous fortune to last a lifetime.

When her eyes finally adjusted to the lack of light, she gasped. Lord Voldemort was standing over Dumbledore and Harry, his back to her. Voldemort was not alone, though. On one side of him stood Lucius Malfoy, arrogant as ever, while on the other side stood Severus.

Hermione almost cried out in shock, seeing the distaste on Severus' face as he glared at the headmaster and Harry. Dumbledore was pleading with him, but Severus just smiled and cast another Cruciatus on Harry. Again. And again.

She couldn't bear it. She couldn't hear Harry's screams or Dumbledore's pleas, but she could feel their anguish. Severus' betrayal had torn Dumbledore's heart out, literally, while Harry's pain and rage was only egging Severus on.

She tried to move toward them, but before she took a step, there was a flash of green light, and her allies slumped lifelessly on the floor.

It's only a dream, Hermione said to herself. *It's only a dream.*

Lucius then turned to Severus and smiled, gesturing with his head toward a bit of floor blocked from Hermione's view. Severus nodded and smiled back with a grin that made Hermione shiver. It was demonic.

They both looked to their master who nodded, and they separated from his side. When they moved, Hermione caught a glimpse of someone lying on the floor, bound in magical ropes. The person was wriggling like a worm, trying in vain to get away from the Death Eaters.

The dream shifted, and Hermione found herself with a clear view of the situation. The girl must have been no more than ten, and she was watching the two wizards with terror. She looked up at Severus with pleading eyes.

Severus knelt down and gently scooped the girl into his lap, embracing her kindly. The girl closed her eyes, weeping with relief as Severus soothed her, petting her hair and crooning softly, telling her everything would be all right, a picture of compassion.

Hermione was about to give in to her relief when Lucius approached the pair, a wicked gleam in his eye.

Severus looked up at Lucius, who nodded, and suddenly Severus' grip on the girl tightened painfully. The girl whimpered in discomfort, but when she opened her eyes, she screamed.

Lucius was standing over her with a dagger in his hand. The dagger glinted dangerously, even though there was no light to reflect. As the knife came down, Hermione looked away, only to see herself watching the scene with unholy glee in her red eyes.

Screaming, Hermione awoke with a jolt. Breathing hard, she felt herself shaking as the disturbing images faded away into the familiar darkness. Adjusting back to reality, she started when a gentle hand touched her shoulder.

"Shh," Severus' voice said. "It was only a nightmare. Relax."

Feeling a wave of exhaustion pass over her, Hermione complied, though she had mixed feelings about Severus starting to stroke her. On the one hand, it was very soothing, but on the other hand, she was still very upset with him.

"What was the dream about?" Severus asked, his voice soft and calming. He sounded so nice.

Hermione yawned and decided not to discourage him from touching her. It did feel nice.

"Well," she murmured sleepily, "I'm not sure. You and Harry and Ginny and Theodore were all chained up, but refused my help, and then everyone leaned back and disappeared into the gilded wall, which then bled and reached out for me."

"Mm. And the other part?" Severus cooed sympathetically.

Hermione sighed uneasily and settled back into her pillow, not entirely comfortable with the way Severus was comforting her. She didn't know why, but it felt wrong somehow, like he wasn't being himself.

"The other dream was much worse." Hermione sighed again and shivered. Severus reacted to the shiver by pulling the sheet up over them both and then continuing his strokes on her arm, though the strokes were getting longer and covering more skin.

"I found myself in a dark area watching as you tortured and killed Harry and Dumbledore while Lucius and Voldemort looked on. After the murders, you and Lucius moved over to a girl who was lying huddled and bound on the floor. You picked her up and started comforting her, being very nice and sweet and gentle. Then Lucius came up, and you held the girl down while he brought out a dagger."

"What did the girl look like?" Severus asked, moving his other hand to her shoulder, massaging her muscles a little without ceasing his strokes on her arm.

"I suppose she looked a bit like me, but she couldn't have been more than ten. And she was far prettier than I ever was as a child."

Hermione paused, trying to relax, though Severus' touch was making her skin crawl. She didn't want to ask him to stop, though, because she didn't want to discourage this sympathetic side of him.

"I couldn't watch Lucius brutalize the girl, but when I turned around, the person I thought had been Voldemort, turned out to be me." She shuddered. "The look on my face was... It was evil. / was evil."

"Ah, well, there's the root of the dream, right there. You're afraid that you're going to turn into Voldemort, what with your new powers."

"And the girl was me?"

"You... or your innocence."

Hermione shivered again, thinking about the enjoyment her evil self had gotten out of the scene. "I never want to be like that. Never."

Severus stroked her arm down to her fingertips and then startled her when he didn't stop there. His fingers ended up on her thigh. She shivered again.

"Don't worry, Hermione," Severus whispered. "You will never be all powerful."

She went to push his hand away, not being in an amorous mood, but he caught her wrist.

"Severus?" she queried when he didn't let go of her wrist. "Severus, please let go. You're making me uncomfortable."

"Hush, now, Hermione. I'm just trying to reassure you that no matter how powerful you get, your powers won't always make a difference."

She frowned up at the man who was sliding his body over hers and tried to suppress her fear. Surely Severus wouldn't do that?

"That's not the kind of reassurance I need, Severus. Now stop scaring me and get off."

He smiled wickedly just over her, his long hair tickling her cheeks. "Make me." He then lowered his head and started nipping at her neck, slowly making his way down to her breast.

Her stomach tightened painfully. She tried to stay in control to keep the panic at bay. Concentrating, she summoned her wand into her free hand. Pointing it at her husband, she quickly cast a Levicorpus on him, to no effect.

"Mm," he said, letting his mouth disengage from her nipple with a pop. "That doesn't even scratch the surface of your powers, my dear. Try again."

He lowered his mouth to her other nipple while his free hand crept toward her crotch. She couldn't even see her own body through the greasy curtain of his hair.

Hermione frantically went through every spell she could think of that might repel him, but even a Stunning Spell had no effect. Feeling the panic rise, she gathered her wits about her and summoned all her emotional strength. She felt the air around her charging. She closed her eyes and focused all the energy she'd summoned to force Severus away from her. She felt the air solidify, but it passed through Severus as if he were insubstantial.

He chuckled from where he was, tonguing her navel. "I told you that you need to learn the art of intimidation if you are to influence me."

He forced a finger into her dryness, making her cry out in distress. She dropped her wand and began hitting him. He captured her other wrist and shimmied up her body.

"Severus, stop!"

She scrambled desperately to create some space between them.

"Why are you doing this to me?" she wailed.

"Hermione, did you truly think I was nice?" he said, a cruel smile overtaking his face.

He shook his head mockingly. The dank curtain of his hair suffocated her and muffled her scream, even to her own ears.

"Don't play dumb, Hermione!"

She sobbed, still struggling against his grip and body.

She closed her eyes, unsuccessfully trying to stop herself from sobbing while blindly trying to kick his legs off her, shift his weight off her, anything.

She whimpered unconsciously.

Please, no. She closed her eyes. *This is just a dream! I will wake up right now! This is just a dream! I will open my eyes, and everything will be okay.*

"Hermione! Look at me!" he ordered in his professorial tone, giving her shoulder a little shake.

Mindlessly obeying, her eyes popped open, and she found him kneeling beside her, giving her more room to fend him off.

She punched him square in the chest and rolled away as he reeled. She quickly found the edge of the bed and propelled herself off of it, blind to where she was going. When she hit the wall, her heart sank, knowing the only exit was blocked by her invincible foe.

Unable to see anything through her blurry vision, she gave up and sank to the floor, instinctively curling into as small a target as possible. She hid her head in her knees, shaking with fear as she waited for his approach, but then realized that was silly. She wanted to see him coming so she could at least prepare for his attack.

When she looked up, he was between her and the bed and was approaching slowly.

"Hermione?" His voice was soft and concerned, just like it had been with the girl.

"Don't come any closer!" she cried, raising a hand protectively.

He stopped, and even through her tears she could see his confusion and fear. He held up his hands in a peaceful gesture, though he was clearly at a loss for words.

He stood very still for a moment before slowly backing away from her in the direction of the bathroom, never turning his back on her or making a sudden move. She watched him closely every step of the way until he disappeared through the door.

Panting in relief, Hermione quickly wiped her eyes and wondered if she had enough time to make a run for the Floo. Just as she started shifting, he came out of the bathroom, a bundle of blue rope in his hands.

Her panicked mind immediately sprang to the worst, and she started sobbing again, trying to back away.

"Please don't do this, Severus," she begged, stopping him in his tracks.

"Don't do what, Hermione?" he whispered haltingly.

She couldn't look at him. "Please, don't... Please..."

"Hermione, I won't hurt you."

She heard him moving and flinched.

He stopped and cursed under his breath. "I'm getting Poppy."

Hermione raised her head in surprise, but Severus had already turned to leave the room. He was unfurling the rope as he walked, and she finally recognized it as her robe when he wrapped it around himself. It was then that she noticed how short his hair was.

*It was **all** a dream*, she thought.

She let out a sigh of relief, which turned into a sob before she finished. The tears came fast and heavy, and she found it difficult to catch her breath. She tried to calm herself down, but every effort made it worse.

"Hermione," a feminine voice said near her. She looked up, but even the sight of Poppy couldn't stem the tide. "Hermione, I need you to take this Calming Draught. You're becoming hysterical, child, and I need for you to breathe slowly."

Hermione nodded her understanding, though her cries weren't letting up. Somehow, with a good deal of excellent timing, and a pinch of magic, Hermione managed to swallow a measure of the potion and almost immediately she felt her body relaxing. Her diaphragm was unclenching, and her sobs faded, though the tears kept falling.

Thoroughly exhausted, Hermione let her head fall onto her knees, riding out the last of the hiccups privately. When she felt something being draped over her back, she jumped, but Poppy started murmuring soothing words, and Hermione forced herself to relax again, knowing she was safe in the matron's care.

Soon the tears stopped, and Hermione slowly raised her head. The first thing she saw was Poppy's worried face, but a motion behind Poppy caught her eye before she could smile in reassurance.

Severus started walking toward her, looking haggard with worry. Unfortunately, Hermione's body reacted before her brain, and she flinched at his approach. He stopped, looking wounded before his mask slipped into place.

Poppy took in the by-play between them with concern.

"Hermione, did Severus hurt you?"

Hermione shook her head, trying to find her voice. "No. Not in real life."

She then looked to Severus and tried to smile apologetically. "Severus, I know I'm overreacting. I know you won't hurt me, but... but that dream was so real."

Severus nodded tersely and opened his mouth to speak, but found he had to clear his throat first. "I suggest we discuss this somewhere more comfortable."

Hermione nodded. She stood up with Poppy's help and, leaning on the elder witch, made her way to the sitting room. She sat next to Poppy on the settee while Snape chose the wing chair by the fireplace, looking very closed.

"Was this nightmare similar to the one you had last night?" Poppy asked in a soothing voice. Hermione nodded, but she realized it wasn't quite true.

"The last one was, but the two preceding it were very different, and I'm pretty sure they're unrelated."

"She had a nightmare last night?" Snape asked coolly. Hermione could feel Poppy nod.

"Will you tell us about the nightmare?" Poppy asked. Seeing Hermione's reticence, Poppy added, "Sometimes all it takes to keep a dream from repeating itself is to examine the cause."

Hermione laughed bitterly. "That's what I've been trying to avoid for the last three days."

"Three days?" Snape asked. Hermione looked up at him and flushed.

"When, er... when Lucius attacked me, he, erm, kind of *touched* me."

Severus looked uncomprehending for a moment and then went pale. He drew his fingers up to trace his lips, looking at Hermione with an intense glare.

"I see. Did he do more than touch you?"

Hermione shook her head, unsure of whether his anger was directed at her or not. His manner was so cold, she couldn't tell.

"And in your dream... I was raping you?"

Hermione reluctantly nodded, trying not to shiver.

He stood up abruptly, his face a grim mask of rage. She couldn't disguise the fear his expression evoked, and it earned her a harsh look before he turned away to face the fireplace.

"I imagine you would be more comfortable sleeping elsewhere."

Hermione's heart sank. He was angry at her. He was dismissing her. She was surprised at how much his rejection hurt.

She was so wrapped up in her thoughts, she didn't answer. He turned around for confirmation, and she was surprised by his worried mien.

"The other nightmare," he said so quietly she could barely hear him, "the one from last night, was it the same?"

On impulse, Hermione got up and walked toward him, hugging the robe to herself as she neared him.

"The details were different, but mostly, yes."

She was leaning her shoulder against the mantle, watching him. His eyes were open, but it was obvious he saw nothing in the room. She watched as a fog of sadness settled itself around his features, aging him prematurely.

She wanted to reach out to him, to apologize, to tell him it was only a dream only a messed up part of her subconscious using his face as representation of all the outside forces pushing her this way and that, but she found her voice was suddenly waterlogged.

"Why didn't you tell me, Poppy?" he eventually asked, focusing on the nurse. "Why didn't you tell me about the nightmare before I came back here?"

Poppy rubbed her eyes wearily before looking at Severus. "I didn't know the dream featured you, Severus. As it was, I assumed it would be for the best if Hermione had someone nearby."

Severus stared at Poppy for a second and then nodded curtly.

"I trust you'll be able to find her something?" he said without bothering to look at Hermione.

Hermione bit her lip to keep it from trembling. She knew that she had hurt him, but she had hoped he would talk to her, tell her how he felt instead of simply kicking her out like a wayward child. She could admit she'd had a childish reaction to her nightmare, but the transition between the dream and reality had blurred edges at best. Holding that against her wasn't fair.

Poppy smiled sadly looking at both of them in turn. "Of course. Pack a change of clothes, and then come through the Floo, dear. I'll go make up your bed."

Poppy then hustled away through the Floo connection leaving Hermione and Severus standing there awkwardly, each very aware of the others' presence. Hermione ducked her head and went to pack, noting that Severus did not follow.

When she was finished, she came out to find Severus standing by the fireplace, watching the flames as if enchanted.

She still wasn't sure what to say, though she felt as though *something* needed to be said. She felt the urge to apologize, but refused to do so until he could see and treat her as an adult.

"You'll be happy to know that Lucius was taken into Auror custody tonight," Severus said conversationally without looking up from the flames. "They're holding him at the Ministry until his trial tomorrow afternoon. If you want to be sure of his conviction, I suggest you add your testimony personally."

Hermione nodded in understanding. "I'll be there, then. Will you be escorting me?"

Severus looked up at her at that. "If you wish it."

She nodded fractionally. "I... Yes. I would."

For a split second, Hermione thought she saw hope in his eyes, but the next instant he was looking even more weary than he had been.

"The trial begins at three. I will collect you from your last class."

She nodded again. "Thank you." She turned toward the fireplace and took a handful of powder from the pot Severus held out for her. Clutching it in her hand, she stared at the flames in much the same way Snape had been, her mind and heart whirling.

Without looking at him, she murmured, "Goodnight, Severus," before calling out for the hospital wing and disappearing.

Author's Notes: Gild (v): 1 : to overlay with or as if with a thin covering of gold

2 a: to give money to b: to give an attractive but often deceptive appearance to c *archaic: to make bloody*

Never fear. Believe it or not, this is a big step forward for both of them.

And as always, a big thank you to Southern for betaing this mess! Any mistakes are my own, especially as I fiddled with this afterwards.

Southern's Notes: I am happy to know this is a step forward. Eerie nightmares, those. I feel like telling Poppy to give her a draught of some kind to let her sleep in peace. I can't help but to feel sorry for Snape in all of this. Hopefully, he'll learn to voice what he's thinking soon so that she can stop making guesses.

XII

Chapter 12 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Since both she and Poppy had been disinclined to try the Dreamless Sleep Draught again after Tuesday's disastrous try, Hermione spent the remainder of the night tossing restlessly as she drifted in and out of a troubled sleep. Her dreams alternated between her being cowed by someone sometimes Severus, sometimes Lucius, once it was

even Dumbledore and her using her newfound powers to do evil, mainly by torturing Severus. It was the latter that kept waking her, making her breathless with despair and guilt.

The third time she woke up, shaking from the violence she'd unleashed, she decided sleep was a lost cause for that night. Lethargically, she made her way to the bathroom, thankful there was hot water in this section of the castle. That made her think of the horrible shower of Severus'.

I'm sure there's some charm out there that can fix the problem, she thought as she lathered her hair. I'm sure it's something the entire castle would suffer now and again, what with old pipes and such. I expect there's some maintenance charm that Severus hasn't bothered to keep up with, that's all. I'll just have to keep an eye on it once I'm back...

Her thoughts were diverted by the realization that she might not be going back. Severus had more or less kicked her out. She sighed and rinsed her hair, the joys of hot water forgotten as she pondered the state of her relationship.

She'd been surprised by how much Severus' rejection had hurt, and as she mulled it over, she was overcome with guilt. If she felt this way without even loving him, he must have endured a series of torture over the past week or two. She hadn't had an inkling of how cruel she'd been. In her defense, she hadn't known he cared at all until Friday at the earliest, but that was a week ago. She hadn't been fair. She hadn't given him a chance, and now it was possibly too late.

She hung her head in shame as she towed off, wondering if their relationship was really over before it even began, and if so, how did she feel about that? In one respect, it would make her life much easier. Severus was a frustrating man to the extreme, and learning how to deal with him was a full-time job in and of itself. But... It had felt good taking care of him those few minutes she'd managed to, and the fact that he'd let her care for him at all had warmed her through and through. And then, in the hospital wing, he'd been so very sweet. If that was the man who was in love with her, how could she not regret the lost chance of knowing him?

Of course, there was also the fact that Severus had a lot to make up for. True, he hadn't known the extent of her fear of Lucius, and true, he had been under the influence of a powerful narcotic, but he had just declared Lucius to be his sworn enemy because of her and to side with him against her had felt like such a big betrayal.

She shook her head, laughing at herself ruefully. A betrayal it might have been, but it was too small to be resentful over.

Unlike his meddling. Her face tightened as she thought of his admission. The fact that he thought he'd had the right to run off his competition like that... She started to suppress her thoughts as she felt her temper flaring, but then remembered Dumbledore's advice and decided to just ride it out.

Casting a quick silencing charm, she let all the anger she felt, all the indignity, all the pain and turmoil surface, giving herself over to her rage. She stood there shaking, gritting her teeth until she couldn't hold back a howl of misery. She felt the air around her condense, but paid no mind to it as she let all her emotions wash over her.

How dare he? she screamed to herself. How could he take advantage of her ignorance like that? How could he demand her trust after abusing it so terribly? How could he ask for her love and forgiveness knowing he had willfully cornered her? *How could he?*

He was supposed to *love* her, damn it!

Somewhere in there, she'd started crying, but not for herself. She fell to the floor as the grief overwhelmed her. Her anger at Severus spent, she started castigating herself for her role in their farce.

She could see now how she'd hurt Severus by rejecting him over and over again, not only in her mind, but in every action she had taken, no matter what he said or what he did.

You aren't receptive to new ideas, Theodore had told her.

She had hurt Severus so badly that he didn't want to be in the same room with her.

You tend to think about love more than feeling it...

And the worst of it was, she had meant to hurt him.

She hadn't consciously wanted to harm him, but there was some part of her that was glad he was suffering, glad she could punish him for all his surliness, all his rudeness, all his misdirected anger. There was a part of her that was glad she had the power to tear his heart to pieces.

She suddenly felt sick with shame. Bending over to the toilet, she let her body purge the bile she'd created, hoping she was purging that vile part of herself as well.

Completely spent, she sat back down on the floor and leaned against the wall, wiping the sweat from her brow, her eyes open, but unseeing.

She didn't know what to do.

She wanted Severus to know she was sorry for all the pain she'd caused, but she didn't know if she could deal with another rebuff at that point. She didn't know how he would react, but judging from past interactions, it probably wouldn't be peaceable.

She started to drag her knees up to her chest, but stopped when she felt a pain in her heel. Looking down at her foot, she saw a bead of blood forming where some broken glass had punctured her heel. Confused, she looked up, drawing in a sharp breath at the scene before her.

The bathroom was destroyed.

Not only had the mirror shattered, but the tiles lining the walls also looked as if each had been smashed with a hammer. Even the stone walls were dented as if something had rammed into them.

It occurred to her that she had done all the damage. The force of her anger had demolished everything around her. Granted the damage all seemed to be from her waist level up, but she shuddered to think what would have happened if someone had been in the room with her... if Severus had been in the room with her.

A cold wave of dread engulfed her, and she realized just how much damage she could do. If she lost control of her emotions around him, she could kill him. She needed to figure out her feelings surrounding him, else she might unconsciously attack him. *One unintended attack per couple is more than enough* she thought to herself, reminded of his uncontrolled Legilimency in Potions.

She wasn't sure what to do, but she decided that until she had thought everything out, avoiding Severus would be the wisest plan. If she didn't see him, she couldn't hurt him. Right?

Wearily, she took out Lucius' wand and repaired all the damage, wincing as the shard in her foot rejoined its brethren to reform the mirror. She flicked the wand at her foot, healing the cut quickly, and then got back into the shower to rinse herself off once more before making her way to breakfast.

By the time Hermione reached Vector's classroom, she was starting to get annoyed. At first it seemed that every student she met skittered away from her as if she were contagious, but after one first year Slytherin fainted when she smiled at him, she was wondering if they didn't view her more as something more dangerous like a rampaging dragon. Or a Succubus. Either way, it was irritating.

With a scowl in place, she sat down in her usual seat and got out her books, hoping that the day would improve.

A few minutes later, a bunch of giggling Ravenclaw girls came into the room. When Hermione looked up, the girls abruptly stopped laughing and paled, trying to evade Hermione's sight as they took seats three rows behind her.

Her mood darkening even further, Hermione looked back to the front just as Theodore entered the room. When he saw her, he paused a moment, his eyes widening before he approached her cautiously.

"Everything all right, Hermione?" he asked, and she could tell he was trying to suppress his nervousness.

She tried to curb her irritation and nodded reluctantly. Motioning to the girls behind her, she muttered, "Oh, everything is just peachy. It seems that I'm now competing with Snape for scariest person at Hogwarts."

Theodore relaxed somewhat and slid into the seat next to her, chuckling. "There isn't a competition. I'm pretty sure everyone is *much* more afraid of you."

Hermione turned to question him, but just then a surly Professor Vector entered the room. She strode up to the chalkboard without a word and waved a series of equations into existence.

"Pop quiz. Books away." Hermione deftly removed her quill from her bag as she dealt with her books. When she looked up, she found Professor Vector staring at her unpleasantly, though her eyes shifted as soon as Hermione met her gaze.

Troubled, Hermione bent over the blank parchment and tried to concentrate on the quiz, but it was difficult. Every now and again, she felt Vector's gaze on her, but whenever she looked up, Vector was pointedly looking elsewhere.

Fortunately, the quiz took the entire period. Hermione had finished answering and reviewing her figures a few minutes before the bell rang, but after a particularly venomous glance by Vector as she turned in her parchment, she decided it was best to keep her head down anyway. She used her hair to hide how affected she was by Vector's attitude and was very grateful when the bell rang.

She managed to be the first person out of the room and wanted to run down the corridors to escape the disappointment welling up inside her. Students were spilling out of classrooms blocking her progress, though, so Theodore, who had left class a few seconds behind her, caught up with her quickly.

"That was interesting," he said conversationally as he adjusted his pace to match hers. "Any idea why Professor Vector was looking daggers at you?"

Hermione stopped and looked up at Theodore, her face a mixture of relief and sad resignation. Arithmancy had been one of her favorite classes, and some of that had been due to Professor Vector's enthusiastic encouragement. She'd thought Vector had liked her, and it made the class even more fun feeling like she was participating as much as an equal than as a student. To know she wasn't imagining Vector's new behavior was both gratifying and disheartening. To her horror, she felt tears forming.

Concerned, Theodore pulled her aside out of the traffic flow and cast a discrete Do-Not-Notice Charm.

"What's wrong, Hermione?"

She shook her head and tried to smile. "It's nothing... And everything." At his look of impatience, she sighed and slid down the wall to sit on the floor. After a quick glance around, Nott joined her, though making sure to keep a discrete distance between them.

"On Monday... Everyone was... The rumors were going strong, no thanks to me, but I'd also had a bit of an unpleasant encounter with Poppy the previous night, and then I noticed Professor Vector glaring at me over breakfast. I thought they were jealous of me."

Nott raised his eyebrows in amused disbelief.

"Yes, I'll admit that believing Poppy to be jealous was a bit far fetched, and we've since cleared everything up." She paused and looked down at her hands, trying to find the right words. "I thought, or hoped, that because I'd misinterpreted the situation between Poppy and Severus, that I had just imagined Professor Vector's glares. When I was collecting homework yesterday, she was rather unpleasant, but I thought she was just annoyed that I'm pushing myself too hard, like all the other professors."

She looked up to see if Nott understood where she was going and saw sympathetic eyes.

"You'll never succeed at gaining everyone's friendship, you know."

Hermione laughed bitterly. "That's been obvious for quite some time, thanks."

He blushed and frowned, looking upset with himself; Hermione took pity on him and continued.

"The thing is, Professor Vector... Well, you've been in class for the last year or two. Surely you've noticed that she seemed to like me."

Nott nodded, grinning a little despite himself. "Erm, I think it's safe to say you, er... She certainly thought highly of you."

"You mean I was the teacher's pet," Hermione huffed.

Nott chuckled and shrugged. "It's something the rest of us have simply had to accept. I think that's one of the reasons everyone was so surprised by Professor Snape marrying you because he seemed to be the only teacher who *didn't* favor you."

Hermione laughed, this time more lightheartedly.

"Well, it was as much a surprise to me as to everyone else, I can assure you."

He shrugged again, deflecting her defensiveness.

"Jealous?" he asked.

"I can't really think of another explanation, seeing as I'm the only one she glares at," Hermione replied, not sure whether he was asking if she or Vector was jealous.

Nott's lips twitched but he nodded. "Do you think they had a history?"

Hermione leaned her head back against the wall. "I've been wondering that, but haven't had the nerve to ask Severus." She shook head. "Strike that, I haven't had the *opportunity* to ask Severus."

"A lack of opportunity? I'm shocked. You've been married for, what, four days now? And you've had at least twenty hours together in those four days. I expect one or two of them were even conscious."

She tilted her head over to smile at him. "So, do you think my theory has merit?"

Nott smiled mischievously. "Well, Vector is certainly more plausible than Pomfrey. After all, she is quite attractive and intelligent, two things Professor Snape obviously appreciates. And she's far younger than Poppy is."

Hermione didn't know whether to scowl or smile, but she blushed all the same. She ended up throwing him a mock scowl.

"You're quite the comfort to an insecure wife, you know."

He smiled sardonically. "Didn't you know I'm just an overgrown teddy bear?"

She laughed. "Well then, *Teddy*, I'm glad you weren't the bear I had as a child. I'm certain I'd have bite marks."

"I'd have only nibbled now and then," he teasingly replied but then frowned, looking flustered again. "I didn't mean that... er, I didn't know... erm, *why* are you insecure?"

Hermione watched him as he worked himself into an embarrassed frenzy, wondering why he was nervous so suddenly. Did he think she was going to bite his head off for a little curiosity? Granted, it wasn't something she was going to explain to him at that time or possibly ever. She didn't think Severus would appreciate that.

She shrugged in answer, noticing Nott took it for the cue it was intended as, though he still looked a bit confused.

"I suppose we should find our way to our next classes," he said reluctantly.

Hermione nodded, feeling a momentary surge of panic before remembering she had this period off.

"Yes, you'd best be on your way. I imagine you've missed the first ten minutes by now."

He chuckled as he stood up. "Maybe, but Trelawney will have foreseen my delay, so I don't think there'll be a problem."

Hermione coughed in an effort to suppress her laugh, but Theodore's twinkling eyes caught her off guard, and she let out an undignified snort. He smirked.

"Now that I've made The Great, The Frightening, The *All Powerful* Hermione Granger snort, I believe my work here is done." He bowed theatrically to her and extended his hand to help her up.

Laughing, she accepted the hand and bowed back.

"I am all gratitude for The Ever Comforting Teddy's time."

He shot her a luminous smile and then turned, but not before saying, "Next time I'll teach you proper manners. A witch doesn't bow, she curtsies."

Hermione shot a playful burst of air in his direction, mussing up his hair as he retreated down the hall. Feeling better than she had in days, she then headed for the library.

When lunch arrived, Hermione was once again reminded of her new infamy. She was running late, so the Great Hall was already teeming with students when she came in.

She felt like her robes should be billowing elegantly behind her the way the students scuttled out of her way, the ones already sitting actually leaned toward their tables just to avoid the remote possibility of being in her way.

She now had a good idea why Severus' mood was so foul.

Scowling, she reached her seat across from Harry and Ginny and was gratified that at least Neville and Seamus didn't cringe from her presence. But then again, they were so busy discussing Quidditch that she suspected Voldemort himself would have been ignored.

"Good to see you, too," Ginny said, offering a matching scowl.

Hermione took a deep breath and relaxed.

"Actually, I am glad to see you both. It's nice to be around people who aren't afraid of me."

Harry grinned, even as he continued demolishing the food on his plate. It looked like he was going to say something, but Ginny elbowed him and gave his mouth a pointed look. Hermione just smiled at them.

"So what are your plans for the weekend?" she asked.

Both Harry and Ginny got secretive smiles, and their faces flushed just slightly, telling Hermione much more than she wanted to know.

"Ah, so lots of practice, then?"

Harry nearly choked, but Hermione suspected it wasn't the lack of air that which made his face so red.

Ginny tried scowling at Hermione, but her grin kept poking through. She did manage to keep a straight face as she said, "Yes. We've got a big match coming up and I want to make sure I know all the right moves." She offered Harry a halfhearted pat on the back when he started choking again.

"I do need the practice, though. Quidditch, that is," she continued more seriously. "I haven't had the chance to fly for almost a week now, what with one thing and another."

Hermione nodded as she started digging into her potatoes.

"Yes, I imagine you've had nearly as much on your plate as I've had."

Ginny smiled. "No, not quite as much, but I could place some of the blame on you, you know. What with keeping watch over you in the infirmary one day, then exploring uncharted territory the next, how do you expect me to stay on top of my busy schedule?"

Hermione's rebuttal was interrupted by a nondescript owl landing in front of her, bearing a note.

Distractedly offering the owl a bit of ham, which it gratefully accepted before flying off, she opened the note with her heart in her ears, recognizing the spiky scrawl.

Hermione,

The trial has been pushed back to next Friday. Some nonsense about "the defendant needing time to gather evidence."

Severus

Her heart sank at the terseness of the note even as she was amused at his talent for implying invectives. She looked over to the staff table to gauge his mood, which was when she noticed he wasn't there.

"Ginny, was Severus teaching today?" she asked as she turned back to her friends.

Ginny gave her an odd look while nodding. "Do we have you to thank for his good mood?" she asked, and Hermione couldn't quite decipher whether she was being

facetious or not, so she shrugged.

"Before I say yes, what constitutes 'good'?"

Ginny's look became cannier. "He was very mellow. I don't think he yelled at one person, and he only took points off of Gryffindor because Colin was late."

Hermione didn't know what to think. Severus had never been described as mellow before, well, not without having ingested a Calming Draught. Something had to be wrong. She rolled her eyes at herself. Yes, of course something was wrong!

"I'm to blame," she said as much to herself as to Ginny, sadness descending onto her shoulders.

It was true that she wanted to avoid him, but she reasoned it was for his own protection. She now suspected he was avoiding her as well and wondered if it was for the same reason: so she couldn't hurt him. The guilt descended again, striking at her heart.

She hoped he would forgive her in time, and she vowed to give him as much time as he wanted. She could be patient and would prove that to him.

Ginny continued giving Hermione a shrewd look, pursing her lips to speak until Harry interrupted with a quiet, "Leave it, Gin."

At Harry's words, Hermione snapped back to the present, eyes darting from one friend to the other. They looked a little tense, but nothing serious seemed to wrong.

"So, what's in the note," Harry asked mildly, turning away from Ginny.

Hermione smiled grimly and handed it over. Harry read it twice with brows contracted.

"Lucius?"

She nodded.

He handed the note back, still looking rather tense. "Well, I'm glad he's at least in custody, but it doesn't exactly look good with them giving him that leeway, does it?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, not really, but I expect Severus and I will be able to come up with enough testimony to send him off for a long while."

"What about Nott?" Ginny asked. At Hermione's confused look, she expanded. "He told us he'd heard of Malfoy's plans before even Dumbledore knew. Could prove it was planned and possibly even a conspiracy."

"Well, except that if we went for conspiracy, Nott's mum would be implicated," Hermione pointed out, but considered Ginny's idea nonetheless. "But, I expect that if we run into trouble, his testimony might be worthwhile." She looked over her shoulder and found Nott at the Slytherin table talking to Pansy and Draco. "I think I'll go ask him now."

Harry and Ginny distractedly said good-bye as she made her way over to the Slytherin table as confidently as possible.

She was fairly reassured when Teddy looked up and smiled as she neared. She was quite amused when Draco caught sight of her and blanched. She was pretty sure only Pansy's restraint kept him from bolting. As it was, several of the nearby students started and decided to cut their meals short when Nott greeted her.

"Hello, Hermione," Teddy said politely.

"Hi, Teddy. Draco, Pansy," she added to be courteous. Pansy gave her a shrewd look but acknowledged her greeting with a cool nod of her head. Draco tried to look nonchalant, though he had started to sweat.

"This seat taken?" she asked and then sat down next to Nott when he answered in the negative.

The rest of the Slytherin table had quieted at her approach and was now watching her nervously, as if she were a wolf among sheep. She smirked at that comparison which did nothing to ease the growing tension.

"I was wondering if you'd be willing to help me out, if it becomes necessary."

Teddy looked surprised, but nodded earnestly. "Of course I would! What do you need?"

"Lucius' trial has been pushed back to next Friday." She paused and stole a look at Draco, only now realizing the indelicacy of her timing. Draco was concentrating on his near empty plate, but she got the impression he was listening intently, so she decided to forge ahead.

"I'm guessing that his contacts at the Ministry are still strong enough to potentially let him off, and I was wondering, if Severus and my testimonies aren't enough, would you add yours?"

Nott had become pensive, and Hermione knew he was thinking about the repercussions that could affect his mother. "I'll understand if you don't want to, seeing as your mother might..."

"I'll testify."

The entire table shifted its focus from Hermione to Draco who was now looking at Hermione with a hard face.

"Draco," Hermione spluttered, completely taken by surprise. "I don't... I couldn't ask you to testify against your own fa..."

"He's not my father," Draco said, his jaw tightening. "Not anymore."

"But Draco..." Pansy started, stopping when he looked at her fiercely.

"He killed my mother, Pans. He killed my mother and got away with it. If I have to cooperate with Granger to get justice, I will."

Pansy nodded solemnly, and as one they looked back at Hermione, who sat there completely dumbfounded.

Snapping her mouth shut, she frowned at Draco. "I'm afraid the charges against him aren't very serious, only enough to get him a decade or two at Azkaban, if we're very lucky."

Draco's smile chilled her to the bone. "All I need is for him to spend one month in there. Justice *will* be met."

She nodded slowly, deciding she didn't want to know what he had in mind. "All right, then. It's probable that we won't need any testimony other than Severus' and mine, but if we do need yours..."

"You'll have it," Draco stated, standing and holding out his hand.

She stood as well and, with only a slight hesitation, shook hands with him.

"Thank you, Draco."

"It's not for you, Granger."

"I know, but I appreciate it all the same."

He nodded tersely and then looked down at Pansy, softening slightly. "Done, love?"

She looked between Draco, Hermione and Nott for a moment before taking her napkin and dabbing her mouth fastidiously. "Of course, dear." She accepted Draco's hand gracefully and walked away, ruining the elegant effect by looking back at Hermione with a suspicious sneer.

Hermione sat down and watched the scene with a mixture of amusement and envy. She couldn't think of anyone more well suited for each other than those two, and she could only wish that she and Severus would develop a similar level of comfort without developing their obnoxious personalities.

She looked over at Nott who was watching her closely, a weird mixture of sad amusement on his face, making her wonder if he had read her mind.

"I would like to help as well, but..."

She waved aside his excuse. "I understand, Teddy. Really, I do. It *would* place your mother in a bit of a tight spot."

He nodded but still didn't look happy. She placed her hand on his, startling him. "It's okay."

He nodded again, but remained uncomfortable.

Hermione decided it would be best to leave.

"I'll see you later?" she asked as she stood to go. He smiled and nodded.

"Yeah."

She gave him a quick smile then strode off to the library to do a bit more work before her next class.

It was only after Madam Pince was starting to hustle the students out at closing time that Hermione realized she didn't have a place to sleep.

After quickly going through her options, she decided that asking Poppy for a room, or even just a bed, would be the best choice. Poppy already knew about the problem, so she would have the fewest questions. She hoped.

Unfortunately, Poppy had other ideas.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but I don't think this is the best place for you," she'd said before turning back to tend to a couple of Hufflepuff boys who had obviously been in a fight, judging by the tentacles sprouting from one and the color of the other.

Disappointed, Hermione slipped away, decidedly nervous as she walked to Gryffindor Tower. She just hoped that Minerva wouldn't feel the same way or ask too many questions; she didn't feel up for an interview.

As she stood before Minerva's door, she thought about other options. She really didn't want to open her relationship up to such scrutiny and gossip, but she didn't want to hurt Severus any more than she had already. She couldn't bear the thought of having another incident like the night before, even if he did let her back in to his rooms.

Sighing, and feeling very small, she knocked on the door, hoping Minerva was alone. She silently begged for Minerva to be alone when the witch opened the door wearing her dressing robe.

"Professor, er, Minerva, I hope I didn't inter... er, wake you?"

Minerva snorted in amusement and waved her in. "Of course not, child. Would you like some tea?"

Hermione accepted with a quiet, "Yes, please," as she sat down on the sofa.

After a moment, Minerva handed her a cup of minty tea and asked, "So what brings you by?"

Hermione bit her lip as her stomach roiled uncomfortably. She concentrated on her cup of tea as she quietly said, "I was wondering if you might be able to find a room for me for tonight."

Minerva was silent for long enough that Hermione was forced to look up. The elder witch was regarding her with concern rather than disapprobation, but it was obvious an explanation would be required.

"Last night I had a nightmare featuring Severus as the villain. When he woke me up, I panicked and..." She paused, trying to keep the tears at bay. "I reacted so strongly that I had to tell him about the dream, which was actually a repeat, and... it hurt him. I hurt him so badly he sent me away."

She looked up at Minerva and tried not to break down. Taking a shuddering breath, she continued. "I spent the rest of the night in the infirmary. I noticed he wasn't at any meals today, and I have the feeling it's because he doesn't want to see me, which is understandable. I actually don't want to see him because I'm terrified of hurting him again."

"He's a grown man, Hermione. You're doing him a disservice."

Hermione then haltingly explained about her anger at Severus' machinations and the destroyed bathroom.

"I'm afraid of losing my temper again if I see him before thinking everything out. I don't doubt he'd offer more resistance than the bathroom did, but I don't want to risk it." She looked up at Minerva. "I couldn't stand to see him looking at me like he did last night. Please, Minerva?"

Minerva pursed her lips but nodded.

"There's a room down the corridor that I expect will do, but I hope you'll at least give Severus the courtesy of letting him know where you are. He's suffered enough on that account already."

Hermione nodded. "Of course."

"Very well, then. Let's set you up."

The room turned out to be a very pleasant sort of suite with a small sitting area leading to a cozy bedroom. It reminded Hermione of her grandmother's seaside cottage, sans clutter.

"I trust this will do for tonight?" Minerva said, interrupting Hermione's perusal.

"Oh, yes. This is wonderful. Thank you, Minerva!" she cried gratefully.

Minerva nodded crisply. "Well then, I'll leave you to it. Sleep well."

Hermione thanked Minerva again and saw her out. Looking about the room, she headed for the tiny desk in the corner, intent on writing Severus a note.

Half an hour and several drafts later, she stood by the fireplace, checking over the note once more before sending it on its way.

Dear Severus,

Thank you for letting me know about the trial. Draco is willing to add his testimony against Lucius if need be, though I'd hate to put him through that unless absolutely necessary.

Minerva has been kind enough to allow me the use of her guest suite, as I didn't want to impose on you. I hope that this way allows you a good night's rest. I suspect you need it as much as I do.

Hermione

Not really satisfied, but unable to think of another way to put it, Hermione spelled the note into an airplane and tossed it through the Floo. She watched as the flames died back down to glowing embers, hoping her note found Severus all right.

Eventually, she made her way to bed after organizing her Potions' notes in preparation for her first class with Dumbledore.

She still hadn't decided whether to accept his offer or not, but after her outburst in the bathroom, she was thinking that learning how to control herself would be a valuable tool, possibly even essential. Her temper had been unreliable at best lately, and she had no wish to harm anyone else. If learning how to control her powers meant expanding them, she would just have to learn her lessons very well indeed.

And with that thought, she slipped into an uneasy sleep.

Avery's Notes: As always, a huge round of applause to Southern for her fabulous betaing skills. Any mistakes are mine, though.

This chapter is dedicated to everyone who thinks Hermione has been a little unfeeling where a certain Potions master is concerned. *g* And, although I can't *promise* it, I suspect the angst level will be receding from here on out. Oh, and I don't know if the term "teddy bear" is used in Britain, but, for my sake, pretend it is?

Also, thank you so much to those of you who have been reviewing. It lifts my heart to hear your thoughts!

Oh! And before I forget again, this story was nominated for a multifacet! I recommend you go check out the nominees and vote for your favorite (if there's still time. Voting concludes July 22). If you choose not to, or can't vote, you'll at least get a list of good reading material!

<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/main.htm>

Southern's Notes: I'm so glad that Draco will help her if she needs it. I'm hoping Lucius gets his for what he's done to Narcissa and for the attempt on Hermione. I can't wait for the next chapter and hope some Snape will be in it!

XIII

Chapter 13 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Hermione woke up to the odd sensation of being at peace with the world, feeling as if everything would be all right in the end. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt that way, but guessed it had been a few years.

She stretched in bed, luxuriating in the feel of her muscles limbering up, and tried to remember her dreams. She knew she'd had quite a few troubling ones early on in the night, but then she'd dreamt that she'd woken up from one of the more terrifying nightmares to find Severus sitting at the foot of her bed, watching over her. He hadn't said anything; he'd just smiled wistfully, smoothed her covers out and placed a chaste kiss on her lips.

After that, she'd slept fairly well.

She smiled as she placed her fingertips on her lips, remembering their last real kiss, but the smile drained from her face as she remembered everything else. Closing her eyes, she resigned herself to another day spent avoiding Severus.

It was for his own good.

No longer feeling very good, she dragged herself out of bed to prepare for the day ahead. She tried to concentrate on her upcoming lessons with Professor Dumbledore, but thoughts of Severus kept pushing themselves into the foreground.

She didn't love him, of that she was quite certain, but she didn't hate him either. She wasn't sure what she felt for him, but she was beginning to think that getting to know him better would be nice. Well, maybe not "nice," but it would be interesting, and she was sure there would be rewards to balance out the frustration.

Of course, getting to know him would require some proximity, and that wasn't going to happen until she was confident that she wouldn't blow him to smithereens. Getting to know him would also require his cooperation, and if he was still avoiding her, then whether she was in control or not was a moot point.

Details, details, she thought wryly as she headed down the corridor.

Joining the throng headed down to breakfast, she was so caught up in her train of thought that she was oblivious to the students parting for her until a fourth year Hufflepuff yanked a second year Slytherin out of her path. The move brought her focus back to the present, and she looked around to find all of the students in the area keeping their

distance. They were all watching her nervously, and some were even cowering.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, *grow up!*" she said with a scowl before stalking into the Great Hall, vaguely aware that her hair was swirling around of its own accord.

She let her book bag fall to the floor with a thump as she sat down heavily next to Harry.

"Morning. Please pass the potatoes," she requested, trying to tone her annoyance down. There was no need to take out her frustrations on her friends.

Ginny dutifully handed them over without looking up. Her elbow was on the table as she drew her fork around in her plate, pushing the bacon here and there next to the eggs.

Hermione noticed this and looked at Harry questioningly. He shrugged, but looked a bit worried himself.

"I'm fine!" Ginny said moodily, as if they'd been pestering her instead of exchanging a single glance.

"Okay," Hermione said, not wanting to inflame Ginny further. She and Harry avoided looking at each other, but they couldn't help sneaking furtive glances at the red head.

After five minutes of awkward silence, Ginny slammed her fork down and looked up testily.

"Stop it! I told you, I'm *fine*, so just stop it!"

Harry and Hermione both looked at her, bewildered.

"Erm, Ginny..." Hermione started but stopped when Ginny looked her way. Her eyes were flashing, and it was obvious she was on the verge of a temper tantrum. Both Harry and Hermione had dealt with enough of those to know the signs. It was harder to know how to circumvent them.

"We believe you," Harry said in his 'soothing' tone. "You're perfectly fine, and we'll stop doing whatever it is that's annoying you, although if we knew what that was, it would help."

Without warning, Ginny cast a powerful Bat-Bogey Hex on Harry and stomped away without a second glance.

Hermione quickly cast the counter-jinx for Harry, and he dithered for a moment on whether to follow Ginny or not, but in the end decided it would be better to leave his witch be for the while.

"What was that about, or do I want to know?" Hermione asked after he'd started pushing his food around morosely, unconsciously imitating his wife.

Putting his fork down, he swept his hand through his hair in a familiar gesture of frustration.

"I don't know! I guess she just woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning because she was fine last night. I can't think of anything happening that could have upset her like this."

"How about things that haven't happened?" Hermione asked jokingly.

Harry took her seriously, though, furrowing his brow in thought.

"Harry, I was..."

"The only thing I can think of is that I said she didn't look well this morning. She's been, well, like *that* ever since."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm guessing that giving her a little time and space will solve everything, Harry. Really," she pressed when Harry looked less than convinced.

"I hope so." He looked down at his plate again, toying with his fork. "So, do you think Snape's going to be mellow again today?" he asked hopefully, changing the topic.

Hermione looked up at the staff table, but once again, Snape was nowhere to be found. She shrugged and looked around before quietly saying, "I don't know. I haven't seen him since late Wednesday night."

Harry looked up at that, surprised. "Did he hurt you? If he did, I'll..."

Hermione shook her head quickly. "No. Truth be told, /hurt him." She smiled ruefully at her glass of pumpkin juice. "He has every right to want to avoid seeing me."

Harry didn't say anything, but when Hermione looked up, he was giving her a hard stare.

"Have you talked with him since?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not really. It's more complicated than a simple talk is going to fix."

Harry rolled his eyes and sighed. "That's what you said every time you and Ron had a nasty row, and every time all it took was an apology before you guys were the most sickening couple on the planet again."

Hermione laughed softly, remembering their last fight with amusement. They'd been so angry with each other and over what? Whether coffee was better than tea in the morning. Granted, the argument had been as much about stress relief as it was about caffeine. And the make up sex had been worth every ounce of friction.

She smiled down at her pumpkin juice torn between the joy of the memory and the despair of her loss.

"I miss him, too," Harry said quietly, shifting over to put an arm around her.

Leaning her head against his shoulder, she sighed. "It was so sudden. All of it: the hunt, the battle, his death... All of it seemed to happen so fast."

She felt Harry nodding his head. "Yeah, but I don't think he'd want you pining away for him. I know he'd try to hex me if I didn't move on with life, and he'd probably try to hex you, too."

She laughed, pulling away. "No, he wouldn't hex me. He would tie me down and shout till he was hoarse."

Harry backed away, his hands up in defense. "Too much information there, Hermione!"

She slapped him lightly on his arm, smiling. "Prat."

He smirked at her slyly, trying to look innocent while doing so. The look was so reminiscent of Severus she gasped... and then burst into laughter.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, thinking she was crying.

"Not... crying..." she tried to explain, but her mirth was making her breathless. Calming herself, she wiped her eyes and giggled as she explained. "You looked just like

Severus for a minute there."

When Harry scowled at the thought, she started laughing again. "There, too! Your scowl... Perfect!" she gasped.

Harry's face took on a bit of acrobatics while he tried to express his disgust without adopting one of Snape's expressions. He gave up about the time Hermione started clutching her stomach from laughing so hard.

"You're cruel, you know that? Cruel!" he exclaimed, though she could see his lips were twitching in amusement.

Calming down, Hermione grinned. "Oh, come now. It isn't as bad as all that, is it?"

He purposefully sneered, setting off her laughter once more.

She rode the spiral staircase up to Dumbledore's office with the remainder of breakfast's laughter still on her face. She was nervous to begin studying under the greatest wizard of the age, but she was just as eager and excited. She'd heard he had been an excellent teacher in his time, and she couldn't wait to experience that for herself.

The door was open when she reached it, but she still knocked politely on the frame before entering. Hearing her, Dumbledore turned and graced her with a grandfatherly smile that set her at ease immediately.

"Welcome, Ms. Granger! I hope this morning finds you well."

"Very well, sir, thank you," she answered, mind reeling at how different an experience this was from any of Severus' lessons.

Dumbledore's mustache twitched as if he knew what she was thinking, but all he said was, "Excellent. Shall we get started then?"

At her eager nod, Dumbledore flicked his wand at a relatively empty spot in his office, transforming it from cluttered and eccentric office space to a sparse table perfect for potions preparation and a chalkboard covered with a complicated recipe she'd never seen before.

Beside the table was a shelf with every sort of cauldron she could imagine along with hundreds of ingredients far more than the student stores held.

"I suggest you get started," Dumbledore said kindly, shaking her out of her awed perusal. She immediately reviewed the board and found there was no indication of what type of cauldron to use. Looking over at Dumbledore, she found him regarding her passively, and she got the distinct impression that this was a test.

He smiled encouragingly, and she smiled back nervously while trying to allay the panic she felt rising. She did not want to fail in front of the headmaster.

Shaking herself slightly, she reviewed the recipe and all its ingredients, trying to figure out the purpose of the potion, but found that she could narrow it down no further than half a dozen options. The unfortunate part was that each metal and alloy reacted differently to create wildly different uses of those ingredients.

"Sir," she said, looking over at Dumbledore. He glanced up from some parchments and regarded her seriously.

"Yes, Ms. Granger?"

"Er, may I ask a question?"

He looked rather pleased. "You may. You may even ask three other questions relating to the potion."

She smiled absently and thought about her question carefully. After going through all the traits of each ingredient, and the reactions each had with others, she was relieved to find she only needed to know one thing at that moment.

"Which cauldron should I use, sir?"

He smiled proudly, and she wondered if that was the test.

"The sixteen inch silver cauldron will do nicely, I should think."

Hermione nodded and fetched the cauldron, thinking out what the reactions would be while she prepared the ingredients. Half an hour later, she stepped back from the cauldron, hoping the potion was supposed to look like purple mud at this point. She lowered the heat to a gentle simmer and watched for a moment while the bubbles struggled their way to the surface.

She looked over at Dumbledore for reassurance, but his expression didn't tell her anything.

"Sir, is the potion supposed to look like that at this point?" she asked, hoping she wasn't wasting a question, but wanting to be certain before there wasn't any time left to correct mistakes.

He got up and walked over to observe the potion, although she suspected it wasn't necessary, as she'd felt him watching her the entire time.

"Yes, this looks quite nice," he said after observing it closely from several different angles. "Yes, I believe this will turn out just fine. Well done, Ms. Granger," he said as he straightened and looked past his spectacles at her. "Now, have you come to any conclusion on what this potion might be?"

Hermione shook her head. "It's a restorative draught of some kind, I gather, but I've never seen one quite like this. If it had mandrake in it, I would think it was a cure-all, but without it, I can't imagine it being useful for countering most spells. It must be for something specific."

Dumbledore inclined his head. "You are on the right path. I suspect you will have a better idea when it is finished. Would you care for something to drink while the potion matures?" She nodded and he gestured she take a seat in one of the squashy chairs in front of his desk.

"If you don't mind my asking, I was wondering if you had thought any further on my offer?" he asked while conjuring her a cup of what smelled like hot chocolate.

Hermione nodded, biting her lip as she did so.

"Yes, sir. I was wondering about a few things though."

"Such as?" he prompted when she hadn't continued.

"Such as, how soon do you think I'll be able to rein in my powers? What exactly are these powers? What's the process involved in controlling them? What are the chances of my losing control and hurting someone or of becoming a power hungry lunatic like Darth, erm, Voldemort? Is it really the Force, and how did you tell Minerva about that before it even existed?" She paused for breath and noticed Dumbledore was chuckling.

"I'm glad to see you're thinking about this." She blushed and opened her mouth to apologize, but he continued, "However, as I told you the other night, the answers to most of those questions are variable.

"I suspect that you will be able to get rudimentary control quite quickly and possibly even achieve a certain level of mastery in a year or two, given your studious record.

However, I must caution you that as we get older, life becomes rather more persistent in its goal of interfering with our plans, so it may not come as quickly as you wish."

Hermione started worrying her lip again at that, but Dumbledore continued. "At the same time, the possibility of you harming anyone due to lack of control will recede quite quickly if that is something you *want* to avoid. Unfortunately, you've tapped into this energy at a less-than-stable time of your life, so I imagine it will be hardest for the first year or two. As things settle down, it will be easier to keep your emotions in check and thereby control your outbursts."

Hermione looked into her mug, her stomach twisting with the possibilities. When she looked up, she found he was patiently waiting for her to speak.

"What..." she whispered, unable to hold eye contact, "what if I don't know if I want to hurt someone or not? How do I deal with that now, without waiting?"

He frowned lightly at her question, but answered kindly enough:

"How did you master your first spell?" It was a rhetorical question.

She bit her lip again, frowning. "... It overwhelms me though. Magic so far has always been an intellectual exercise. Every time I've become overemotional, I've just lashed out physically, but now, I... I just don't know what to do, sir."

She felt, rather than saw, Dumbledore lean forward. "That is perfectly understandable, Ms. Granger. My offer is to teach you. This *is* something you can learn, just like the charms from the Standard Book of Spells. And just as you had Professor Flitwick to show you the precise wrist movements and the correct intonations, so too will you have me here to guide and counsel you. I can assure you that shutting yourself away will not help you. This is not something you can simply think through as a puzzle. You will have to experience *all* facets of this to master it."

She looked up at him, wide-eyed, hoping she had misunderstood. "But..."

"You do not have to employ all facets," he said soothingly. "But you must have the clear knowledge of your capability and the accompanying sense of responsibility, else real harm could be done."

She started trembling slightly and shook her head. "I want to avoid the temptation altogether. I've had nightmares the past two nights about how terrible my powers made me, and I don't want to even get near that."

Dumbledore relaxed slightly and smiled. "But don't you see, child? While not real in the physical sense, those dreams have given you a touch of experience."

She sniffed and looked at him, unsure. "But..."

"Magic does not exist wholly on the physical plane, Ms. Granger. It is as much in our minds and souls as it is in our bodies. Do not dismiss dreams as irrelevant or mere fantasy. We can learn a great deal from them if we listen carefully and intelligently."

She hadn't thought about it that way, but his words resonated within her. She felt one burden lift off her shoulders.

"And what would the process be? How does this work?"

Dumbledore smiled and popped a sweet into his mouth. "It is much like learning magic all over again. You would learn to focus the energies properly, using your wand to channel them."

His face took on a thoughtful look, and his eyes lit up as he said, "Your wand... It was broken recently, was it not?"

Hermione nodded and the old tingling sensation in her stomach appeared, as if a puzzle piece was about to be placed.

Dumbledore sat back with a rather broad smile. "Oh, Ms. Granger, it appears I owe you yet another apology! It is very possible that your unpredictability lately has more to do with that than anything else! The wand you're using, I am assuming it is Lucius Malfoy's missing wand?" Hermione nodded, flushing slightly. Dumbledore smiled happily at her though. "It would seem that his wand isn't conducive to your magic. Normally it wouldn't be much of an issue, but with your energies tapped... I do apologize for not thinking of this any sooner. A new wand should help tremendously!"

"Really?" Hermione asked, her voice pathetically hopeful as another burden lifted from her shoulders. Dumbledore just beamed down at her.

"Oh! That's... That's good then!"

"Indubitably!"

He looked rather pleased with himself and summoned a large parchment to his desk. As he pored over it, he said, as much to himself as to her, "I will arrange for you to visit Olivander's, preferably sooner than later. Hopefully the schedule will allow Severus to escort you there this weekend."

Hermione suddenly felt very awkward. "Erm, sir?"

He looked up distractedly, though he focused quickly when he saw how distressed she was.

"Would it... I... Could..." She shook her head, feeling like it would be cowardice to ask for someone else as an escort. "Never mind."

"What's upset you?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"Nothing," she answered determinedly. "I have a study date tomorrow afternoon, but otherwise I'm free."

"All right," he said mildly as he looked at the chart again. "Well, it seems Severus has no rounds at all on Sunday. If you wish, you could even make a day of it. I know you've had very little time alone together yet."

Hermione bit her tongue, deciding that if the headmaster was living in blissful ignorance, she would not be the person to deprive him of that state.

"Sounds fun," she said faintly, hoping that two days would be enough time to figure out her feelings surrounding Severus.

"Lovely! And I believe your potion has only thirty seconds left to simmer."

Hermione jumped up to tend to the potion, firmly forcing all extraneous thoughts from her mind as she concentrated on the final intricate steps. Before long, she was bottling a viscous greenish substance, still wondering what it cured.

When she handed Professor Dumbledore the bottle, he asked, "So, have you any ideas what you just brewed?"

Hermione reluctantly shook her head. "The only thing I can think of is that it's to do with the bones somehow. Is it for arthritis?"

Dumbledore smiled enigmatically and asked, "Shall I answer? That is your third question."

Hermione shook her head immediately, cursing herself for such carelessness.

"No, sir. I suppose my final question is whether I have any knowledge of this potion."

He nodded his head merrily. "Yes. Now, your homework is to read up on restorative draughts and report your findings, including your educated guess on what this potion may be and its specific effects. An essay no longer than three feet, say?"

Hermione nodded, picking up her book bag just as the lunch bell rang.

"Thank you, Professor. Oh, and I think I'd like that training."

He smiled down at her. "Excellent. I will send you a note as to when to start."

She thanked him again and left for lunch.

When she arrived at the Great Hall, Ginny was just exiting, a rather enticing smelling napkin in her hand.

"Care for a quiet lunch?" she asked jovially, holding the napkin up for inspection. Hermione saw two sandwiches tucked discretely into the folds.

"All right." Hermione didn't know what to make of Ginny's extreme mood shift from that morning's outburst, but she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. It took them barely five minutes to find an empty classroom and conjure some comfortable chairs.

"Where's Harry?" Hermione asked, tentatively. Ginny gave her an odd look and then shrugged placidly.

"Don't know. Wasn't he in class?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, then at another one of Ginny's odd looks, remembered she hadn't shared her news. "Oh, I'm no longer taking Potions with Severus. Professor Dumbledore has offered to be my tutor."

"Oh." Ginny looked impressed. "Well, that solves that entire 'my husband the teacher' scenario you were worried about."

"Yes, it does, doesn't it?" Hermione replied happily.

"So, how is married life treating you?" Ginny asked right before she bit into her meat sandwich.

Hermione looked down at her meal as her cheerfulness, along with her appetite, suddenly disappeared.

"Great."

"That was really believable, Hermione! You're getting much better at dissembling!"

Hermione looked up to see Ginny smirking at her.

"That obvious?"

Ginny nodded. "So, are you going to dish on why Snape was in such a good mood yesterday? It might make you feel better."

"What are you implying?"

"Just that you look guilty, Snape seems cheerful, and so obviously the order of the universe is completely out of whack. What did you think I was implying?"

Hermione shook her head. "Nothing." She played with a bit of cheese that was dangling off the edge of her bread, wondering how much she should tell Ginny. She felt like she needed someone to confide in, and although Minerva was coming to be a friend, the fact that she was Severus' colleague gave the conversations a different dynamic that wasn't necessarily conducive to confiding. It had been very uncomfortable telling Minerva the bare minimum necessary to secure the room.

"I..." She looked around as if checking for hidden visitors and then cast a quick Muffliato before admitting, "I haven't seen him since Wednesday night."

Ginny looked at her in surprise.

"Really? I was sure that you must have just worn him out. Why?"

Hermione blushed at Ginny's implication, and the knowledge that that's what everyone else would be thinking as well. "I had a couple of bad dreams and overreacted. He more or less told me to sleep elsewhere."

Ginny's face contorted with anger. "That bastard! How dare he..."

"No, Ginny, it's not like that! I..." Hermione sighed, realizing that she was required to tell the whole story yet again. Ginny listened patiently throughout, and Hermione felt a bit better by the time she reached the end.

"And we've been avoiding each other ever since. So, I imagine I am to blame for his restraint yesterday, but I expect it isn't from good cheer."

Ginny scooted over to offer Hermione her shoulder, hugging her fiercely.

"You do know that he almost certainly wasn't mad at you, don't you? If I were him, I would be after Malfoy's head for putting you through all that."

Hermione nodded, but sighed. "I can see that now, but then why did he send me away?"

"Hermione," Ginny said seriously, turning so that she could look her in the eye, "how do you think he felt seeing you flinch at the sight of him? If he loves you as much as you think he does... If that had happened to me and Harry, I know he would have happily slept in the common room that night. My guess is he actually thought you *would* be more comfortable elsewhere, as far away from him until you aren't scared of him anymore."

"If that's so, it's very sweet, but the fact of the matter is *I am* scared of him, though not because of the nightmares. I'm terrified I'll blow him up if he happens to say something that pisses me off, which, you have to admit, is pretty likely."

"You blowing him up or him pissing you off?"

Hermione laughed. "Both, I suppose."

"Oh, Hermione," Ginny said, shaking her head, "I don't envy you your relationship."

Hermione snorted and decided to change the subject.

"Speaking of enviable relationships, what was going on this morning?"

Ginny scowled, but then a grin popped out against her will.

"Oh, Harry just..." She shook her head. "Harry was just being Harry, that's all."

"In which way?"

Ginny snorted. "The usual. He's better than a lot of boys are, but he's still absolutely clueless."

At Hermione's inquiring look, she sighed and explained. "I was, well, feeling a little, er, feisty this morning, so I was lounging in bed, trying my best to look a bit sultry and lure Harry back to me. When he noticed I hadn't gotten up, he came to investigate, saw me sprawled out on the bed in my best seductive pose, and asked, 'Are you feeling all right?'"

Hermione blushed a bit, but laughed along with Ginny.

"I was a little offended, but not deterred, so I sat up and started crawling toward him in what *thought* was an enticing manner. Instead, he got that worried frown of his, touched my forehead and said, 'Really, Gin, you look feverish. Maybe you should check in on Madam Pomfrey before breakfast.'

"And then the considerate prat goes and gets me a cool flannel!" Hermione laughed and shook her head in sympathy while Ginny finished. "Needless to say, by that point, I wouldn't have let him touch me had he declared me a goddess and started worshipping at my feet, but you know, I don't think he ever thought beyond his first impression!" Ginny was laughing so hard she was having trouble speaking. "I just don't know what I'm going to do with that boy!"

"You're right. When I asked him what was wrong this morning, he did think you were upset because he said you looked off, but beyond that, he was rather hopelessly lost. If I'd known what was really wrong, I would have slapped him upside the head for you."

Ginny grinned. "Well, maybe it's a good thing you didn't know then, what with your new stupendous powers. By the way, has anyone told you what's going on yet?"

"Yes!" Hermione exclaimed and then rushed on to tell Ginny about her upcoming lessons with Dumbledore.

"Wow," was all Ginny said, looking at Hermione with a bit of awe. "That's why Dumbledore is so powerful? So that means you could very possibly become the next Dumbledore? That's... Wow. I'll have to keep in touch, now won't I?"

Hermione gently shoved Ginny, feeling silly at how obtuse she'd been. Dumbledore was just about as far from being a dark wizard as anyone, which gave her hope for herself.

"Well, if, as you say, I do become the next Dumbledore, it'll be many, many years before I have even a smidgen of the influence he has, so I'm afraid you'll have to keep in contact for quite a while."

With a disappointed face, Ginny glumly replied, "I guess I'm in for the long haul then," before she shot her a sly grin.

Harry was waiting by the door when Hermione showed up for Transfiguration, and as soon as he caught sight of her, his face sagged with relief.

"Hermione!" he said, meeting her halfway. "Where were you for lunch?"

She smiled at his concern. "Ginny waylaid me, and we had lunch in an abandoned classroom. I expect she would have deigned to invite you had you been there."

By his shifty look, Harry had obviously caught on to her implied question, but he decided to ignore it.

"Oh, good! That means you saw Ginny. Is she feeling better?"

Hermione coughed to hide her laugh, but smiled nonetheless. "Yes, she's feeling much better. I expect it was just a minor irritation, that's all."

Harry sighed in relief even as he frowned slightly. "Did she say what was wrong?"

Hermione was saved the embarrassment of answering when the classroom door swung open, and McGonagall hurriedly ushered everyone in. She had never been more grateful that McGonagall required her NEWT students be studious from the moment they walked in the door. Harry didn't have a chance to pursue the subject.

At the end of Transfiguration, Hermione was able to convince Harry to go talk to Ginny, leaving her free to nervously approach McGonagall. She was feeling guilty about avoiding Severus again tonight, but until she had a new wand and her control had increased a little bit, she felt as though it was the least she could do for him.

Or so she tried to convince herself.

She stood at the corner of McGonagall's desk until the last student left, and the professor looked up at her.

"Yes, Ms. Granger?"

"I was wondering, Professor, whether I could extend my stay another night or two?"

Hermione bit her lip when McGonagall frowned, a disappointed look crossing her face.

"Hermione, you really must..." Minerva closed her eyes, and when she opened them, her gaze was devoid of any feelings. "Of course you may, child. However, in return, I hope you'll join me for tea after dinner tonight?"

Although Minerva's tone was friendly, Hermione knew that she was going to get an unpleasant lecture. Inwardly sighing, she smiled and said, "I'd be delighted, Minerva. Thank you."

Minerva nodded. "My office at eight then."

Hermione nodded and left for the library, dreading the impending discussion about Severus. By the time eight rolled around, however, she had decided that it might be good to discuss Severus with someone who knew him quite well, even if she did feel uncomfortable talking about him to his superior.

Resigning herself to her fate, Hermione knocked at the stroke of eight. When Minerva called out for her to enter, she expected her to be at her desk, grading papers. Instead, she was sitting in the chair facing the door, already holding a cup of tea.

"I'm sorry, Minerva. Did I keep you wai..." Hermione's voice faded out in surprise as she suddenly caught sight of an equally surprised Severus Snape. Severus' gaze quickly hardened as he turned back to face Minerva.

"Really, Minerva, must you..."

"Shush, you," Minerva said repressively to Severus while gesturing for Hermione to come in. Closing the door behind her, Hermione was startled by the harsh look Minerva was giving them. It looked like Severus was going to say something, but Minerva held up her hand imperiously, and Severus' mouth shut with a snap.

"I've had enough from you two. Yes, you've had a rough start and a rough few days, but now it is time to gather yourselves and grow up!"

Severus must have smirked because Minerva shot him a withering look and said, "I'm including you in that statement as well, Severus."

He looked like he wanted to object, but another look from Minerva kept him quiet.

Hermione worried her lip as she stood, hands clasped in front of her as if she was awaiting punishment. She snuck furtive glances at Severus, who seemed to be sulking in his seat until Minerva's voice brought their attention back to her.

"Although I do wish to see you both happy and able to work things out on your own, right now all I want is for you two to deal with each other like adults before the rumors start flying around even more fiercely than they already are. To that end, I am locking you both in this room until you can both treat each other as the adults you supposedly are."

Minerva stomped past Hermione to the door. Turning back, she added frostily, "If you haven't worked out your problems by the morning, I will have to bring in reinforcements, and trust me, you do *not* want that!"

And with that, she slammed the door shut, leaving Hermione and Severus facing each other, each looking rather surprised.

They stared at each other for a long moment before Severus said, "I see you've managed to survive the last two days." He then turned away with a sneer, leaving Hermione gaping at the back of his head.

"You really are a git, aren't you?"

Severus stilled and turned back, his expression unreadable. "I suspect Minerva does not include name-calling in her definition of acting as an adult."

"I expect she doesn't include baiting either."

She wasn't sure, but for an instant she thought she saw his lips twitch, but he turned away, his attention back on his teacup.

"No, I doubt she does. She's horribly mundane in that regard."

Hermione shook her head, but was unable to suppress a snort of amusement. Walking over to the chair Minerva had vacated, she conjured a cup of her own.

Pouring herself some tea, she responded, "Her sense of irony is rather astute though, wouldn't you say?"

When he snorted in turn, she bit her lip to keep herself from grinning in triumph.

"Indeed."

Leaning back, she made herself as comfortable as possible in the stiff chair and observed Severus warily as she sipped her tea.

"So what now?" she asked into the tedious silence.

He smirked, set his cup down and leaned back into the comfortable sofa. "I believe this is where you apologize and grovel for my forgiveness, Madam."

Hermione tried to remain calm, but it was very difficult. After a few moments, she finally ground out, "Why are you trying to provoke me, Severus? Do you really want me to be angry?"

He gave a weary sigh, which was belied by his growing smirk. "Must I repeat myself, Madam? I've already told you that you are most becoming when you get... wound up."

Hermione did not return the smirk. Instead she sat there, mortified by his answer.

"Severus," she said, shaking her head, "this... you... I can't let myself get angry. I'm not in control of my magic anymore, and if you continue to provoke me, you may just get yourself killed."

He laughed almost merrily at that.

"Hermione, are you threatening me?"

She remained serious and shook her head. "No, I'm warning you."

His mood shifted quickly and he snickered unpleasantly. "You are most gracious in your warning, Madam," he spat, "but it would be far more effective if you could hide the terror I inspire in you." Getting up to pace behind the sofa, he shot resentful glares at her every turn.

She sat as still as stone as he watched her with a bitter look. Her heart sank, and she closed her eyes to silently curse Minerva for forcing the issue before they were ready.

She jumped when Severus' dangerous voice whispered in her ear, "Your face says it all, Hermione. You can not intimidate me, so do not waste time and effort trying to."

She looked up at him and found him staring at her harshly, his nose inches from hers.

She shook her head slowly, keeping eye contact and said, trying to keep her voice from breaking, "I'm not scared of you, Severus."

He laughed and pulled back sharply. "Do not lie to me!"

Hermione stood up. "I'm not lying, Severus! It's not you I'm scared of!"

He had faced the door and stood stiff backed while she spoke. When he turned, she gasped and instinctively stepped back at the malice he was directing her way.

"Do you think I'm an idiot, Madam?" he said dangerously, taking a step toward her. She shook her head dumbly and backed up again.

"Do you think me a coward?" She shook her head again, but he just sneered and advanced.

"You think I'm incompetent then? That my attitude is to keep others from getting near enough to find out how utterly and completely pathetic I am?"

He was towering over her, and his voice had risen from that deadly whisper to a shout. She shook her head again, opening her mouth to say anything to appease the man before her. And then his look of fury changed into something else, and he started leaning down as if to kiss her.

Something inside her snapped, and she pushed him away violently

"Maybe you are an idiot! Why else can't you take my words at face value, or even learn from your mistakes?"

He snarled and stepped up to her again, but the air had condensed around her and pushed him away. She took a step toward him, feeling a slight thrill of satisfaction at his disconcerted look. She had tried to warn him...

She advanced on him again, and he tried to stand his ground, only to stumble backwards as her shield of magic pushed him again.

"And maybe you are a coward because you *do* resort to intimidation when things don't go your way!"

He narrowed his eyes angrily, but continued retreating as her magic surged and pushed him further back until he hit the wall.

"And why *do* you have to be so hateful and vicious? Why do you have to make it so hard for everyone?" she screamed at him, feeling the air pulsing around her insistently.

At that point she noticed Severus no longer looked angry. He almost looked scared and was wincing ever so slightly.

Her anger vanished in an instant, and she immediately retreated.

He watched her and took several deep breaths, leaning on the wall for support. They stared at one another in mutual bewilderment for a moment, though her bewilderment was tinged with horror.

"I'm so sorry, Severus! I didn't mean... I..."

Backing away further, she closed her eyes and whispered, "It's not you I'm terrified of. It's me."

The room was still, and she could only hear her own ragged breaths and pulse, but after a minute or so, she also heard a very quiet and sardonic, "Perhaps I should have heeded your warning."

She let out a breath that was half laugh, half sob and nodded her head. "Yes, perhaps you should have."

Her eyes popped open when suddenly she felt his hand on her cheek. He was standing before her, looking down at her with an unreadable expression as he stroked her face fondly.

"And perhaps I am an idiot, for I should know better than to underestimate you."

She smiled wanly, but didn't feel in the mood for banter.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked, tentatively reaching out to touch his chest. His lips twitched, and he shook his head.

"Nothing more than bruised pride, my dear. I'm sure I will recover quickly."

She smiled, but felt tears threatening to spill, so she leaned her head forward. She had either misjudged the distance between them, or he had stepped forward in that instant, however, for she was surprised when her forehead came in contact with his chest. They both stilled for a moment, but then she relaxed, moving in to lean against him. He remained still for a breath longer and then cautiously brought his arms around her, holding her against him tenderly.

When he spoke, his voice reverberated in his chest.

"You understand that I *will* make you angry again, don't you?"

She smiled against his robe and nodded.

"And you understand that I'm not angry about tonight?"

He stroked her hair softly, and she could feel his head bobbing above her own.

"And that I still want an explanation."

Another head bob coupled with a soft, "yes," told her he knew what she was talking about. She reflexively wrapped her arms around him and gave him a gentle squeeze, receiving one in return. She closed her eyes and let herself enjoy the warmth of his embrace, pushing all her grievances and anger aside to simply feel him against her and her against him.

When he started to draw away, she let out a small mew of protest but let him go. She was somewhat surprised when he took her hand and led her over to the sofa. She was even more surprised when he sat down next to her and put his arm around her, drawing her close. After a few moments of awkwardness, they soon found themselves comfortably entwined.

"Is this all right, or do you wish to face me for the *interrogation*?"

She shot him a look for his sarcastic tone, but said peaceably enough, "I like this."

His arm tightened around her for a moment, and he replied, very softly, "As do I."

She rested her head against his chest again and sighed, partly from the comfort, partly from ordeal to come.

She tried to corral her thoughts and questions into some semblance of order, but as each silent minute went by, she noticed Severus was getting more and more tense.

She realized he was waiting for her to start, and not wanting to test his patience, she finally blurted out, "Why?"

He tensed a little more and then relaxed beneath her, though she could hear his heart beating very fast.

"As I told you the other day, because I want you in my life."

She shook her head and sat up, realizing she needed to face him for this conversation. He must have realized the same, for he released her and repositioned himself.

"But why chase off the competition behind my back? Why go about it in such an underhanded way?"

He was silent for a moment, staring into the fire as he thought. Just as she was wondering if he was going to answer, he started speaking, his voice low and smooth.

"I knew that if I wanted you for myself, I would need to level the playing field." He looked at her squarely, and she felt inclined to squirm under his harsh gaze. "I have no illusions about my desirability, Hermione."

"And that justifies taking the decision out of my hands?" Hermione challenged. "You could have approached me privately and let me know, but instead you decided to manipulate my life and play head games!" Hermione forced herself to calm down and then added, "You didn't even let me know you cared about me at all until the day before the wedding. You didn't give me a fair chance."

"A fair chance? Do you really want to talk about fair chances?" he growled.

"You treated me like a child, Severus! You decided *you* knew what was best for me instead of letting me make my own decisions!"

Severus' face tightened, and he looked away.

"Severus, I'm not saying you don't... I would have given you a fair chance if you'd been up front with me. If you'd come to that interview and said, 'Hermione, I care deeply for you. Please give me a chance,' I would have!"

Snape laughed bitterly. "Would you really? Would you have been receptive, or would you have thought I was playing some cruel prank on you?"

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but knew his point was fair. That would have been her first reaction. She remained silent, thinking about everything he'd revealed.

"If that's what you thought... Severus, all this begs the question..." Hermione paused, before continuing carefully. "Why would you want *me* if you thought that I wouldn't choose you based on your own merits? Why would you want someone who thinks so little of you?"

Severus opened his mouth, but then snapped it shut again, looking unsettled. He furrowed his brow, and after a few moments, closed his eyes in resignation. She felt a bitter sort of relief that he finally got it and wondered what his next move would be. She was surprised, therefore, when he quietly said, "I really fucked things up, didn't I?"

She nodded. In what seemed an impulsive move, he reached out and caressed her cheek tenderly. He was smiling sadly at her, emotions laid bare.

"Can you forgive me?" he asked quietly.

"Do I have a choice?"

She closed her eyes and cringed in self-disgust as soon as the words were out of her mouth and desperately wished them unsaid. She had already forgiven him, truth be told. She shouldn't have been cruel.

"I'm sorry. That was uncalled for, especially since I already have. Forgiven you, that is."

Severus didn't say anything for a moment. He was completely still. She wondered if he was even breathing, but she couldn't bear to look up and see his hurt expression until he said, very quietly, "I *am* sorry."

She glanced up at his quiet words, her stomach a tangled knot of grief, guilt and compassion.

He looked stricken and disgusted with himself. She hoped, anyway, that the disgust was because he could clearly see his actions from her point of view now and not because he had debased himself by apologizing. She winced at that ungenerous thought and looked back down at her lap.

"We've both fucked things up pretty royally, haven't we?" she admitted.

His lips twitched, and he nodded silently as he reached out for her hand. Holding it in his, he gently rubbed his thumb along her skin, sending tingles up her arm.

"So what now?" she asked.

He chuckled sardonically. "The last time I answered that, I ended up being squeezed rather uncomfortably against that wall. The Quaffle is yours, Hermione."

She rolled her eyes at the Quidditch reference and tried to scowl at him, but ended up laughing. "Men and their sports! Can't you think of anything besides your brooms?" she teased.

He raised his eyebrow suggestively, and she blushed, only then realizing the double entendre. Seeing her blush, he grinned wickedly and said, "Of course not. Our goal in life is to score."

Hermione snorted and they shared a moment of amusement, but Snape's smile was the first to fade.

"How have you been sleeping?"

She sighed. "Better. The nightmares haven't gone, but they're better." She debated whether or not to tell him of her last dream, the one where he'd been watching over her, but decided that it wasn't something she was ready to share just yet.

"Good," he said, sounding more distracted than pleased. Glancing at him, she saw he was staring into the fireplace again pensively.

"Knut for your thoughts," she pried.

He let out a long sigh and turned back to face her, his face resolute.

"I think you should stay in Minerva's guest quarters."

That hadn't been what she was expecting him to say. Before she could ask for a reason, he continued.

"This obviously isn't an easy transition for either of us. I find I've been a bachelor for so long, I'm rather set in my ways, and..." He paused with a grimace before admitting with a sigh, "As much as I want you in my life, I can't help but still see you as my student."

He looked almost apologetic when he met her eyes, but she nodded.

"I think that's a good idea. I need time to adjust to the idea of being married as well."

He flinched slightly, and she wondered why. She also wondered why he looked nervous so suddenly before he said, "I have two questions."

She nodded for him to continue, curious.

"First..." He paused, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "First, why won't you take my name?"

Again he had surprised her.

"Erm," she said, buying time. He raised an eyebrow and waited patiently, which didn't make it any easier.

"I... I'm eighteen, Severus. My magical life, until this point, has been focused on being Harry's bookish sidekick and to help him kill the most evil wizard of our time. Somewhere along the way I decided that my identity wasn't important in the scheme of things, so... I hardly know who I am now, especially with... with everything that's happened since the end of the war. My starting place is my name. I want to figure that out a little more before I change everything around yet again."

He nodded, though he still looked pensive.

"Had Mr. Weasley survived, would you have taken his name upon marriage?"

She looked at him sharply, suddenly getting an idea of what was wrong.

"No. Not right away, anyway. If the circumstances had been the same as these, I would have given him the same explanation. The only difference is he probably would have whined about it."

She caught him off-guard with that and he snorted. She gave him a cheeky smile, which he almost returned.

"Was that the second question?" she prompted after another silence in which he had resumed staring into the fire, though not quite as pensively.

He looked up, startled, as if he had forgotten she was in the room. Looking a bit dazed, he then frowned, looking uncomfortable.

"No," he said hesitantly, and Hermione prepared herself for the worst question he could ask, though she wasn't sure what could be so bad. "Secondly, would you permit me to court you?"

Hermione wanted to laugh in relief, but she didn't dare. "Oh," she said breathlessly. "Oh, I think that would be wonderful!"

Severus relaxed visibly, though his expression hadn't changed.

"That's a brilliant way of adapting, isn't it?" she continued enthusiastically. "It'll give us a chance to get to know all about one another, and assuming the dates are mostly outside of the castle, we'll be able to approach each other much more as equals!"

He raised an eyebrow at her enthusiasm, though his lips were twitching into an expression dangerously close to a smile.

"I'm glad you approve," he commented blandly.

"Approve? Severus, do you know how nervous I've been about marrying a virtual stranger? Yes, I know a bit more about you than a person off the street, but I mean, I don't even know your full name! All it listed in your class book was 'Severus Snape,' and I've recently found that the class books are highly unreliable for giving any valuable personal information whatsoever. Do you even have a middle name?"

He looked nonplused for a moment before he stood and drew himself up to his full height. Bowing genteelly, he said, "Severus Xavier Onassis Snape at your service, Madam."

"Xavier Onassis?" Hermione asked, trying to keep her voice steady and her face straight. When he nodded, looking slightly defensive, she decided not to ask whether his parents had had a grudge against him. Instead, she stuck out her hand and said, "I look forward to our first date, Mr. Snape."

His lips quirked up again as he took her hand, and bowing deeply while keeping his eyes locked on hers, he placed a chaste kiss on the back of her hand. Hermione suddenly felt breathless and wondered whether the temperature in the room had gone up by a few degrees.

Rising, he continued holding her tingling hand while gazing deep into her eyes.

"I look forward to it as well," he replied gently.

The door unlocked, and they knew they were free.

End Part 1

AN: I chose his middle names for two reasons. First, imagine the indignity of being a man like Snape and having XO (hug and kiss) as your middle initials! Second, say the names out loud. Very suitable for our dubious hero, don't you think? Credit goes to "The Prairie Home Companion" radio show for that bit of inspiration.

As you might have noted above, this is the end of the first part of this story, effectively making it the end of act two (act one being "Marry A Choice").

In the next part, we will see how our couple fares on their dates, why Vector is giving Hermione the cold shoulder, how Teddy really feels about Hermione, and what's up with Harry and Ginny, among other trivial details.

Though it isn't complete, this story will be on hiatus for a while to give my muse some time to recharge. So, if there's a question you want answered in the story, now is the time to ask. Thanks, as always, to SW for her time and effort in betaing this. :-)

Till next time, fare thee well!

~Averygoodun

XIV

Chapter 14 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Huge thanks go to the beautiful Keladry for her sage advice, and to my amazing beta SW69 for taking care of all those pesky commas that pop up unexpectedly, among other things. They are both wonderful editors, but any mistakes you see are my own dang fault.

Also, thank you for your extreme patience regarding the previous lack of updating. My life will be returning to a less hectic pace soon, and hopefully the muse will continue her stay when it does.

Hermione woke the next day feeling hopeful. It may have been dreary and gray outside, but she felt like everything was finally falling into place. She and Severus had mutually decided to take it slowly. Dumbledore was going to train her in controlling her emotions and magic, and a solution to eliminating her destructive outbursts was nearly at hand. Although it wasn't perfect yet, she knew that all would be right in the world in short order.

She also had the study session with Teddy to look forward to. She was becoming very fond of that boy. She hoped that these study sessions would give them a chance to become closer friends as well as help them through NEWT preparations.

At the thought of NEWTs, Hermione grinned and rolled out of bed, eager to start the day off right with a nice, warm shower.

"Hi, Teddy," Hermione said cheerfully as she sat down across from her friend. "How goes it this beautiful Saturday?"

He looked at her as if he wasn't quite sure what to make of the bubbly person before him. She just smiled even more effervescently at his bemused expression before going for her books.

"Erm... fine, I suppose. I'm glad to see you in a good mood."

"Hmm?" she hummed distractedly as she came up to the table with a giant tome on Arithmancy.

"What's put you into such a fine mood today?" he asked, rather than repeat himself.

"Oh," she said, then blushed. "Severus and I made up last night."

His expression of embarrassed horror was such that she quickly continued to explain. "No, no, nothing like that! We've just... we've reached an agreement, and it's a relief to know that we can act civilly towards each other every now and again. We are adults, after all."

He nodded, still looking embarrassed, although she guessed it was because of his first assumption, rather than what she'd just said.

"So," she continued in a more serious tone, "care to start with Arithmancy?"

He nodded again, bringing out his textbook and avoiding her eyes.

"Teddy?"

She saw his mouth twitch, but his expression was blank when he finally looked directly at her.

"Yes?"

"Is there something wrong?"

He tensed his jaw, but quickly relaxed as he shook his head. "No, of course not. I'm just... Why Arithmancy first? I don't have many problems in it, and I know you don't."

"Ah. Well, I..."

"Hermione," he said, reaching across the table to pat her hand, "you know..." He looked at her for a moment with his mouth prepared to say something, but he obviously thought better of it. He shut his mouth and smiled slightly, giving her hand another friendly pat. "I guess we'd better get to work then, shouldn't we?"

Hermione smiled back, pushing aside the implications of what he was going to say and deciding that getting to work was first on the agenda. She could think about what he was going to say after they'd finished their homework.

Later in the day, they were making good progress on their respective Potions assignments when Hermione felt something hit her head. Looking up, she saw no one around and was just about to go back to her essay when she caught Teddy's smirk.

"Did you toss something at me?" she whispered rather incredulously, seeing as she thought he was more mature than that.

He shook his head, but by then he was having a hard time holding back a smile. Scowling, Hermione leaned forward to give him a quiet piece of her mind when she felt something in her hair shift. Scowling at Nott, who was now trying not to laugh, she cautiously put her hand up to where she'd felt the impact and soon found herself holding a charmed parchment airplane, which was stuck in her hair.

Giving Nott one more dirty look, she opened up the missive and was surprised to find it from Severus.

Dear Hermione,

The Headmaster has informed me that I will be escorting you to Ollivanders tomorrow. He further suggested that we "make a day of it."

Having recently been chastised for not taking other people's feelings and opinions into consideration, I thought it prudent to consult you on how you wish to "make a day of it."

If you have any specific ideas or desires pertaining to luncheon, please let me know at once, for I have taken the liberty of making reservations at Les Cuisinart to celebrate the acquisition of your new wand, pending your approval, of course. If you would rather partake of lesser foods, then I will humbly bow to your wishes.

Yours,

Severus X.O. Snape

Hermione couldn't decide whether she should laugh or huff at the letter's tone, but she decided that neither would be appropriate in the library. Carefully putting the letter aside, she found that she was leaning towards amusement, judging by the smirk that was blossoming.

"Who's it from?" Teddy asked, nodding toward the now folded parchment.

"Severus."

Teddy smiled knowingly and made an understanding sound.

"Oh, it's nothing like that."

"Like what?"

"Like what you're thinking."

"And what am I thinking?"

"That it's some torrid love letter or other such nonsense."

This got Teddy's attention. "Nonsense? You don't like romance?"

Hermione felt her cheeks go red at that. "No! I like romance, I just... I mean... With Severus, I..."

Nott smiled in good-humored amusement and stopped her stuttering protest with another pat on her hand. "You don't need to justify anything, Hermione. I was just teasing."

Hermione flushed even more deeply at that.

"I know that," she said almost petulantly, though she had the grace to grin sheepishly at him. "It's just... Severus doesn't exactly scream "romance," now does he? I don't want to give false impressions, but I also don't want anyone to think that he's unfeeling or... well..."

Teddy chuckled quietly at that. "I can honestly say that I've never thought of Professor Snape in conjunction with romance, but then again, he's not really my type. However, considering your wedding especially his proposal I'd wager that he does have a bit of romance in him wanting to get out."

"It's possible..." Hermione replied carefully.

"It's not like you're following a normal courtship ritual. He might be confused. It happens to the best of us."

She rolled her eyes, and his smile broadened his smile into a toothy grin. She noticed the corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled so fully. It made him look rather adorable and terribly sweet.

Realizing she'd been staring at him for a bit too long, she hastily looked down as if she had forgotten something, then realized she had. She needed to respond to Severus immediately, seeing as their date was so soon. She also expected he was the type to appreciate prompt responses.

"Parchment... parchment..." she muttered, rooting around in her bag and happily finding a length just as Teddy handed her one of his. Holding hers up, she set down to writing a response. She grinned as she realized that she could also give him hints about future behavior, seeing as his response had been so sarcastic.

Dear Severus,

I would apologize for not mentioning tomorrow's outing, but I know how much you hate repeating yourself, so I'll refrain. Needless to say, it slipped my mind in the midst of other matters.

As for your plans, i.e. lunch at Les Cuisinart, I have no objections. I will let you know now that normally, where outings or, more specifically, dates, are concerned, the instigator of such an outing needn't always ask for the input or permission of their companion for all the details. Granted it is always polite to let one's date know what level of dress is required for such an outing to avoid awkward Transfiguration accidents, but sometimes it's best to surprise one's date. If done prudently, it will seem spontaneous and romantic, and it will make one appear in a good light.

That said, if we're going to be in Diagon Alley, would you mind terribly if we made a quick stop into Flourish and Blotts? There are a couple of Arithmancy texts I want to buy.

Yours,

Hermione

Hermione looked the letter over; she sounded exactly like the know-it-all he proclaimed her to be. It was almost as obnoxious as his letter. She smirked.

"Dare I ask?" Teddy whispered, interrupting her imagining Severus' face upon reading the letter.

Her smirk blossomed into a grin as she shook her head. "No, I think you dare not."

Raising his eyebrows, he smiled back curiously before retreating to his Potions text, although he kept shooting her inquisitive glances over the top of his book. She just smiled back blithely as she charmed the parchment into an airplane and sent it off.

Thirty minutes later, Hermione felt another object collide with her hair. Deftly disentangling the struggling object from her curls, she couldn't help but feel a tremor of anxiety. Every time she had teased Severus the results had been almost disastrous. Suddenly not sure that her response had been the right way to go about things, she carefully unfolded the parchment.

My Dearest Darling Hermione,

The bookshop sounds delightful. Perhaps after you have found the books you so desire, we could search out the finest volumes of poetry for me to read to you from below your balcony as you comb your lustrous curls till the moonlight is reflected in the sheen.

Or am I not supposed to tell you that?

I suggest we wait to visit F&B till after lunch, seeing as your library habits indicate we might miss our reservation otherwise. However, since Minerva and Albus both have put their noses where they don't belong and have more or less ordered me to keep you out until after sunset, I cannot think of a better place to wile away our day.

Unless you'd prefer a quick game of Quidditch?

Yours,

Severus

Before she could sigh in relief, Hermione nearly choked as she read the letter. She bravely converted a loud guffaw into a delicate snort. Ignoring Teddy's renewed curiosity, she dug out another piece of parchment and scribbled out a quick reply, unaware that she was giggling rather evilly.

My Dearest Severus,

Oh, how I long to hear your dulcet tones recite sweet lines to me, but alas, if I gave way to such desire, you would find no soft posy for your reward, for it would remain in my forever stilled, befrozen hand, these chill and frosty nights.

Flourish and Blotts it is. Shall we meet at the entrance at, say, 10?

Warmly yours,

Hermione

P.S. Quidditch, both literal and metaphorical, is not an option. Nice try, though.

As she folded the parchment, she became aware of the wicked grin she was sporting when she glanced up at Teddy and found him watching her warily.

"I'm afraid that my curiosity is overwhelming my sense," Teddy said with a grin as he quickly snatched the inanimate airplane from Hermione's hands.

Squawking in protest, Hermione tried to grab the parchment back, but before she'd even gotten close, Teddy had cast an Impediment Jinx on her, and she fell gracelessly into her seat.

She watched in embarrassed horror as he opened the missive and felt her face flush as his eyebrows crept up his forehead.

"Erm, Hermione, I thought you said that these letters weren't that sort of letter. Had I known you were exchanging such... such intimate prose..."

He lifted the charm and handed the letter back to her with a mischievous grin. "I apologize for invading your privacy," he said with almost believable sincerity.

Hermione huffed and quickly sent the letter on its way before any further attempts on its secrecy were made. After it had safely left her sight, she turned and glared at Teddy. He was still grinning at her with obvious amusement. She ignored him, collecting her Potions texts and unrolling her parchment to measure her essay yet again.

After she had carefully ignored him for five minutes, she looked up to find him sitting back and observing her, still grinning inanely.

"Well?" she huffed with annoyance.

His eyes twinkled, and his grin widened. "Befrozen?"

Hermione laughed despite herself, then put her head into her hands with a groan.

"And you know that's what Severus is going to say as well. Serves me right for trying to be funny," she said through her fingers.

"Well, don't worry," Teddy said, assuming a comforting air. "I'm sure he'll only bring it to your attention once or twice. He isn't the type to pick on other people's weaknesses..." Teddy's voice faded out, and his grin got even wider. "Oh, I s'pose you are in for a hard time, aren't you?"

Hermione scowled at him, though it didn't seem to affect him at all. If anything, he looked even more upbeat.

She was just opening her mouth to tell him off when she caught sight of another airplane flying toward their table. Catching it, she quickly opened it, wondering what Severus' response would be.

My Darling Hermione,

Befrozen? My dear, surely you can do better than that! Also, I will have you know that if I were referring to Quidditch in the metaphorical sense, the word "quick" would not have made an appearance.

Ten it is.

Befrozenly yours,

Severus

"Git," she muttered under her breath, although an affectionate smile was tugging on her lips. It was nice to know he did have a sense of humor after all.

When she looked up at Teddy, he was pretending that he was hard at work, although his twitching lips betrayed him.

She wanted to tell him off for being so... irrepressibly cheerful at her expense, but just as she was opening her mouth, she was once again interrupted, this time by Madam Pince swooping down on them.

"Ms. Granger," she said in a harsh whisper, "I will have to ask you to leave if you continue to disrupt the peace of the library with any more of your missives. It's difficult enough to maintain a discipline in here without parchments flying overhead willy-nilly!"

"Of course, Madam Pince. I'm sorry, and I promise I won't send any more messages that way."

Pince narrowed her eyes at Hermione suspiciously, reluctantly turned away, and then looked back as if she expected Hermione to break more rules at the first opportunity. Hermione watched her go with a repentant expression, and only when the librarian was safely out of sight did she dare look at Teddy.

His head was bent over his book, but he seemed to sense she was looking at him, for he raised his head and caught her eye. She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing raucously and decided that turning back to studying was by far the quietest option.

She and Teddy spent the rest of the day studying and managed to get through the majority of their assignments. She had been surprised at how quickly the time had flown by and that it was suddenly nearing curfew.

"I guess this means that dinner is over?" she asked while looking at her watch in amazement. She caught Teddy looking at his own and was pleased to see she wasn't the only one who had lost track of time.

"I guess so."

They looked at each other rather amazed, but soon found their smiles.

"Do you want to go to the kitchens and get something before bed?" Teddy asked hopefully, though he frowned when Hermione shuddered.

"Erm, no thanks. I'm actually not really hungry."

Teddy frowned, and she caught him looking her over quickly. "Are you sure?"

She smiled bemusedly at him. "Yes, I'm sure. I'm actually more tired than anything."

He didn't look particularly happy, but accepted defeat. "Well then, may I have the honor of escorting you back to your quarters, Ms. Granger?" he asked as he stood and offered his arm playfully.

She cursed the blush that stole across her features, but she responded as playfully, "I would like nothing better, Mr. Nott."

It was only when they reached the corridor outside the library and he headed for the staircase to the dungeons that she remembered that her quarters were out of his way.

He turned and looked at her quizzically when she stalled her movements.

"I promise to keep you safe from the mildew, milady," he said with a smile, "as I'm sure no other entity would dare accost you."

She smiled at him, but shook her head. "I... Erm, my quarters... I'm now living near Gryffindor Tower."

He cocked his head, but continued smiling. "Professor Snape must love you very much."

"Why do you say that?" she asked, confused.

He gave her an odd look before saying, "Well, he's made no secret about hating Gryffindor, so moving up there..."

Hermione's mouth formed a small "o" of comprehension, and she shook her head. "Er, no, Teddy, Prof... Severus is still living in the dungeon."

Teddy's smile slipped. "I thought you said the two of you had made up."

"We did, but we decided that it would be better..." She stopped, frowning as she realized she was getting defensive about something that wasn't really Teddy's business anyway.

Teddy must have sensed that as well, for he immediately apologized. "I didn't mean to pry. It's just... I was surprised."

Hermione's features softened once more, and she smiled at Teddy. "I know. It's new to me, too, but then, all of this is."

Teddy smiled cheerfully and replied while offering his arm once more, "But it's for the better, right?"

She smiled back and linked arms with him again.

"Of course it is," she said while she mentally added, *I think*.

Next up: Hermione gets her new wand and learns a few things about Severus that she'd never have guessed.

XV

Chapter 15 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Author's Note: *Many thanks go to Keladry and Southern for their encouragement and sharp eyes. Any mistakes there happen to be, however, are mine.*

Hermione realized when she woke up the next morning that she hadn't seen Severus once the day before. She and Teddy had been so late to lunch that only a few people were left in the hall when they arrived, Severus not among them, and then they'd completely missed dinner.

She hoped he would still be in as playful a mood as he had been the day before. If he was, their outing could be a lot of fun. Of course, she was hoping that he had been playful. It was always possible that he was mocking her.

Frowning, she pulled out the letters he had sent and reread them. Chuckling as she reached the end, she could almost imagine Severus sulking a bit as he wrote, "I will have you know that if I were referring to Quidditch in the metaphorical sense, the word "quick" would not have made an appearance."

The written word was difficult to interpret without vocal or physical inflections, but she thought that it was more likely, especially after their last meeting, that he was not taunting her, but teasing. She couldn't see him putting down anything so close to purple prose in any other circumstances.

She carefully folded the letters in half and put them in her worn out copy of "Hogwarts: A History," smoothing out the creases made by the memo charm before shutting them in the book. As she put the book back onto the shelf, a slip of paper fell out of the book's back and fluttered to the floor.

Leaning over, she picked up the paper and instantly recognized the note. It was from Ron. Her fingers started trembling as she stared at the note, frozen in a state of indecision. One part of her wanted to reread the silly note again just to reconnect with Ron, to remember everything they'd had. Another part of her wanted to toss the note into the fire and get on with life, let go, forget. Yet another part railed at her for being so unfaithful as to even wish to move on while a fourth part quietly took control and forced her to safely replace the note in the back of the book and put the book back on the shelf.

She had forgotten Ron's notes. He hadn't written many, and most were highly unsentimental filled with whinges or requests rather than lovemaking but they were from him. The majority of the notes were stowed away in a small box full of her sentimental treasures, but that one, that had been his last note. Although she had memorized it, she hadn't had time to fully absorb it, not enough to stow it away, before the last battle overtook their lives. Before it took his life.

She frowned again, realizing that she hadn't touched "Hogwarts: A History" since she had recovered from the battle. She couldn't even remember quoting it in the last three months. No wonder her friends had been worried.

She snorted, snapping herself out of her maudlin trance. It occurred to her then that everything was in its place. All her possessions had been neatly transferred once again. This was now her home in the castle. She looked around the room, letting her eyes skitter past the bookshelf and the hidden note. Everything really was in its place. It was home.

Catching sight of the clock, she decided she didn't have time to analyze why that thought had a melancholy feel to it.

"You're late, Madam." Snape was standing rigidly by the front door, glaring at any students who dared pass within his range of vision. For an instant, Hermione thought he looked nervous, but dismissed the idea as silly. He was just impatient.

"I am not!" Hermione replied with a smile. "It won't be 10:01 for another thirteen seconds! Well, five now, but you know what I mean."

He snorted dismissively and turned to leave; Hermione wondered if maybe that was his way of saying, "Fair enough."

They walked down the hill to the front gates and the Apparition point in a companionable silence, although that was due more to Hermione's breathlessness than from lack of topics; Severus' stride was rather demanding.

When they reached the gate, Snape held it open for Hermione, raising an amused eyebrow at her obvious panting.

"My legs are short, and yours aren't," she snapped, mildly annoyed at his amusement. He bowed his head in acknowledgment, although Hermione suspected it was more likely to hide a grin. Rolling her eyes, she stepped through the gate and waited while Severus closed it behind them.

"Shall we?" he asked, offering his arm with an almost friendly smirk.

Twining her arm through his, she nodded. "Yes, let's shall," she replied and grinned when he gave her a quizzical look at her odd phrasing. "Leaky Cauldron, then?" she added.

He gave her a long, wry look before nodding his head and disengaging her arm. "After you," he said, waving to her courteously.

Hermione closed her eyes and disappeared with a quiet pop. She kept her eyes closed until the slight nausea passed, and just as she opened them, she heard a barely audible pop beside her. Turning, she found Severus smoothing his robes out and adjusting them minutely. She watched in amusement until he was satisfied and looked up to acknowledge her.

"Shall we?" she asked, playfully mimicking him from before, including the friendly smirk.

Raising an eyebrow, he smirked back. "Indeed." He then pulled out his wand and tapped the bricks, waiting until they had melted away to offer his arm to her once more.

When Hermione opened the ancient door leading to Ollivander's, she looked around, marveling at how nothing had changed, not even the tiny bell ringing somewhere out back. As she looked around in wonder, she didn't notice Mr. Ollivander emerging from the back room until he greeted her.

"Good day, Ms. Granger, or would you prefer Mrs. Snape now?" he said softly, looking at Severus curiously.

"I'm still going by Granger for now, but thank you for asking," she replied, catching sight of Severus scowling out of the corner of her eye.

Ollivander turned his attention back to her, and she suddenly remembered how creepy his unblinking stare was.

"And what can I do for you, Ms. Granger?"

"I, um, need a new wand."

He tilted his head and continued staring at her. "So soon?" he asked after a few unnerving moments.

Hermione's brow wrinkled in confusion. "What do you mean, 'so soon'? I'm not the first of my friends to break my wand."

"Of course not," he said. He didn't react in any other way, but she could sense his disappointment. She gritted her teeth into a sweet smile, trying not to let his attitude grate on her nerves.

"'Tis a shame about your old wand. Ten inches, vine wood with dragon heartstring. Unusually stiff, but yielding, if I remember correctly. A fine wand." He nodded to himself mournfully as he got out the measuring tape and charmed it to start measuring her.

"Yes," Hermione said archly, "I was rather fond of it myself."

Ollivander gave her another long, piercing look, then nodded once and began searching the shelves. After a minute of searching, he came back with a small box. Opening it, he revealed a wand so similar to Hermione's former wand that she couldn't help but gasp. Upon picking it up, though, she frowned. It didn't feel at all like her other wand had. It felt heavier and almost sluggish, worse even than Lucius' wand.

Before she could even raise her arm to try to swish it about, Ollivander snatched the wand from her hand with another piercing glance.

"Maybe it is time after all," he muttered as he went back to the shelves.

Hermione looked at Severus, who was frowning, but upon seeing her glance shrugged slightly.

"Try this one," Ollivander said, bringing her attention back to him once more. She lifted the pale wand carefully and got as far as lifting her arm before Ollivander plucked it out of her hand.

"No, no, that won't do at all," he said, burrowing through his shelves a bit more. He came back with another box, slightly longer than the previous two.

Opening it revealed another pale wand, though it had to be at least fourteen inches long.

Hermione went to reach for it, but just as she touched it, it was snatched away and another box placed in its stead. This process repeated itself for nearly an hour before a tidy little box was placed before her.

She could feel the magic tingle in her fingertips as soon as the box was opened and looked up at Ollivander in surprise. He was watching her closely and nodded with a quirk of the lips.

She picked up the burnished sienna wand carefully and felt the magic thrum in her blood, much more powerfully than her old wand had. She didn't need to wave this wand about to know it was the one. Whether it had chosen her, or she it, they were one now, and she wasn't going to let it go.

"Alder, twelve inches with dragon heartstring. Quite supple, as well. A powerful wand in wise hands, good for the more... ah, difficult spells."

His pause, and the stress on the word "difficult," made Hermione look up at him. She was surprised to see his placid face was disturbed by a creased brow.

Looking at her intently, he added, "Be careful, young woman, on how you use this wand. The dragon whose heart this came from was an exceptionally strong and temperamental beast, even for a dragon. The wand might at times... mimic its origins. Beware, lest you lose control."

Hermione eyed the wand in her hand suspiciously and worried her lower lip between her teeth. The wand sang to her, but if it was absolute control she wanted, maybe it wasn't the right wand?

"Remember that control comes from within, Hermione," Severus murmured in her ear. Surprised by his closeness, she looked up at him, finding him regarding her benignly. He nodded encouragingly at the wand, and added, "Better to have a tempestuous wand that resonates with you than a sober wand that fights."

He offered her a small smile, a mere twitch of his lips, and retreated, leaving her to make her decision.

She looked down at the wand, turning it in her hand and examined its vibrant color, its weight, and the feel of how it fit in her hand. Closing her eyes, she listened to it and felt it hum to her, literally energizing her blood and magic. She could almost hear its melody and rhythm weaving itself into her own music.

This was her wand, tempestuous or not.

"I'll take it," she said, opening her eyes to see Mr. Ollivander nodding placidly, any signs of disturbance long gone. He rang her up, and she paid for it, never letting it out of her touch, continuing to toy with it after she placed it in her pocket. She and Severus both nodded to the old man and turned to leave.

"Be careful, witch," she heard Ollivander utter softly from behind them as they reached the door. "Control is the key to your fate."

Turning to face him, she found the room empty once more, nothing but dust motes moving about. She glanced up at Severus and found him looking at her a bit impatiently.

"Buyer's remorse so early?" he asked, a slight sneer creeping into his voice.

Narrowing her eyes at his tone, she decided not to respond other than straightening her shoulders and raising her chin as she regally stepped through the door.

Feeling very well fed, Hermione and Severus decided to walk back to Diagon Alley, as the weather was a fair sight warmer in London than it was at Hogwarts.

The first few blocks were spent in companionable silence, each wrapped up in their own thoughts and quiet observations of the city around them. Hermione was gazing into the shop windows contentedly when a stray reflection caught her whole attention.

She whirled around, immediately reaching for her wand while she sought out the tall man with blond hair she'd been sure she'd seen.

"What is it?" Severus barked, sensing her alarm and instantly ready for battle, though staying her hand as she made to pull out her wand.

"Lucius."

Severus relaxed slightly and tried to indicate that she should relax as well. She ignored him, still searching the crowds for the familiar head.

"Hermione, he's in Ministry custody. He is nowhere near here, you can be sure."

"I saw him, Severus. I'm sure of it!" Hermione didn't care if she sounded slightly panicked, as it was an accurate reflection of how she felt. She looked through the crowds once more, not caring that she was disrupting the foot traffic around her.

"What did you see exactly?"

"It was a reflection in the glass there," she said, pointing offhand to the shop behind her. "I saw his hair as he turned away."

She felt Severus relax beside her and was annoyed when he placed a placating hand on her arm.

"Are you even sure it was a man? After all, there are many people with long blond hair, Hermione."

"Don't patronize me!" she said, shaking off his hand. "I know what I saw."

When he placed his hand back on her, she broke her search to glare at him and found he was looking at her with concern.

"Hermione, if he was here, he's as powerless to do anything as we are. There are too many Muggles around."

"That didn't stop Peter Pettigrew!"

He winced, but remained firm. "No, but Wormtail knew Black was after him with murder on his mind. He was desperate. Lucius, if it was him, and I highly doubt that it was, is not in fear for his life."

Hermione scowled and rescanned the crowd once more before quietly replying, "Desperation drove him to attack me."

Severus placed his hand on her elbow, and she reflexively tensed further.

"Lucius is locked up in Azkaban until his trial. He is not a threat to anyone but the rats and gulls who venture too near."

He tightened his hold on her slightly, giving her a comforting squeeze, and she gave in and nodded when he indicated that they move on.

"Don't worry about Lucius. It will spoil your digestion, and I just spent a small fortune on feeding you well. It would be a poor show of gratitude."

She smiled, despite his harsh tones.

"Back to the gratitude issue, are we?" she jibed playfully.

"That is how life works, my dear. I do something for you; you do something for me."

"And how does my not worrying about Lucius serve you?"

"As I said, worrying will spoil your digestion, and I would prefer to not smell the results."

Hermione snorted and playfully smacked Severus on the arm.

"I will have you know that I do not..." She paused, coloring a little.

"Do not... what?" he asked innocently.

"I do not... stink."

"Are you certain about that?"

"Severus!"

"One's own personal perfume is rarely as offensive as someone else's."

Hermione gaped at him then turned away, blushing and muttering, "I am not having this discussion with you. Not here, not now."

"Oh?" he persisted. "When would be a better time? We could schedule it and go over the finer points of gastronomic distress in detail. I even know of a few jokes that would break the... ice."

Hermione giggled to keep herself from gaping.

"I never thought of you as one for bathroom humor, Severus."

He snorted dismissively and said, "I should hope not."

Their conversation waned as Hermione considered this unexpected side of Severus Snape.

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer a game of Quidditch?" Severus asked reluctantly as they neared Flourish and Blotts.

Hermione glanced up at him, unsure as to how serious he was. His lips weren't twitching and his face was blank. It was impossible to tell.

"Yes, I'm sure," she responded, wanting to pull at his sleeve when his pace slowed. "Do you honestly prefer flying about on a broom to browsing through book stores?"

"I'm allergic to dust," he said in the same undecipherable tone. This time his lips did twitch, though.

"Well, if that's really how you feel, why don't you go off and find a pitch while I look up all the rules and possible fouls. That shouldn't take too long, and I would hate to ruin a game with my gross ignorance."

His lips twitched again. "I suppose I can postpone till you have a better grasp of the game. Besides, if it got back to Minerva that I'd abandoned you for a quick ride on my broom, she would do unspeakable things to my unmentionables."

"And heaven forbid you do anything to anger Minerva," Hermione said sarcastically, though blushing slightly at his innuendo.

"Absolutely not!" was the emphatic answer he gave while opening the door for her. She paused as she passed him, grinning in bemusement.

"Are you afraid of Minerva?"

"Of course not!" he said, but didn't quite meet her eyes.

"You are!"

He looked down his nose at her and glared.

"I am no more afraid of Minerva than I am of Potter."

Hermione stepped back, astonishment written across her face.

"You're afraid of Harry, too?"

Severus' jaw clenched, and he impatiently motioned for her to step through the doorway.

"I am not talking about this," he muttered sotto voce.

Hermione couldn't help herself. "Oh, I understand you wouldn't want to discuss something like this in such a public venue. Maybe we could schedule an appointment to discuss it further?"

He gave her a look that could have frozen salt water.

"Careful, wench."

She tried not to giggle, but couldn't restrain a broad grin. "Or what, you'll give me detention?"

He stepped forward to loom over her, a wicked grin crossing his face. "I'm not your teacher any longer, Hermione. I wouldn't have to abide by those pesky rules and conventions."

Hermione flushed slightly as she took in his glazed eyes and feral grin. She opened her mouth to respond, but found she didn't know what to say. He leaned closer, raising an eyebrow provocatively. She licked her lips and noticed his eyes follow her tongue. When he looked back up to meet her gaze, she found it difficult to breathe, seeing the amount of longing and lust in his eyes.

She didn't know what to do. She didn't want to rush things, but she was so very aware of his body, so close, yet so far away. She was aware of her heart accelerating, pumping blood to her cheeks and elsewhere. She was very aware that it would take only the slightest hint of agreement on her part before he ...

"Well, this is a pleasant surprise!"

She and Severus both jerked their heads around to meet the happy face of Arthur Weasley. They instinctively stepped away from each other, making Arthur chuckle slightly.

"I didn't mean to interrupt you two; I just was so surprised to see you here, I couldn't help the exclamation." He looked expectantly from one to the other. "So, what brings you so far from Hogwarts?"

Hermione noticed that Severus had already recovered. He didn't look ruffled at all, damn the man. She was still trying to overcome the ridiculous feeling of being caught out by her father.

"Hermione needed a new wand, and Albus insisted that we... 'make a day of it.'"

Arthur chuckled again, this time more openly. "That sounds like Albus, alright. So, a wild day on the town was on the books, so to speak?"

Hermione groaned, and Severus rolled his eyes at the very bad pun. "You continue to amaze me, Arthur," he said very dryly.

Arthur winked at Hermione as he continued to grin at Severus. "I'm flattered, Severus!"

"Of course you are," Snape muttered.

Arthur laughed at that and slapped Severus on the back good naturedly. "I do miss your wit, Severus. One of these days you'll have to come by for dinner. You know Molly would love to feed you." He smiled at him, and Hermione was surprised to see Severus return the smile, albeit in a much more muted way.

Arthur then turned to her and added, "And you know that you are always welcome at the Burrow."

She blushed with the sudden discomfort of having rejected two of his sons. He seemed to understand her feelings, as he said, "You are family, Hermione, no matter your last name. I'm glad you chose Severus, actually. Fred, and I dare say George, would have driven you batty within a month." He lowered his voice to a false whisper and added, "At least you have a good year before Severus drives you crazy."

She gave him the obligatory laugh he was after, but was uncomfortable knowing how close she had come to choosing madness. Glancing at Severus, she saw he was equally uncomfortable, judging by his stiffening posture.

Arthur looked between them, picking up their subtle cues, and gracefully changed the subject.

"So, Severus, have you been following the Wasps' progress this season? Their new Beater looks to be a smashing addition."

Hermione groaned again, but this time it wasn't at the pun. She quickly excused herself, deciding it would be a good time to go find the Arithmancy books she wanted.

Hermione had found the texts she wanted, as well as a few others that looked promising, and was so involved in the theories presented, she hadn't noticed the passage of time until her stomach started growling.

Looking at her watch, she squeaked in surprise. Six hours had flown by since lunch. Looking around, she noticed it was darker outside nearly dusk and the lamps had all been turned up to keep the light even.

Quickly gathering her books, she hustled out to the main area of the shop, hoping Severus wasn't too angry with her for losing track of the time so wantonly. When she reached the clearing, she looked around but couldn't see Severus anywhere. Hoping he hadn't left in disgust having given up on her, she quickly started searching the store for her husband. It didn't take long before she came across Severus. He was holed up in a secluded corner in a cozy club chair, his long legs sprawled in front of him. Hermione leaned her shoulder on the nearest bookshelf, watching him as he read. She had never seen him look so relaxed before, except for the morning after their wedding, when he'd been soundly asleep. It brought her pleasure, seeing him so entrenched in his book that the rest of the world was lost to him, although she wondered if he was as oblivious as he seemed, or if he had one corner of his mind keeping watch, making sure to stay alert for signs of malice. It didn't seem like he was the type to be caught off guard by anything or anyone, except possibly for her.

Sighing, she pushed herself off the bookshelf and took a step toward him when she felt his first ward. It was a modified Do-Not-Disturb charm, making him visible for the store clerks' sake, but unapproachable. She smiled triumphantly, having guessed correctly that he wouldn't leave himself so unguarded in public.

Closing her eyes, she felt the area for more signs of his protection and, after a moment, found three more wards, each more complex than the last. By the time she found the last one, she understood very well how he could seem so relaxed and oblivious; he was very well protected very well, indeed.

She was loath to interrupt his quiet reverie, so she left his inner wards undisturbed and wandered back to the Arithmancy section, figuring he would find her after he was done with his current section. He had to be at least partially aware of her presence after she'd stepped on the Do-Not-Disturb charm. He'd know she'd been there.

An hour later, Hermione wasn't so sure. She found herself looking at her watch more often than the book in front of her, as she grew more and more aware of her stomach and the lack of food within. She still didn't want to disturb Severus, but she was beginning to lose patience. Seven hours was a long time, even for her, to be ensconced in a bookstore. Of course, she could usually finish all but the most complex or lengthy book in seven hours.

Thinking about that, she furrowed her brows, wondering if Severus had indeed finished that book and was waiting for her to find him. Or was he a slow reader? Or had he fallen asleep? Or had he given up on her?

Slamming her book shut, she gathered her belongings and stalked back to Severus' corner, unsure of what she felt when she found him sitting there, in the exact same position, except obviously on a different page.

A little miffed at his oblivion, she purposely stepped through his first two wards while taking out her wand to dismantle the third and fourth. She was surprised that it took till she started working on dismantling the last ward before he looked up, and she was curious at his look of surprise upon recognizing her.

He waved his wand and the last ward fell down. He raised his eyebrow in a silent inquiry before asking, "Is there something you wanted, my dear?"

"Yes, Severus. I would like dinner."

His lips quirked up even as his brows drew down. "I know you've been starving yourself lately, but it's unhealthy to gain all that weight back in one day."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"I have no intention of stuffing myself. All I want is to keep up my energy." Seeing his continued confusion, she added, "It's nearly nine, Severus."

She'd been expecting a look of at least fleeting surprise, but his entire reaction was to look at his watch, raise one eyebrow, and say, "Oh, so it is," before closing his book and getting up.

She watched as he stretched out his spine, gracefully and discretely relieving the tension stored up after sitting for so long. He waved his wand again, and the chair disappeared along with the lamps around it. Hermione looked around and grinned when she saw how dark and gloomy the corner he'd chosen was.

Looking back at him, still grinning, she asked, "So, do you do this often?"

He looked at her askance. "Pardon me?"

"Do you do this," she waved her arm about, indicating the corner and store in general, "often? Get lost in a book?"

His lips twitched, but otherwise, he didn't react.

"I never get lost, not even in books," he said disdainfully. "I knew precisely what time it was."

She raised her eyebrows at that.

"You knew it was this late, and you weren't the least bit curious as to what was keeping me?"

He snorted. "My dear, in case it bypassed your observational skills, this is a bookstore. I think even Mr. Crabbe would know what was keeping you."

She was about to open her mouth to tell him off for assuming that she was safe, for assuming she was nothing but a bookworm, when it occurred to her that not only had he given her an implicit compliment on her defensive abilities by not worrying about her safety, but he had been as absorbed by the books as she had been. He hadn't been bothered by the amount of time she'd spent. He hadn't minded whiling away the hours with the written word. He hadn't complained once.

"Well, I'll be sure not to ask to come to a bookstore with you again," she said instead. When he looked at her curiously, she added, "I see it's a dangerous thing for us to come to bookstores together. We could likely as not starve to death before either of us lost interest enough to say something."

His lips twitched. "Indeed, I do believe you have a point, my dear. Perhaps next time you will see the merit in my suggesting Quidditch as a viable option?"

She snorted merrily. "Not likely, Severus, but you can keep hoping."

She thought she saw him smile fondly for an instant before he schooled his face into his stern mask, though his feelings were belied by the gentle way he took her arm in his and guided her to the register.

"Perhaps it is a fool's errand, but I believe I shall keep hoping by your leave."

She looked up at him with a smile. "By all means, Severus, keep hoping. Just be careful to stay on the right side of delusion."

He smiled then, fully and sincerely, long enough for her to know it wasn't her imagination. "That, my dear, is in the eye of the beholder, so it very likely is too late for that on

both our accounts."

"I dare say you're right," she said as she placed her books on the counter.

He smiled rather wryly and placed his book with hers. "Of course I am."

"Because you're always right?"

"It has become an unfortunate habit, yes."

She snorted derisively and turned to face him.

"Yes, I imagine that it's difficult to deal with dunderheads every day. No wonder you confine yourself to the dungeons whenever possible."

She'd said it as sarcastically as possible, but he nodded seriously.

"You have no idea how *tedious* it is, my dear."

Hermione eyed him sharply, thinking he might be mocking her, but decided to play along anyway.

"Oh, I have a fair idea myself."

He looked behind her for a brief moment, then smirked and nodded his head, reaching out behind her. "Yes, I imagine you would. That's one of the appealing traits about you. You know the difference between a hawk and a handsaw."

As he finished speaking, he pulled his hand back, caressing her back as he did so. She shivered slightly.

"Well," she said, searching for words as her brain temporarily collapsed under the weight of both the compliment and the touch, "I'm not sure I'm completely sane, as I did..." She stopped herself from saying 'marry you,' thinking they weren't quite ready to joke about their seedling relationship yet. She covered her pause with an embarrassed look and continued: "As I did fancy Lockhart at one point, but I'd like to think that I'd at least know an idea from an idiot when the wind is right."

Something in his eyes flared, and he backed away from her, standing taller than he had been before. She would have sworn he was angry with her, except for the pleased aura he was radiating.

"Yes, I rather think you do know the difference, even if it does take a change in the weather to show you."

Hermione decided that was a good time to look away and pay for her books, but when she looked at the counter, everything was gone.

"Excuse me," she said to the clerk while looking around the countertop, "but weren't my books here?"

The clerk gave her a rather condescending look. "Yes, they *were*. They are *now* in the bag your husband is holding."

Hermione looked where the clerk indicated and indeed saw a big bag in Severus' hand. She looked back up at the impatient clerk who was looking behind her to tend to the next customer.

"And would you like me to pay for them?" she asked, maneuvering so that the clerk had to look at her.

The clerk sighed with heavy patience and looked at her pityingly. "Your husband has already taken care of it. Now," he said, while looking around her once more, "may I help the next customer, please?"

Hermione turned around to find Severus standing back a bit, eyebrow raised in amusement, watching her. She didn't know whether she was more upset that he had just stood by and let her make a fool of herself, especially after their previous conversation, or because he had paid for her things.

She walked out of the store scowling with Severus following behind her.

They got as far as the Leaky Cauldron before the silence was broken.

"So, where would you like to eat, my dear?"

She turned around to face him, scowl still in place.

"You didn't need to pay for my books."

His eyebrows rose in surprise, but his lips tightened in annoyance.

"Nor did I need to pay for your lunch, but since I invited you out, I thought it would have been rude to ask for you to pay."

"The lunch I expected. The lunch... My books aren't... I can pay for the books myself, you know. I do have money and can take care of myself."

His thin lips turned into a scowl. "I have no doubt of that, Madam. But can I not buy you a gift?"

She gave a sharp bark of laughter. "Severus, gifts are all well and fine, but that was over fifty Galleons worth of books! That goes beyond a simple show of affection."

Severus opened his mouth to rebut, but Hermione raised her hand to stop him and continued before he could object. "Also... I know you're probably thinking I'm being terribly ungrateful, but those books are needed for my studies. They're necessary. You buying them... it's like you buying me groceries, rather than just dinner. It carries the implication that I can't take care of myself."

His scowl still firmly in place, Severus waited for a moment to make sure she had finished and then peevishly asked, "May I speak, now?"

Hermione scowled back at him and nodded curtly.

"Although my intention is not to undermine your independence, answer me this: Where did you get the money to pay for your school supplies?"

"My parents pay for all my schooling costs," Hermione answered immediately.

Severus just stared at her, waiting as if she was missing the point. When she just stared back, he sighed heavily.

"Hermione, you are my wife now. That means you are *my* responsibility, whether that seems medieval or not. If you were earning wages and were to pay for your supplies from them, then I would gladly let you exert your independence in that manner, but I will not, nor do I think I should, allow you to exert your independence from me by relying instead on your parents."

Hermione expelled the breath she had drawn for protest in a slow hiss and nodded. "I hadn't thought about it like that. I didn't mean to insult you."

His scowl softened, though it didn't disappear. "So I gathered." He tapped the brick wall in front of them, and the wall neatly rearranged itself into the arched exit. "So, I ask again, where would you like to eat?"

Hermione sighed, suddenly feeling very young, inexperienced and foolish. She was glad the alleyway was dark as it hid her trembling lips. "It doesn't matter to me."

"Would you allow me to Apparate us somewhere?" he asked solicitously.

She nodded and suddenly felt his arms wrapped around her, his wand tapping her shoulder lightly. An uncomfortable moment later, they were standing in a wood a few feet away from a dirt road. Severus lit his wand and took her arm, guiding her through the brush, dousing the light once they reached the road. They started walking, her arm through his, in silence.

Hermione was glad he had extinguished his light, as she wiped her eyes surreptitiously. She didn't want him to know how upset she was, as she was ashamed she was upset in the first place. She really did feel like a fool, though. An illogical, childish fool. She should have known better. She should have thought everything through. She should have remembered. But she hadn't.

She knew that some of the dreadful pain in her heart was the realization that she wasn't her parents' *child* any longer. She would always be their baby, but Severus was right: She was no longer their responsibility. When she'd married him, she'd given up that part of her life. It was a hard realization.

After a few minutes, they rounded a corner and found themselves at the edge of the forest. In front of them was a smallish field, in the middle of which was a scraggly shack with a lone light. Hermione looked at Severus inquiringly, but he didn't seem fazed by the odd location. As if he sensed her gaze, he looked down at her for a beat, then back at the path.

"It doesn't look like much, but they serve the best lamb shanks in Europe."

She quietly blew her nose before asking, "Is it a magical establishment?"

He stopped their progress and looked down at her again. The light was so dim that she couldn't read his expression, but she could sense there was something he wanted.

"No, although they are aware of the Wizarding world. This is my uncle and aunt's house. My father's brother and his wife."

Hermione was a bit taken aback. "Oh."

"If you don't want to meet them right now, I'd understand. Perhaps I should have warned you, but... They aren't expecting us, so we can go somewhere else, if you like."

"No," Hermione said, getting over her shock. "No, it's fine, really, unless we'll be imposing on them. Don't you think they'll have eaten already?"

"They eat late," was all he said as he started forward again. Hermione didn't say anything else, but worried her lip nervously right up until Severus knocked on the door. She hadn't thought of Severus having family, although she couldn't think why not. She guessed it was just another case of thinking of Severus as just a teacher, rather than as a man.

A tremulous voice came from behind the door. "Who is it?"

"Just a wanderer and his wife, looking for some victuals," Severus responded loudly.

The door was thrown open, and a shortish, squat woman stood there in amazement.

"Wife! Severus, you rogue, you never even gave us a hint!" She immediately rushed forward and engulfed Snape in what looked like a bone crushing hug.

"Auntie Cora," Severus croaked, sounding breathless, "I can't breathe."

She released him from the hug, but only to turn to Hermione.

"And you must be his wife?" she said as she threw open her arms and embraced Hermione in the same bear hug, albeit a more comfortable one, as they were close to the same height.

"This is Hermione, my new bride," Hermione heard Severus say while Cora rocked her to and fro joyously.

Cora pulled back, putting her hands on Hermione's arms as if to keep her still. "Hermione? What a good Greek name. Welcome. Welcome to our family, Hermione." She then gave her another hug.

When Cora released Hermione, she patted her cheek tenderly. "You chose a pretty young wife, Severus."

Both Cora and Hermione looked up at Severus, who stood tall, but looked uncomfortable, as if he didn't know how to respond.

Cora laughed and caught his face in her hands and gently shook it side to side. "You should be ashamed of yourself, Severus!" She patted his face with a gentle slap. "We should have been there at your wedding! You know we would have loved to be part of it!"

Severus' jaw tightened in embarrassment. "It was a last minute decision, Auntie. There was barely time for *me* to get there."

"Pfft! As if a wedding could take place without a groom!"

Hermione and Severus looked at each other, each unsure as to who should explain.

"Well..." Hermione finally said, although she hesitated to say anything further.

No longer smiling, Cora looked at the two of them shrewdly. After a moment of careful scrutiny, she shrugged and let her face relax back into its happy mien. "Well, you better come along inside then, and tell us the story over some stew."

Both Severus and Hermione let out identical sighs and took her up on her suggestion.

"Gilgamesh! Your nephew has brought us a surprise!" Cora called out rather loudly, considering the size of the home.

Hermione looked up at Severus with a raised eyebrow. She mouthed behind Cora's back, *Gilgamesh*? He quietly snorted and shook his head minutely.

Their interactions were not missed by Cora, who explained with a twinkle in her eye, "It's a pet name I have for him. 'Gil' has always seemed too short."

"Why not call him Gilbert?"

"Because that's not my name."

Hermione turned around in surprise to find herself face to face with an older version of Severus. He smiled kindly at her as he took off his coat and cap and then extended his hands in a welcoming gesture.

"I assume you are the surprise my Cora mentioned?" he asked as Hermione tentatively placed her hands in his.

Hermione nodded, and Severus stepped forward to be beside her.

"Uncle, this is my wife, Hermione."

Gil looked at Severus, very surprised indeed. "Wife?" He looked back at Hermione, gripping her hands tightly, though not painfully so, and smiled broadly. "Oh, what happy news! It's an honor to meet you, Hermione! I am so happy to see our little Severus finally settling down!"

He drew her into an affectionate hug, then released her into Severus' care. She felt Severus tentatively put his hands on her shoulders as he stood behind her.

"They have hinted that there is a story behind their marriage, Gil," Cora said from the stove.

Gil just smiled at Cora. "Of course there's a story! Every couple has their story, even old, boring ones like ours." Cora scowled at him lightly before smiling back. "And perhaps they will even tell us their story, yes?" he added, looking at them hopefully.

Severus looked at Hermione who looked at Cora and Gil. They seemed so fond of Severus and so happy for him that she thought it almost cruel to hurt them with the truth. Unfortunately, that was all she had to tell. She wouldn't insult them with lies. She bit her lip and nodded reluctantly.

"Oh, come now!" Gil laughed, seeing her reaction, "It can't be as bad as that. After all, it isn't like you two were forced to marry, true?"

Hermione tried not to blanch, but she knew her reactions were plain to all in the room. Gil stopped laughing and looked at Severus with a serious expression.

"Severus, did you dishonor this girl?"

"Absolutely not!" Severus cried.

Hermione added, "It was nothing like that at all!"

"Maybe you should start the story before supper?" Gil said, his eyebrow raised sardonically.

Severus' shoulders slumped as he sighed and then nodded. "It all started when Hermione's boyfriend was killed..."

"And then I stopped the wedding and asked her to marry me instead. She agreed, and here we are."

Hermione rolled her eyes, but bit her tongue to keep from interrupting him. Cora saw her, though, and laughed.

"Perhaps you have a different story, dear?"

Hermione smiled back. "He left out quite a few pertinent details."

"I did not. All the essentials were there," Severus protested.

"I didn't say the essentials were missing, just a few details, like how you teased me terribly throughout the entire ordeal or how you rejected my proposal at the altar because it was undignified for the woman to propose, as if the whole farce had a shred of dignity to begin with."

"I didn't think that was relevant."

Severus gave her a look that was obviously intended to tell her something, but she blithely ignored it, turning to his relatives with a roll of her eyes. Uncle Gil, however, didn't seem to be amused.

"A young woman should never have to be put through such indignities!" Gil said, slapping his hand down on the table for emphasis.

Severus scowled back. "It wasn't as if I..." he started, but stopped when Hermione gently laid her hand on his arm.

"I don't think your uncle is angry at you, Severus."

"Of course I'm not! How dare the government try to manipulate your lives like that? How dare they think they know what is right for any person when it comes to the heart?"

Cora laid a restraining hand on Gil's arm and smiled up at him. "They found out, though, didn't they? They won't try it again."

"But too late for Severus and Hermione!" Gil yelled, still angry.

"But is it so terrible a result?" she asked quietly.

Gil looked at the younger pair, and his face softened somewhat.

"Perhaps not," he said, sitting back with a contemplative look.

"I can't honestly say that I would have chosen Severus of my own volition, but I'm not despairing of our relationship, now that the choice has been made."

Cora gave a knowing smile. "And it isn't all that different from people of my generation getting married after only a few months, or in some case, a few weeks, just so they could finally have sex."

"Auntie Cora!" Severus exclaimed, blushing furiously.

"I'm simply saying that those couples barely knew each other when they wed, the same as you. In some ways, you may be better off than them, as at least you know of Severus' temper, Hermione, and you've been Hermione's teacher all these years. You're not total strangers and have probably seen each other in less than ideal circumstances."

Hermione nodded emphatically and noticed out of the corner of her eye that Severus nodded as well, albeit reluctantly.

"Although, the benefit the couples had was that they were in love with each other. Severus and I... well..."

Auntie Cora shrugged, although with a smile tugging at her lips.

It was quite late when they left. Cora and Gil both insisted Hermione call them Auntie and Uncle, and both made sure she knew that she was very welcome in the family, Cora going so far as to give Hermione her mother's secret recipe for tzatziki that had been handed down throughout the generations.

Hermione left with a warm glow of love, eradicating the memory of all the negative feelings she'd had earlier that evening. She didn't feel young, so much as cherished, and instead of feeling foolish, she felt young.

They Apparated back to the gates, and Severus took her hand into the crook of his elbow as they walked up the hill to the castle. At first they walked in silence, both still enjoying their full stomachs and full hearts, but as happens with romantic walks under the chilly stars, Hermione shivered, breaking the spell.

"Are you cold?" Severus asked, disengaging her hand from his arm so as to wrap that arm and his cloak around her.

"A little," Hermione responded quietly, pleased at his attention.

His arm tightened around her, pulling her toward him, and she readily complied. They continued to walk that way, casually bumping into each other for a few paces before Hermione's mind got the better of her.

"How on earth did you end up so reserved with relatives like yours?"

Severus snorted. "First of all, I lived with my parents the majority of the time. They were not as... open... as my aunt and uncle. My mother, especially, discouraged such open displays of emotion. She never did understand that aspect of my father. He would try to rein in his emotions for her, but..."

Hermione thought Severus had paused, but after a few moment of silence, it became clear he wasn't going to continue. His face was pensive and strained when she peeked up at him, and she debated with herself on whether to barge into his privacy or not. After a bit of back and forth, she finally decided they would never get anywhere if she left him to lead the personal conversations.

"But?"

"But," he said slowly reluctantly, "it always backfired."

He started walking quickly, but when Hermione fell behind, he stopped, back rigid, waiting for her to catch up.

"I'm sure Potter told you of the childhood scenes of mine he found in his one successful Occlumency lesson." He said it as a statement, but it confused Hermione.

"Um, no. Harry didn't tell us much of anything about those lessons."

Snape looked at her sharply. "You needn't lie to protect him."

"I'm not lying. Harry does have some good points, you know. He doesn't spread gossip and certainly not with malicious intent," she replied with a bit of bite.

Snape regarded her silently for a moment then nodded, tucking her back under his cloak before continuing their slow pace from before.

"One of the memories he witnessed was of a fight my parents had when I was a small boy. Back then it... it disturbed me, but as I grew up, I realized that my dad just needed to blow off steam every so often. He was an emotional man trying to repress it all for the sake of his wife.

"But I am the product of both my parents, not just one. I may have my father's temper, but I also have my mother's abhorrence of all things... uncomfortable. Emotional displays are as uncomfortable as possible, hence my reserve, as you kindly put it."

"But if emotional displays are abhorrent, then why... erm, that is... I'm not exactly a shrinking violet, as I'm sure you've noticed, and, well, it's obvious you adore your aunt and uncle, who are most definitely not restrained..."

He sighed. "It's not something I can explain easily, Hermione."

"Will you try?"

She felt him shift beside her, as if in discomfort. She suddenly felt bad for pushing him into an uncomfortable place.

"Don't worry about it, Severus. I don't need all the answers right now."

For some reason, Severus found that highly amusing as he let out a beautiful laugh that curled around her like an embrace before floating off in the wind.

"Who says there are answers at all, my dear?" he replied, still chuckling.

She reviewed what she'd said and saw the joke. Smiling, she looked up at him and said, "I do, of course. Everything has an answer, even if there isn't a question. And I should know."

He laughed again, and Hermione knew she wanted to hear that sound more often; it was addictive.

"Yes, you are my little know-it-all, aren't you?" he joked as they reached the main doors of the castle.

She smiled playfully up at him. "I do remember someone giving me that title at some point as a matter of fact."

She noticed his hand twitch as if he wanted to reach for something. Judging by his relaxed smile, she guessed he had wanted to reach for her, and she was mildly disappointed he hadn't.

They stood there on the threshold for a few awkward moments before a gust of icy wind reminded them of their location. Severus ushered them in and closed the door behind them.

"May I escort you to your door?" he asked gallantly, although it came out a little stiff.

She smiled and extended her hand. "I'd like that."

He gave her a small smile back, accepted her hand, and they made their way up to Gryffindor Tower.

Once again, they were silent, but Hermione wasn't going to break it this time. She didn't want to make Severus any more uncomfortable than she already had. She didn't know if it was fair of her to demand any answers from him at all, although she didn't know how she was going to get to know him otherwise. He was too reserved to offer many clues without prompts, and she wasn't skilled enough in the art of reading him. That skill would come in time, she knew, but she was impatient. She didn't want to wait for years to know who her husband was, or what he liked, loved, hated or despised. She wanted to know *now*.

And she had been fairly forthcoming herself. Probably a little too much so, for his taste. She knew he was better at reading people than she was, having had more practice, but it seemed he had a difficult time reading her. He'd come to many stunningly wrong conclusions the week leading up to the wedding, so she could only assume that he read her as well as she read him. She wanted him to know her, preferably with as few misunderstandings as possible.

"It comes down to need, I think," Severus said softly, breaking the silence and wrenching her out of her thoughts.

She nearly said 'pardon,' but kept her mouth shut and thought back to previous conversations.

"Need?" she asked, looking for another clue.

"Yes." She thought he was going to stop there, but when they reached her corridor, he furrowed his brow and continued. "While my mother loved us very much, she didn't give many displays of affection. It didn't bother me and still doesn't. However, when I met Uncle Gil and Auntie Cora the first time, it was at Dad's funeral. They... they were as they are now, and they showered me with affection. It was... unnerving, uncomfortable and unwelcome, but..."

He squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"But it was touching all the same?"

He opened his eyes and looked at her, nodding once.

"They came again for my mother's funeral, and I was... very touched. They hadn't been on friendly terms with my mum, but they came anyway to give their respects and support me."

He paused as they came to her door, but Hermione leaned against the doorframe, patiently waiting for him to continue.

"It... It's not so much that I wished I had their flamboyance, or that they'd raised me, because *blo* like who I am. It just opened my eyes to a different approach at relationships, and it was one that had appeal."

"Severus, I..." Hermione started, intending to assure him that he was as flamboyant as they were, though in a subtler manner, but stopped herself, somehow knowing that he would not appreciate it. Instead, she said, "I'm touched. Thank you," and rose up on her toes to kiss him gently on the cheek.

She watched as his face tensed in anticipation and then relaxed into a soft smile as she stepped back.

He took her hand and concentrated on it, playing idly with her fingers before he raised them to his lips.

"Thank you for this day, Hermione."

"Thank you, Severus. I had a wonderful time."

He reluctantly let her hand go, letting her fingers slip through his like silk falling from the skin. But before she turned to go, he leaned in and brushed her cheek with his lips and then was gone in a flurry of black robes.

She smiled at his back until he'd turned the corner, then made her way to bed, quite sure that her dreams would be good that night.

XVI

Chapter 16 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

When Hermione entered the Great Hall the next morning, she was surprised that the stares and whispers were back with a vengeance. All of the students were looking at her, and she was pretty sure it was not just her imagination at work.

Sitting down next to Harry and Ginny, she glanced around the room and was rewarded by several students quickly looking elsewhere. The only students who didn't seem shy about meeting her gaze were the Slytherins, who were eying her speculatively. Teddy, however, was nowhere to be seen.

"What have I done this time?" she asked, looking over at Harry while loading her plate.

Ginny snorted and looked around Harry to explain. "From what I've heard, you've either left Professor Snape, breaking his tender new heart, or Professor Snape kicked you out after realizing what a conniving, manipulative shrew you are. Either way, you're now on par with Mrs. Zabini as a dangerous seductress."

Hermione rolled her eyes, but her mouth thinned. "So everyone's found out we're in separate rooms, then?"

Ginny nodded. "Yeah."

"And the fact that we were out all day yesterday? I know some students saw us leave together, so why hasn't that been contributed to the mill?"

Ginny leaned forward a bit more, as did Hermione, to see around Harry. Before Ginny could speak, Harry rolled his eyes and stood up, motioning for Ginny to scoot over into his place, which she gladly did.

"Well, *obviously* you two were out finalizing your separation," Ginny answered mockingly. She shook her head in disgust. "People will see signs of failure if that's what they expect."

Hermione nodded, adding, "Or if it's what they want."

Harry looked around Ginny at that, obviously confused. "Why would they want your marriage to fail?"

Hermione smiled ruefully. "It's not like Severus or I are the most popular people in the school."

"Also, I think the thought of you two together, especially after your display the other day, scares people," Ginny added thoughtfully. "Here's Professor Snape, a wizard who practically radiates pent up power, rage and Dark Arts, and then there's Hermione, with these newfound powers, and shortened temper... I expect people are afraid that together they'll team up to be the new Dark Couple."

"But that's just stupid," Harry said, the confused look still there.

"I didn't say it wasn't stupid, Harry," Ginny said, tweaking his nose playfully. "I just think that's what most people are thinking."

Hermione looked around and shook her head. "Sometimes I think you give them too much credit. I'm not sure half of them even think about it but just agree with whatever the person next to them says."

Ginny nodded and said, a bit too lightly, "I agree."

Hermione gave Ginny a half-exasperated look before chuckling. She then shook her head, dismissing the topic from her mind; she refused to get worked up about what other people thought. It wasn't their business, and she wasn't going to let it diminish the good-date glow she was still feeling.

She did kind of wonder how everyone came to know about their new situation, though. It wasn't something she had actively hidden, but she also hadn't advertised it the thought of Severus doing so was ridiculous. She hoped it had nothing to do with Teddy's absence.

"Hermione!"

She whipped around, ready to hex the next person who either offered their congratulations on taking Snape down a notch, or who attempted to chastise her for being so heartless. The Langlock Curse was at the tip of her brain before she recognized Teddy.

Debating for a split-second on whether she should cast the curse anyway, she reluctantly put her wand down as he rushed to catch up with her, but her scowl didn't go away.

"Teddy," she greeted coolly with a nod.

He offered her a confused smile. "It's good to see you! I didn't see you around at all yesterday."

"Severus and I were out."

He drew back a little at her harsh tone and creased his brow at her. "Erm, is there something I'm missing here?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and heaved an exasperated sigh. "How about the school buzz on how I'm now the most heartless woman in Britain and possibly Europe because I've cruelly taken *poor* Professor Snape's heart and have cast Sectumsempra on it until, if rumor is to be believed, he can barely breathe and is a mere shadow of the man he used to be." She threw up her hands and started stalking off. Before she could take two steps, however, Teddy grabbed her arm.

"Why are you so angry at me? It's not like I started the rumor."

"Didn't you?" Hermione charged. When Teddy looked at her with an expression that was both outraged and hurt, she softened a little.

"Teddy, you're the only one who knew about my move."

"I'm not the only one with eyes, though," he said through tight lips.

"No, but considering I haven't been living in the dungeons since Wednesday, and the rumor didn't start till yesterday, what am I to conclude?"

Teddy looked beyond her for a moment before saying, "That the rumor mill was a bit slow?" She laughed, and he smiled wryly. "Seriously, though, I don't see why you automatically assume I started the rumor. Is it because I'm a Slytherin?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, but gave him the courtesy of thinking before answering. "Maybe a little, but mostly, everything just added up and pointed toward you. You found out late Saturday and were genuinely surprised, which means that the rumor mill obviously hadn't started yet. I was gone all of Sunday, as was Severus, and no one was around when I left my new rooms. And then... Why weren't you at breakfast?"

Teddy tried to raise one eyebrow at her, though both came up. "It doesn't mean that I started the rumor. It hurts that you think I'd do something that I knew would hurt you."

Hermione looked over his shoulder while pressing her lips together to maintain her composure before looking back at him.

"It hurt to think that you would do something like that, too, but what am I to think, Teddy?" she implored. "You have to admit that the evidence is against you, and I do know that, in general, Slytherins aren't that kindly disposed toward me."

His lips compressed, and he looked insulted. "Don't make this about House politics, Hermione."

"Oh, come on, Teddy! You know as well as I do that I'm not talking about you, but people like Malfoy and Greengrass. I've seen the way they look at me, and, given our past history, I wouldn't be surprised if it was a Slytherin who started it."

"I don't know how you do it in Gryffindor, but in Slytherin we like to show respect to our Head of House."

Hermione compressed her lips together so tightly that they threatened to disappear. She breathed in deeply through her nose, certain her nostrils were flaring she was so angry. After counting to ten, she calmed down enough to realize she needed to be blunt. In a reasonable tone, she asked, "When you went back to your common room Saturday night, did you tell anyone where I now live?"

Teddy, similarly angry and tense, nodded. "Yes, I did. For some reason I thought it would be better to tell them I was back after curfew because of your new location rather than have them think less... honorable things."

Hermione's shoulders slumped, and she leaned back against a wall. "Well, thank you for that," she muttered, still not happy but able to see it could have been worse.

Teddy was still angry, though. "You're welcome, but I have to wonder: Had the same circumstantial evidence been there incriminating Potter, would you have assumed he did it?"

"Harry?" Hermione asked, looking at Teddy in bemusement. "Don't be silly."

"How is it silly?" Teddy asked, raising his voice for the first time. "I know we haven't been friends for very long, but surely I've given enough proof that I'm..." He stopped and shook his head. "You know what, never mind."

He turned to walk away, but Hermione grabbed his arm, which he violently shook off.

"Teddy, you can't compare our friendship to mine and Harry's! It isn't fair!" He continued to walk away from her, so she jogged to catch up, pulling him to a stop before he turned into the main corridor.

"Harry and I have been friends for more than six years while you and I have only begun our friendship. Harry is like my brother, and we have been through hell together, so don't you even think of presuming that my level of trust in him should be visited on you! I *know* Harry. I don't know you. I want to I think but you *cannot* compare yourself with Harry. You will come out the loser if you do that."

Teddy looked away, jaw still clenched, but she could see that he was thinking over what she'd said.

She softened her voice and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry I assumed the worst, but can't you see that your information probably sparked the rumors?"

He didn't shake off her hand, but his voice and look were quite cold. "And can't you see that you're incriminating my true friends?"

Hermione drew in a sharp breath and dropped her hand before answering, "I trust Harry with my life, but when it comes to his prejudices, I always take his view with a grain of salt." She then turned and walked away, blinking back tears of distress. She was both relieved and upset that Teddy didn't call her back. She didn't want him to know just how much their argument had upset her.

She knew it had been unfair to accuse him of starting the rumor, but, in effect, he had. He'd given the vultures the information they needed, and she didn't really care if it was a Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff or Gryffindor who had actually come up with the theories. He'd provided the fodder, and he should have known better. After all, he could have told them that they'd lost track of time while studying. Everyone would have believed that of her.

She slowly made her way to the Great Hall, adjusting her bag into a more comfortable position several times as she went. She didn't know what to do about the situation. All day had brought confrontations of fairly intense proportions, both effusive and derogatory, and all day she had been ignoring it as best she could. It felt like the wrong approach, but she hadn't had the opportunity to talk it over with Severus. After the last bout of relationship rumors, she didn't want to say anything that might incense him again. But it still felt wrong.

And now her budding friendship with Teddy was under duress. She didn't even know how to feel about that. He seemed like such a nice, intelligent boy, and he'd offered her so much support over the past few days. She genuinely liked him and had been looking forward to their next study session, but now...

And all because he'd opened his mouth to defend her.

She winced at the irony.

So, with these thoughts in mind, she entered the hall for dinner and sat down beside Harry and Ginny with a rather glum expression.

"Rough day?" Ginny asked sympathetically with a friendly rub of the back. Hermione nodded silently as she served herself.

"Anything we can do to make it better?" Harry asked.

She shook her head, answering, "Not unless you can somehow get everyone to stop speculating over things that aren't their business."

"Oh, everyone's still on about those rumors?" Harry asked, his voice conveying just how stupid he thought the rumor mongers were.

She just nodded.

"I'd like to find the source of all this and hex them," Ginny added.

"I don't know that it would make anyone feel better if you did hex him, though," Hermione said, her thoughts still focusing on Teddy and not the current conversation.

Ginny looked over at her and propped her chin on her hand. "You know who started it and you haven't told us?"

Hermione paused mid-bite and looked over at her friends. She noticed at the same time that everyone else at the table was actually minding their own business. It was distinctly odd.

She nodded. "I suspected this morning, and just before I came here... Thing is, I know who gave out the information, but not who came up with the absurd theories, and considering Teddy only gave the information in my defense..."

"Teddy? You mean Theodore Nott?" Harry asked incredulously.

Hermione closed her eyes and nodded.

"You confronted him about it, did you?" Ginny asked and made a sympathetic face when Hermione nodded again stiffly. "What happened?"

Hermione told them. She had got through his comparing their friendships when she noticed the three of them were no longer alone. Looking up, she found Severus standing there in his typical dominating posture with a speculative look on his face.

"Good evening, Severus," she said, not quite sure how much he had overheard or how he would react to her befriending Teddy.

He offered her a grave nod in return. "*Madam*," he said quite formally. "I have a note for you from our solicitor." He offered her a small, official-looking scroll of parchment. Looking from the roll back up to him, she cocked her head curiously. He didn't offer her any clues but just stared coldly.

"Thank you."

He nodded again curtly, but she thought he seemed to tense up just slightly.

"Good evening," he said before walking up to the staff table. Hermione watched him go, fiddling with the missive nervously. She hoped he was up to something, but she couldn't think what could involve a solicitor. The fact that he was playing along with the rumors was very disquieting.

A nudge in the ribs brought her attention back to the table. No one was minding their own business now, as everyone was looking at either the note or herself.

She looked at Ginny who nodded at the note encouragingly, although she seemed a bit confused.

"It was a rumor, wasn't it?" she whispered. Hermione nodded and slowly unfurled the scroll, reading as she went.

To Ms. Hermione Granger,

First, as one of Severus' oldest friends, let me offer my congratulations on your marriage to the old grease ball. May you suffer the old bugger in equanimity and happiness, if that's at all possible.

Second, as his solicitor, I would like to welcome you and introduce you to my services, although Severus has already taken the liberty of adding you to his Muggle life insurance policy and has adjusted his last will and testament to reflect your new relationship status.

If there is anything I may be of service of for you, please do not hesitate to contact me by owl or Floo.

Please give the bastard my warmest greetings, assuming he hasn't read this already. And, if you have read it, Severus, then let me remind you of the hexes I embed in my notes. I will be checking up on you shortly to see if your lovely new wife has received this. I don't want her getting the impression that you hold all the power, now do I?

Sincerely,

Amanda Prewett, solicitor

Hermione laughed out loud, startling several of the people watching her, and looked up to the staff table. Severus raised a goblet of pumpkin juice to her, and she followed suit, noticing that their actions were being followed by many a confused student.

"What's it say?" Ginny asked, trying to take the scroll from Hermione but pulling back quickly when she got zapped by a privacy hex.

"Oh, it's just a letter welcoming me into Severus' circle," Hermione replied, smiling down at the note again. That's when she noticed a smaller roll of parchment curled up in the bottom of Ms. Prewett's letter.

Curious, she pulled out the smaller scroll. Although it was rolled up, she noticed it was also folded into an envelope. On the front, her name was written in Severus' distinctive scrawl.

Keeping in mind Severus' attitude when he'd handed her the scroll, she cautiously opened the envelope. The instant the letter had opened, a wild rose so red it was almost purple appeared before her on the table. Looking up at the staff table, she could see Severus watching her intently. She made a production of lifting the rose to her nose, making sure everyone in the hall could see it if they wished.

She smiled shyly at Severus and then read the note.

Dear Hermione,

Having done a bit of research on the matter, I have found it is customary to send letters of an amorous intent to the person one is courting. So-called love letters are intended to show the recipient that the sender cares enough to take the time to put their feelings into words and onto parchment.

I am sure you are aware of this custom, however, as you seem to be fairly proficient when it comes to researching all matters.

Nonetheless, I thought I would try my hand at such frivolity.

A large ink blot where, Hermione suspected, he had rested his quill came next, along with a few small doodles.

As you may have determined before this piece of... proof, frivolity is not my strong suit.

Yours,

Severus

Hermione was shaking with suppressed laughter by the time she finished, and only when Harry asked her if she was okay did she raise her face. Before Severus could think she was laughing at him or his attempt at being romantic, she looked up and offered him a brilliant smile. She then took up the rose again, smelling it to hide her giggles.

Her table mates were looking at her very oddly as she tried to compose herself, although most of them weren't going to say anything. Seamus, on the other hand, had never been shy about voicing his thoughts.

"Erm, Hermione, you haven't gone nutters, have you?"

Hermione just started laughing outright, which wasn't very reassuring of her.

"Since when are separation papers served with flowers?" she heard Seamus ask and looked up in time to see Neville rolling his eyes along with half the girls in hearing range.

Still giggling, she looked up at the head table and saw Severus talking with Professor Flitwick. She could almost convince herself that he was blushing, but she quickly discounted that as silly. She had never seen Severus blush and didn't know if he was even capable. He did look uncomfortable, though, as if he was fighting off a smile.

"Why *are* you laughing?" Ginny whispered in her ear. Hermione looked over and saw Ginny looking at her with a strange mix of amusement, relief and concern. Everyone else at the table was still laughing at Seamus or trying to convince him that red roses were actually symbols of violent hatred.

Looking back to Ginny, Hermione whispered, "Severus does have a sense humor, you know."

Ginny raised her eyebrows doubtfully, but muttered, "He must."

Hermione smiled down at her food, feeling very hopeful suddenly.

All throughout the rest of the meal, she kept sneaking glances at Severus. He seemed to be engrossed in his meal or conversing with the professors around him, but every now and again she would catch him glancing at her. Whenever he did, she would smile at him while unconsciously fingering the wild rose, delicately feeling her way around the thorns and prickles

When she noticed he was finishing up his dinner, she decided it was her turn to make a move. She picked up her belongings, said good-bye to her friends and made her way to the head table.

Severus watched as she made her way to him, raising an eyebrow in question. She smiled, trying to concentrate on Severus, rather than the whispers of the remaining students. They didn't matter.

When she finally reached the table, Severus raised his eyebrow again and said coolly, "Is there something you want, Ms. Granger?"

"Severus!" Minerva exclaimed, irritated.

"Minerva?" he responded, turning his raised eyebrow on her.

She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at him. "Do you really think that's an appropriate way to address your wife?"

"You'd rather I throw myself over the table and sweep her into a passionate embrace?"

Several staff members snorted, and the Defense teacher was patted on the back in a feeble attempt to help clear his airways.

"Of course not, but you could at least give her the courtesy of referring to her by name."

"Actually, she doesn't mind her husband calling her by her last name," Hermione cut in. "She would much prefer that over some demeaning pet name or even a salacious twist to her given name."

Minerva turned her frosty look on Hermione, then sniffed in defeat. Severus, on the other hand, was looking highly amused.

"And you called yourself helpless," he mused, shaking his head, while giving her a slight smirk.

"That wasn't the point and you know it, but that's neither here nor there. I actually came up to ask if you would care to go for a walk once you've finished with your meal."

"Being terribly forward, aren't you, my dear?" Severus replied, raising his eyebrow in amusement.

She shrugged. "I was under the impression that women were supposed to follow the man's lead only until their wedding night. Now that I'm your wife..."

"I'm afraid Severus is right, dear," Professor Sprout cut in with a kindly smile. "Women are supposed to defer to their husbands in all matters for at least the first year."

"Or at least pretend to," Minerva added with a mischievous glint in her eye while Sprout nodded amiably. "It's standard practice." She leaned forward and added in a stage whisper, "That way they don't see the power shift until it's too late."

Having caught on early, Hermione made a big show of slow comprehension. "Oh! That's different from how it is in the Muggle world now." She turned to Severus, trying very hard to keep a straight face. "I'm sorry, Severus. I didn't know. But of course I can see that you are the master of our proverbial house, and I will follow your lead in all things."

She could see that Severus was trying not to smile. "All things?" he asked innocently.

Hermione looked at him with what she hoped was wide-eyed innocence and replied, "As much as this persistent headache allows."

The whole staff table burst out laughing, and Hermione was a little distressed to see Severus' cheeks turn pink in embarrassment. She offered him an apologetic look, but he shook his head minutely and gave her a fleeting smile.

"Well," she said as the laughter died down, "I'll just go back to the table and wait for your offer of a stroll, then."

Severus chuckled along with everyone else before he pushed back his chair and stood up.

"I don't think there's any need for such a waste of energy, my dear. I find that the idea of stretching my legs has immediate appeal."

He walked around the table and, upon reaching her, offered his arm. Blushing very slightly at the public display, she threaded her arm through his, and they walked out of the hall silently. Both were quite conscious of the bulk of castle's population observing them, and neither wished to have any more of their words twisted for the morning gossip.

Once the doors to the Great Hall closed behind them, Severus turned to Hermione.

"So you wished for a stroll?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes, although I must admit I'm not up for anything long. Do you know of any interesting passages in the castle?"

He raised a brow, smirked and said, "I believe I know of a sufficiently interesting passage, yes, but perhaps we should first make a detour to your rooms?" he asked.

She wasn't sure what he meant until he gave her shoulder a meaningful glance, reminding her of her heavy bookbag.

"Yes," she said, smiling in response.

Once they had successfully dropped off Hermione's belongings, he led her up a couple flights of stairs.

"Thank you for the flower and the note," Hermione said after they had reached a small corridor. "They were perfect."

He looked at her quizzically. "Perfect?"

"Yes, perfect."

"In what respect were they perfect?" he asked. She detected a small modulation in his voice that made him sound almost insecure.

"Well, not only was it a perfect way to dispel all the stupid rumors that have been floating about today, but it was also a much needed mood lifter and very..." She paused, not wanting to offend him with the wrong word, "gratifying."

She looked up at him in time to see his jaw clench slightly. Knowing she had misjudged, she turned to him and playfully added, "If it had been from anyone else, I would have called it incredibly sweet and endearing, but I wouldn't want to offend you with such soppy terms."

His jaw relaxed and he shot her a wry smirk. "I thought you might be in need of assistance since I heard you had decided to remain admirably mum on the subject."

She shot him a wry grin of her own and nodded. "Well, I wanted to follow your lead, like a good wife should."

He graced her with a deep chuckle that echoed down the hallway and then, almost before she knew what was happening, he had changed their positions and was leading her in a graceful waltz down the empty corridor.

Her instinctive reaction was to tense up and struggle, but he shook his head with a slight smile. "Ah-ah-ah," he rebuked, looking at her with an inscrutable expression. "It's my lead."

She laughed at that and relaxed, finding he was a good guide as they danced down the corridor. A small pressure here, a slight pull there, and they moved in near-perfect accord, although she was sure her movements weren't nearly as graceful as his were.

He continued dancing as they reached the end of the hall, carefully maneuvering them through the narrow doorway, although Hermione barely noticed her surroundings. Her attention was on him and the way his face had relaxed into an expression very close to the one he'd worn when under the influence of the Calming Draught. He looked almost happy.

She found herself smiling up at him and was rewarded with a small grin in return.

He slowed their gait as he led them around in a large circle, finally ending the dance with a slow, shallow dip.

Hermione's eyes never left his through the entire move, and she was mesmerized. He was so intense and yet so gentle; so sure footed, and yet she saw glimpses of insecurity flit over his face. She saw so much passion, but the dance had remained light and playful until that moment.

She thought he was going to kiss her lips as he gently brought her back up, but instead he backed off and bowed, kissing her hand.

She was surprised by how disappointed she was.

"Thank you for the dance," she said, curtsying politely, glad that he had at least continued holding her hand.

"It didn't aggravate your headache, I hope?" he asked, a playful glint in his eye.

"No, not at all." She smiled back rather mischievously. "In fact, I do believe it helped relieve it a bit."

His eyebrow went up enticingly. "Is that so?" He took a small step forward.

She nodded wordlessly, suddenly feeling rather breathless. She found herself holding her breath as he leaned forward. Her eyes fluttered closed as his lips brushed hers,

allowing her to concentrate on the feeling of his lips as they explored hers ever so lightly and tenderly.

She only realized her lips had parted when he took possession of the bottom lip, gently pulling it between his soft lips and tentatively caressing it with his tongue. A quiet moan escaped from her throat, answered almost immediately by an increase of pressure.

The kiss evolved from a gentle, tender expression to something much more passionate rather quickly. Soon, she felt as if she was drowning not only in his lust, but her own. She was becoming very aware of how empty she felt and wanted nothing more than to banish that feeling with him filling her.

Suddenly he pulled back, leaving her breathless, but she was gratified to find his breaths were coming in rather laboriously as well. He rested his forehead lightly on hers for a moment before sliding over to her ear.

"And how is your head now?" he murmured silkily before backing away from her. She reflexively tightened her hold on his robes, preventing his retreat even as her mind started thrumming with questions how fast did she actually want to go? How far?

How did she feel about him?

He was staring at her, his expression intense but unreadable, and she knew he was leaving the next move up to her.

How do I feel about him?

It was that question that had her loosening her grip on his robes and smoothing them out, symbolically pushing him away from her. It was too soon. She didn't want to hurt him. She didn't want to *use* him.

"Peskiy aching," she murmured back softly, focusing on her task of smoothing out his robes and avoiding his gaze.

His finger came under her chin and gently forced her to look up at him. She was pleased, but surprised, to find he was smiling at her tenderly.

"Let me know when it's better?"

She ducked her head shyly and nodded.

With her head bent, she was perfectly positioned to notice him offering his hand. She looked up at him with a shy smile and accepted his gesture, weaving her fingers through his. He smiled back, and then led her to the nearest window.

She looked out upon the dark land before her and was awed by the subtle gradations of light that the waning moon cast upon the earth. The bare hills looked like dark velvet above the spotty highlights of the trees below.

"This is where I come when I'm troubled. I find this view more calming than any other offered by the school."

She turned to look at him, a slight frown creasing her brow.

"Are you troubled now?"

"No, but I had the impression you might be."

She looked back out upon the view, her frown intensifying. For a few wonderful moments, she had forgotten about Teddy and their argument. She was slightly annoyed with Severus for ruining the moment, even if it was his concern that prompted the remark.

Partly due to her annoyance, and partly due to the subject of the annoying matter, she remained silent as she looked out at the land, trying to recapture the peace she'd felt before.

"I hope you know that you can talk to me as well," Severus said, squeezing her hand supportively.

She sighed and looked down at the windowsill.

"How much did you overhear?" she asked softly.

"You and Mr. Nott had a disagreement?"

She snorted. "Yes, you could say that." She looked up at him, observing him shrewdly. "What is it you want to know?"

He sighed and looked at her with a slightly put-out expression. "You aren't going to let me be the least bit subtle, are you?"

She snorted softly with a smile. "No, I'm not."

His lips thinned in disapproval, and he looked back out the window. She was beginning to think he would rather forgo knowledge than subtlety when he said, "I wasn't aware that you and Mr. Nott were in a position to get into disagreements."

She smiled in acknowledgment of his concession and told him about how she and Teddy were starting to become friends. Severus listened quietly as she told him about finding the perfect study partner in Teddy and how kind and supportive he'd been when she'd needed a shoulder to lean on the last few days. She told Severus how they had simply clicked, and it seemed as if she had found someone who really understood her. She ended with the rumors and how Teddy was involved, leading to their argument.

She felt a burden lift from her shoulders and realized in that moment how much she'd wanted to share her new friendship with Severus. However, when she looked at Severus' carefully blank face, she also realized that she'd been fairly enthusiastic about someone her husband had considered a rival, so she quickly added, "Thank you for listening to me, Severus. I didn't realize how much I'd wanted to tell you about Teddy."

He raised a dark eyebrow at her. He didn't say anything, but she could feel the question on his mind.

She stepped forward and took his other hand in hers before smiling up at him. "You've been answering so many of my questions, and I haven't really had the chance to reciprocate. That doesn't seem very fair to me."

One side of his mouth curled up, although she couldn't tell if it was from good humor or bad. "If I had known you were sharing only for a sense of fair play..."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," Hermione said sharply. When the other side of his mouth joined the first in a slight curl, she knew he was teasing her. She tried to let go of his hand so she could playfully slap him, but he seemed to know what was on her mind and held fast, pulling her closer to him.

"You didn't let me finish," he murmured softly, relaxing his grip slightly. "If I had known you were sharing only for a sense of fair play, then I would have started telling you about myself weeks ago."

His expression softened as he smiled down at her. "Thank you for telling me about Mr. Nott, Hermione. I'm glad you've finally found an intelligent friend no offense to Mrs. Potter."

He allowed her hand to escape for one well-deserved slap on the arm before recapturing it and kissing it in a courtly manner.

She raised her face to smile up at him, but was mortified when instead of a grin, she offered him a yawn. He chuckled and gathered her into his arms for an impromptu hug. She relished the feel of his arms surrounding her, even as she marveled at his being capable of such tender spontaneity.

"I do believe that is my cue to return you to your quarters," he said into her hair, not having released her.

She nodded in agreement, loath though she was to let go of such freely offered comfort. Seeming to sense this, or perhaps a little reluctant to let go of her himself, he wrapped an arm around her back, pulling her to his side as he slowly led the way back to her quarters.

They walked in comfortable silence until they reached her door when the silence suddenly became tense. They'd returned to holding hands at some point, and they both took to staring at their intertwined fingers.

"Thank you for showing me a different view," Hermione finally said, knowing it wasn't as subtle as she wanted, but hoped he would appreciate the effort.

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Perhaps by the end of the year I will have been able to show you all of my favorite spots."

She looked at him and smiled when he finally returned her gaze. "I'd like that, and I'd like to show you some of mine, as well, if you'd like."

He smiled gently, bringing up a hand to caress her cheek. "Yes, I'd like that."

"And perhaps," she added, still leaning into his touch, "we might even discover a few new spots together."

He nodded and then leaned down to give her a gentle kiss on the lips before backing away. "Sleep well, my dear."

She smiled up at him tenderly. "Good night, Severus."

Their fingers finally reached their limits, and they parted, leaving Hermione a bit surprised at how lonely it felt letting him go.

With another gentle smile, she turned and entered her quarters, very hopeful that she would indeed sleep well that night.

AN: Thank you both Southern and Keladry for your support and sharp eyes! Any mistakes left are obviously my own fault, though.

A leopard may not change his spots, but panthers hide them well. Snape may seem OOC, but perhaps, just perhaps, he has found a reason to reveal some of those beautiful hidden spots to someone for whom he cares. As for Amanda Prewett, she's obviously related to Molly Weasley somehow, but the genealogy charts got lost in the mail. Let's just call her 'cousin,' shall we?

Next chapter will be Lucius' trial. Yes, can you believe it? I will actually be skipping (or skimming through) a few days for the sake of forward progress. ;-)

Also, if interested, here's an image I made up for this chapter while the muse was off in Lalaland: <http://www.deviantart.com/deviation/51476424/>

XVII

Chapter 17 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Thanks to both my lovely betas, Keladry Lupin and Southernwitch69, for their time, sharp eyes, sympathetic ears and sound advice. All mistakes are my own, however.

Although Hermione was anxious about what the rumor mill would damn her and Severus with the next morning, she needn't have worried. It seemed that Blaise Zabini had given the mill more interesting fodder by being caught in a broom closet with a fifth-year... Hufflepuff. Since that was obviously more exciting gossip than her and Severus getting along, she was left to attend classes and meals in peace.

She would have liked to see more of Severus, but it seemed the only time they had free for each other was immediately after dinner. Hence they began a nightly ritual of Severus walking Hermione to her quarters, although frequently there were detours involved, most of them involving a jaunt through the library.

Hermione was certain they would be the focus of the rumor mill once again on Thursday after she and Severus had been caught coming out of the Restricted Section Wednesday night rather flushed (and, in her case, mussed) by a group of third-year Ravenclaws, but to her surprise, there was barely any mention of them because early the next morning Daphne Greengrass was seen kissing Neville yes, *Longbottom* in the Charms corridor.

So it was that Hermione managed to make it through an entire week in peace.

Friday dawned auspiciously enough, and besides some rather annoying twinkling by the Headmaster during her Potions lesson, the day proceeded much to her liking. She'd even received full marks on the essay he'd assigned about the Skele-Gro Potion with encouraging notes on her thought processes. It was a nice change from the usual acerbic comments left by Professor Snape.

As she made her way to Transfiguration after lunch, she was struck by how she was now automatically separating 'Severus' from 'Professor Snape' in her mind. She was exceedingly pleased that there really did seem to be a difference between the two, and now that they were getting past their professional relationship, it was becoming much, much easier to see him as a man, rather than just as the teacher.

The past week had been illuminating indeed, and she couldn't help but notice that whenever she thought of Severus, as now, a grin would pull at her lips.

"What's so funny?" Harry asked, breaking into her thoughts.

Hermione looked over at him and let the grin loose. "Severus."

Harry made a face that she was pretty sure was more genuine than affected. "I'm sorry I asked!"

She swatted at him, although he dodged from reflex, laughing good-naturedly.

"So things are working out okay?" he asked with genuine interest.

She nodded. "Yes. He's been very... well, I want to call him 'sweet,' but that doesn't exactly hit the mark with Severus, does it?" she asked Harry playfully, knowing it would elicit a moue of disgust.

"Erm..."

She laughed. "He's been sarcastic, inquisitive, comforting, insightful, caring, and... well... playful." She sighed happily. "He's been wonderful, Harry."

Harry nodded with a lopsided grin. "I'm glad to hear that." He seemed to mean it.

"No protestations of the impossible?" Hermione asked in amazement.

Harry laughed and gave her a quick squeeze. "Hermione, even Goyle can see you're happier now than you have been for months. I can't tell you how... relieved I am."

She looked at Harry intently, then smiled wryly. "I'm sorry if I've..."

"Don't!" Harry said harshly, though he softened his tone with a smile. "I won't have you crying in your pudding anymore."

Hermione laughed, albeit ruefully. "Don't worry, Harry. I won't cry in my pudding unless it's a pudding worth crying over." She paused for a moment, then asked tentatively, "So I seem happier now?"

Harry laughed at that. "Hm... You've been smiling, laughing, joking around and you've got a glow about you that you haven't had in months. I think it's possible that you might be happier." He beamed at her, though the smile slipped into something less pleasant as he added in a mumble, "And to think all of that's thanks to Snape."

"You think I'm in love with Snape?" Hermione asked, bewildered at what she thought Harry had said.

Harry turned to her with a confused and incredulous expression. "Love?" he asked, just as bewildered as Hermione. A second went by when the two just looked at each other, and just as he opened his mouth to say something more, McGonagall opened the classroom door.

Looking thoughtful, Harry muttered, "Talk later?"

She nodded, and they headed into class.

Just as class was wrapping up, the door opened and Severus appeared. He only gave her a hint of a glance as he made his way to Minerva who seemed to be expecting him. Even before he said anything, Minerva looked up at Hermione and indicated she should come down.

"Would you take care of these?" Hermione whispered to Harry, indicating her bag of books and supplies. Harry nodded quickly and offered a quiet 'good luck' as she headed down to the front.

"Ready?" Severus asked sharply. She frowned at the tone before noticing that he looked rather tense. She gave him a small smile, which he responded to with a quick nod.

"Good luck," Minerva said *sotto voce* as she escorted them to the door, giving Hermione's shoulder a supportive squeeze.

Once in the corridor, Severus set off at his usual brisk pace. Hermione rushed to keep up, knowing they didn't have much time to collect Poppy from the infirmary before meeting Draco in the Entrance Hall. As it was, Severus was impatiently muttering under his breath by the time the three of them reached the front doors.

He stopped muttering, though, when he saw that it wasn't just Draco waiting for them.

"Teddy?" Hermione called out uncertainly.

He turned around and smiled at her, at first brilliantly, though it quickly became rather sheepish.

"I was hoping I could go with you, just in case you do end up needing my testimony," Teddy said, watching Hermione with a hopeful wariness.

Before Hermione had a chance to smile back and respond, though, Severus impatiently cut in.

"Come if you wish, but we need to leave. Now." He then turned on his heel and led the way out of the castle. Hermione flashed Teddy a grateful smile before hurrying to catch up with Severus. She hoped his brusqueness was just impatience, not jealousy, but if it was the latter, she didn't want to give him justification. Unfortunately, it was impossible to tell which emotion was motivating him when she caught up and noticed his scowl.

When she touched his arm, he glanced over at her, giving her a short acknowledging nod before turning his attention back to the path. Judging that he wasn't in the mood to chat, Hermione dropped back to talk with Poppy, thanking her for coming to give her testimony as a mediwitch. Poppy, however, was breathing too hard to do more than wave off Hermione's thanks, leaving Hermione to walk down the hill beside her in silence.

They Portkeyed from the front gates to the Ministry's atrium, and after they had all registered their wands at the front desk, they were told to gather in the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement's office on level two.

Hermione's first reaction was surprise that Malfoy wasn't being tried by a court until she remembered that it was very possibly just a pre-court meeting. Or it could be a meeting place where they would gather prior to leaving for the courtroom.

She was not reassured, however, when she looked up at Severus only to find him scowling at the wall rather fiercely. When the rest of the group moved but Severus was still standing there, she gently touched his elbow. He didn't startle but looked down at her as if coming out of a dream, his face slowly regaining its normal indifferent mien. With a quick nod, he motioned for her to join the rest of the group at the lifts, following just behind her.

They were all silent as the lift took them lower and lower into the Ministry, and Hermione was wondering what everyone else was thinking. She had no idea how much knowledge the boys had of the Ministry or if they'd ever dealt with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement before, although she suspected they must have, what with their fathers being charged and imprisoned only a couple years before. She wondered if the boys were thinking about their fathers.

The lift finally came to a stop at level two, and they filed out of it, following Severus as he made his way through the maze of corridors. She stole a quick glance at Severus' face and wasn't surprised to see that his stone mask was back in place. She knew it must be difficult coming back here for him, and a sudden wave of gratitude washed over her at his stoic support. Needing to show him that she recognized and appreciated his sacrifice, she caught up with him and wove her arm through his.

Without missing a step, he looked down at her and quirked an eyebrow in a silent query, which she answered with an equally quiet smile. It took only a moment for him to understand, and she was rewarded with a slight relaxation of his face and the warmth of his hand finding its way to rest on top of hers.

She was almost sorry when they reached the office, as it meant they needed to separate, if only for decorum's sake. The secretary greeted them and politely told them to have a seat while she let the head, Mr. Walgren, know they were there. After a minute, the secretary came back out and told Hermione to enter.

Hermione looked at Severus nervously, but he just nodded supportively. She reluctantly left his side and headed into the office as directed.

Although the room was decorated in rich, warm tones, Hermione shivered the minute she entered. The head of the department was a wizard she had never seen before. He was fairly heavy-set, though tall enough to seem big boned, with a large walrus-like mustache over a big, square jaw. His most striking feature, however, was his cold, viridian eyes.

"So you're the girl who's accused Mr. Malfoy of rape, eh?" he asked dismissively, not bothering to introduce himself.

Hermione bristled but managed to keep hold of her temper. "Yes."

"What evidence have you got?"

She bristled even further. "Considering it was only attempted rape, *sir*, the only evidence I have is my testimony, although the school matron can attest to the condition, both physical and mental, that I was in once I escaped from him." The wizard looked at her long and hard and seemed to come to some conclusion that was not going to be in her favor. "And both my husband and Mr. Malfoy's son can testify that Mr. Malfoy has been conspiring to do me harm for some time."

One of the wizard's eyebrows slowly rose. "You the girl who got married, causing a scandal, then?"

Hermione clenched her fists and only by supreme effort managed to not spit invective at the man.

"Yes, and, if you don't mind, I would prefer to be addressed as Ms. Granger."

She might have imagined it, but she thought his eyes grew a bit harder at the mention of her name.

"One of the 'dream team'?"

"Yes." There was no doubt about it; his eyes were trying to stab her. "And I would like my husband to join us for the rest of the interview, sir."

His mouth thinned, but he nodded, sending a message to his secretary with a wave of his wand. Only a few moments later, Snape walked in, and an immediate change overcame the head's demeanor.

"Snape!" he said, standing up with a smile and outstretched hand. "It's good to see you, old man!"

"Walgren," Severus replied coolly, taking the hand and then conjuring a chair beside Hermione's.

Walgren stilled at that action, and Hermione could see him putting the pieces together.

"You married your student?" he asked Severus, ignoring Hermione altogether.

Severus' narrow lips thinned further. "Hermione is no longer *my* student."

Walgren sat down slowly, looking as if he was trying to figure out just how to treat the two people before him. Finally, when he was resettled, he said with a knowing smirk, "Ah."

Hermione saw Severus' hand twitch toward his wand even as hers did. But Hermione was surprised when Severus smiled knowingly back and said, "Indeed. I caught wind that Lucius was trying to seduce her, but I felt that would only end badly for everyone involved, so I took matters into my own hands."

Hermione had to remind herself to breathe. She had to remind herself that killing her husband was not a good idea, especially in the middle of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She was so angry that she barely managed to hear Walgren's next words.

"So Lucius *did* want to lay hands on your wife?" He no longer looked dismissive, but thoughtful. Hermione managed to take several deep breaths and realized what tactic Severus was using and why.

"Yes. So much so, in fact, that the day he attacked her, he had come to the castle to duel me for her."

"So you believe your wife's story?"

Severus leaned forward confidently, and even though the whole ordeal insulted and disgusted Hermione more than the attack itself had, she had to admire Severus' technique. "She had nightmares for several days afterwards and wouldn't let me *near* her. Yes, I believe her claims."

Walgren nodded thoughtfully. "I see." He stroked his mustache thoughtfully for a few moments before saying, "I was led to believe that this was just another case of poor girl claiming rape to get at Lucius' money, but I can see now that I was mistaken." He looked at Hermione for the first time since Severus entered and bowed his head. "My apologies, Ms. Snape."

Hermione didn't trust herself not to swear at him if she opened her mouth, so she merely offered him a blunt nod in return.

"I will take your testimonies, and his trial will be set for next week."

"You mean he isn't going to get tried today?" Hermione asked, bewildered.

Walgren just chuckled. "Trials aren't trivial things, luv. They take time and care. But if it'll ease your mind, I'll see when the next available court is."

Hermione opened her mouth to respond but stopped when Severus placed his hand on her knee and squeezed. Snapping her mouth shut, she sat and fumed.

Walgren looked at the calendar on his desk and was able to act very surprised at what he found there.

"Oh, it seems that you're in luck, Miss. It seems someone already put him on the docket, although I don't know how that happened without my approval. It seems he's due in court in only half an hour."

Hermione forced herself to smile, though judging by Severus' hand squeezing her knee again, it wasn't very convincing.

Twenty minutes later found the five of them at the door of the anteroom to courtroom nine in the bowels of the Ministry. Severus opened the door for her, but she stood beside him as everyone else filed into the room. Although she was still furious with Walgren, and upset with Severus for his methods of manipulating the bastard, she was loath to leave his side. Possibly it was his confidence, possibly it was his knowledge of the area, or possibly it was because of his feelings for her, but whatever it was, standing beside him kept the depressed chill from entering her bones.

Teddy and Draco had entered the room, and Severus motioned for her to go in as well; she turned to comply when she was distracted by the sight of Lucius Malfoy being led to the courtroom's doors down the corridor.

As if sensing her gaze, Malfoy looked her way. Recognition made his eyes gleam, and he looked her up and down before smirking knowingly. Hermione felt a motion at her side and looked over to see Severus turning around to see what was delaying her. When she looked back at Lucius, she noted that the superior look only intensified when he caught sight of Severus' protective glare.

Lucius opened his mouth as if to say something, but quickly shut it again with an unpleasant expression.

"Prisoners are cursed with a Silencing Charm for the journey from their cell to the courtroom," Severus explained quietly while smiling smugly in Lucius' direction.

Hermione made an "ah" of comprehension, but then saw a motion from the corner of her eye. Looking toward the anteroom's door, she saw Draco coming out to investigate.

"Is everything alright?" Draco asked, touching her arm in a supportive gesture. She would have wondered at his sudden affection had she not seen him looking at Lucius out of the corner of his eyes; she knew it would look to Lucius like Draco was only looking at her.

Looking back to Lucius, she was struck by the sudden change. It was as if another man had switched places with Lucius. He was looking at Draco as if his world had been destroyed. He seemed broken. Where before he'd been standing by the Aurors as if they were his personal bodyguards and exuding arrogance from every pore, now it seemed as if the only thing keeping him upright was the guards' chains. Hermione watched, appalled, as the last dregs of hope drained from Lucius' eyes.

It wasn't until that moment that she understood, thoroughly and completely, that Lucius Malfoy was only a man, and like every other man, he had a heart to be broken as well.

She turned back to Draco, pasting a smile on her face. "Everything's fine, although I think you should go back into the room now," she replied, giving him a slight nudge in the direction of the room.

He made a show of smiling at her in a friendly way before turning away, not even giving his father a backwards glance. Hermione watched as Lucius' eyes followed his son before sinking closed in defeat.

"We should go as well," Severus said, trying to steer Hermione into the room with him. She shook her head.

"You go. I have to do something," she said, still looking at Lucius.

She didn't wait to see if Severus actually went into the room as she stepped toward Lucius and his guards. It wasn't until she was five feet away that the guards took notice and called for her to stop.

"May I approach Mr. Malfoy, please?" she asked politely.

The guard closest to her shook his head gruffly. "No, ma'am, 'fraid not."

She nodded her head understandingly, keeping her eyes riveted on Lucius who was still looking at the floor.

"Can you lift the *Silencio* for a moment?"

The guard shook his head. "No, ma'am."

Hermione nodded again, although she wasn't sure whether she felt relieved or disappointed. They didn't stop her from speaking, though.

"Mr. Malfoy?" she asked, trying to get him to look up at her.

It didn't work.

"Lucius?"

That made him look up, but she was surprised that none of the hatred or smug superiority was left in his gaze. There wasn't even outrage at her taking such liberties. He just looked at her with complete apathy.

"I'm sorry, sir."

That made him blink, but he didn't even try to say anything. She couldn't see anything in his eyes, but decided to answer the obvious question in case he was curious.

"I'm sorry I brought Draco with us. I didn't know how much... I didn't realize... I didn't intend to hurt you like that."

Lucius clenched his jaw for a moment, but then relaxed back into apathy.

Hermione fidgeted slightly, uncomfortable at how empty Lucius seemed. "Yes, well... I just thought you might like to know." She started to turn to go back to the anteroom, but stopped and faced Lucius fully again.

"I don't know whether you're sorry or not for all you've done, but where it concerns me, I forgive you."

He looked up at her again, but this time it wasn't indifferently, though she couldn't quite decipher his expression. He didn't say anything, just looked at her. He continued looking at her until she tore her own gaze away and turned to find Severus waiting for her at the door. His face was inscrutable, but when she reached him, he surprised her by giving her a soft smile. The heavy feeling in the bottom of her stomach lightened slightly, and she managed a weak smile back.

He took her hand and threaded it through his arm possessively, and as they walked through the door, he leaned down and whispered in her ear, "You're a far better person than I."

Hermione blushed and looked down, away from the curious gazes of everyone else in the room. Severus steered her toward one of the long, uncomfortable-looking benches, and they settled in for the wait.

Fifteen minutes later, a portion of the wall transformed into a rough mouth, and Severus was called from the room to give his testimony. Hermione tried not to fidget, but found it difficult, not knowing what was happening. It became even more difficult as the minutes ticked by with no sign of Severus' return. Finally, after another fifteen minutes, she couldn't stand it any longer and started pacing.

Almost as if that was the password to a complicated ward, the door opened to reveal a somber Severus reentering the room. She looked up at him curiously, but he didn't offer any clues to the trial. Hermione worried for a moment before remembering that witnesses in most trials were charmed to reveal nothing while the court was still in session.

She wagered that Severus hated that just on general principle.

Suddenly, the mouth in the wall opened up again, and she was called into the courtroom. Feeling more than a little nervous, she gave a quick smile to those gathered and made her way to the hallway. A guard was waiting for her at the door to the courtroom and opened it as she neared. She took a big breath, and then, while exhaling, she nodded politely to him and entered the court.

It seemed to be a full court as there were about fifty witches and wizards scattered about the circular room. Hermione distractedly made her way toward the center of the floor. She was aware of Lucius to her right, but decided it was best if she didn't look his way.

"Ms. Granger," called a male voice from the benches, "you are here to testify against Lucius Abraxas Malfoy. Is this correct?"

"Yes, sir," she answered, still feeling very nervous.

"You have charged that he magically bound you and then attempted to force himself upon you in a carnal manner. Is this correct?"

"Yes, sir." Her stomach roiled. She thought that she might not be so nervous if she could simply see the faces of the court, but they were cast in heavy shadow.

"Please tell us what happened."

Hermione reflexively looked over at Malfoy, and her stomach knotted. He was sitting in a chair with chains tying him down every which way. He wasn't looking at her or the court members, but at his hands, which were still upon his lap. She winced at the sight.

"Ms. Granger, we are waiting."

Recovering herself, she turned to the benches and told her tale, starting from when Malfoy had first entered the castle while she and Severus were having their spat in the Entrance Hall till she escaped his *Petrificus Totalus* and found herself in the strange little corridor. Every now and again she would glance at Lucius out of the corner of her eye, but he remained defeated and inert.

When she finished her version of the events, the members of the Wizengamot murmured amongst themselves for a moment before questioning her further.

"How did you break free from Mr. Malfoy's spell?"

Hermione shrugged. "I honestly don't know. At first I thought he had released me so as to position me better, but on further thought, I'm not certain that was the case. I did have a surge of magical energy that evening, so it's possible that breaking free was the first manifestation of the surge."

More murmurs met that. Although she wanted to be surprised that no one followed up on what she considered a fascinating subject, she knew full well that this was not the time nor place for a conversation on magical theory.

"Very well, Ms. Granger. Is there anything else you wish to add to your testimony?"

Hermione thought hard for a moment but couldn't think of anything else and said so.

"You may go. The guard will cast the Privacy Charm as you leave."

Hermione nodded, feeling relief sweep over her. It was over. For her, at least.

She returned to the anteroom with the charm in effect and released a huge sigh as she saw Severus anxiously waiting for her. She barely noticed when the wall opened up and asked for Poppy though she did smile distractedly at the departing mediwitch as she was intent on sitting down on one of the uncomfortable benches.

The rest of the afternoon dragged on. Poppy had come back in after only a few minutes to bid them all adieu; she had to get back to the castle as soon as possible, but she wished Hermione good luck in the outcome of the case.

Hermione was only slightly surprised that they didn't call either of the boys. It sounded as if the case against Lucius was only that of assault and attempted rape rather than anything more serious. The boys' testimony would only prove valuable if Lucius had been charged with conspiracy as well.

It wasn't until nearly six o'clock that they were called back into the courtroom to hear the verdict.

They filed into the room and took the nearest available seats, watching as the Wizengamot members settled themselves after what appeared to be a debate.

Someone rapped on a piece of wood and the noise died abruptly.

"All those in favor of acquittal?" a voice called without preface. A fair number of hands rose into the air, although, from Hermione's view, it didn't look like a majority. The court's scribe quickly counted them, and the voice called again, "And all those in favor of conviction?"

A number of hands rose, and Hermione knew it was going to be a close call. She started nibbling on her fingernails as they waited for the scribe's final count.

"The court finds Lucius Malfoy guilty of both charges," the voice said, and Hermione let out a huge breath, although she immediately turned to Draco to offer her support or congratulations. She was unnerved, however, to find him staring at his father with a cold glint in his eye and an evil smile edging his lips up. Something cold pierced her stomach, but then he looked over at her and the expression vanished. They exchanged polite congratulations before she turned to Severus, wondering if he'd seen the same expression. By the way he was observing Draco, she guessed he had.

They were so busy congratulating and observing each other, though, she missed the sentencing. It was only as they were leaving the courtroom that Hermione thought about that at all.

"Did you hear how long his sentence is, Severus?" she asked.

He nodded his head slowly. "He will serve the mandatory sentence for Binding Assault of three months in Azkaban."

Hermione stopped her forward progress, causing one of the boys to run into her. "Three months?"

Severus nodded again.

"And if he'd actually raped me?" she asked, anger growing inside her.

Severus tilted his head slightly. "I believe it would have been ten years in that case."

She calmed down a bit at that. It still seemed inadequate, but she didn't have more than an emotional response to it at the moment. It was something she could look into later when she was in a less emotional frame of mind.

They made their way out of the maze of corridors. When the lift came, they quietly shuffled into it, all of them glad to get out of the bone-chilling atmosphere.

"I think a celebratory drink is in order," Draco said suddenly, interrupting the silence.

They all looked at him, and indeed it seemed that he was in the mood for a drink. Hermione and Teddy looked to Severus, who looked back at them with the faint traces of disapproval on his lips.

"It's on me," Draco coaxed.

Severus sighed and then inclined his head in capitulation. "One non-alcoholic drink and then we head back."

"Excellent!" Draco crowed. The lift doors opened, and they followed Draco as he made his way to the designated Apparition spot.

"I assume we will not be heading to the Leaky Cauldron?" Severus asked before Draco could reach the unwarded area.

Draco shot him a condescending look. "The Leaky? My *house-elves* wouldn't be seen dead there!"

Severus smirked slightly, but said, "Then perhaps it would be better to Floo to the location instead?" He glanced Hermione and Teddy's way.

Draco waved off Severus' suggestion. "I am not going to dirty my robes for a M--for no reason," he said, correcting himself when he saw Severus' face darken dangerously. "I thought we could go to Arian's. I know you've been there, and you have, too, haven't you?" he asked in Teddy's direction. Teddy nodded, and Draco looked back at Snape triumphantly. "So you can just Side-Along Gr--your wife there."

Severus didn't seem terribly happy as he looked at Hermione to see if she was okay with the plan, but she nodded in approval. Draco smirked as he stepped over the Anti-Apparition line and disappeared with a small 'pop.' Teddy stepped over the line as well and, with a small wave, disappeared with a slightly louder 'pop.' Severus extended his hand, which Hermione took without hesitation. She was pleased when he pulled her closer and wrapped his arms around her protectively before he Disapparated them away.

When Severus' arms loosened, Hermione looked around and was somehow unsurprised at what she saw. It was very cozy, very posh, and she could feel the prejudice infusing the air. This was compounded by a man doing a double take at her and recognition hardened his features. The man's hateful gaze traveled over to Severus who promptly took her arm, secured it through his in a display of possession and protection and glared the man away.

She could understand why Severus hadn't looked happy at Draco's suggestion. He had donned a very bored and supercilious expression as he surveyed the room. When he caught sight of Draco, his expression didn't falter in the least, and the only reason Hermione knew he'd seen him at all was because he nudged her to start walking and subtly guided her by their linked arms.

He guided her to a semi-private area that contained a sofa and two club chairs occupied by the two boys. It was not lost on her how at home they both looked, sitting there with drinks already in their hands. Hermione marveled at the quick service they had received until she and Severus sat down and drinks instantaneously appeared in their hands.

"I hope you don't mind, but I've ordered you each a butterscotch," Draco drawled.

Hermione suppressed a snort of amusement at ordering something she thought of as a sweet. She managed to restrain herself to only lifting her eyebrows before politely raising her drink in thanks as Severus had.

When she took a sip, however, the silent reproach of Draco's tastes died. If she had thought butterbeer was good, it was nothing to the fiery but smooth sensation of butterscotch. It was butterbeer for grown-ups. She assumed it was alcohol free since Severus hadn't objected, although it certainly tasted stronger than butterbeer did.

She closed her eyes and let the liquid roll over her tongue before swallowing; she then relaxed back against the couch with a contented sigh. When she opened her eyes a few seconds later, she found the guys watching her with obvious interest and amusement.

"First time?" Teddy asked, even as Draco snickered.

She blushed and nodded, sitting back up as she tensed in embarrassment. She heard Severus' deep chuckle and looked over to find him looking at her almost fondly, although his hooded eyes hinted at something more than mere affection.

Blushing even more fiercely, she turned her eyes to her cup, frantically thinking of something to say to take their attention off of her.

"This isn't anything like the Muggle sweet," she said, then cringed.

Draco snorted. "I should hope not! Theirs is just a pathetic and failed attempt to copy us when some wizard was careless about who he let taste his drink."

Hermione cocked her head to the side and looked at Draco, deciding to ignore his racist undertone. "So you've had the sweet?"

Severus chuckled again when Draco looked a bit embarrassed. Draco took a sip of his drink to try and cover it, and Severus answered for him.

"When he was about four, he and I were doing errands in Hogsmeade, and having been a very good little boy, I assented to his request to go into Honeydukes and even agreed to buy him one sweet." Draco's face was now quite pink, and Hermione could tell it was all he could do to keep from squirming. "Narcissa had got it into her head, somehow, that sweets were bad for young children, so he hadn't had much exposure to them except at Christmastime, when, of course, Lucius would overrule Narcissa's objections and spoil him rotten.

"You should have seen his face, so alight with wonder at the sweets spread before him in the store. He went from bin to bin in a haphazard sort of way, trying to decide which one would be best. Finally, he came upon the small selection of Muggle sweets Honeydukes provides more as a joke than anything. He couldn't read yet, so I was listing what each one was, and when I came upon butterscotch, his eyes lit up with that four-year-old's 'I'm about to get away with something' look, and he solemnly picked one piece out of the bin while looking very pleased with himself!"

Hermione and Teddy were nearly shaking with laughter at this point, especially as Draco was looking more and more sullen.

"It turns out that Draco had heard his father and me talking about butterscotch," Severus said, lifting his cup, "and when he'd asked for a taste, Lucius had, not surprisingly, said 'no.' Draco had been rather put out at his father's refusal, especially as Lucius wasn't known for refusing his requests at that point. So, he really thought he was getting away with something when he found the confection and had *me* buy it for him."

Draco had sunk into his chair with his arms crossed against his chest, having given up all pretenses of a lordly demeanor.

"I was four. What d'you expect?"

Severus' smile softened into something almost paternal. "You should have seen how proud your dad was when I told him the story, Draco. He was so proud that he almost gave you some real butterscotch as a reward, although your mum put her foot down rather firmly on that count."

Draco pouted. "And that's why he kept giving it to me for Christmas?"

Severus smirked. "Well, beyond the fact that you seemed to enjoy it quite a bit, yes. He wanted to encourage you."

Severus' smile dropped from his face quite suddenly, and he looked rather somber. He observed Draco thoughtfully for a moment before swallowing the rest of his drink in a single gulp.

"Come, Draco, I have something to show you. If you'll excuse us for a moment?" he added, looking at Hermione and Nott. They nodded as the two men stood, and soon they were left alone.

Hermione and Teddy glanced at each other for a moment before hastily looking at their drinks. Hermione absently studied the low candlelight reflecting on the amber liquid while thinking about Severus, Draco, Lucius and Teddy and how they all fit together. Her muddled thoughts were interrupted, however, when Teddy said, "I'm sorry."

She looked up, finding him still staring at his drink. He was swirling the cup and observing the butterscotch with a slight frown.

"Thank you," she said, prompting him to look up. He was still frowning slightly, but he didn't look angry. "Thank you for the apology, which I gratefully accept, and thank you for coming today."

"Not that I was of any use," he grumbled.

"I'm glad you didn't have to testify!" Hermione exclaimed. "Both you and Draco would have been put in such awkward positions if it had been required. However, I'm grateful and touched that you were willing to put yourself out for me. I really do appreciate it and the moral support you did provide."

She reached out for his hand, and he met her halfway with a rueful smile. "It was the least I could do."

She smiled back happily.

"So, friends again?" he asked hesitantly.

She shook her head. "No." Teddy's brow contracted in worry before Hermione added, "Friends still."

He relaxed and his smile came back. They sat there in happy meditation for a few moments, their hands still clasped before either of them thought of anything to say.

"So, how are lessons with Professor Dumbledore?"

Hermione smiled and squeezed his hand. "Oh, they are so good! He's given me a lot to think about and some exercises that have already really helped my control issues."

Teddy gave her an odd look. "Control issues?"

Hermione looked at him blankly for a second before she realized she hadn't told him about the other lessons she was receiving from Dumbledore.

"Oh, yes. That... display the other week? It seems Dumbledore is familiar with its cause and has offered to teach me how to control my newly accessed powers. So, I'm getting Potions lessons twice a week and the other lessons whenever we're both available, which has only been once so far."

"So you won't be scaring the wits out of all the firsties again?" Teddy asked cheekily.

Hermione snorted. "Not if I can help it."

He sighed and shook his head. "That's too bad."

Hermione let go of his hand and slapped his arm playfully. "Be nice."

He looked affronted. "I'm always nice! Have you forgotten I'm just a teddy bear?"

Hermione giggled. "Of course I haven't forgotten, Teddy. But you were showing your teeth and claws for a moment, there."

"So am I to hide the sharp bits away and mislead people into thinking I'm nice, safe Teddy, making sure they forget that I'm a vicious bear underneath all the cuddliness?"

Hermione let out a delighted laugh. "Well, that would be the Slytherin way, wouldn't it?"

Teddy smiled, but also shrugged. "I'd like to think that we Slytherins have more individuality than that. After all, you can't exactly call Professor Snape's method a sneaky one. Everyone knows just how dangerous he is."

"Ah, but what if he's using the same tactic just to hide what a softy he is on the inside?" Hermione joked.

Teddy, who had been taking a sip of his drink, snorted and then grimaced in discomfort. Rubbing his nose, he complained, "That was mean!"

"How is it mean to suggest that Severus is human?"

"It isn't. It's mean to make me laugh while drinking butterscotch! Do you know how much that hurts?"

Hermione just laughed rather unsympathetically while patting his hand. "Serves you right for showing your claws."

He smirked and then sniffed uncomfortably a bit more.

They sat in comfortable silence for a few moments before Teddy continued. "But really, I think you underestimate us Slytherins. We aren't all underhanded, nor sneaky, nor evil."

"No, you aren't. Just as not all Gryffindors are brash, brainless and bold. Though you must admit that the descriptions fit a couple members of our respective houses frighteningly well."

"Well, yes, I'll agree to that just as long as you aren't implying I'm being nice only because I want something from you."

"You don't?" Hermione asked slyly.

"Of course not."

"Are you sure about that? You don't want anything from the great, the fearsome, the *all-powerful* Hermione?"

Teddy was starting to look uncomfortable, so Hermione backed off with a smile. "I'll admit I'd be disappointed if that were the case. After all, I would like to have your friendship, and I'll be bold and brash if I have to be if that's what it takes to get it."

He smiled back. "But not brainless, I hope?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm afraid I've too much Ravenclaw in me to give up the use of my brain most of the time."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said, relaxing back into his seat.

A sudden unsettling thought occurred to Hermione though. "You *aren't* being nice just because you want to be my friend, though, are you? I mean, you do like me for who I am rather than my *stupendous* powers, right?" She tried to lighten her tone enough to make it seem like a joke, but he saw through her. He sat up, placed his cup on the table, took her hand in his again and squeezed it.

"No, Hermione, I'm not after you just because it will assuredly be good for me to be on your friends list in the coming years. I want to be your friend because I like and admire you."

She bit her lip, suddenly a bit choked up at his sincerity. "Thank you," she answered gruffly.

"Thank you for being so forgiving," he answered, squeezing her hand again.

"I should probably apologize as well. I didn't mean to denigrate you or your friends just because you're Slytherin."

He snorted and smiled wryly. "Well, I'm not sure I deserve an apology," he started, but then he dropped the smile along with her hand. Hermione was confused until she noticed that Teddy was looking over her shoulder. Turning, she saw Severus standing there, glaring at Teddy.

"Oh, you're back!" Hermione said with a smile that was mostly genuine. She hoped he didn't get the wrong impression from the handholding although, judging from his expression, he had. Hoping to staunch any urges towards hexing that might be flitting about his mind, she grabbed his hand to get his attention, then patted the seat next to her. "I'm glad, as this settee needs more than one to keep it warm."

She could see the thought of Teddy sitting in his spot was begging to escape his mouth, but she squeezed his hand and patted the seat again, looking up at him imploringly.

Without any acknowledgment, he walked around the sofa and sat beside her, although closer than she thought he would have, had his jealousy not been invoked. Not that she minded him so close. She was surprised, however, when he took her hand in his and started stroking it possessively with his other hand.

Hermione felt the tension rise subtly and looked over to Draco to see if he'd help defuse the situation. Unfortunately, Draco seemed a bit out of sorts himself and was ignoring them. Struggling to find something to break the uncomfortable mood, Hermione glommed onto the last thing Teddy had said.

"Why do you think you don't deserve my apology, Teddy?" she said, hoping that the tension hadn't make its way into her voice.

Teddy, who had been in a staring contest with Severus, broke away and looked at Hermione rather dazedly. "Um," he said, obviously trying to gather his thoughts. "Oh, because you were right. It turns out that Blaise and Daphne were behind the rumor."

"Were they?" Severus said in a chilling tone. Teddy nodded and swallowed nervously.

"Yes, sir." He returned his gaze to Hermione, obviously more comfortable under her scrutiny than Snape's. "After dinner on Monday, I asked around and found out that Blaise and Daphne had conveniently 'misinterpreted' what I'd told them and had mentioned it to a few of their friends in passing, which, of course, they then shared with other friends, and so on."

Hermione glanced at Severus out of the corner of her eyes and found his expression had been demoted from dangerous down to cranky.

"I never thought Blaise had anything against me," Hermione noted.

Both Teddy and Draco smirked. "He doesn't," Teddy said.

"But why--"

"Because he wants to get into Greengrass' pants," Draco explained with a snort.

Hermione bobbed her head in understanding, blushing a little as she did. "Oh. And Daphne?"

"Thought it would be fun."

"I believe she is jealous of you," Severus offered, surprising them all.

"Jealous?"

"Mm." His mask was back in place, which to Hermione indicated that he was very uncomfortable. "She has been harboring a... a *crush* on me for the last two years."

Both Teddy and Draco looked shocked at this, and although Hermione felt a bit shocked as well, she tried her best to hide it, feeling it wouldn't be politic to reveal such blatant disbelief.

"Oh," all three said in unison.

"Um..." Hermione said as her mind started sifting through the facts. "Then were the 'scandals' this week planned diversions?"

Nott looked very pleased at this question. "In effect, yes. When I found out about their role, I determined that they should be the ones to fix it."

"How did you manage to *persuade* them to cooperate?" Severus asked with interest.

Teddy grinned. "Well, Blaise was easy. I just threatened to tell either of you he was behind it, and that was quite enough to get him to agree. With Daphne... I didn't know about her, erm, motivation, but I told her that if you found out about her role, you would think that she was trying to break you two up, and, well, I pointed out that you wouldn't take kindly to that, seeing as you went to a lot of trouble to get married in the first place," he said apologetically to Snape.

"Risky," Snape said, stroking his chin thoughtfully, "but it seems to have worked." He gave it another moment of thought and then nodded his head. "Overall, well done." Teddy beamed. "But I do have to wonder, Mr. Nott, *why* you went through all this effort."

Teddy's smile faded, although he didn't look as nervous as he had when Snape had come back. "Isn't it obvious, sir? First of all, I knew the rumors were my fault and that if they continued unabated I would be the one facing your wrath as well as Hermione's. Secondly, you're our Head of House and deserve far more respect than to be laid out on the rumor mill. And thirdly... well, Hermione's my friend, and I would like to keep it that way." Teddy had raised his chin defiantly at the last statement, looking Snape in the eye.

Hermione smiled at Teddy while covertly glancing at Severus. She was surprised when she saw grudging pride flit across his mask-like face, although it seemed he was too tense for that to be his main emotion. She gave his hand a gentle squeeze almost reflexively, not knowing whether she was asking, pleading or warning him to be nice.

"Mm," was all Severus said, although, judging by Teddy's look, it was about the best he could have hoped for.

Severus then looked at the empty cup in Hermione's hand and glanced at both Teddy's and Draco's abandoned cups. "As it seems we have all finished our drinks, I think it is time for us to get back to the castle," he said and stood up. Already holding one of Hermione's hands, he offered the other one to help her up with both hands, which she gracefully accepted.

The boys stood as well, albeit a little more reluctantly.

"Gods, I'm looking forward to school being done with," Draco sighed, looking around the place lovingly and longingly.

Severus raised his eyebrow in warning while Teddy merely looked tense. Hermione shrugged. "Yes, it must be nice to look forward to lounging your days away in exclusive clubs, hey?"

Draco looked at her coolly and smirked. "You've no idea, Granger." Hermione didn't smirk back.

"Just be careful you don't go to waste, Draco," Severus said, and Draco narrowed his eyes at that. "Now, it is time to go," Severus repeated, tugging very lightly on Hermione's hand, guiding her out of Arian's.

Severus gestured for Teddy and Draco to Disapparate first and then, when they were gone, looked at Hermione. Hermione looked back at him for a second before moving in close and hugging him round the middle. She felt Severus tense up slightly at the unexpected gesture, but when his arms came around her and squeezed in time with their Disapparating, she knew she'd made the right choice.

They popped into existence right outside the Hogwarts gates and found Teddy and Draco leaning against the wrought iron. When the boys saw Severus and Hermione's embrace, both sets of eyebrows went up, although one of the boys' expressions seemed more genuinely amused than the other's.

A cold, hard wind had come up while they were gone, so their trip back up to the castle was a quick and silent one, none of them saying anything until they parted ways in the Entrance Hall. Hermione and Severus watched the boys descend into the dungeons and then looked at each other.

"Shall I escort you to your rooms?" Severus asked. Hermione nodded, holding out her hand to him. When he accepted it without hesitation, Hermione knew they had overcome some hurdle, although what the hurdle was, she wasn't sure.

Halfway up the second staircase, Hermione said, "Thank you for all your help today."

She saw Severus looking at her from the corner of her eye. "You're welcome, my dear."

Her face relaxed into a smile at the term of endearment, and she squeezed his hand in response. Neither said anything else the rest of the way, but Hermione was reluctant to part with Severus when they reached her door. They both had slowed as they neared her corridor, and now that they stood before her door, she tried to think of something to say to keep him there a little longer.

After standing silent for a few moments too long, she finally blurted out, "Would you like to come in?"

Severus looked surprised, but nodded. Out of reflex, it seemed, he looked both ways down the corridor before he followed her inside. Meanwhile, she quickly waved her wand tidying things up and starting a cozy fire in the grate. When she turned around, she found Severus standing in the middle of the entrance, staring at the fire absently and looking pensive.

"Something wrong?" Hermione asked, conjuring a teapot and some boiling water.

He shook his head distractedly, though he seemed to notice her invitation to sit down. She had hoped he would sit on the sofa for some more hand holding, but he chose the lone chair that faced the door.

She handed him a cup of tea, which he accepted with an indistinct murmur of thanks. She sat down on the sofa with her own cup and sipped it while observing Severus.

"I really do appreciate all your help today. I know it can't have been easy to go back to that place, but I suspect that if you hadn't been there, that awful Walgren wouldn't have let the trial proceed."

Severus sipped his tea carefully and nodded, still not looking at anything but the fire. "Mm."

Hermione raised her eyebrow and took another sip of tea.

"I take it Walgren was a Death Eater?"

Severus hummed again.

"Are you good friends with him?"

Severus didn't respond at all that time.

"I imagine you must miss taking tea with all those Death Eaters, although I'll admit I'm curious who was mother or if that role belonged solely to Voldemort?"

At the last word, Severus roused and looked at Hermione sharply. "What did you say?"

Hermione waved her hand dismissively and put her cup back on the table. "What's wrong?"

Severus rolled his eyes and frowned. "Nothing."

"Severus, did you hear anything I said before 'Voldemort'?" He pressed his lips together and simply glared at her. "I've never seen you so inattentive, and I figured something must be wrong."

Severus put his teacup down as well, shaking his head as he did so. "I'm afraid it has been a long day, and I'm not in a sociable mood. I should head down to the dungeons now and catch up on marking before rounds." He stood up to go, and Hermione followed suit.

"I wasn't criticizing you, Severus, nor was I asking you to leave. I just wanted you to know that you can talk to me as well."

Severus did look at her then. He came up to her, took her face in his hands and lowered his lips to hers for a gentle kiss.

"I know, my dear, I know. But let me tell you in my own time."

Hermione harrumphed slightly at his hypocrisy, but nodded all the same.

"I really should be going, though," he said, then kissed her again, a bit more passionately. When he finally withdrew, he gave her a fond smile. "Sleep well."

And then he was gone, leaving Hermione to watch the cozy fire all by herself.

AN: Next up, the weekend.

AN: Thanks once more to my lovely ladies, Keladry and Southern, who took the time to read through this for me. Any and all mistakes are my own, though. But you know that already, don't you?

Hermione didn't sleep very well that night; her dreams were filled with threats and sexual tension that culminated with a physical confrontation with Lucius in the courtroom while Severus, Teddy and Draco just stood by and watched. She woke shortly after that, feeling ill and out of sorts.

She tried rolling over and going back to sleep, but unfortunately, her body wasn't having any of that. A sudden, sharp cramp in her lower-midsection told her all she needed to know about what was going on, and she swore as she made her way to the bathroom for supplies.

After she had dealt with the essentials, she realized she wasn't going to feel any better until she ate, so she reluctantly got dressed and made her way down to the Great Hall.

Early as it was for a Saturday morning, there were a few people already seated throughout the hall, although a quick look found neither Severus nor Harry and Ginny. In fact, the only person at the Gryffindor table was a mousy-looking first-year. Debating with herself, she finally went over to the first-year and asked if she could join him. The boy looked up at her fearfully, but nodded all the same. She smiled kindly at him, then promptly focused her attention on her breakfast.

Three-quarters of the way through her meal, Harry and Ginny showed up and plopped themselves down beside her.

"Morning," Ginny chirruped happily.

Hermione mumbled something back that might have been a greeting without looking up from her porridge.

She felt her friends staring at her and glanced up to find them looking at her with worried expressions.

"You look like shit," Harry said with all the tact of a diplomat. "What happened?"

Hermione shook her head. "Thanks. Nothing. Just didn't sleep very well. And do try to set a better example, Harry," she added, waving in the direction of a few first-years who were just down the table.

Harry's concerned look didn't fade. "Yeah, sorry, but how did the trial go? Did the bastard get off?"

Hermione groaned as her dream came back to her from Harry's inadvertently horrid pun. "No. He got three months."

"Only three months?" Harry yelled, outraged.

"Sh, Harry! Yes, only three months for binding me."

Harry looked mutinous, which did more for improving Hermione's mood than anything else. She smiled fondly at him and patted his arm. "It's okay. I'm just glad he hadn't done anything to get a longer sentence."

"Of course I am, too, but... the bastard should have been put away for life for everything he's done."

Hermione nodded distractedly and shrugged as she took a sip of her pumpkin juice. "C'est la vie," she said ruefully as she wiped her mouth with her napkin. "There's not much more I can do to get him a longer sentence. And honestly, I'm not sure that Draco didn't give him a worse punishment."

She told them about Draco's actions and how they'd affected Lucius, seeming to drain him of all hope.

Harry harrumphed, still looking upset. "Serves him right."

Hermione shrugged noncommittally and finished off her juice. "Perhaps, but I still feel sorry for him. Yes, everything that's happened to him is his own fault, but at the same time..."

"You've too soft a heart, Hermione," Ginny said matter-of-factly.

Hermione was midway through a shrug when Harry said, "Speaking of which, what did you think I said yesterday?"

Hermione frowned, trying to recall a possible misunderstanding. It didn't take very long to dredge up the conversation he was talking about. She blushed.

"I thought you said, 'And to think you're in love with Snape.' Why? Wasn't that what you said?"

Harry shook his head, looking at her with a serious expression. "No, I said, 'And to think all of that's thanks to Snape.' It never crossed my mind that you might be in love with him." He continued staring at her. "Are you?"

She involuntarily looked over at the staff table, though Severus was still absent. When she looked back at her friends, there was a knowing look on both their faces. She scowled at them. "Of course not! Don't you think it's a bit soon to be talking about love?"

"I don't know," Ginny said, a smirk in place, "you tell us."

Hermione continued scowling and opened her mouth to deny everything, but something stopped her. She closed her mouth and thought about it for a few moments, analyzing her reactions to Severus and how abandoned she'd felt the night before.

"I don't know. I don't think I'm in love with him, but he is growing on me quite a bit. I certainly enjoy his company, and, well, knowing how he feels about me does... It gives me a warm feeling, you know?"

Harry and Ginny traded knowing looks before turning back to her and nodding. Harry looked vaguely disturbed, but Ginny was smiling.

"I'm glad for you," Ginny said. "You deserve to be happy." Harry nodded, although Hermione thought it was lacking in enthusiasm. Not that she blamed him.

"Thanks," she said, then scooted back in preparation to leave. "And now I should get to the library. I didn't get any studying done yesterday!"

Both her friends smiled at that. "So I'm guessing you want your books back?" Harry asked.

Hermione stopped and looked at him sheepishly. "Yes, that might help."

Harry smiled and then, with a flourish, brought her bookbag into view. "I thought we might see you, and, knowing your studying habits..."

Hermione tried to scowl, but couldn't manage it. "Thank you, Harry," she said and kissed his cheek spontaneously. "I'll see you later?"

They nodded, and she took herself off to the library, hoping to get caught up with her planned schedule.

Hermione had been ensconced in the library for more than an hour before someone dared interrupt her studies. Fortunately for the interloper, it was her study partner.

"Lo," Teddy said, smiling down at her. "Mind if I join you?" he asked, having already sat down.

She smiled back. "Yes, terribly. Would you pass me that blue book, please?"

He chuckled quietly, handed her the book in question and then started unpacking his things.

"So Arithmancy is still the top priority?" he asked, having noted the title of the blue book.

Hermione nodded as she thumbed through the text, looking for the answer she knew was there. "Yes. I've been reviewing my past work, and it's absolutely *appalling* what I got away with in the last year! No wonder Professor Vector is so upset with me!"

Teddy didn't say anything, and when Hermione glanced up after having found the correct page, she noticed he seemed rather grave.

"What's wrong?"

"Your work is not appalling. It's always been top-notch."

Hermione shook her head. "No, it isn't." She dug out a small pile of parchment rolls and pushed them over to Teddy. "Look at those. You'll see how weak my theories and proofs are. There are holes everywhere in my reasoning."

"Hermione," Teddy said as he read over one of the rolls, "this is from fourth year. And the fact that you're getting into seventh-year theorems without missing a beat shows this as anything but weak."

Hermione made a dismissive noise, although she was once again concentrating on the book in front of her, hurriedly scribbling notes of the relevant passages. "Yes, well, I obviously haven't been keeping up with my usual standard. I've been falling behind."

Teddy snorted mirthlessly. "You mean you aren't as far ahead as you wanted to be."

"Same thing."

Hermione continued writing until Teddy's hand came over and covered hers. "Hermione, you know that whatever grudge Professor Vector's got against you now isn't about your work."

Hermione looked up at him. He seemed very concerned, but also annoyed.

"Maybe so, but if I work hard enough, she'll have to be impressed..." She trailed off as Teddy shook his head.

"That's not how it works, and you know it."

"But maybe why she's upset at me right now is because she thinks that getting married will affect my work? You don't know, but that could be the case!" Hermione said with a pleading note in her voice. "If that's so, I need to show her that she doesn't have anything to worry about!"

"If that's what she's worried about, then she would have eased up on you last lesson. I saw your report, remember, and it was beyond flawless. It was brilliant!"

Hermione blushed, but shook her head. "It only got an Acceptable."

It was Teddy's turn to shake his head. "Did Professor Snape ever give you more than an 'E'?"

Hermione bristled. "No, but you can't compare the two."

Teddy's brows rose. "Yes, I can. Snape's grading is biased; everyone knows that. I expect if we turned in the same paper I would receive an 'O' while you would get an 'E' at best."

"No, we'd both get 'T's for cheating and a few detentions to boot," Hermione replied matter-of-factly.

Teddy looked at her for a moment and then burst into laughter. "Okay, fair enough."

Something of the panic Hermione had been feeling eased, and she found herself smiling back. "Although I'll agree that most likely you would get the easier detention."

He laughed some more. "Nah. He'd give you the easier detention since he fancies you."

Hermione blushed again. "Yes, well, the entire argument flies out the window when you take that into account. If I were still his student, he might actually deign to give me an occasional 'O' now as well."

"You think?"

Hermione shrugged and looked down at what she'd written so far. Furrowing her brows, she realized that Teddy was right; what she was writing was well beyond Vector's assigned coursework.

Heaving a sigh, she dropped her quill, whereupon Teddy released her hand. "Fine. I won't obsess on Arithmancy, but I'm still going to try my best to prove to her that I'm not going to go to waste."

Teddy smiled. "Good, cause I have some questions about Muggles that I don't know the answers to."

Hermione laughed and swatted Teddy's hand. "Slytherin," she said with false venom.

He smirked. "Thank you."

They worked the day away, although they were careful not to miss either meal. Hermione wasn't surprised she didn't see Severus at lunch, but when dinner came around, she was slightly concerned that he didn't attend. She and Teddy had wrapped up for the day, so she had hoped Severus would be there to share a walk with afterwards.

For a minute, she was tempted to go down to the dungeons and see him, but it didn't take long to argue herself out of that idea. She didn't want to push him, nor did she want to be a nag, and it didn't matter that she wouldn't be intending to be either of those, but just wanting his company. He would see the pushiness rather than loneliness.

She sighed, said good-bye to her friends, and made her lonesome way up to her room. She tried not to feel sorry for herself while she did so, but failed miserably.

She was shocked that she missed Severus after only one day apart and was trying to ignore what that might mean. Was she in love with him, as Harry and Ginny seemed to think? Was her heart so small that she could fall in love with Snape after only a couple months of mourning Ron?

She tried to remind herself that Ron wouldn't want her to mourn forever. She knew that. At the same time, she still felt like she was betraying his memory by opening her heart to Severus. She felt like her feelings for Ron were a sham if she could get over him so quickly and easily.

She felt like a horrible, selfish person.

She came to her door and unwarded it with a quick wave of her wand. Pushing it open, she found a fire already going, giving the room a welcoming feel.

She looked around, almost expecting someone to be waiting for her in the shadows, but the room was empty. She guessed that a house-elf had come in and started the fire before it left.

She placed her bookbag on her desk and then shrugged off her outer robes. Toeing off her shoes, and undoing her hair, she walked around her room, looking for something to read. It was still too early for bed, and even though she was tempted to work on her Arithmancy essay a bit more, she realized Teddy was right; she needed to ease up on that. So she surveyed her bookshelves.

Looking over all her schoolbooks, and all the books she used to help Harry defeat Voldemort, she came to the Muggle section. *Jane Eyre* called to her, but for some reason, she felt disinclined to read it. She also passed over *Alice in Wonderland* and *Cannery Row*, settling instead for *Pride and Prejudice*.

Opening the battered book, she tucked herself under the covers of her bed and lost herself in the characters, only releasing the book when sleep finally came, taking her away from the two Fitzwilliams at Rosings Park and into the arms of a dream...

She was walking down a dark corridor, the shadows threatening on all sides. She wasn't afraid, though; she was too excited. She found her progress was lacking, so she broke into a run, racing down the corridor until she came to a dead end with a door.

Without pausing to catch her breath, she burst through the door and found herself in an open field. The sun was bright and the flowers blooming as she wove her way through the grass down to a stream. She looked up and down the riverbanks, but couldn't see what she was looking for, so she headed downstream, following the water as it made its way to the beautiful lake just beyond the bend.

As she walked along the lakeshore, she kept looking around. She knew she was close to what she wanted, but she hadn't found it yet. Suddenly, someone tapped her on the shoulder.

She turned around and her face lit up with joy.

There were no words, just contact. She wrapped her arms around his neck, bringing his head down to her level and kissed him. He tasted perfect, and his kiss was all encompassing, leaving her body alive with passion.

He lowered her to the ground, kissing her lips, her cheeks, her neck, her breasts, making his way down her body with rapt attention. She felt him spread her legs as he continued lower, and she ran her hands lovingly through his ginger hair.

He kissed and licked her just as she liked it, bringing her to the edge, but not letting her go over.

"Please," she begged, but he just laughed delightedly.

He crawled up her body, sprinkling kisses along her torso until he was nibbling her neck. She opened her eyes and took his face in her hands, guiding him to her lips as she took in his familiar face.

"Oh, Ron," she gasped as he positioned himself. "Please."

He gave her his tender smile, his blue eyes sparkling with love, and then slid in.

She nearly cried in delight at their joining, having forgotten how wonderful he felt, as if he completed her. She wanted to close her eyes to concentrate on feeling him, on their connection, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from his face, thinking for some reason that she wouldn't see him again.

He propped himself up on his elbows and looked down on her as he moved in her, smiling gratefully when she tilted her hips to meet him every time. He lifted one hand and stroked her face, her hair, her neck.

Her eyes were drifting closed, but still she kept forcing them open, drinking in the sight of him loving her. She fought to keep her eyes open until he lowered his mouth to her ear and murmured softly, "Close your eyes, love."

Obediently, she did as he bid, and the sensations started overwhelming her. He started thrusting a little more forcefully and she could feel his excitement growing. She moved in rhythm, slowly letting go of her inhibitions and letting herself feel him pumping into her, rubbing her, stroking her.

Her nerves were alive and singing before his finger found her clit, and after he did, the nerves consumed her.

She felt her body start to lose control, and then, suddenly, she was on the edge. He thrust and rubbed and sent her flying until she could feel nothing but pleasure as she fell, nerveless, screaming in her pleasure: "Severus!"

She woke up breathing heavily, thoroughly aroused and feeling even guiltier than she had before. What kind of immoral person was she?

Unable to control herself, she cried herself back to sleep, though this time it was untroubled by lovers of any kind, and instead was filled with dread.

Morning came, and Hermione woke up exhausted. She had the vague notion that she'd had disturbing dreams, but the bright light shining through her windows seemed to chase the memories away. She could remember waking up in the middle of the night with an overwhelming sense of guilt, but that didn't fit with the vague images of sunshine and flowers.

She tried to shrug it off as she got up and stumbled, yawning, into the bathroom. If it was important, she would remember, otherwise it was best to forget. However, her body felt as if she had acquired a ball and chain during the night, and she had the unpleasant feeling it was thanks to her subconscious. That or she hadn't got enough sleep.

If she had hoped a shower would wake and cheer her up, she was to be disappointed. She was cleaner but still sleepy and crabby as she made her way to the Great Hall. Unlike the day before, however, she was not one of the first people there.

She sat down hard beside Ginny who was just finishing her plate of fruit and didn't even bother with a greeting.

"Good morning to you, too," Ginny said cheerfully enough to make Hermione cringe.

"Why can't they serve coffee or tea?" Hermione responded grumpily.

Ginny rubbed her back sympathetically, although it was obviously feigned because she said, "What you need is fresh air. Harry and I are going to practice some flying, so why don't you come out to the pitch and watch?"

Hermione looked up at her in blatant disbelief. Ginny scoffed. "Bring a book then, but you need to get out."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "And I wasn't out of the castle on Friday?"

"That doesn't count. That was a nasty business, and any fresh air was nullified by the circumstances."

"I didn't realize that fresh air could be nullified."

"It certainly can!" Ginny proclaimed. "But beyond that, Friday was two days ago. Any benefit you might have received has obviously worn off, so you need another dose."

"And what if my exhaustion is due to the fresh air I received?" Hermione griped ill naturedly.

"If you look any crappier for having been outside, I will apologize, promise never to force you out into the open again, and then escort you to Madam Pomfrey. Agreed?"

Harry snorted into his eggs, but Ginny and Hermione ignored him, as they were in the middle of a contest of wills. Unfortunately, Hermione was just too tired to do battle, so she looked away with a frown.

"Fine."

Ginny patted her back once more in mock sympathy while Harry laughed.

"If I didn't know better, I would say you've been spending too much time with Snape."

Hermione screwed up her face and stuck her tongue out at Harry, who just laughed it off and handed her an apple. Fortunately, food did help Hermione's mood improve, so when it came time to leave, she had to pretend reluctance and even that quickly faded away as they walked down to the pitch.

It was a lovely morning. The sun was shining, the cold breeze had gone, and it felt like Spring might make an appearance at any time. She made herself comfortable in a sunny spot in the stands, lounging back in her conjured lawn chair. Closing her eyes, she felt her skin absorbing the sun and smiled.

She would have to admit that Ginny was right, or at least partially so. She wasn't convinced that the air itself was doing her any good, but she could tell that the sun was melting away her bad mood in a way that was almost magical. It was better than magic, in fact, as the thorough warmth and health she was feeling beat out a Cheering Charm any day.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?"

Her eyes popped open as she grabbed her wand and turned in the direction of the voice, nearly panicked. Teddy stood there watching her with quiet amusement.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you," he said, although she wasn't sure she believed him.

She resettled herself in her chair, still panting slightly and then frowned over at him. "You're going to get hexed one of these days if you keep sneaking up on people."

He smiled, conjured a chair of his own and relaxed beside her. "Oh, I'm careful who I startle. I'd never try that on Professor Snape, for example, not that I think I'd be able to sneak up on him in any case."

Hermione's pulse had slowed down and she relaxed. "Mm. Yeah, he knows all the tricks, and I expect he's always aware of what's going on."

Teddy nodded. He was about to say something else when a motion on the pitch caught his attention. Hermione turned to see Harry and Ginny mounting their brooms and then start zooming around the pitch at breakneck speed.

"Ah, so you've come to watch your friends?" Teddy asked, a note of insecurity in his voice.

"More like they dragged me kicking and screaming, but yes." She looked over at him and smiled. "They thought I needed fresh air."

Teddy smiled back. "Do you?"

Hermione looked back at the field and watched as Harry chased Ginny through some complicated looking moves. "Mm. Not air so much as sun."

"I never took you for a sunbather."

"I'm not usually. I have no desire to get skin cancer or sunspots or premature wrinkles, but a nice soak every now and again does seem to do the soul good."

Teddy hummed in agreement, and she looked over to see him relaxing back in his chair, his face at ease and angled up to catch a bit of sun himself.

Smiling, she returned to watching Harry and Ginny chase each other around the pitch, each of them glowing with health, happiness and laughter.

At some point, the repetitive motions of Harry and Ginny circling, combined with the warmth and brightness of the sunshine, forced Hermione's eyes to drift shut, and she fell into a deep, dreamless nap. The next thing she was aware of was whispering.

"She'll probably have a burn, though, and she's not going to be happy about that," one voice said.

"No, but I'm sure Snape would be happy enough to give her something to ease the pain," another voice whispered.

Mirth met that statement. "Maybe, but do you really think he won't blame me for it in the first place? He won't be happy that she's suffered at all," a third voice reasoned.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll get an equal share of his blame."

"Oh?"

"Yeah."

"Why? Has he suddenly started hating you?"

"No, but I don't think he's comfortable about Hermione's and my friendship."

"It is just friendship, isn't it?" the lighter voice asked.

"Of course it is! I'm not about to go after any man's wife, let alone Professor Snape's!"

"Good. 'Cause you know that I'd have to hex you if you did have designs on her, right?" the third voice said.

"Erm, before or after Snape killed me?"

"Before. I'd hand you over to him afterwards."

"Right. Well, I'll keep that in mind if I ever do find myself tempted." They all laughed, but then the defendant asked, "Why would *you* hex me, though? I thought you hated

Professor Snape?"

"Yeah, well, in some sick and twisted way I have to consider him my brother now," Harry grumbled much to the amusement of the others.

"Aw, poor baby having an actual family now," Ginny teased.

"Oh, come on, Gin, who in their right mind would be happy about having Snape in their family tree?"

"Hermione seems happy enough," Teddy said bluntly.

Silence met that. Then: "Alright, I'll give you that."

"So, you went with them on Friday?"

"Yeah..."

"So, how did they act around each other?"

Hermione heard someone shifting, and she didn't know whether Teddy was checking to see whether she was still asleep or if he was squirming uncomfortably.

"They... I don't know. They were always touching, like holding hands or whatnot, whenever it was acceptable to do so. She seemed to gravitate towards him and always seemed reluctant to leave his side."

"Careful now, or we'll have to question your feelings more closely," Ginny said lightly.

"What do you mean?"

"You sounded a bit put out."

"Oh, well, maybe I was. Maybe I wanted someone to gravitate towards me like that, too."

"Mm. If you say so," Ginny teased.

"Whatever," Teddy replied just as lightly.

There was a silence then, and Hermione could feel her skin prickling, as if everyone was watching her.

"She is getting pink," Ginny whispered.

"Yeah."

"It was our idea to get her outside, and she might never come out again if she gets too uncomfortable."

"Yeah, but she looks so peaceful. And she's obviously not been sleeping well, so I still say we shouldn't wake her up."

Hermione decided that was her cue to 'wake up.' She opened her eyes to find all three of her friends sitting on the bleachers beside her, staring at her. She started to smile at them, but found a yawn forcing its way out of her along with a leonine-like stretch.

After she recovered herself, she looked back to find her friends grinning.

"Did you have a good rest?" Harry asked.

Hermione nodded with a sleepy smile. "Yes, I did. Thanks for the suggestion, Ginny."

Ginny snorted. "I wanted you to come outside. Don't credit me for the nap."

Hermione shrugged good naturedly. "Yes, well, I'm not sure I would have had the nap without the glorious sunshine to relax me. So thanks anyway."

Ginny bit her lip and leaned over to touch Hermione's face with a cool fingertip. "You might not thank me in a few hours, though. You've got a bit of a burn."

Hermione shrugged again, still feeling rather blissed out from her sun-soaked nap. "I'll survive." She sat up and stretched again, trying to wake herself up. "So, how did practice go?"

Harry grinned. "We decided to just have some fun."

"You lost, you mean," Ginny said and tweaked his nose. She turned to Hermione and explained. "We made a bet. I won." She smiled with almost malicious glee. "He just conceded defeat a few minutes ago."

Harry didn't look too put out, though. "What do you have to do?" she asked him.

Both he and Ginny blushed, prompting Hermione and Teddy to throw up their hands in defense. "Never mind, I don't want to know," Hermione said quickly while Teddy nodded vigorously in agreement.

Ginny laughed. "Oh, it's not that bad. I'll just be getting foot and back rubs for the next week."

"And I'm sure that's all," Teddy muttered, squeezing his eyes shut in distaste.

Harry slapped Teddy on the shoulder in a brotherly way and said, "It is a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done before."

Hermione and Teddy both groaned.

"I didn't know you'd read Dickens," Hermione said.

Harry looked at her and grinned. "I haven't. I saw the tail end of a program years ago, and that bit stuck in my memory."

"You do realize that those were that character's last words, don't you?"

"I seem to remember that, yeah."

"Then why..." She cut herself off as she saw Harry and Teddy look at each other in amused exasperation. Ginny came round and put an arm around Hermione's shoulder and led her away from the boys.

"He's just being a pillock, is all." Hermione immediately understood and blushed a bit. "So, who's hungry?"

It turned out everyone had a bit of an appetite, so they headed up to the castle. Hermione watched in bemusement as Harry and Teddy joked around with each other in what seemed to be a friendly way while still calling each other stiffly by their surnames. She shrugged, glad that they were at least getting along.

There was a bit of an awkward moment when they reached the Great Hall, however. Teddy was so engrossed in conversation with Harry, he didn't realize they'd made their way to the Gryffindor table until he was about to sit down.

Embarrassed, he looked around at the sea of Gryffindor faces and retreated a step.

"You are welcome to sit here, you know," Hermione pointed out, grinning.

"But only when invited," Harry agreed with mock severity.

Teddy looked around again, then seemed to mentally shrug and sat down beside Harry while Hermione and Ginny sat across from them.

Hermione noticed Teddy getting some odd looks from those who knew him, but he seemed to ignore it admirably enough. She half-listened to Ginny chatter on about various plans she had concerning the coming summer while also half-listening to Harry and Teddy chat about various brooms and Quidditch teams.

She was continuously amazed at how seemingly easy it was for males to bond. A sex joke, a sport and some broom comparisons, and suddenly they were friends. She wished it were that easy for her.

"So what do you think?" Ginny asked.

Hermione look over at her friend and smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Ginny, but I missed the last bit."

Ginny smirked. "I know." She looked over at the boys. "It's good to see them getting along, isn't it?"

Hermione nodded. "Yeah, it is."

"How long do you think it'll take before Harry's on good terms with Snape?"

Hermione snorted. "I think it'll happen around about the time hell freezes over. Even if Harry's open to it, which is unlikely, Severus is less than, er, congenial where Harry's concerned."

"What are you saying about me?" Harry said, cutting into their chat.

"Oh, we were just wondering how long it'll be before we see you chatting with your big brother like this."

Harry looked a bit confused for a moment until he caught on that Ginny was talking about Snape, not the remaining Weasleys. Then he looked unsettled.

"Er..."

The rest of them laughed, though that didn't seem to settle Harry's unease.

"Don't worry, Harry. I won't subject either of you to each other unnecessarily until you're both ready."

"Um, thanks, I s'pose."

The dishes on the tables disappeared at that moment, startling all of them; they hadn't realized how late it had become. They looked at each other, wordlessly asking if any of the others had any ideas for what to do. When no one spoke up, Hermione offered, "Have any of you seen my room yet?"

They all shook their heads, and their course was decided. They spent the rest of the afternoon sequestered in Hermione's sitting room, playing games and chatting about nothing and everything. Teddy looked uncomfortable at first, as if painfully aware that he was just a pale replacement and didn't fit in, but after a few hours, even he started looking a little more comfortable being part of the group. Certainly everyone else was willing to give him a chance.

After what seemed like only minutes, the dinner hour arrived. They made their way downstairs, laughing and joking as if they'd all been friends forever rather than only a few hours. Hermione watched with a full heart, beyond happy that she had such good friends as Harry and Ginny and now Teddy. She hoped Severus would come around someday. Surely if he loved her, he would at least try to look beyond his hatred of Harry? She sighed, having her bubble of happiness burst just a bit. She knew Severus and Harry would never really get along, not even for her.

She looked up at the staff table for Severus, but found he was missing again. Thinking back, she hadn't noticed him there at lunch either. That was two days he'd been missing from all meals. She knew that teachers were allowed to eat occasional meals in their quarters, but they almost never missed more than two in a row. Not even Severus.

She looked around the hall, thinking she might have missed him somehow, but he wasn't there. She barely noticed when Teddy said good-bye and left for his table, but was aware enough to wave distractedly. She went to sit down with Harry and Ginny, her mind trying to figure out why Severus was missing. She figured if something had happened, she would have been told by someone. As his wife, she would have been alerted, even if it was just Dumbledore telling her that Snape was missing from the castle.

So she assumed he was all right, physically, but thinking about it, she wasn't as certain about his mental state. He'd been fine until they'd left for the Ministry. She'd assumed that he'd just been tense about the trial and having to go to that horrible place, but perhaps she had been wrong. What if something else was the matter?

But he'd seemed fine at Arian's. Well, until he and Draco had gone off wherever they'd gone off to. But then again, he'd been wearing an emotional mask the entire time there, only taking it off once when he'd told them about young Draco.

Her mind was so consumed with the missing Potions master, she didn't even taste her food as she ate it, and as soon as she was done, she said good-bye to Harry and Ginny, telling them that she was off to get something for her burned face.

As she left the hall, however, she heard quick steps behind her. Turning around, she saw Teddy catching up to her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, clearly concerned.

She nodded. "Yeah, I just... My face stings a bit, and I thought I'd go see if Severus has anything for it."

She was glad she was burned because at that moment she recalled the conversation she'd overheard, and she would have blushed if she hadn't been pink already. Teddy, however, didn't even bat an eyelash.

He saw through her lie, but nodded anyway. "Shall I walk you there?"

"Oh, don't worry about it. If you haven't finished dinner..."

"I'm done, and if you don't mind, I'd like to escort you. I don't think anyone would dare attack you, but the dungeon still isn't the safest of places."

Hermione wanted to refuse, but knew he had a point. "Thanks."

They headed off down the stairs.

"So, no love letters this weekend?"

Hermione looked at him, confused. He grinned and said, "*Befrozen*."

Hermione laughed as she remembered those fake love letters she and Severus had exchanged the previous Saturday. "No. No purple prose this weekend. I think that was a one-time deal."

Teddy raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

She sniffed. "Oh, come on, Teddy. Neither Severus nor I are the types to pour our hearts out on a piece of paper. Whether we're romantic or not is going to be a private thing that will just be in our memories."

"You say that as if you haven't heard of Legilimency."

Hermione paled, then blushed at the memory of Snape's mental attack on her, but quickly shook it aside. "Well, I do have basic training in Occlumency, you know. Besides, I doubt anyone's going to be peeking into my mind just to see what romantic trysts Severus and I have had."

Teddy shrugged, a smile still on his face, although it was rather forced. "Well, I think it's a shame you haven't continued with those letters. It's something you could look back at in a hundred years and laugh long and hard over."

"True, but Severus... It's not something... It's more fun when it's spontaneous. If it happens again, I'm not going to put a stop to it, but..."

Teddy seemed to understand, as he didn't press the issue. They soon came to Severus' door, which Hermione knocked on before turning to Teddy to wish him goodnight. Teddy, however, cut her off before she began.

"So, do you want to meet at the library again next Saturday?" he asked hopefully.

"Um, sure. It seems to be working out well."

"I think so as well. I just hope I'm not too much of a bother or strain on your time."

She laughed. "You've been anything but a strain and only a little bit of a bother," she said, the last part teasingly.

"I'm glad to hear it," Teddy said with a soft smile on his face. "I'd hate to think I'm a big bother."

Neither said anything, and just as the silence was about to get awkward, Severus opened his door. Before Severus could even open his mouth to say something, Teddy flashed a smile at Hermione, then left for his common room. Hermione called out thanks and goodnight, to which Teddy called back an echo.

She then turned to find Severus frowning at her, one eyebrow raised in query.

"Yes?" he asked.

His look made her feel like she had done something wrong. "I was wondering if you've got anything for a sunburn."

"To create one or heal one?" he asked snidely, although he moved aside so as to let her enter.

"To heal, if you please," she said archly. She felt wrong-footed with him being so cool to her, and she didn't know what was wrong.

He closed the door behind her, then moved toward the bedroom. "Right this way," he said, indicating she should follow him. Nervous, and not sure why, she followed. He led her to the bathroom and winced when he turned on the bright light. He motioned for her to sit on the toilet while he rummaged through the cabinet beside the sink, muttering under his breath as he did so.

Finally, he retrieved a jar of orange looking goo out of the cabinet and turned to face her. Only then did his scowl change into something less harsh.

"Hm," he said as he approached to observe her face more closely. "You did get a bit too much sun, didn't you?" He stroked her cheek tenderly, barely touching it. When she shivered slightly, he withdrew and asked, "It hurts?"

She shook her head. "No. It doesn't hurt much at all in fact. If I hadn't seen for myself, I wouldn't have known I was burned."

His brows furrowed. "But you're sure it's a sunburn?"

"Almost certain. I fell asleep outside, and it was rather sunny at the time."

"But it's possible someone could have hexed you?" His tone was suddenly sharp.

"No, or at least not likely. Teddy was with me nearly the entire time, not to mention that if someone had been close enough to hex me, Harry and Ginny would have seen it, even if they were busy flying around."

Severus had tensed up at the mention of Teddy but relaxed again when she added the others to the list. "Mm. Likely a burn then."

"Yes, I think so."

He nodded and unscrewed the jar of goo. He then dipped a finger in and carefully applied the paste to her face.

"This will need to be rinsed off in fifteen minutes," he said coolly, tilting his head as he applied the last bits of medicine to her nose and forehead and then rinsed off his hand under the tap.

She turned to look at herself in the mirror and choked back a laugh at the sight. Not only was the paste a vivid orange, but as soon as it was applied, it started expanding into the puffy orange foam that she'd seen used on severe burns.

"I thought this was only for third degree burns," she said, turning to Severus, who was quickly retreating into the dark bedroom.

"It is effective for all burns," was the curt reply.

She edged out of the bathroom, voicing a quiet "nox" as she did. Severus had returned to the sitting room and was waiting rather impatiently at the door.

Feeling insecure, awkward and annoyed, Hermione fidgeted slightly as she came out of the bedroom.

"I get the impression that you're kicking me out, but could I possibly wait until it's time to rinse this stuff off?" she asked, finding her tone was a bit sharper than she'd

intended.

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as he let out a large sigh. He also nodded. "If you must. Just please keep the prattle to a minimum."

Hermione compressed her lips in anger, but as she stood there looking at him, she realized he was obviously hurting, most likely with a headache, judging from his pose.

"To borrow a phrase from Harry, you look like shit. Maybe you should sit down?"

"Before you knocked on the door, I was happily lying down."

"Don't let me stop you," Hermione said, motioning to his bed with a sarcastic flourish. "No need to stand by social conventions around me."

He opened his eyes just enough to glare at her. He opened his mouth to say something, but decided against it and closed it with a snap. His fingers pinched his brows in what looked like a painful grip, and Hermione backed down.

"Severus, please sit or lie down. I might be able to help."

"You're a Healer now, are you?"

"No, so don't expect a good bedside manner if you keep mouthing off!" she snarled even as she walked up and tenderly took his hand in hers and led him to his bedroom. He grumbled, but didn't protest outright.

She didn't need to prod him into lying back down, but when she went to touch him, he grabbed her wrist in a fierce hold.

"What are you doing?"

"I was going to give you a massage... if you'd release my hand, that is."

He let go of her hand, but continued to glare at her. "I don't see the point."

Hermione closed her eyes and sat down on the edge of the bed. "There isn't much of a point beyond trying to offer you comfort. If it's a tension headache, then I might be able to relieve the pain quite a bit, though I can't promise anything for a migraine."

He clenched his teeth, but waved for her to commence. With a wry grin pulling at her lips, she slid her fingers under his neck and started stroking his scalp and neck. It was awkward, but she didn't feel like they were at a point where she could climb up and straddle him without adding to his already sizable tension.

She must have been doing something right, however, because suddenly he groaned in pleasure. And promptly tensed up, ruining everything she'd done.

"Just relax, Severus," she said in as soothing a voice as she could muster. "I'll take any sounds you make as compliments on my skill."

"And if those sounds consist of oaths?" he said, though he did his best to relax as ordered.

"Then I'll know I'm digging a bit too deep and ease up," she responded with a smile. He didn't see the smile, however, as his eyes had drifted shut.

Despite what she'd told him, he didn't utter another sound. He did, however, let her know that he liked something by smiling. She didn't know if he was aware he was doing it, but she took to watching his face for cues on where he needed work.

She rubbed his neck and head until her face began to itch, signaling it was time to rinse the paste off. Severus was breathing deeply, and he looked so relaxed, she assumed he was asleep. With a last gentle caress, she withdrew her hand and retreated to the bathroom, closing the door before she turned on the light.

When she'd rinsed off completely, she turned off the light and opened the door. The soft light from the sitting room gave the bedroom a dim illumination, enough to see Severus sitting on the bed, rubbing his neck.

"I thought you were asleep," she said, going over to him.

He stretched his neck, making his spine utter some atrocious sounds. "I thought you'd left." His tone was still cool, but not as nasty as before. She lifted a hand to his neck, squeezing it gently.

"Still hurt?" she asked as she rubbed him a bit more.

"Mm," he said in agreement, dropping his chin to his chest to allow her access to the base of his skull.

She took his hint and used her thumbs to try and soothe out the kinks she felt in there. His breath caught and then he sighed, but still he didn't utter a sound.

When her arms got tired, she let them fall to her side.

"Sorry I can't do more."

He shook his head. "Thank you for what you have done. It's more than just a headache, but the tension has been alleviated slightly."

He stretched his neck again, and she shuddered as it popped several more times. He seemed happy with the result, though.

She got up and brushed down her robes in a sudden fit of nerves. She looked around the room and caught sight of the wedding dress still lying on the chair in the corner. She gave a little laugh and went to pick it up, smoothing it out as she did so.

"I didn't realize this had been left behind."

"I suppose the house-elves thought it was mine."

She looked over at him, rolling her eyes as she did. "Yes, you are known for wearing white all the time," she sniped and was pleased to see his lips twitch up.

"And meringue."

She smiled, although it was short lived. "Of course, I'm not exactly known for wearing white, fluffy dresses either."

"With one rather notable exception."

"Yes. With that exception."

She stared at the dress and fingered the lace around the bodice. It really was an awful dress, but she found herself growing attached to it.

"It's horrid, isn't it?" she asked. When Severus didn't respond immediately, she looked up and was startled to see his face turning cold.

"Repulsive." His tone was surprisingly sharp, and he immediately turned and left for the sitting room. She followed him, still holding the dress.

"I'm sorry to have left it mussing up your room."

"It really does not fit in with the current decor," he said mockingly, his voice getting colder.

She looked up just in time to see him turning on his mask, and her shoulders slumped in defeat. She looked back down at the dress.

"I..." She let out a sigh, but didn't look up at him.

"Your face will probably be sore tomorrow morning. It might need a bit of murtlap lotion. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have marking to catch up on."

Torn between anger and despair, Hermione threw the dress down and stormed across the room to the door, saying, "Thank you for the burn paste, but I'll not waste your time any more. I'm sure Poppy has the murtlap lotion, so I won't need to bother you."

She got to the door and looked back at Severus, who was standing by his desk scowling at the essays. She felt sorry for those whose work he marked that night.

"Goodnight," she said and then left his quarters, barely able to refrain from slamming the door behind her.

XIX

Chapter 19 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Thanks, as always, to Keladry and Southern for taking the time to read through this. Any mistakes herein are mine alone, though.

Hermione managed to storm her way through most of the castle on her temper alone. However, about the fourth staircase up, her indignant thoughts of "How dare he!" slowly turned to the more contemplative "Why did he," and by the time she reached her room, she'd reached several conclusions.

The most obvious one was that Severus was a miserable, horrible, no good, thoroughly rotten patient. When he was feeling sick or ill or off in any way, he achieved levels of crankiness, which were nearly unheard of in the land of normal people. She guessed that Voldemort probably had had the occasional bouts of nastiness to compare, but she quickly pushed that thought out of her mind, as she didn't feel comfortable comparing her husband to Voldemort.

To her knowledge, this was the second time she'd been around him in private while he was sick. Although this time he was much milder than he had been with the chickenpox, he was still oversensitive and moody and had a knack for pissing her off that only Ronald Weasley could have competed with.

It was a less than thrilling revelation. She hoped Severus wasn't prone to getting sick often, else their marriage was going to be a very rocky one.

The second conclusion was that he'd read more into what she'd said than she'd intended. She hoped this time it was just a side effect of being sick, but she needed to be careful about that in the future. She was pretty sure he'd been upset about her comment that the wedding dress was horrid, although why, she didn't know. Perhaps he thought she was commenting on their wedding or even being married. If that was the case, although she thought that was stretching meanings a bit too far, she could understand his defensiveness. However, she did think that it was a bit too far to reach, even for him, so she didn't think that was the case.

She supposed that he perhaps *liked* the dress, and so he thought she was insulting his taste when she insulted the dress, but the thought of Snape liking that monstrosity... It was preposterous. Wasn't it?

Of course, he possibly was fond of the dress for the same reason she was: sentiment. She could see him liking it solely because she'd worn it to marry him, just as she liked it because it reminded her of her grandmother and her youth. She couldn't add the wedding or being married to the list yet, but she hoped that she would be able to at some point. She supposed that when she insulted the dress, he had thought she was insulting the memories attached.

Bugger.

And then she came to revelation number three. He had tried to apologize. She wasn't certain of that, but she thought that when he changed topics back to the condition of her face, he was telling her he was sorry. He'd done it in a piss-poor way, but he had tried. Not only that, but she thought he might have been inviting her to visit him in the morning.

She cringed as she realized he must have been terribly busy, especially if his headache had wiped him out as he'd implied. He would have a lot of marking to catch up on. She cringed again when she reviewed what he'd said and found he hadn't actually kicked her out. She'd jumped to that conclusion all by herself. Granted his tone had been less than welcoming, but she guessed there were mitigating circumstances for that as well.

Well, if he'd been inviting her over, she'd made it perfectly clear that she wouldn't be coming. She lightly banged her head against her bedpost. She was an idiot. A rash idiot. And here she'd told Teddy that she wouldn't give up use of her brains.

Sighing, she made her way to bed, exhausted from all the emotional turmoil. She had to figure out some way to fix things. Probably going down there in the morning and apologizing would be the best course, even if it was the least appealing. His headache would probably be back, and he'd probably be as ill tempered as he had been that evening, if not more so.

But, she had helped make this mess, so she would help clean it up. The one thing she was happy about was that she knew Severus was an intelligent and...for the most part...rational human being. An apology would probably go a long way to making sure he remained rational.

Letting out an enormous sigh, she closed her eyes and tried to relax. It wasn't long at all before she fell asleep.

Due to the early hour she'd gone to bed, Hermione woke up early. Very, very early. Dawn was just making an appearance, and when she looked at the clock, she saw the hour hand hanging around the ungodly number of five.

She groaned and rolled over but found she was now wide awake. She stretched and yawned, noting that her face was indeed sore, as Severus had warned it might be.

Thinking of Severus brought back the event of the day before, and then her mind was a-whirl with her current problem and how to solve it.

Finally, she decided it would be best to just head down to his room. Mornings were not her best time, but she figured that it would be better to get everything over with at the beginning of the day rather than let it hang over both their heads for the rest of the day. With any luck, she wouldn't wake him, but even if he was still asleep, she might still be able to get in if he hadn't changed the password since she'd moved out.

Thinking about it some more, she hoped that he was asleep, assuming she could get in. Then she could sneak in and get comfortable before the coming confrontation. He might even appreciate it. She would be prepared for his hexes, just in case he didn't, but it was possible he would see it as the sign of affection it was.

She pulled on her robes and made her way down into the chilly dungeons. About halfway there, though, she changed her mind. She had virtually no experience with Snape in the early mornings. Judging by his mood at every other time of the day, it seemed unlikely that he would be a morning person, and considering how grumpy she was in the morning, she thought that Snape could very well be dangerous if woken up or otherwise confronted at such an early hour.

So she changed course and went for a walk. She wanted to go outside, but it was early enough that it would be literally freezing outside, and she didn't feel like going back for her cloak. She supposed she could do a warming charm, but felt it would be better to stay within the castle in any case.

She walked and walked, exploring nooks she hadn't come across before while letting her mind wander from subject to subject, though most of them seemed to center on Snape. He was just so confusing, and she didn't know what to do about him or her reactions to him. For some reason, he inspired her temper like no other. Even Ron hadn't made her as instinctively defensive as Snape made her. But he also inspired other, more primal, reactions.

At times, she wasn't sure she liked who she was around him. At other times, she felt she had the potential to be her best when around him. He made her want to care again, and there was something utterly enticing about digging through his outer shell to care for the vulnerable person who lay beneath. She wanted to be the person to care for him, even as she thought that might not be the healthiest base for their relationship.

She found herself staring out an eastern facing window, watching the sky catch fire. Orange and red crept steadily across the clouds until they flared with yellow highlights as the sun made its way up. The fire died slowly, until finally the sun peeked above the horizon, and the colors vanished into the blue of the highland sky.

Hermione basked in the young sunlight for a few minutes before turning around and heading to the dungeons.

It was eerily quiet as she made her way down the stone corridors of the dungeons. She almost expected to hear water dripping in the distance, although she knew the charms on the dungeons kept them comfortably dry. Still, it was eerie, so she hurried forward and made her way to Severus' quarters as fast as she could without actually running there.

Once there, she knocked quietly on his door, not wanting to wake him if he was still asleep. After waiting a few seconds and hearing nothing, she recited the password and let herself in. She didn't know who was more surprised, herself at finding Severus awake and at his desk, or Severus, seeing her come in. Whether or not he was more surprised than she, he quickly recovered and bent his head down to complete his thought on the parchment. As soon as he finished writing, he moved the pile of marked essays on top of it.

While he finished up his work, she came in all the way and quietly closed the door behind her. As soon as he was done, she shyly said, "Hi."

He stared at her with hard eyes for a moment before responding. "Good morning."

He got up a bit stiffly, stretched his back and then moved over to the sofa. He indicated with a graceful twitch of his hand that she should join him. Going over, she chose to sit in the chair by the fireplace rather than beside him on the sofa.

"What brings you down here so early in the morning?" he asked, conjuring a boiling kettle at the same time as he summoned the tea service. He put the tea on to steep in the same precise manner as he made potions, and Hermione was so engrossed in watching his process that she almost forgot he had asked her a question.

"I thought that last night's conversation didn't end well, and I just... I didn't want to leave it there."

He nodded and although he seemed tired, he didn't look like he was upset, so she wasn't prepared when he said, "And, knowing me so well, you knew that I'd be awake and ready for a chat."

Hermione scowled at his snide tone. "No, I didn't know you'd be awake. I came down early so that I might have a chance to get comfortable before we started sniping at each other, but I see it's never too early for that."

Severus shot her a warning look. "As I recall, I didn't invite you in, madam. You broke in."

Hermione reined in her anger, knowing he was right. "You're right, of course," she said almost contritely, although her tone wasn't conciliatory when she added, "Shall I come back later when you might not be inconvenienced?"

"Drop the sarcasm, Hermione. It doesn't suit you."

His comment lacked bite, and he seemed more tired than before. Hermione's anger dissipated as her worry increased.

"I actually came to apologize for snapping at you last night and to thank you again for the burn-healing salve." Severus frowned but nodded in acknowledgment. Hermione continued. "I also wanted to... well, I guess I wanted you to know that I didn't mean anything by the dress comment."

He lifted his brows. "Why should I be bothered that you think the dress is horrid?" he asked with a small, tight smile.

"I don't know, but you seemed to be. And if you were bothered by it, I want you to know that all I meant was that the design itself leaves something to be desired."

"Ah, and here I thought it was the paragon of wedding attire," he said completely deadpan.

"You *are* joking, aren't you?" she asked hesitantly.

He snorted softly and said, "Yes, my dear. Have no fear. I am no more fond of frilly masses than you seem to be."

She let out an exaggerated sigh of relief and was glad to see his lips twitch in amusement. Thinking about it, she looked around for the dress but didn't see it anywhere. Suddenly, she was concerned that he might have tossed it out.

"Where is it, by the way?"

"What?"

"The dress."

He looked slightly uncomfortable and her fears increased. "I might have said it was horrid, but I hope you didn't throw it out or destroy it. After all, it does hold sentimental value."

He shook his head and stood up, gesturing for her to follow. He led her into the bedroom and pointed into the corner and there, in the same chair as before, was the dress, looking just as it had when she'd picked it up the night before. It struck her as an incredibly sweet sentimental gesture on Severus' part.

"Oh. Thank you," she said lamely.

He gave her a curt nod. "I knew it was your grandmother's."

"Yes." She looked at him and thought he still looked a bit uncomfortable. Deciding to chance it, she added, "But it is also *my* wedding dress."

His discomfort increased slightly, confirming her suspicions. Pleased, she stood up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

He looked pleased, but even more uncomfortable and said rather sharply, "What a lot of fuss over this horrid thing."

She smiled. "Yes."

They made their way back into the sitting area and settled upon the couch. Severus poured their tea and they sat beside one another in an amiable silence. At least the silence was friendly to begin with, but after a few minutes, Hermione felt it was a bit strained.

She looked over at Severus, who seemed to be concentrating on his tea, though she guessed he was lost in his thoughts. He looked sad and tired.

"You look tired."

"I was up late marking," he said in a rather short tone.

"Ah." She felt awkward, as if he was deliberately subverting attempts at conversation. Annoyed, she was tempted to 'prattle' just to annoy him, but curbed that impulse. She had no desire to be malicious, even if it was tempting in the face of his bad manners.

Finally, after a few more minutes of awkward silence, Hermione asked, "What's wrong?"

His expression suddenly turned rather chilly. "Nothing."

"I don't believe you."

"Shall I award Gryffindor points for uncharacteristic perception?"

"Oh!...you... Perhaps you should dock me points for inappropriateness?"

He put his cup down and looked at her. "Perhaps I should."

"Severus, I just want to help."

He looked like he wanted to growl. "Of *course* you do," he said with quiet venom. "Of *course* you just want to step in and hold my hand and say soothing things, like 'Everything's going to be all right' and 'Don't worry, be happy,' and ignore the fact that it's none of your bloody business to begin with!"

"And how am I supposed to know that it's none of my business?" Hermione said back in a surprisingly calm voice. "All I know is that you're upset, you're avoiding me, and you are acting like the git you used to be."

"Of course I'm upset! Bloody Gryffindors are knocking at my door at all hours trying to save me from myself. I imagine you'd be upset, too!"

"That is not fair, Severus. All I offered was comfort."

"Comfort, curiosity, it's all the same bloody thing."

"You know bloody well that's not true!" she argued, starting to raise her voice. "I may be curious--"

"I'm actually surprised you're curious at all," he said, cutting her off. He shot up off the couch and started pacing, hands clenched at his sides. "After all, you're the lauded Gryffindor know-it-all. Surely you have a theory to share?" he said mockingly, his voice rising as well. "Tell me what's wrong with me! Go on."

Hermione pursed her lips at his sarcastic tone, but was too angry not to rise to the bait. She stood as well, though she stayed by the couch.

"Believe it or not, I *don't* know. It obviously has something to do with the trip to the Ministry, but I can't think of what it was that set you on edge. Of course, that's because I don't know enough about you to have a clue as to what might be wrong, and of course, that would be because you haven't told me anything, like, for example, **what's wrong!**"

"Was that all one sentence?" He raised his eyebrow mockingly.

"Severus..." she said in a warning tone.

"Don't take that tone with me, madam."

"If you insist on keeping me out of your life, then I must insist that you call me Miss Granger, since the word 'madam' implies that I might, in fact, have a spouse."

"It could also imply that you are a whore."

Hermione stepped back breathing hard. She took several quick, shallow breaths, trying to suppress the overwhelming need to cry.

"That was a joke," Severus said, noting her distress. He took a step toward her, but she backed up in reaction, so he stopped. "It was poor joke; I wasn't calling you a... I was illustrating the semantics."

"I'm sorry I married you," Hermione said as calmly as she could while restraining a sob. She turned to leave, but before her hand reached the handle, strong arms were around her, reeling her in to his chest, not letting go even as she struggled.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I *am* sorry!" Severus crooned into her hair. With her ear against his chest, she felt and heard his breath hitch.

"That wasn't just a joke," she cried, finally giving up her struggles of escape.

He rocked her to and fro and held her tighter to him. "I was being clever. I didn't mean it." He gripped her arms and pulled her far enough away to look her in the eyes. "Please forgive me, Hermione. I didn't mean it."

She looked at him for a painful, breathless minute, then shook her head. He let her go instantly, almost as if she had given him a shock. The despair and remorse that filled his face at her motion spurred her to speak quickly.

"I want to forgive you, but, Severus, I'm not going to be your whore in any respect. You cannot toss me aside when it suits you. You can compartmentalize your life all you want, but you have to accept that I am not going to stay in a box of any size or shape."

"I refuse to corrupt you with the secrets of my soul," Severus said forcefully. "If that is what you are asking of me..."

She shook her head. "No. I don't want your secrets. I'll admit I *am* curious, but I will never demand you tell me your secrets. However, if something is wrong and it is because of a secret, you need to give me a reason not to go there. You can't just shut me out altogether and then insult me when I start to pry!"

He sank down onto the sofa, resting his head in his hands. "And I get no privacy? No time for rumination?"

She sank down onto the coffee table in front of him. "Not if it means you shut me out of your life all together. I'll give you all the time in the world, but only if you give me some of your spare time in return."

He bowed his head. "I've been giving you all my spare time," he muttered, head still bent.

She sniffed, overwhelmed by everything. "You weren't here this weekend, and I missed you."

He looked up. "I've been in the castle the entire time."

"Your body has, but on Friday, when your body was having tea with me in my room, you weren't there. Saturday not even your body was there to walk me to my room, and yesterday... Yesterday you went from here to not here in a heartbeat, and I left feeling more alone than I had on Saturday. Same thing this morning." She sniffed again. "Besides which, you'd asked for time on Friday, and although I missed you and wanted to see you, I didn't want to seem like I was pushing you, so I stayed away."

"And coming down here and pressing me for answers doesn't constitute being pushy?"

Hermione stood to leave, but Severus caught her arm and pulled her down to sit beside him. He looked at her, his eyes miserable. "I've always been an all or nothing person, Hermione. That's who I am."

"How is that an explanation?"

He looked away as if searching for answers. "I'm not... If a problem is on my mind, then it consumes me. I will spend all of my time trying to solve it."

"So you do nothing but obsess on it, day and night?" Hermione asked, eyes narrowed slyly.

"Nothing."

"Not eat or sleep or teach?"

He looked back at her through his own narrowed eyes. "You know very well I meant spare time."

Hermione bit her lip until she could control herself. "And what am I? Where do I fit into your schedule?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." She paused to control her breathing, sensing she was on the verge of sobbing again. "I mean, how do I rate on your scale of importance? Above rounds but below obsessing? Or perhaps rounds are more important as well?"

"That's part of my job, Hermione," Snape said warily. "And to answer your question, you rank very highly, probably just below breathing."

"Then why do I feel like I'm underneath Filch?"

Severus's eyes shot open and he paled. "That is a thoroughly disgusting thought, Hermione!"

Hermione wondered about his reaction until she reviewed her words and realized the double entendre. She then caught Severus' eye and they grimaced at the same time.

Something about that struck her as funny, and she started giggling.

"It isn't funny," Severus said, still looking ill.

"Yes," she countered, nodding vigorously as she laughed harder, "it is!"

"No, it isn't," Severus said, though his lips were starting to twitch. "Filch and sex is a vile idea at the best of times, and the thought of you mixed in..."

Hermione laughed even harder even though the subject was thoroughly disgusting. Perhaps it was because most students felt the same way about Severus. That thought and the subsequent thought that maybe Filch wasn't as horrid as he seemed, either calmed her down.

"You're right, of course," she said, not looking at him directly. "But you are the one who brought it up."

"I beg your pardon!" Severus cried, insulted. "You were the one who mentioned him."

"But you were the one who has the filthy mind misinterpreting what I say," she said with a slight twinkle.

Severus didn't say anything, though he did look a bit shifty, as if he'd been caught out.

"Severus, why do I have the feeling that you were goading me?"

His lips twitched. "You know as well as I do the reason to that."

"Because you insist on riling me up?" Hermione growled.

"No. Because you're paranoid."

Hermione laughed in surprise. "Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean you're not out to get me," she said, still laughing.

"But I've already got you," Severus said, twining an arm around her and pulling her closer.

Hermione pulled away and stood up, her good mood gone. "Have you, though?"

He sighed, frustrated. "I had hoped that marrying and courting you would do the trick, but perhaps I was misinformed about that."

"Then why aren't you courting me?"

"Excuse me?"

Hermione frowned in his direction, although she wasn't frowning at him specifically.

"You were courting me up until we left for the Ministry on Friday. You've been everything I could ask for, even throwing in a bit of romance with that lovely rose and letter. Then the trial comes up and that vanishes alongside you. After a couple days alone, I try to find out where you've gone, and..."

She sighed. "I want my beau back."

She focused on him, easing her frown as she did so. "It may seem utterly selfish, but I want you paying attention to me. I also want to learn more about you, especially as you were just getting really interesting, but you're not making it easy."

"Some things are private," Severus growled.

"Very true. And let them stay private. But please, don't spend all your time obsessing on private matters. It doesn't help me feel like you want me in your life, which I've always thought was the purpose of courting."

Silence met that, though it wasn't hostile. After a long pause, Severus said, "Indeed."

"Thank you. So, next time please tell me it's private, and I won't pry." She paused, then added, "Oh, and if you call me a whore again, even if it is in jest, I'll hex you into next week and won't forgive you so easily."

"Does that mean that you forgive me this time?"

Hermione made a reluctant face, then nodded. "Yes. But that was still very bad form."

He'd stood up as soon as she nodded and came over to stand in front of her. "Yes, it was, and I promise I shan't do it again."

He then wrapped his arms around her in an almost painfully tight hug, which she relished despite the squeezing. It made her hopeful that he wouldn't retreat again. She did, however, find it a bit difficult to breathe, and she made a slight noise of distress. He immediately loosened his hold, but he didn't let go. Instead, he cradled her against his chest, holding her like a precious treasure. At that moment, she felt so loved and cherished, she started crying.

She let out a shuddering breath that caught Severus' attention. He pulled away and tilted her chin up to see her better. She knew she must look a mess, but she smiled up at him anyway.

He scowled in response, even as he tenderly wiped her cheeks dry with his thumbs.

"What's wrong now?"

She shook her head, still smiling. "Nothing."

"You cry over nothing?"

"No, but nothing's wrong."

He looked a bit upset and hurt, and she guessed he thought she was lying to him. Instead of explaining her feelings and voicing things she wasn't ready to face yet, she merely smiled again and then kissed him.

He hesitated for two seconds before he took her face in his hands and started kissing her back. When he did, she melted into his embrace, savoring the way his lips moved over hers, feeling like silk as he ghosted across her skin. It was gentle and tender and completely frustrating.

She pressed herself against him, trying to deepen the kiss, but he backed away, never enough to lose contact, but enough to keep it light. She tried again, and he reacted the same, though this time he let out a slight chuckle as he retreated.

She pulled back, breaking their kiss, and scowled up at him.

"What game are you playing?" she asked, trying to be upset, though it was hard in the face of his obvious delight.

He said nothing, but pulled her close and lowered his lips hers again. It was the same light, teasing kiss as before, but this time she didn't move to deepen it. He made a noise of approval, deep in his throat, then stroked her hair and her face and continued lower until his hands had crept down to her bum and came back up until they rested at her waist.

And then, just as she was starting to get irritated with the light kisses, he tightened his grip and pulled her to him, deepening their kiss as he did. She responded with equal feeling, and soon they were melded against one another, trying to devour the other in their need to get closer.

She had no idea how long they had been kissing, nor when they had positioned themselves on the sofa, but there they were, she on her back and him on top of her as he lazily stroked her hair and continued kissing her as if his life depended on it. Although, at this point, he wasn't quite as fervent with his lips since his attention had shifted to what his hands were feeling.

She was enjoying his hands as well, very much in fact. When his hand brushed against her nipple, she let out a moan of approval, which only encouraged him to spend more time there. But then a noise from the bedroom jarred her attention away from Severus' ministrations.

"That sounded like a phone!" she exclaimed, breaking away from his kiss. She looked at him curiously, though the curiosity was temporarily shelved when she saw how red and swollen his lips had become. It was a beautiful sight, especially when they lifted up at the corners into a soft smile.

He chose to ignore her question and started kissing her some more, which she willingly submitted to until she heard the buzzy, ringing noise again, this time twice.

"Severus, what was that?" she asked, this time not letting him distract her with another kiss.

"It's my alarm. Breakfast is over."

"What?" she exclaimed, shoving Severus to the side in her quest to sit up. "I'm going to be late!"

Severus, however, wasn't letting her go so easily. He grabbed her shoulders and brought her back to the couch and pinned her down, smiling as he did so.

"But I've only just begun, my dear," he purred before kissing her more purposefully than before. Her body responded eagerly enough, but her mind was fairly quick to recover control.

"Severus," she panted having escaped his lips, "If I don't leave now, I'm going to be late!"

"So?" he asked, nibbling on her ear.

"So, if we're both late for our classes, people will talk!"

"So?"

"So I'd rather we not draw attention to ourselves!"

He withdrew enough to look at her clearly. "In case it escaped your notice, we are married. Married couples are expected to have intimate moments now and again."

"Yes, but do you really want your students to speculate on that?" she countered.

She was mostly pleased when he scowled, heaved a big, hard-done-by sigh and released her. "Fine," he said petulantly as he sat up. "Wouldn't want to terrify the little blighters anyway. I've enough melted cauldrons as it is."

She smiled at him as she stood up and straightened her robes, which were now creased. Darting forward to give him a quick peck, she took one look at his mussed hair and red lips before realizing she must look even more ravished. Feeling panicked about the time, she darted through his bedroom and into his bathroom.

She thanked the heavens that she'd thought to check because she was a mess. Her hair was hopeless, her robes wrinkled and her lips looked bruised, they were so swollen. It also was pretty obvious that Severus hadn't shaved by the condition of her skin around her mouth.

She was about to cast a few healing charms when a bottle of lotion presented itself before her.

"Murtlap lotion will work just as well," Severus explained, lowering her wand from her face. As he poured a portion onto his hand, he added, "And with less risk of mishap."

She had forgotten about the lotion, but she eagerly reached for it only to have him keep it away from her.

"Tch, tch," he teased, raising an eyebrow. "Patience is a virtue."

"I don't have time to be virtuous right now," she muttered, still trying to reach the bottle.

His smile quirked into a lascivious smirk. "Is that so? How about a sin or two?"

She gave up reaching for the bottle with an aggrieved sigh. "There's even less time for that," she said.

He twisted his face into a rueful look. "Pity." He then gently, but efficiently, coated her face with the murtlap lotion. She was surprised how much better it made her feel, even if it did leave a shiny gloss making her look like she'd been sweating copiously.

"Thank you, sweetie," she said distractedly, pecked him on the cheek and was out the door in seconds. She was so intent on getting to her class on time that she didn't even register the look of shock Severus showed at her new term of endearment. She certainly didn't see the slow, ecstatic smile that had crept across his face, as she was halfway to her room before it came to fruition. She did hear rumors later that day from anxious students, however, that said Professor Snape had been caught smiling to himself when he thought no one was looking.

That, apparently, unnerved some people. Especially the ones who had seen him. She supposed she had a bit of sympathy with them because it was one thing to see him being chivalrous to his wife, quite another to imagine him actually being happy. It was like a one-way portal to an alternate universe.

She, herself, found that she was also quite prone to smiling, but no one commented on that. Or, she was smiling until she made it to Arithmancy. She had handed in her paper with a smile, but it died at the frosty reception in which Professor Vector received it. Fortunately, Teddy was there to offer her a comforting hand squeeze before class got underway, but it still hurt to know that Vector's opinion of her had changed so dramatically over something Hermione herself couldn't help. It had been the logical choice to marry Snape, after all. Surely Vector could see that.

But no matter what logic dictated, Vector was horrid to her, so it was a somber Hermione who descended to the Great Hall for dinner after having retreated to her room for some solitude. She was so distracted that she almost missed Severus' call.

"Ms. Granger!" he said, having raised his voice to be heard over the din. She looked up and was surprised to see him standing by the open doors, frowning at her.

"Yes?" she said as she made her way to him through the crowds.

He didn't respond except to hand her an envelope. As soon as it was in her hand, he gave a short bow and headed off to the staff table, robes billowing behind him dramatically.

She fingered the letter and kept looking over at him as she walked to her seat, not really paying attention to anything around her. He'd looked rather cross, but she couldn't think of anything that might have made him cross. Unless he'd heard the rumors. And then it was his own fault.

But he was known for being unfair...

Hesitantly, she opened the envelope and took out the parchment within. Scrawled across the top of the page was a note, saying:

Your presence this morning interrupted the completion of this note in its original intent. It also made it rather redundant, but upon rereading it, I found that I was reluctant to just let all my work composing it go to waste. - S

Hermione,

You've just left here, and unless I am much mistaken, you are upset. I suspect that it is due to something I said or, more likely, how I acted.

I am not going to apologize, however. You cannot expect me to apologize for getting upset when you come bothering me with matters that anyone else could help you with. I am a very busy person, after all.

True, I told you that I was lying down, but I was busy doing that. In fact, I'll have you know that I was very happy being perfectly miserable when you came in. And you ruined everything by being comforting and pleasant. You even had the gall to ease my pain. Such nerve!

So, dear wife, can you not see how I was perfectly entitled to take such a cool tone with you. You had disarmed me, stripped me of my hobby and then insulted my chambers as mussed with a horrid object. No. I will not apologize for my tone. Especially as the horrid object in question belongs to you. And, worse still, you left the object here, reminding me of your presence and all that you have done to me these past few weeks.

I find it rude for you to even expect an apology, as I'm sure you do.

However, I can understand your mood might be affected as much by your injury as by my actions. I do hope that you don't suffer any more than you have on account of that burn. I suppose, if you must, you may come to me for the murtlap lotion, as I believe it is not something that Poppy keeps stocked. But don't expect me to appreciate your intrusion into my brooding nature.

Reluctantly yours,

Severus

PS: Perhaps next time you come by at an unreasonable hour, you will at least be courteous enough to refrain from arguing until we have finished the tea. It is terribly uncivilized to let the tea go cold.

Hermione didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The note was such a perfect representation of Severus that she was tempted to do both. Before she could do either, however, her thoughts were interrupted.

"What's that?" Ginny asked.

Hermione looked up. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were probably sparkling with tears; it must have looked bad, for Ginny frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she replied and gave in to the urge to smile, though she also sniffed. "Absolutely nothing."

"Happy tears?" Ginny asked, her frown receding.

Hermione laughed at Harry's confused scowl as he joined them. "Something like that, although it's a lot more... It's just a lot more."

Ginny smiled softly, then turned her attention to Harry, leaving Hermione alone to reread her note and consider whether the post script was the invitation she thought it was. By the time Severus came to escort her to her room for the night, she decided that she wouldn't ask him if it was; she would just show up.

On the whole, it was a happy Hermione who went to bed that night, lips swollen once more from Severus' parting kisses. She fell asleep thinking that perhaps the Fates weren't the cruel harpies she'd thought them to be not so long ago.

XX

Chapter 20 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Thanks go to Keladry and Southern for all their help. You gals rock!

The next morning, Hermione approached Severus' door with a mixture of dread and anticipation. She was fairly certain that his postscript had been an invitation, but there was always the chance that she was misreading him. They seemed to be very good at misreading each other. In fact, they rather excelled at that.

Still, she was already down there, and she decided that she might as well knock. However, she also decided to knock quietly in case he was asleep, and this time she would also wait for him to answer the door. She had no desire to be treated like an unwelcome guest again.

She waited a full ten seconds before she started fidgeting and tried to decide whether to knock again. Right as she raised her fist, though, the door opened.

"Good morning," Severus said grumpily. He looked like he had just got up when she'd knocked; his hair was sticking out at odd angles, and he was wearing nothing but an old-fashioned nightshirt and his black fuzzy slippers. Trying not to stare, Hermione returned his greeting and entered his chambers when he waved her in.

Once inside, however, they were both at a loss of what to do or say. Hermione looked around his room to avoid staring at him. After a drawn out silence, Hermione finally peeked over at him. He looked like he felt just as awkward as she did.

"Er," Hermione said, feeling the embarrassment rise, "was I correct in assuming that was an invitation in your note?"

To her relief, Severus nodded. "Yes, it was. However, I'll admit that when you didn't question me about it last night, I thought you had either misinterpreted it or weren't interested."

"Ah," Hermione said, still feeling more than a little awkward. "I, er, thought it might be a nice surprise..."

She was feeling very foolish at not having discussed this the night before. She should have realized that he would want advance notice.

"It is."

She looked up at him to find him smiling at her softly, although there was also a bit of mockery in there as well. She smiled back.

"Yes, well, now that we've established that I'm not barging in uninvited, how about some tea?" she said, taking charge of the situation before it became any more awkward.

He nodded. "That would be acceptable, although if you would excuse me, I would like to clean up a bit more."

Her eyes automatically went to his hair.

"Believe it or not, I do wash my hair on a regular basis," he said with a sour look. She blushed at her gaff, but kept her chin up.

"I assume that your hair is persistently oily, like mine is bushy, and Harry's is messy. Perhaps it's just another expression of our magic," Hermione said, thinking aloud.

He raised an eyebrow at that. "There may be something to that, although if that's the case, I hate to think what the magic is trying to express."

Hermione struggled not to smile or otherwise give away her thoughts, but something of them must have escaped, as Severus scowled. "Yes, well, please excuse me for a few minutes."

Hermione waited until the bedroom door closed before giving in to her smile, and then she set about making the tea. Remembering her experience with Severus' horrible shower, she didn't expect him to be long. Sure enough, just when the little egg timer she'd conjured rang, Severus stepped out of his room fully clothed, although his hair was still obviously damp. She also thought he looked a bit chilly, but that could have been her imagination.

"I meant to ask you that first morning why you don't get the shower fixed?" Hermione said as she poured their tea into their cups. When she looked up, it was to find him looking at her with something akin to guilt for a moment. Or so she thought until his lips twitched, and he started chuckling.

At her raised eyebrows, he said, "It isn't broken. I fixed it that way as a timer."

Her eyebrows did not descend. "A timer? And here I was thinking that your persistent bad mood was due to getting a cold shower every morning."

He chuckled a little more. "I rarely stay in long enough to let it get cold anymore."

She harrumphed but didn't say any more as he sat down beside her and handed him his cup. "Well, it certainly would have been nice if you had warned me."

"It had been on my to do list, but as I recall, other matters pushed it out of my mind," he said as he ran his finger along her thigh. She shivered and then took a sip of tea to try and cover her reaction.

"Yes, getting sick does make one spacey, doesn't it?" she said as innocently as possible.

He withdrew his finger abruptly and only grunted in reply. Peeking over, she saw him glaring at his tea, even as he sipped it gracefully.

Regretting her teasing, she shifted her hand to his leg and gave it a friendly squeeze before resuming the sipping of her tea. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed his scowl virtually disappeared, although she wasn't sure that smug look was better. It made her suspicious.

They sat in an expectant silence for a few minutes, neither sure what might be a safe, argument-free topic. That was Hermione's concern, anyway, and she assumed it was Severus' as well until he said, "Despite the rather horrid reminder sitting in my bedroom, I do forget that you spent a night down here."

Hermione nearly choked on her sip of tea and spilled the rest of it down her front. "Yes, well, it was terribly forgettable," she replied sarcastically, mopping her front.

"Please leave the sarcasm to me, dear," Severus said, conjuring another napkin to help her clean up. "As I said before, it doesn't suit you."

She looked up at him, eyebrow raised in wry amusement. "Severus, I do hope you're not trying to create certain roles for us because I'll have you know that I've been sarcastic for quite a few years now, and I'm unlikely to give it up anytime soon."

He rolled his eyes while continuing to wipe the front of her shirt, something she was very aware of and not at all displeased by.

"If sarcasm were truly in your nature, you would have agreed with me in as convincing a tone as you possess and told me how perfectly spiffing I was to take the burden off of you. I say again, it doesn't suit you."

Annoyed, she shooed his hand away from where it was 'mopping' her dry breast. "Well, it isn't like I've had masters of the art to practice on. Give me a few years and I expect even you'll be impressed with the levels of vitriol I can come up with."

He gave her a look of blatant disbelief, which didn't do anything for her deteriorating mood. She was just on the verge of protesting when he got up, muttering, "'Years,' she says. Months, more like, and then she'll be showing me up for the rest of our lives."

"Did I just hear you compliment me?" she asked as he disappeared into his bedroom.

"Of course not. Don't be silly!" he called out gruffly.

She was still wearing a bit of a silly grin when he came back, towel in hand. He knelt down in front of her and resumed rubbing her front, trying to soak up the last drop of moisture from her chest area. She just passively watched him with amusement.

After a minute or so of his overly careful ministrations, she finally said, "I think my robe is as dry as it's going to get without a drying charm, Severus."

He frowned slightly. "I suppose so, although the tea is still in there. If you took off your robes, we could clean them more effectively and treat any burns you may have sustained."

Suddenly uncomfortable with his scrutiny and overcome with a case of modesty, she decided a diversion was in order. She smiled and reached out to stroke his cheek, surprised when he closed his eyes and nuzzled her hand.

"Black hides stains well," she said softly, causing Severus' eyes to pop open and then narrow in her direction. "And the tannin will see to any burns I might have received."

Now frowning, Severus got up and began to move away, but she caught his hand and kept him from retreating.

"I'm sorry, Severus, but... Weren't you the one who chastised me about the incivility of letting the tea go cold?" she said, directing his attention to his half empty cup.

He looked from the cup to her, raising an eyebrow. "Are we on the verge of another fight?"

Something in her stomach knotted. "I don't know. Are we?"

He pulled his hand away but didn't retreat. Instead, he sat down beside her and reached for his tea. After taking a sip (and grimacing at the temperature), he said to the fireplace, "I will never force you to do anything you are uncomfortable with."

Hermione snorted, which at least made Severus look at her instead of the fireplace. "That's absolute bullocks, and you know it." His hurt look made her sigh. "You made me marry you, which was uncomfortable; you asked to court me, which is frighteningly uncomfortable; you make me reevaluate my assumptions and values, which is more than just uncomfortable, and you react unpredictably, which, believe me, makes me very uncomfortable."

His face had, not surprisingly, grown rather thunderous, and he made to get up. She took his hand in hers, digging in with her short nails when he tried to pull away. "*But...* just because I'm uncomfortable doesn't mean I'm objecting to any of that."

His face had lost most of its thunder and retreated into a low level sulk. "I did *not* make you marry me. You could have refused."

Hermione compressed her lips and looked at him. "I'm trying to explain that I like you, either despite of, or perhaps even *because* of, the discomfort, you grumpy grouch. So, do you really want to argue right now?"

He took another sip of tea. "Perhaps not. It would be uncivilized, after all."

She refilled her cup and took a sip before adding, "That said, I do appreciate you being sensitive of my feelings."

He glared at her. "Do *you* want to argue?" At her confused headshake, he growled, "Because I thought I told you never to use that word in relation to me."

She tried to suppress her grin, but failed. "I'm sorry," she said rather cheerfully. "I'll try to remember that you're an insensitive git from now on."

He glared at her out of the corners of his eyes, but his mouth quirked up. All he said was, "Better."

Severus seemed unwilling to make Hermione any more uncomfortable, so by the time she left, the only contact they had was a furtive kiss he placed on her cheek just as she was heading out the door. Although she would have been happy with another snogging session, she was equally pleased by his reticence and also by the unexpected innocence of stealing such a kiss. In truth, she smiled more from that small gesture than she had from his previous kisses.

All in all, it was shaping up to be a rather nice day. She and Severus had understood one another, Ancient Runes had been both interesting and challenging, and now she was happily on the way to sate her growing hunger in the Great Hall.

"Hi," a familiar voice said next to her. She looked over and smiled at Teddy.

"Hi, yourself."

"So what are your plans for lunch?" he asked, grinning.

"Oh, the usual. Why? Do you have something else in mind?"

His grin broadened, crinkling his eyes jovially. "*Well...*" he started drawling, but before he could say any more, Hermione felt someone nudge her. She turned to find Harry and Ginny grinning at them.

"So, what's the plan?" Harry asked brightly.

Hermione turned back expecting to see Teddy grimacing but was pleasantly surprised to find him beaming.

"I was about to propose..."

"Too late for that, I'm afraid," Ginny said cheekily. "She's already married."

Teddy turned a bit pink but continued, "...that we snag some food from the hall and head out to the lake. It's a gorgeous day."

"Excellent idea, Nott!" Harry said, clapping Teddy on the back. "How about we go scavenge while the girls find a good spot?"

Teddy agreed, and they rushed off without even consulting the girls about it, so intent were they on getting to the hall before the masses.

"Ginny," Hermione scolded, turning on her friend after the boys were out of hearing range, "that was terrible of you!"

Ginny didn't bother looking contrite. "Oh, it was all in good fun, and he knows it."

"You embarrassed him."

"So?"

Hermione looked at her friend a little more carefully. "So, that's a mean thing to do."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "And we must always be perfectly polite to our friends, right?"

Hermione opened her mouth and closed it again angrily.

Ginny eased up a bit and smiled. "I was just teasing him, that's all. If he was mortally offended, I'll apologize, and make up and all that. Okay?"

Hermione twisted her mouth down, still displeased by Ginny's tone, but she knew her friend was being sincere. "Fine. But it still seems mean to rub his face in it."

"Rub his face in it?" Ginny asked, dropping her playful act. "In what?"

Hermione realized her mistake, but there wasn't really a way out if it now. "Oh, erm, he sort of tried to propose."

"What? When?" Ginny demanded, a little more loudly than Hermione liked.

"It's more that he *would* have proposed, had no one else done so. Or, that's what he told Severus."

"Wait a moment," Ginny said, grabbing Hermione's arm and stopping them both. "Nott told Snape that he would propose to save you from the law?"

"Yes."

"But..." Ginny looked a little upset. "He said you were just friends."

"We are. He's seemed pleased enough that Severus stepped in." Ginny looked at her suspiciously, irritating Hermione. "It's not like he's made any moves on me!"

Ginny didn't really lose her suspicious look, but she let go of Hermione. "Of course he hasn't. But--"

"But nothing! He's been there for me these last couple of weeks in the same way you and Harry have been, and I really like and appreciate his friendship, so don't even think about chasing him off!"

Ginny scowled, but nodded her head in agreement. "If he tries anything..."

"I will be the first to tell him that I am a married woman. But I really *don't* think he feels that way about me. He's a friend, full stop."

"Okay."

Hermione and Ginny started walking again, although in a somewhat stilted silence, and made it to the Entrance Hall just as the boys came out of the Great Hall, spoils in hand. They didn't seem to see the girls, so Hermione waved her hand and called out to them.

"Ms. Granger!" a sharp voice exclaimed from behind, startling her. She turned around to find Professor Vector glaring at her. "Your behavior is unseemly, especially for that of a Head Girl. Ten points from Gryffindor."

Hermione and Ginny could do no more than gape as the Arithmancy teacher brushed by them on her way to the Great Hall. Harry and Teddy caught up to them, and Harry looked over his shoulder at the door the professor had gone through while Teddy gave Hermione a sympathetic look and a shoulder squeeze.

"What's eating her?" Ginny asked.

"I don't know," Hermione said mournfully. "She's been like that to me ever since I married Severus."

"Why would that bug her?" Harry asked, perplexed.

"I wish I knew." Hermione shrugged as Teddy pulled her and her friends out into the sunshine and out of the eyes of any curious onlookers. Hermione bit her lip and tried to forestall tears by blinking rapidly and covering it by shielding her eyes from the sun.

She knew she hadn't fooled anyone though, especially when Teddy drew her into a hug while she pulled herself together. Fortunately, the warmth, friends and food went a long way to soothing Hermione's hurt feelings, so the lunch hour wasn't a complete loss.

The afternoon passed by uneventfully, though it was on the relentless side, so as she finished dinner, she couldn't help but smile when Severus came by to pick her up.

"What are you getting out of the library tonight, my dear?" Severus asked as they exited the Great Hall.

"Actually, I was wondering if you might be interested in just walking tonight?" Hermione asked pensively. She didn't have any homework whose research couldn't wait until tomorrow. His eyebrows rose in surprise, but he nodded and changed their course.

They went up several flights of stairs and ended up in a long, wide corridor. Hermione vaguely remembered it from her explorations in her fourth year, but back then she had been scared away by the very empty and silent feeling the corridor possessed. She shivered slightly, feeling the silence, although it didn't seem so overpoweringly empty with Severus by her side.

"Have you been here before?" Severus asked, and she was surprised his voice penetrated the eerie silence. She nodded and explained her experience. Smiling slightly, he agreed. "Yes, although, I must say that's what attracts me to this corridor. The rest of the castle is so lively you can almost hear it moving about, but here... I find it peaceful."

Hermione nodded. "I can see that." They wandered down the corridor, their footsteps oddly muffled. It was then that she realized what was so different about the corridor. "There's no echo!"

She looked up at Severus and found him smirking at her. "Well spotted."

She shrugged off his sarcasm. "Last time I was here I was alone."

"And you weren't keen on calling attention to yourself?"

She glared at him. "Actually, as I recall, at that point I was trying to avoid unwanted attention. A lot of girls were jealous about Viktor."

Severus scowled briefly, but nodded. "Ah."

They walked in silence a little longer. Hermione finally broke it by asking, "May I ask you a personal question?"

He chuckled. "If I said 'no,' would that stop you?"

Hermione frowned. "Yes, as a matter of fact, it would." She paused. "Was that a 'no' then?"

"No," he sighed. "Of course you may ask me a personal question, although I cannot promise to answer it."

She nibbled on her lower lip for a few moments, trying to think of how best to frame her question. Finally, when she could feel Severus getting restless, she blurted, "Were you and Professor Vector ever lovers?"

Severus stopped, stunned. She stopped as well and looked up at him anxiously, hoping she hadn't offended him. It took a few moments for the shock to wear off, but when it did, he laughed. Loudly. For quite some time.

"No," he finally said, once his laughter had waned sufficiently. "No, Septima and I have never even really flirted. Why do you ask?"

Hermione frowned. "Because ever since I married you, she's been horrid to me. I wouldn't take it so personally, except that beforehand we were getting along quite well. Well enough that I was figuring on pursuing a friendship after leaving the school." She looked down, not wanting to show Severus just how distressed she was. "The only reason I could come up with for her change was that she was jealous of me."

Severus put his finger under Hermione's chin and raised her face. He looked appalled. "Hermione, you of all people should know that when a person's behavior changes suddenly there might be more sinister reasons than simple jealousy! What if she's an impostor or under the Imperius? For God's sake, Hermione! You should have mentioned this sooner!"

Hermione backed up a little, both chastised and annoyed. "And what if it is just jealousy as I thought it was? How would you explain to her the tests being done to prove she's who she is? I'm not going to throw accusations around, even if I thought they had merit!"

"If it is just jealousy, she would be perfectly reasonable about getting tested because she knows the dangers! She's a logician, for Circe's sake. She'd understand!"

"And then she would review the possible suspects for who suspected her, and it would boil down to me, and she'd behave even more horribly towards me."

"What has she done?" Severus asked, concern now in his voice.

Hermione shook her head with a bitter laugh. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing except cold glares and generally frosty behavior. I'm almost positive she's not an impostor because she hasn't behaved out of character, she's just been cold."

"But that *is* out of character for her behavior toward you," Severus pointed out.

"But she's been her same old self to everyone else. Her classes have been the same. Everything is the same except her treating me like a blister, and that started immediately after you and I got married. Logically, it makes more sense for her to be jealous rather than to be an impostor."

"What about the Imperius?"

Hermione hesitated. "Who would do so just to harass me?"

"I can think of several people who would be willing to do anything to get to you."

"But she hasn't *done* anything. She hasn't even been threatening. Believe me, I would have reported that if she had. I assume that anyone who wants to get to me would do so for more substantial purposes than to wreak havoc on my standing as the universal teacher's pet."

"Unless, of course, they knew your boggart?" Severus said flippantly.

Hermione snorted. "Yes, well, my boggart has changed substantially since third year."

Severus chuckled. "I'm glad to hear that."

Hermione grumbled something about boggarts wearing vulture hats, but then sighed, shoulders slumped. "You won't mention this to anyone, will you?"

"She hasn't threatened you?"

"Not even an intimidation."

"And you would let me know if she does?"

"Yes, you and the Headmaster, of course. I'm not stupid, you know." Severus had nothing to say to that, so she took that as her point won. But, sensing that he was still worried, she added, "Besides which, even if she did attack me, which I really, really, really doubt will happen, I think that I can control my power enough to ward off all but a Killing Curse."

That didn't seem to ease Severus' mind. "Don't underestimate the effectiveness of a surprise attack!"

Hermione laughed mirthlessly. "I won't, but at the same time, her behavior toward me has eliminated the possibility of a complete surprise attack."

Severus still wasn't convinced. "Promise me that you'll be careful around her."

Sighing, Hermione agreed. "I will be. Don't worry."

She was surprised when he said very softly, "I can't promise not to."

She took his hand in hers and gave it a snug squeeze before they continued their long, slow walk around Hogwarts.

The next morning, Hermione was roused by a knock on her door. Dragging herself out of bed, she pulled on her dressing robe and opened the door to find Severus standing on the other side. He looked *cheerful*.

Not even bothering to greet him, she left the door open and retreated to the sofa, collapsing onto it haphazardly.

"I am starting to gather that you aren't a morning person," Severus said after closing the door and sitting down beside her gracefully. She grunted in reply.

Having closed her eyes as soon as she was seated, she was vaguely surprised when Severus took her hand and placed a hot cup in it. Bringing it to her nose, she was pleased to smell tea. Cracking her eyes open a notch, she carefully sipped the tea, feeling a bit rejuvenated almost immediately.

After half the cup was consumed, she finally managed to open her eyes all the way, only to find Severus watching her with obvious amusement.

"Good morning," he said, still too cheerful.

She set her cup down and stretched, yawning, before picking her cup up again and nodding at him. "Morning."

Severus took his own tea and relaxed back into the sofa, still watching her. "I thought I would repay the favor of your visit," he offered.

"What time is it?" Hermione croaked out.

"A little after six."

It took a moment to register, but when it did, Hermione looked at Severus askance. "Six? Six in the morning?"

"Judging by the angle of the sun, I would say so, yes."

Hermione closed her eyes, bringing up her hand to pinch the bridge of her nose. "And when did we get back last night?"

"About midnight, as I recall." He was enjoying her discomfort far too much.

She pinched her nose a bit harder. "And it would be terribly rude of me to go back to bed, wouldn't it?"

"You don't need to stand by social conventions for my sake," he drawled. "Although, if you wished to be a polite hostess, you could always invite me to join you."

Finally, Hermione cracked a grin. "Was that the purpose of visiting this early?"

"Of course not! I came merely for the pleasure of your company."

She hummed in disbelief and took another sip of her tea. After another rather large yawn, she finally woke up enough to look at Severus properly. He raised his eyebrow, at which she smiled.

"I never would have guessed you were a morning person," she said mildly.

"I'm not," he said. "I'm afraid that I'm normally about as fond of mornings as you seem to be."

"And today is different because...?"

"Because I got the pleasure of waking you up."

Hermione gave him a brief glare. "That's not very nice."

He smiled. "Probably not, but at least this way I get to see you without your clothes on."

Hermione took a small pillow and threw it at Severus, who surprisingly laughed as he caught it. "Now, now, my dear. Surely you've learned better than to resort to violence."

"Not at six in the bloody morning, I haven't!" Hermione said, tugging her dressing robe together more effectively while a smile was also tugging at her lips.

"Ah. I'll have to remember that."

Severus stayed till it was time to go down to breakfast and was annoyingly cheerful the entire time. She loved seeing him so playful, but all the same, she really wished he could have chosen a better time of day to display it.

The rest of the day whirled by quickly. By the end of it, she and Dumbledore had been so caught up in discussing the theory behind magical manifestations that they were surprised by the dinner bell. Although she was a bit annoyed to have to cut such a fascinating conversation short, she reluctantly made her way to the Great Hall with Dumbledore when he told her that if he were the cause of her not eating another meal, he would be subject to Poppy's wrath. Truth be told, she found herself to be on the ravenous side, so she didn't protest *too* strenuously.

They arrived a bit on the early side, so Hermione was relegated to the empty Gryffindor table while the headmaster made his way to the half-full staff table. Severus was

seated already, looking thoughtful. He looked up at something the headmaster said, and his eyes jumped over to her. He offered her a quick quirk of the lips in greeting, which she returned.

She was tempted to go over and say hello, but just then Harry and Ginny came into the hall, so she stayed where she was. Neither of them looked particularly cheerful, and Harry was hovering over Ginny in a protective manner. When they sat down next to her, she noticed Ginny looked rather ill.

"Are you all right?" she asked tentatively, not knowing what mood Ginny might be in.

Ginny shrugged as she helped herself to a bun.

Hoping Harry might be a little more helpful, Hermione looked to him. He shrugged as well, but looked a lot more concerned than Ginny did. "She had an attack of vertigo."

Hermione looked back at Ginny, alarmed. "Weren't you flying today?"

Both Harry and Ginny nodded, Ginny looking annoyed. When she looked up and saw Hermione's expression, though, she smiled reassuringly. "I only got about two feet off the ground before I got dizzy, so it wasn't too terrible." She played with the bun a bit distractedly. "But it's so strange. I've never been affected like that before."

"Maybe you're coming down with something," Hermione soothed.

Ginny shrugged again and nodded. Harry, however, looked more cheerful. He gave Ginny a quick squeeze and concurred, saying she would probably be better by the next game.

Ginny was the first to leave after eating only the mutilated bun and a handful of grapes. She pleaded homework, and although neither Harry nor Hermione believed her, neither was willing to push Ginny too far. Instead, they exchanged worried looks and tried to pass the rest of the meal talking about their days, though conversation petered out as their minds drifted to different subjects: Harry on his wife's health and Hermione on her conversation with Dumbledore.

After Harry left, Hermione was so distracted by thoughts on magical theory that she was unaware of how much time had passed until a voice over her shoulder said, "Are you finished, my dear?"

Hermione looked up at Severus with a smile and a nod. Her tablemates still looked at Severus with wonder; she supposed she couldn't blame them. If she hadn't been the object of his affection, so to speak, she would have been fairly boggled at the sight of Severus smiling at someone almost fondly. In public.

She thought it was rather mean of Severus to prove the rumors true, knowing how much it disturbed the students, but she could see the appeal, and she certainly wasn't going to criticize him over it. As she got up and bid her friends goodnight, she noticed they were already resuming their previous conversations.

She smiled inwardly at the adaptability of the human spirit.

Severus grabbed her attention once more by taking possession of her hand and placing it in the crook of his arm, just as he did every night. She smiled up at him as they made their way out.

"Is there a detour on tonight's schedule?" he asked her mockingly. She smiled despite the tone, knowing he seemed to enjoy their detours as much as she did.

"Yes, there is. Professor Dumbledore mentioned a book he thought I might enjoy."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Might enjoy?"

"I think his exact words were, 'I hesitate to recommend this book to you for fear that you will forget to breathe whilst reading it.'"

Severus' other eyebrow met the first near his hairline. "The Headmaster said this?"

Hermione nodded. "I meant to run to the library before dinner, but we lost track of time during our discussion, so this is literally the first opportunity I've had."

Severus chuckled quietly, startling a first year who was heading for his common room. "Or perhaps he made certain to keep you busy until you were out of time. You know how he loves his little manipulations."

Hermione harrumphed, but without much bite. Severus was still, rightfully, insecure about how the Headmaster's machinations were the only reason for their relationship, and she didn't want to put him on the defensive.

A sudden thought occurred to her. "Or, it could be that he wanted to make sure you were with me when I went to get *Maricum Monsura* isn't a dangerous book, is it?"

Severus looked at her in surprise.

"That's the book he recommended?" She nodded. He seemed to hold his breath for a moment, but then shook his head as he exhaled. "No. Powerful, but not dangerous."

She looked up at the wonder in his tone and saw him gazing at her as if seeing her for the first time.

"What?" she asked, suddenly nervous.

"Perhaps he did want me to be with you, though. He knows I would love to see that book."

She arched her brows in surprise. "You haven't seen it? But it's here in the library!"

He gave her a crooked smile. "Some books choose their readers rather than the other way around."

Her brow wrinkled in confusion, but before she could ask him to explain, he tugged her forward and into the library.

They both nodded to Madam Pince as they made their way into the Restricted Section; Hermione still held her breath every time she crossed the threshold, irrationally expecting some barrier to keep her from all those lovely books.

She heard Severus chuckling and glanced over to see him looking at her with unconcealed amusement.

"What?"

He straightened his face and raised an eyebrow in question. She huffed.

"What was that look for?"

His lips twitched. "Your expression was... telling."

"Oh?" she asked, prodding him gently. "And what did it say?"

"It said that you are very much in danger of forgetting to breathe if an interesting enough book is placed before you."

She snorted. "Yes, well, Ron and Harry could have told you that years go."

She tensed as soon as the words were out of her mouth, regretting them instantly. She felt it was in bad taste to keep bringing Ron into the conversation with Severus, but it had just slipped out.

"I figured that out all on my very own," Severus murmured into her ear and then moved past her and into the darker part of the stacks. He looked back with a beckoning finger and added, "But then again, it is also common knowledge."

Hermione relaxed slightly and followed Severus, taking his hand that was still extended toward her.

He led her down the stacks to a very dark corner, and for a moment she was tempted to ask him if he had brought her here for something different altogether, but then she caught sight of the book. It was hard to miss, really, as it was glowing.

As she stepped closer to the shelves, she examined the spine with awe. "It's so beautiful!" she whispered, reaching out to touch it.

"No!" Severus barked, grabbing her hand and wrenching it away from the book. "That's not the book you want."

Hermione couldn't look away from the book though and didn't understand what Severus was talking about. It had to be the book. It was calling to her.

"Hermione," she heard it say. "Hermione! Look at me!"

Suddenly, she felt hands on her head turning her away from the book. Her eyes strained to keep it in sight, but then there was a mouth on hers, and teeth nipping at her lips, a tongue sneaking its way into her mouth, and oh! That felt good.

She closed her eyes and hummed, opening her mouth to welcome the invader. Her hand was released, and she immediately sought out the neck attached to the face attached to the lips that were making her melt.

She felt hands holding her, sliding down her torso until they held her hips and pulled possessively until her hips were flush with another pair of hips, and oh, God, it felt so good when he stroked her bum like that.

She ground against him as she kissed him back, and she felt him groan, a deep guttural sound that was more vibration than noise. Suddenly, those hands clenching her hips lifted her up, and she was swung around. Her back was now against the bookshelves, and her bum was resting on the barest hint of a shelf as Severus' hands urged her legs apart and around his hips. She eagerly complied.

With him situated between her hips, they were able to get closer; he was pressing her against the books almost painfully, but all she wanted was for him to be closer still.

Their kiss had evolved into something frantic and needy. She clung to him desperately while he held onto her just as desperately.

Unfortunately, they both needed to breathe, and so they unwillingly ripped themselves away from each other, and stared at the other, panting heavily.

Hermione was the first to recover, and as she released a very shaky breath, she asked, "What was that book?"

Severus was still panting heavily, and it looked like he was only barely on the cusp of controlling himself, but the question cleared his eyes a little.

"Nimue's diary," he panted, still holding her to him possessively.

"Oh."

And just like that, the spell was broken. His eyes cleared completely, and a slight blush overtook his cheeks. He helped her to the floor and stepped back, aborting a move to help her smooth out her robes. "My apologies, Hermione,"

She looked at him sharply. "Whatever for?"

"I told you I wouldn't... I know you don't like it when I lose control like that."

She shook her head with an exasperated smile. "Severus, I..." She didn't know exactly what she could say, so she decided to just kiss him instead.

After a nice, leisurely, clarifying kiss, she withdrew and ran her finger along his jaw. "It's all about the circumstances, Severus," she explained. "And I must say, that circumstance was damn hot!"

He growled and pulled her to him, though instead of kissing her senseless once again (as she was hoping he would), he thrust his nose in her hair and nibbled on her earlobe.

She shivered when he lightly blew on her ear, and then asked in a husky voice, "And how am I to tell the difference between these circumstances?"

He withdrew and she shrugged in answer before pulling his face down to kiss her once more.

After they parted yet again, she leaned her head on his chest, listening to his heart pounding. After a few heartbeats, she finally said, "That's something you'll just have to learn along the way, as unfair as that sounds."

He huffed, though she couldn't tell whether it was in laughter or annoyance, but she hoped it was laughter as his arms tightened around her in a satisfying hug. When he finally let go and drew back, she could see his eyes sparkling with good humor along with a fair amount of lust.

"Far be it from me to require fairness in another."

She laughed loud enough to merit a distant "Shh" from Madam Pince's desk. Both of them were a bit chagrined at that, and so, with a smothered giggle on Hermione's part, they decided it was best if they just retrieved the *Maricum Monsura* and left.

They spent the rest of the evening in Hermione's room, poring over the tome and discussing arcane magical theory, although both of them were guilty of letting their thoughts stray on occasion.

Severus opened his door the next morning to an irate Hermione.

"Where were you?"

"Excuse me?" Severus said, looking amused.

"I thought you said you would come by this morning!"

"I was just about to leave to meet you." His words were belied by his dressing robe and mussed hair.

Hermione put her hands on her hips, clearly not impressed. "I'm sure." She gave him a rather frosty look and then made herself at home on the sofa, summoning the tea service and conjuring boiling water.

She did this all in a flurry of righteous anger, and when she noticed Severus was not on the sofa with her, she looked up to find him watching her with bemusement.

"Well?" she asked imperiously, indicating he should sit himself down beside her post haste. He raised his eyebrow and chuckled, meandering over to the sofa at his own pace.

"You really aren't a morning person," he said, taking the proffered cup.

"We've already covered that," she snapped.

"Indeed." His lips were twitching rather violently, making Hermione glare at him.

"Are you laughing at my expense?"

"Since I am the one suffering your bad mood, I should say I am laughing at my expense, not yours."

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but then shut it again in a sour line. "I hate it when you're right."

"Oh, dear. I'm afraid this relationship will be a rocky one, then."

Despite herself, she snorted. She then summoned a pillow and whapped him. He was only barely able to set down his tea before the pillow came in contact with him. She managed to hit him two more times before he caught the pillow and wrenched it from her grip.

"There is no excuse for such behavior at this late hour!" he roared, though his eyes were twinkling. She shrank back in surprise, but then leaned toward him, poking him with her finger.

"And there is no excuse to take that tone with me!" she said back almost as fiercely.

He grabbed her finger before she could poke him again and pulled on it. Not expecting such a move, she overbalanced and squawked as she fell into his lap.

He placed a firm hand on her back, preventing her from getting up, but she managed to flip herself over so that she was at least facing up. She was only mildly surprised to see him smiling down at her.

"It's not polite to poke people," he said, gently poking her in the chest.

She laughed. "No, it's not. It's almost as uncivilized as letting our tea go cold... yet again."

"Mm. Perhaps we are not good examples of civilized society?"

She laughed again. "Perhaps not."

She hummed when he brought his hand up to stroke her hair, squirming a little in his lap to make herself more comfortable. He withstood her adjustments with only a mild grimace of discomfort and then breathed a sigh of relief when she settled down. He resumed stroking her hair, running his fingers through it in a light, teasing way. Her eyes drifted shut as she gave herself up to relaxation.

After a few contented minutes, he said, "Perhaps being civilized is overrated?"

She shook her head minutely. "No, I don't think so. It just depends on what you qualify as civilized."

"And how would you define it?"

"Caring more for others than for yourself."

He chuckled, and she had to open her eyes to see whether it was mockingly or not. It was.

"Living by the golden rule?"

"No, it's more than just that. It's about unconditional love. It's the ability to think about how your actions will affect everyone else and choose others above yourself."

"And, by that definition, would you say you're civilized?"

Hermione frowned. "I try to be, but..."

He chuckled again, and this time there was an unmistakable note of mockery in it. He softened it, however, by saying, "It is an impossibly difficult standard you've set for yourself, my dear."

She opened her mouth to respond, but was cut off by the sound of his alarm. It rang twice, meaning breakfast was over already.

She sighed and lifted herself up to a sitting position. She smiled wryly at Severus, who smiled back just as wryly.

"Even if we have been so uncivilized as to let the tea go cold^{again}, I think I preferred it this way," he said, stroking a stray lock of hair out of her face.

She smiled in agreement. "And see, that fits perfectly with my idea of civilized behavior."

He raised his eyebrow mockingly. "You mean to say that all that contented humming was just a decision made for my benefit?"

She smiled saucily and then kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Ah, what's good for others is often what's good for oneself."

She left for class with his accusatory "Hedonist" weighing nothing on her heart.

Hermione was making her way to the library when she saw students gathered in what was clearly a confrontation in the making. Figuring it was a couple of hotheads intent on doing each other harm, she shouldered her way through the crowd, telling everyone in her Head Girl voice to disperse and be on their way.

When she reached the center of the gathering, she was surprised to find Teddy and a sixth-year Slytherin aiming their wands at each other, looks of loathing on both their faces.

She was so surprised, she didn't know what to say until the sixth-year sneered and said, "Oh, look, *Teddy*, here's your girlfriend to save you." He then lowered his wand

and made a show of turning his back, making his way out through the crowd.

Hermione quickly looked over to Teddy, who had lowered his wand, but was still staring at the spot the other boy had disappeared through with distaste.

"Teddy?" she asked as she took a step forward.

His face was still tight with anger when he looked her way, and she was surprised when he didn't relax. Instead, his expression grew pinched, and he shook his head shortly. "Hermione," he threw at her and then stormed off.

Hermione stood there for a moment feeling a bit bewildered, but then noticed that people were still lingering and staring at her. She scowled at them and was somewhat grateful when they immediately scattered. Sometimes it was good to be scary.

She continued on her way to the library, wondering what the confrontation was about. It was so rare for Slytherins to fight with each other in public that she was more than a little concerned, especially as she had the feeling that the fight had something to do with her and Teddy's friendship.

Despite her curiosity, she had studying to do, and managed to push the confrontation from the front of her mind. It was about half an hour till dinner when she got the feeling she was being watched. Looking up, she saw Teddy leaning against the bookshelf in front of her table, watching her.

He didn't seem to have cheered up much.

"Care to sit down?" she asked, trying for a casual tone.

He considered it with a furrowed brow for a moment, then pushed himself off the shelf and sat down opposite her.

Although she was terribly curious, she thought it would probably be better if he were the one to initiate the conversation. So, she smiled at him warmly before turning back to her book, letting him ruminate in peace.

It wasn't long before he said something, however. "It seems people have the wrong impression about us."

She looked up at him curiously. "What, do they think we're lovers or something?" she asked mockingly. He went rather pink and nodded. She scoffed. "Well, they're idiots. What do you expect?"

He laughed insecurely, but didn't look at her. Something about that made her uncomfortable, like he was hiding something from her.

"I suppose most of them don't know me well enough to know that I would *never* cheat on my husband, no matter who he is. And I suppose that they've noticed that Severus' attitude has shifted slightly where you're concerned, and they interpret that as jealousy or some such rot." She sighed, leaned back in her chair and ran her hand through her hair, cursing softly when it got caught halfway down. She brought the knot forward and was looking at that when she added, "It *is* rather insulting though, isn't it?"

Glancing up, she saw Teddy's face darken. Rolling her eyes, she continued, "I mean, everyone knows me as 'The Smart One,' and I'm sure most people recognize that you're intelligent. You'd think they would realize that if we were having it off, we would be a little more discreet about it. We wouldn't be seen hanging out with each other or enjoying each other's company."

He laughed again, this time with more feeling. She watched him, waiting until he was looking at her before smiling ruefully. "If you want to stop spending time with me, I'll understand, but I think there are better ways to remedy this situation."

He was still quite pink and subdued. "I don't want to put a strain on your relationship with Professor Snape."

She snorted. "You haven't so far. He said he was glad I've finally found myself an intelligent friend."

Teddy raised his eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Yes."

He hesitated for a moment. "So... you've told him about us?"

Hermione snorted disdainfully. "Of course I have!"

His lips quirked and he nodded his head, although he didn't look particularly happy. "Oh."

"Did you want me to keep our friendship a big secret?" she asked a trifle impatiently. "Because I assure you that if Severus had found out about it in some other way, there would have been slightly more to his behavior than favoring you less obviously."

Teddy snorted and shook his head. "No. No, I'm glad you want to tell people about us." He flushed a slightly darker pink. "That didn't come out the way I meant."

She laughed. "I understand what you're saying." She reached out and patted his hand. "I'm glad to have you as a friend, too."

He looked down at their hands and smiled, although he held it in place just a bit too long. She again got the feeling that there was something more to this than what he'd told her, but decided to trust that he'd tell her when he was ready.

She started putting away her notes and books. "Well, I don't know about you, but creating scandals makes me hungry. Want to help stimulate my appetite further by walking me to dinner?"

He chuckled softly, stood up and held out his arm. "Nothing would make me happier than to stimulate your appetite, my lady."

She took his arm, and they made their way to the Great Hall ignoring the furtive stares and whispers of the weak-minded gossips.

Hermione had to admit that she was somewhat uncomfortable flouting their friendship quite so openly, as she wasn't sure what Severus would think of this behavior. He tolerated it with Harry because Harry was safely married, besides knowing that he was more a brother to her than anything. Teddy was neither.

However, her worries were for naught when they came upon Severus as he was entering the Entrance Hall. Teddy changed their course to intersect with his and then gallantly handed her off to her husband. Severus raised an eyebrow, but happily took possession of her arm, even going so far as to bestow a tiny smile on Teddy.

Teddy bowed goodbye to the two of them and then sped off to the Great Hall.

Severus looked down at Hermione questioningly. "What was that all about?" he asked as they slowly followed in Teddy's wake.

"It seems there's a new rumor going around that Teddy and I are having a passionate affair or something."

"And he thought I was going to hex him?" Severus said, amused.

Hermione smiled. "No. I think he's one of the few who isn't worried about that, knowing that you know me better than to mistrust me so."

Severus smiled at her in a pleased sort of way. "It would be foolish indeed."

She wasn't quite sure whether he was commenting on his faith in her, or the thought of her being unfaithful, but she found it didn't matter much.

She sighed. "I hate to ask this, but you know how the gossip mongers are, so perhaps you'd be willing to put on a show of trust?"

He raised his eyebrow again. "In you or Mr. Nott?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Both of us, preferably." She sighed. "Although, thinking about it, that would just encourage rumors of a more lascivious nature, would it?"

Severus hummed in agreement. "It does tend to work that way. I suggest we all just act as we have been. It will blow over eventually."

She gave his arm a bit of a squeeze and decided to change the topic. "You have rounds tonight, don't you?"

He patted her hand. "Not until late, although I'm afraid that if there's a detour tonight, we will need to keep it short. I have marking to catch up on."

"Of course," Hermione replied cheerfully, though she was a bit disappointed. "I should probably catch up on my work as well."

He smiled at her and raised her hand to his lips for a gentle kiss before sweeping off to the head table. She smiled with satisfaction as she sat down to eat, with a brief glance at Teddy, who had been watching the scene with a bemused expression. She smiled at him warmly and was pleased when his face softened a little before he looked down and busied himself with food.

XXI

Chapter 21 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Huge thanks to both Sun and Keladry for their sharp eyes and kind encouragement.

*This chapter is dedicated to Maddyridle. *hugs**

Friday passed in a blur of academics. It started when she and Severus got into a discussion on the potion essay she was due to turn in that morning. The discussion had got slightly out of hand, and in the end, she needed a note from Severus explaining to Dumbledore why she was late.

Dumbledore had been suitably amused. He even let her stay a few minutes after class to finish up her potion. Of course, as he was doing paperwork while she tended her potion, it wasn't a huge sacrifice on his part.

After a rushed lunch, she made it to Transfiguration on time, although she did panic a bit when McGonagall announced that they would be taking an abbreviated, mock NEWT that class period. Needless to say, she wanted to review the questions after class, despite the loud groan that elicited from Harry.

By the time dinner was through, she had convinced herself that she would get a lousy score on the test because she knew *justnew* she had misspelled one of the spells in her haste to answer the questions completely. If she'd been so rushed as to do that, there was no telling what other mistakes she'd made.

She was still reeling in the shame of it when Severus came by to pick her up.

"Have you finished, my dear?" he asked, startling her out of her worry.

She looked up quickly before taking a big breath and exhaling, trying to relax. She nodded and gave him a small smile. "I don't think I could eat another bite."

He smirked, although it fell slightly when he glanced down at her mostly full plate. "Are you sure? You've hardly touched your meal."

"I'm stuffed," Hermione said. When he furrowed his brow and opened his mouth to protest, she looked around and noticed people were starting to stare at them, so she added hastily, "Really, I'm full."

An eyebrow of his made its way up as he looked at her doubtfully, but much to her relief, he didn't press the issue; perhaps he was aware of the Gryffindors staring at him as well. Instead, he extended his hand, which she gratefully accepted.

They left the whispering Gryffindor table and leisurely made their way up to her room. Severus accepted her invitation in, and they settled themselves comfortably on the sofa. Severus then called and dispatched a house-elf for some wine and cheese.

"Really, Severus, I'm not hungry," Hermione protested.

Severus just raised an eyebrow at her. "And who said it was for your enjoyment, my dear?"

Hermione flushed and then frowned. She opened her mouth to protest, but stopped when his lips quirked minutely. Pinching her mouth shut, she glared at him and snorted in annoyance. Before she could come up with any halfway decent retort, the cheese plate appeared, as did a bottle of red.

Severus immediately helped himself to some roquefort. Hermione wrinkled her nose in distaste, having never liked blue cheese. Severus saw her look and grinned, smacking his lips just slightly.

"I must say cheese is a wonderful way to finish a meal. Wouldn't you agree, my dear?"

She shook her head, slightly overwhelmed by the smell of some warm brie. It smelled rather like dirty nappies, but she did love the taste, especially slathered on fresh French bread, which had also been provided.

Her mind having been thoroughly diverted from worrying about her test results, she found that she was starting to salivate. She also noticed her stomach was rumbling very slightly. She looked up to see Severus watching her with amusement and almost decided to not eat anything just to spite him, but quickly realized that would be beyond

foolish.

Taking a chunk of bread, she served herself some brie and, finishing that off rather quickly, moved on to the cheddar and then the wensleydale. By the time she had tasted all but the roquefort, she was feeling a little more honestly satisfied.

Sighing, she leaned back and smiled at Severus. "Oh, thank you for that! I guess I didn't realize how hungry I actually was."

He smirked in a self-satisfied way. "Would you care for any wine?"

Hermione hesitated, knowing how readily she reacted to wine, but soon nodded. He poured her a glass, which she sipped carefully. She leaned back again and watched as Severus served himself a little more of the white stilton.

She found herself entranced at the way his lips parted as he delicately nibbled on the cheese-laden cracker, careful not to spill a crumb. She was fascinated by his expression of enjoyment. It wasn't something she saw very often on his face.

She also found herself wanting to ask him probing questions, so she took another sip of wine. A few minutes later, she was on her second glass and realized belatedly that sipping wine probably wasn't ideal as a diversion for her curiosity as it only lowered her inhibitions.

Severus had finished his cheese and was leaning back against the opposite sofa arm, looking more relaxed than she had ever seen him without the aid of a calming draught. He caught her staring at him and smirked slightly.

"You look curious, my dear."

She tilted her head and grinned back. "I'm trying not to be."

He raised his eyebrow. "That sounds rather insulting." He was still relaxed and smirking, so she assumed he wasn't insulted.

"I just don't want to offend you by asking the wrong questions."

He lost his smirk to a small scowl, though he still looked quite relaxed. "That doesn't sound like I've done a good job of letting you get to know me."

She snorted. "On the contrary, darling," she said, mildly aware that her tongue was now only tangentially connected to her brain, "I think it shows that I'm learning your boundaries quite well."

He flushed at her endearment, and she realized then that he was as drunk as she was. She vaguely wondered if their wine had been tampered with.

"Yes, well, there's still something off about that," he muttered, looking down at his glass.

"The wine?"

He looked up and smiled. "No, silly, the questions. How are we ever going to get to know each other well enough to shag, if we're afraid to ask each other the important questions?"

It was her turn to blush, although she was aware that her cheeks had been hot for a while. She forced her mind back to his question and blushed even more.

"Is shagging the goal, then?"

He snorted. "Of course it is!"

She raised her eyebrows, and he blushed while trying to backtrack. "Of course there's more to it than just shagging, but I'll admit that I want to make you mine, completely, wholly. I want to touch you and see you melt just a little, and then melt a little more when I touch you somewhere else. I want to see you relax under my influence and be happy and content. I want to see you looking at me as I pleasure you and know that you want me, that you need me. I want you to know that I'm doing everything for you. That I'm yours."

He'd started off apologetic, but by the time he'd said the last words, he was leaning forward earnestly and rubbing circles on her exposed calf. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling heat in more than just her face now.

He leaned forward a little more and took the empty glass out of her hand. He then took her hand, kissed it, and placed it on his groin. She heard him sigh as she tried to grip the erection under his clothes.

He inched closer, staying her hand with his, and whispered, "I want you to want me like this. And I want to *know* that you do."

He gave her forehead a gentle kiss and then retreated, groaning slightly when her hand lost contact.

Clearing his throat, he continued to look at her intently as he added, "And I won't know that until I know *you*, my dear."

Breathing more rapidly than sitting still called for, Hermione frowned in frustration for only a moment before lunging forward to capture Severus' lips.

He made a muffled noise of surprise, but quickly rearranged himself so that she was on top of him, cradled between his legs. Once they were more comfortably situated, he wrapped his arms around her and returned her kisses fervently.

Breaking away from his mouth, she panted into his ear, "The flaw in your logic is that our bodies say quite clearly what our minds might avoid."

He maneuvered to recapture her lips, feasting on them. Moments or eons later, he broke away and kissed his way to her jaw, then ear.

"The body lies, my dear. Or, if it doesn't lie, it misleads." He recaptured her lips and slowly raised himself, guiding her back up to a sitting position without letting go of her kiss. Once they were vertical, he broke from the kiss again and rested his head on her shoulder.

Hermione was very aware of how hard they both were breathing. Her own breaths were loud in her ears, almost as loud as her pulse, while the movement of Severus' chest against hers let her know he was just as breathless.

She was also very aware of how much she wanted him.

Bending her neck to whisper in his ear, she said, "Let's go to bed."

He groaned and tightened his grip on her for a moment before standing them up. He then took two steps back and looked at her almost tragically as he shook his head.

She frowned and opened her mouth to ask him why not, but before she could draw breath, he was at the door and was gone before she could speak.

She looked at the closed door for several minutes, hurt, confusion and lust all swirling within her. She knew he wanted her. Even if he hadn't said so with uncharacteristic forthrightness, she had felt his arousal. She couldn't feel his leaving as anything but a rejection, even though she knew there had to be a reason behind it. Somewhere.

She woke up the next morning feeling very groggy and headachey. It wasn't nearly as bad a hangover as the one she'd had after Harry had taken her out for a sympathy drink or five when she'd been released from the hospital wing in January, but it was still unpleasant.

She opened her eyes cautiously and found the room to be blissfully dark. She didn't remember pulling the drapes closed, but she was glad all the same. She gingerly moved herself upright and felt around for her wand. She was a bit surprised when her hand came in contact with a small bottle instead of slim wood.

Looking over, she squinted and grabbed the bottle, hoping the glowing red liquid was what she thought it was. Bringing it close, she saw spiky lettering on the label and found it was indeed Hangover Relief Potion. Popping the cork, she downed it in one go. Almost immediately, the headache and fog lifted, leaving her feeling almost fresh; she felt an overwhelming need for a shower, but otherwise was as good as new.

She picked up her wand and casually waved it to open the drapes. As light poured into the room, she looked at the bottle a little more closely. It was a particularly pretty vial, almost vase-like. She cast a quick *Tergeo* on it and then transferred the charmed rose Severus had given her with his first love letter into its new home. She smiled. It was a perfect size and shape for the wild rose, and even the color complemented the flower nicely.

Her mind drifted to Severus' exit the evening before and realized that, although a bit on the rude side, it hadn't been an outright rejection. It was actually rather noble of him to want to know her better before taking that step. She focused more acutely on the bottle-turned-vase and realized they were making extraordinary progress if he could recognize that he'd probably offended her by his manner and then set out to apologize, and she could recognize his apology for what it was.

She smiled as she headed off to the shower, feeling very hopeful and lighthearted.

She was mildly surprised that Teddy was at their table first, but quickly realized that she was much later than usual that morning. Alcohol had a Sleeping Draught-like effect on her.

"Good morning, Teddy!" she chirped as she sat down across from him. He looked up and smiled, and she noticed something like relief cross his face. It was gone before she could analyze it further, though.

"Good morning, Hermione. You seem to be in a very good mood."

She smiled happily and nodded as she dug out her books. "I am actually."

"I gather that Professor Snape didn't raise dire objections to our friendship?"

Hermione snorted. "The only thing he objected to was taking an offensive position on the rumors, and I can see that *would* be a bad idea. The way people's brains work, they'd probably have all three of us in bed before the end of the day."

Teddy blushed and looked down, clearing his throat. "Yes," he said, his voice a little deeper than usual, "I imagine they would."

Hermione stifled the urge to laugh, not wanting to embarrass Teddy any further. "But really, I'm in a good mood more because you're here, I'm here, the library is here, and there are still so many books left to read! What could be better on a beautiful Saturday morning?"

Teddy laughed, though he still looked a bit embarrassed. He sighed and, with a vague smirk, said, "What indeed?"

Hermione started giggling, and to avoid attracting Madam Pince's displeasure, she hastily turned her attention away from the smiling face before her, onto the much less amusing Defense Book.

Hermione and Teddy made their way through their course-load in unusually good spirits, bantering both on and off subject with an ease that usually comes only with time. Hermione herself was amazed at how well they were getting along, almost as if they were on the same wavelength for the entire study session.

It was getting on for dinner time when the mood was broken by a note suddenly appearing on the table.

Hermione jerked back, which startled Teddy, though when he saw the cause, he laughed, saying, "It's just a note!"

Hermione frowned, looking at the note suspiciously. "Yes, well, in my experience, having things appear out of nowhere when it isn't apparent who or what delivered it usually means something bad is in store."

Teddy looked at her with a mixture of amusement and pity. "Erm, you eat the food that appears in the Great Hall."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "But that's sent up by the house-elves."

Teddy looked at her with an expectant expression, then rolled his own eyes. "Hermione, dear, the house-elves do more than cook."

"Yes, I know they clean as well," Hermione said, crossing her arms in annoyance. The subject was still a sore spot.

Teddy snorted and shook his head. "For a brilliant witch, you sure do have your blind spots."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He picked up the letter, looked at it, and faced it toward her. "Don't you think it's possible that Professor Snape asked a house-elf to deliver this to you?"

Hermione looked at the letter. It definitely was Severus' handwriting. "But when Dobby or Kreacher deliver anything to Harry, they always appear."

"Dobby? Kreacher? Who are they?"

"Oh. Well, Kreacher is Harry's house-elf, and Dobby is... um, a friend of his, I suppose."

"Potter has a house-elf?" Teddy asked, sounding slightly surprised.

Hermione twisted her lip in disapproval, but nodded.

"Ah. Well, does the house-elf appear without Potter summoning them?"

Hermione suppressed her mild irritation at Teddy's phrasing and thought about it. "Well, Dobby does."

Teddy frowned in thought. "Dobby... Wasn't that the freak elf of Malfoy's who wanted clothes?"

Hermione's hackles went up, but she pinched her mouth shut to avoid saying anything she might regret. Instead, she nodded.

"From what I heard, he has a fascination with Potter, something similar to hero-worship or whatnot. Of course he'd want to be around Potter whenever he got the opportunity."

Hermione thought about it, and even through her ire, she realized that Teddy had a point. "Well, okay, but..."

Teddy handed the note over to Hermione with a kindly smile. "The sign of a good house-elf is to not even know they're there. It's supposed to be *magic* after all."

Hermione blushed. "Of course it is," she muttered as she accepted the note. Embarrassed, she avoided looking at Teddy as she sliced open the note.

My Dear,

It seems my stores have been raided by students hell bent on causing themselves (and, most likely, others) harm. I need to go to Slug and Jiggers tomorrow to restock so they can try, try again in the face of all their failures, or, Merlin forbid, successes.

It occurred to me that you might want to come along. I know how enthralled most witches are at the prospect of shopping. You might even be one of those witches, for all I know.

If you do wish to come and plan on visiting any shops other than the apothecary, please plan to let me know where and when I should meet you after my errand has finished.

Yours,

Severus

P.S.: I hope your morning has been comfortable.

Hermione read the letter twice, a smile blooming as she read the postscript again. She folded the note neatly and carefully put it in her bag where it wouldn't get crushed. She was still smiling when she faced Teddy again, although her smile turned a bit quizzical at his bemused expression.

"You love him, don't you?" Teddy blurted out, then closed his eyes with a pained look.

Hermione furrowed her brows, even as her mouth quirked up. "Why does everyone think that?" she asked.

Even though it was mostly a rhetorical question, Teddy answered. "Because you light up around him. Reading that note..." He shrugged. "It's obvious to anyone who's *looking* for it," he muttered with a hint of malice.

She frowned, not understanding his reaction. She opened her mouth to say something, but he raised his hand and shook his head. "No, it's not my place to know. Forget I asked."

Her frown intensified at that. "Well, maybe it isn't your place to know, but you're my friend, aren't you?" Teddy looked at her warily, but nodded. She nodded in reaction. "That gives you the right to ask."

He raised his eyebrows, but still looked upset. He was obviously having some sort of internal battle, and she had no idea what it was about until he opened his lips and ground out, "Well? Do you?"

She leaned back in her chair, the happiness from the note having drained away. She looked at the table and mentally reviewed how she felt around Severus now that they were finding a more even footing. She reviewed how horrible he could be and how wonderful. She liked him quite a bit, even though she didn't know him very well. And she was growing rather fond of him. And she wanted him and felt protected around him and... cherished. It was impossible not to love him at least a little.

An image of Ron smiling at her suddenly flashed into her mind, and her heart constricted, erasing the warm glow that had been building.

"It's... it's complicated."

Teddy released his breath in a snort-like manner. She wasn't sure whether it was an amused sound or not, and she couldn't tell by his face. He was wearing an indecipherable look very similar to Severus' mask. After a moment, though, he smiled wryly.

"Love is."

They were on the same wavelength for that moment as they shared a wry smile, but then Teddy looked down at his books, away from her.

"It's dinner time."

"Don't tell me Madam Pomfrey has been threatening you as well?" Hermione joked, wanting to do something to ease the tension that was filling Teddy's frame. He looked at her questioningly. She smiled and explained about Poppy's threats to the Headmaster, and who knew how many other people, regarding her eating habits.

Teddy's mask broke as he smiled at her, though she was surprised at the hint of sadness behind it. "No. Madam Pomfrey didn't need to threaten me." He offered her another indecipherable look before blinking and offering her a more legitimate smile. "But I would hate to be in Madam Pomfrey's bad graces, so that just means I'm even more determined to see you to dinner. Shall we?"

Hermione looked at him for a moment before nodding, trying to figure out what had changed between them, because something had. It was almost as if he had erected a wall, because she felt unaccountably shut out. It was almost the same way she'd felt shut out when Severus wouldn't talk to her the week before, but not quite.

After a little thought, she realized it was different because she had different expectations of each of them. She and Teddy were friends. She was rather ashamed to realize their friendship had, so far, been rather one sided. She knew next to nothing about him while he always seemed to be there to offer her an open ear and comforting touch when she needed it. She hadn't realized how much she had relied on his comfort, but being suddenly shut out brought it into focus. She hoped it could be worked through, just as she and Severus were working through their boundary issues.

It was interesting that although it was a similar feeling to what she and Severus were going through, it hurt more when Severus was reticent. She supposed that it was because she and Severus were in a committed relationship. They were bound to each other legally, and she knew that he had bound himself to her metaphorically as well. He was hers; he had given himself to her, just as she had given herself to him. Was *giving* herself to him.

He loved her. And because he loved her, she thought he would share. That's what loving couples did: they shared. It's how lives merged to become one life. How could you love someone and not let them become a part of you? That was what she had experienced with Ron, anyway, and she couldn't imagine another way of loving.

It still came down to trust, she realized. She and Ron had had six years to build trust between each other and six years to test the limits of that trust relatively safely. They had grown into one another from that process until they became part of one another inseparably.

She winced, thinking about Ron not being in her life anymore. Never again. It didn't matter that Severus loved her and that she was very possibly falling in love with him... It didn't make losing Ron any easier. A part of her had died with Ron, and she would never get that back.

No longer hungry, she decided she would skip dinner. With the excuse that she wanted to take her books back to her room before eating, she said goodbye to Teddy. Although he looked a bit suspicious, he wished her a goodnight and made his way into the Great Hall alone.

Hermione made her way to her room quickly enough, but once there found it suffocating. Dropping her books on her desk, she grabbed her cloak and set out for a walk, slipping by the buzzing Great Hall without hesitation.

She was pretty sure the restrictions on being outside after dark had been lifted after the battle, although she wasn't in the mood to find someone to ask at the moment. In fact, she wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone. She made her way down to the lake, carefully avoiding any muddy patches. Once there, she wasn't quite sure what to do with herself, though she was sure she didn't want to return to the castle so soon. She was restless and nervy and raw; being inside chafed her soul.

As she stood looking out across the lake, something about the lonely, windswept scene reminded her of Severus and that he might worry. Concentrating, she conjured a note explaining where she was and her need to be alone. She then called out for Dobby, not sure it would work as she was outside of the castle itself, but the little elf appeared before her an instant later. She asked him to please deliver the note to Severus. Dobby wiggled his ears happily and popped out of existence with a low bow.

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, she looked out over the lake again, though she was still feeling restless. She looked around for a log or something to sit on, but finding nothing, she decided to walk along the shore as the wind whipped her hair around her face.

The sound of the wind in her ears and the lake lapping at the shore slowly took its calming effect on her, and soon she stopped walking. She stared out across the lake, her eyes riveted to the blurry reflection of the waxing moon.

It occurred to her that it had only been three weeks since she'd agreed to be Remus' wife. Three weeks since Severus rescued her. Three weeks since their first kiss. Nearly three weeks since their wedding, and two weeks since he'd asked if he could court her.

She laughed softly. She and Severus weren't exactly the ordinary, average couple, doing things the proscribed way. No, that was reserved for people who weren't involved with Severus. She paused at that thought, then added herself to the mix. She certainly couldn't claim to be an ordinary, average witch anymore.

She smiled at the moon's reflection with as much irony as happiness. She supposed it was a good thing that she wasn't ordinary or average. She doubted that she would be a match for Severus if she were. It was actually a bit of a relief to have discovered her potential now as it was that, more than anything, that had nullified their power imbalance and was allowing them to discover each other as equals.

She wondered if she would have unearthed the potential at all if Ron had survived.

Her smile faded a bit as she thought on that, but it didn't vanish completely. So much had happened in the last month, and not all of it was bad. Severus had rescued her, not just from Remus' curse, but from her depression. He had, inadvertently, given her the power to survive and thrive. And he loved her. He loved her possibly as much as Ron had. Possibly more.

That realization was simultaneously painful and comforting. She closed her eyes against the pain, but opened them almost immediately. She knew it wasn't fair that Ron had been taken from her so soon, but on the other hand, she couldn't deny that she was being given a better chance at happiness than most people were. Hell, it was virtually being forced on her.

She chuckled again. Who would have thought that Severus Snape, bastard extraordinaire, would be so good for her? Infuriatingly so.

She shook her head and turned to go back up to the castle. She felt bad that she had missed her evening walk with Severus, but was glad she'd been able to get a bit of time for herself. She hadn't had much of that the last couple of weeks.

She made her way back up to the castle as carefully as she'd made her way down, and it wasn't until she was nearing the front steps that she realized someone was watching her ascent. Severus was standing stiffly at the top of the steps in his dominating pose. Hermione approached cautiously, not sure which way his mood would turn. It was dark enough that any hints that might have been there were covered in deep shadow.

"Severus."

He nodded at her. When she got close enough, he extended his hand to help her up the last two stairs. She let out a quiet sigh of relief. He wasn't angry then. Or not terribly angry anyway. Once they were inside the castle, they both shrugged off their cloaks, and Severus extended his arm in his usual fashion. Hermione took it, grateful she would get her evening walk after all.

"You shouldn't be out of the castle after dark, Hermione."

Hermione shrugged. "I thought that rule had been lifted."

"It has, but that does not mean it is safe for *you* to be out alone."

Hermione looked up at him and saw the worry in his face. "That's why I sent you the note, to let you know where I was."

He nodded. "And it was much appreciated. But--"

"Severus," she said, putting her finger to his lips, stilling them, "please don't treat me as if I can't take care of myself."

He frowned and looked as if he was about to say something when a pair of students passed them, openly goggling the sight of the Head Girl silencing the Potions professor with a finger.

Hermione hastily withdrew her finger while Severus glared the children away. They looked at each other and silently agreed to continue their conversation in her quarters. They made their way there without another word, though their silence wasn't acrimonious.

Hermione was surprised when Severus opened the door and let himself in before she could take down her wards. When he turned around and found her staring at him, he did have the grace to look slightly abashed.

"My first thought was to wait for you here," he explained. At her raised eyebrow, he looked away and bit out, "I apologize for invading your room."

Her other brow rose to join the first, and she had to work on biting back a smirk. He was really learning.

"And I appreciate your looking out for me," she said placatingly. At that, his posture shifted into something that could be described as insecure, and she was suddenly overcome with the urge to hug him. Not seeing any reason not to, she took the few steps necessary and did so. His body stiffened under hers for a moment, but very quickly relaxed. Soon, he had his arms around her in a comforting embrace.

"That's my job," he rumbled above her as his hands started rubbing her back tentatively.

She leaned back to look at him critically, but found she didn't have the heart to say anything about his phrasing when she saw how utterly uncomfortable and out of his element he was. It reminded Hermione that Severus was not only human and fallible but also terribly, terribly fragile.

She returned her head to his chest and gave him a squeeze, rocking him slightly. His hand moved to her hair, and he ran his fingers through it gently and carefully, avoiding getting caught in her tangles. She hummed in satisfaction and pleasure.

She felt him tense and inhale a couple of times, as if he was preparing to say something, but no other words came out as they stood there in their embrace.

Finally, Hermione's feet started protesting, and she regretfully parted from Severus, moving over to the sofa. He followed and, in a move that surprised her, laid down so his head was on her lap. He smirked up at her, although she could see another hint of insecurity lurking in his eyes. She smiled down and ran her hands through his hair.

It wasn't the first time she'd noticed how oily his hair was, but she was surprised at the texture. It was fine and soft, if limp and prone to showing her ministrations. Just like the rest of him, however, it wasn't nearly as horrid as it seemed at first.

There were so many things she wanted to say, but at the same time, she didn't know how to say them. She didn't want to ruin the moment by fumbling over words, seeing as the likely result of that would be his inferring things she didn't mean and storming off in a huff. She figured that it would be better to leave everything unsaid until she found the right way to say it.

So she just ran her fingers through his hair, gently massaging his head and face while she tried to put her thoughts into some semblance of order... How she wasn't his student, nor was she a child anymore. How she was still so heart-sore, and yet so grateful for his love. How much she liked spending time with him. How fond she was of him.

That last one was the scariest topic, though, and she shied away from it speedily. It led to that four letter word that was far more powerful than any oaths. It led her to images of Ron. Of her parents. Of Harry and Ginny and the Weasleys.

She knew she would have to face it at some point, but she wasn't ready yet. The thought of giving Severus Snape her heart to keep was still a little too scary a thought, even if the process was irrevocably underway.

Hermione woke a couple of hours later when Severus woke up. He'd fallen asleep on her lap while she was stroking his hair, and he'd looked so peaceful and relaxed that she'd been loath to move. So, she had summoned a book and read until her eyes had drifted shut.

When Severus sat up, she'd been disoriented for a moment, but then she caught sight of his mussed hair and saw the hands on the clock had moved, and she put the pieces together.

She smiled up at him, and he gave her a small, fond smile back, though it was taken over by a massive yawn. When he stumbled just slightly as he stood up, she reached out and grabbed his hand.

When he looked down at her, she smiled up at him. "Why don't you stay here tonight?" He immediately stiffened, so she added quickly, "To sleep, Severus. That's all."

He hesitated, and sensing indecision, she said, "Please?"

He gave her a rather piercing look, but at the end of it, his face relaxed, and he nodded. Her smile grew, and she happily led him into her bedroom where she collapsed on top of the covers, not bothering to undress.

He snorted as he climbed onto the bed beside her, nudging her over onto her side so he could spoon her. "May I summon a blanket, or would being under the covers be too great a threat to decency?" he asked snidely.

She snorted in response, but was too tired to get upset at his hypocrisy. "By all means, Severus. Make yourself comfortable," she responded through a yawn.

She was only barely conscious when he pulled the blanket over them, and she thought it a dream when he stroked the hair back from her face so he could gently kiss her goodnight.

Even mostly asleep, she smiled and snuggled into his warm, lithe frame as he draped his arm around her. It was after only a few seconds of cuddling that she fell asleep, comfortable through and through.

XXII

Chapter 22 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

Many thanks to my wonderful betas, Keladry and Southern.

Hermione woke up the next morning alone. She knew he was gone even before she turned over to look for him. She was unaccountably disappointed, though; it wasn't as if anything beyond a few grumbled words would take place. And, knowing how cheerful both of them were in the morning, possibly not even that.

But knowing that didn't help the disappointment fade. She'd felt so comfortable the night before, so peaceful, and after her muddled emotions the evening before, it had simply felt *right*.

She stared up at the canopy feeling annoyed, even though she knew it was a little silly and more than a little ungrateful to feel that way. She would have been annoyed had Severus woken her up just to say goodbye. Probably.

Still, his being gone left her feeling a little empty and blue, so it took a little more effort than usual to drag herself out of bed and into the loo to wash up for the day ahead. Realizing that the day ahead was to be a day spent with Severus outside of the school did cheer her up a fair amount. Enough so that when someone knocked on her door half an hour later, just as she was pulling on her trainers, her voice was cheerful as she called for them to come in.

She was rather disappointed when it wasn't Severus, but Harry and Ginny.

"Don't look too happy to see us," Ginny commented with a smile. "With a face like that, I would think you were expecting someone else at your door."

Hermione tried not to blush, but by the raised eyebrows on both her friends' faces, she knew she hadn't succeeded. "Severus and I are going out today. I thought it might be him."

Ginny smiled warmly while Harry tried valiantly to hide his discomfort.

"Another date?"

Hermione nodded and a smile peeked through. "He has to restock his supplies and thought I might like to join him."

Harry rolled his eyes with a snort. "He's obviously big on romance."

Ginny elbowed her husband while Hermione threw a crumpled parchment at him. "It's nice to get out of the castle, so I think it's quite romantic," she proclaimed.

Both Harry and Ginny rolled their eyes at that. "As long as you're happy," Ginny said, sitting down on the sofa arm closest to Hermione.

Hermione leaned back against the sofa and nodded. "Yeah, I think I am."

Harry smiled his crooked smile at her, and it looked more genuine than the grimace that then overtook his face. "I guess that means I have to be nice to Snape?"

The girls snorted. "I think that's asking a bit much," Ginny said.

Hermione nodded. "Being *respectful* has been an uphill battle for you!"

Harry laughed good-naturedly, though he protested with, "That's not fair! I've been respectful to his face for a while now."

The girls waited, expecting him to add something derogatory, but although he looked tempted, he manfully held his tongue.

"I take it back. You are the very model of a proper, polite graduand," Hermione said dryly.

Harry and Ginny both snorted, though Harry looked slightly affronted by Ginny's reaction. Ginny caught the look and rolled her eyes.

"I love you, dearest, but I'm not blind, you know."

Harry grinned impishly and ran his hand through his hair in a somewhat sheepish move. Ginny matched his grin and moved over beside him, wrapping an arm around his waist. Both of their expressions softened as they looked at each other for a quiet moment, making Hermione smile.

Ginny broke away first, giving Hermione a sheepish look. "So, are you having breakfast with Snape or will you be joining us?"

Hermione finished tying her shoe and stood up, frowning. "I actually don't think we set up a meeting time." She clapped a hand over her mouth in distress. "In fact, I never responded to his note at all! Oh, I hope he didn't think that was a 'no!'"

Ginny offered a small smile and shook her head. "It's early still, so even if he did, he's probably still in the castle. I'm sure you'll be able to clear things up."

Just then, there was a short rap on the door, and it was opened by the man himself. As soon as he saw that Hermione wasn't alone, he stopped short, looking wrong-footed.

Clearing his throat, he nodded at Harry and Ginny rather stiffly, then addressed himself to Hermione. "Madam, I never received an answer to yesterday's note."

Hermione sighed in relief, although his use of the word 'madam' made her slightly nervous. He normally only used that when he was upset with her. "I'm so sorry I forgot, Severus, and please come in! Do you want to leave immediately? Have you already eaten? Are you planning any other stops or will you be buying sensitive ingredients and need to get back right away?" Everything came out in a big rush, and she blushed when everyone, including Severus, rolled their eyes at her.

Severus did enter the room properly and closed the door behind himself. "There isn't a rush, although I would like to leave before lunch time. I haven't eaten, and I suggest we do so before we leave. I have no idea how long an outing it will be, as that is largely up to you."

Hermione let out a small breath she'd been holding and nodded. "If I take my cloak with me, we can leave straight from the Great Hall."

Severus nodded. "That would be acceptable."

Hermione smiled and then caught sight of Harry and Ginny's faces as they watched. Severus also seemed to grow aware of her friends at that moment, as his face reverted back into his customary scowl.

"Perhaps now would be a good time for us to go, then?" Ginny asked, pulling Harry to the door with her. Hermione nodded, while Snape's face remained relatively impassive. "See you later then, Hermione, Professor!" she chirped before she closed the door behind her, leaving Hermione and Severus staring at each other in amusement.

"If I didn't know better, I would say Miss... Mrs. Potter is afraid of me," Snape said, raising his eyebrow inquisitively.

Hermione shook her head. "I doubt it, although she may have been afraid Harry would say something rude. He's more prone to doing that around you than at other times."

Severus smirked. "It's nice to know I have some impact on the boy."

Hermione lips twitched up involuntarily, though it faded quickly as the awkwardness set in.

"I'm sorry--"

"I thought--"

They stopped and motioned for the other to speak. Finally, Hermione said, "I'm sorry I never responded to your invitation. I meant to tell you last night, but then..." She sighed. "It got pushed out of my mind. But if you are still willing to take me, I would love to go out with you."

Severus' face softened slightly. "It was pushed from my mind as well. I would be honored if you would accompany me today."

Hermione gave him a smile that was shaky with relief. "Oh, good! I was afraid..." She stopped herself, shaking her head. "Never mind. I'm really looking forward to this outing."

He nodded with a small smile.

"What was it you were going to say?" she asked, remembering a bit belatedly that he had been on the verge of saying something.

He shook his head. "It's of no matter."

She frowned, not quite believing him, but didn't protest. Unfortunately, the awkwardness seemed to return, and they just stood there watching each other until Hermione was inspired to retrieve her cloak so that they could leave.

Once she had closed the door, she was surprised to turn and find Snape extending his elbow to her, just as he did every evening. Smiling, she threaded her arm through his and relaxed as they headed down to the Great Hall. Still, she found her mind blank on things to talk about. They were just descending into the Entrance Hall when she

finally came up with: "So what ingredients will you be replacing today?"

As soon as she said it, she cringed at how sterile that sounded but was relieved when he answered readily enough.

"Bicorn horn and, if you can believe the audacity, Erumpent oil."

"Erumpent oil?" she gasped, looking up at him in astonishment. "But... Well, at least they obviously knew enough to not blow themselves up."

"Yet," he added darkly. "I am assuming they haven't tried brewing anything yet, though. I am not looking forward to cleaning the walls when they do."

Hermione shivered. "And here I thought it would be Ashwinder eggs and the like."

Snape snorted. "Considering the castle is a giant cauldron of hormones on legs, you would think that would be the most common stolen ingredient, yet, surprisingly, only rarely does that go missing. Once every six or seven years. Of course, using a love potion is grounds for immediate expulsion, and love potions' effects are notoriously easy to spot."

Hermione snorted mirthlessly. "And they tend to be rather incriminating, too."

Severus paused at the doors to the Great Hall. "Yes, although it's wise to never discount the possibility of pranks or revenge. Douse your cheating ex-boyfriend's drink with the potion of the person he despises most, and you have a nice little revenge. The boy gets humiliated and, if everything goes well, expelled."

Hermione looked at him, appalled. He snickered. "Oh, don't be so naive, my dear. It has happened before and it will surely happen again. The clever ones remember to douse both parties' drinks; they're the ones to watch out for."

Hermione blinked. "How often have you seen this done?"

He shrugged. "Three occasions come to mind. Granted, only with one of those cases was the perpetrator clever enough to get away with it."

"If they got away with it, how do you know about it?"

Severus grimaced. "Because Lucius was always quite the braggart."

Hermione blinked again, feeling rather breathless. "How... And you were friends with him?"

Severus grimaced again as he shook his head. "No, my dear. I *idolized* him."

He reached for the door handle, but Hermione stopped him. "You didn't... You haven't... Please tell me you..."

"No. It was very tempting in the case of Potter and Black, but... I would have been the prime suspect. There was no point."

Hermione gaped at Severus. "There was no other reason not to?"

He shot her a repressive look. "Think of how you felt about Lucius. Imagine him being a classmate of yours, constantly threatening you, humiliating, *hurting* you. If there had been opportunity, wouldn't you have been tempted to humiliate and punish him for what he'd done to you?"

Hermione shook her head slowly, her eyes never leaving Severus'. "No."

Severus looked at her hard, but obviously didn't find what he was looking for because he drew back slightly.

"I'll say again, you are a far better person than I am."

She swallowed, trying to dispel the dryness in her mouth. She wanted to ask him why he hadn't reported James and Sirius to Dumbledore, but just as she gathered the nerve, the door opened, reminding her of their very public location. Judging by Severus' scowl, he had forgotten as well.

The two students who came through the doorway started when they saw her and Snape's expressions, and quickly made their way around them. Severus extended his arm again, and Hermione took it dazedly. He escorted her to her place at the Gryffindor table without another word and just as wordlessly made his way to the staff table.

Hermione watched him go, stunned, worried and unsettled by what she'd learned.

"Alright there, Hermione?" Harry asked from afar. She snapped back to reality and offered her friends a strained smile.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You look like you've had a bit of a shock."

She shook her head and set about gathering her breakfast, intent on avoiding everyone's eyes. "Severus just told me about one of Lucius Malfoy's past exploits, is all." She frowned at her bacon, suddenly not hungry at all. "He wasn't a nice man."

Ginny laughed harshly. "That is putting it mildly."

Hermione looked over at her friend and remembered what she had gone through at Lucius' hands. She then looked back at her plate and numbly forced herself to eat.

XXX

Hermione's state of numb shock lasted until she and Severus were on their way to the castle gates. He must have taken note of her change of mood, for halfway down the hill, he stopped and stood in front of her.

"Should I not have told you?"

Hermione blinked up at him. "I don't know." At his scowl, she searched for words to explain. "I mean, I'm utterly appalled to think that you idolized such an awful person, but then again, I do tend to forget you were a Death Eater at one point. And denying your past would be an insult to who you are now."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know, Severus. On the one hand, I really wish I didn't know that about you, but on the other hand, I am flattered and pleased you told me, that you'd share with me a piece of who you are."

"*Were!*" Severus protested. "I am not that person anymore!"

"Aren't you?" Hermione asked. "You wouldn't be tempted to do those kinds of things again? Use your intelligence and talents against those you dislike? Those who harm you... or me?"

Severus scowled fiercely and turned away. Hermione reached out to touch his arm. "I'm hoping that experience has taught you, though, and that you might choose to resist temptation for different reasons, now? And that maybe you're more careful about who, if anyone, you idolize?"

Snape laughed bitterly and shook his head, but did not turn to face her.

"Perhaps it would be better if I went to the apothecary alone."

Hermione dropped her hand, but didn't move.

"It's too late now, Severus."

He turned to look at her, his expression shuttered.

"You've already invited me along for the ride, and I'm not going to run away just because you're not a perfect person. I may be disappointed, but then again, I have no grounds to be disappointed. It is unreasonable of me to expect perfection of you, just as it would be unreasonable of you to expect perfection of me."

He compressed his lips and raised his hand to her cheek, but otherwise remained shuttered. "You are far more perfect than I could ever hope to be."

Hermione laughed. "Thank you, but you know very well that I'm *not* perfect, and I have no intention of living on that kind of pedestal, so you can just forget about romanticizing my character flaws into anything other than what they are."

His face relaxed as he smiled at her, bringing his other hand up to hold her face gently. "They are part of you."

She smiled back, raising her hands to his face. "Yes. And by the same logic, your past and your flaws are part of you."

He didn't look comfortable with that, but he couldn't argue with it either. Instead, he let out a sigh and nodded. Dropping his hands from her face, he offered her his elbow, which she accepted.

They made their way down to the gate, when he stopped her again. He looked at her intensely, and she could feel the fear emanating off of him.

"Do you regret...?" He stopped, looking rather disgusted with himself.

She smiled at him and shook her head slowly, reassuringly. "No. Not on the whole. So far."

He mutely nodded his understanding and opened the gate for her to pass through.

XXX

"Where shall I meet you?"

They were standing outside Slug and Jiggers in Diagon Alley, and Hermione had the distinct impression that Severus wanted her to go elsewhere. The urge to be obstreperous was there, but she decided it would be wiser to leave him be.

"I have to go to Madam Malkin's, the Ink and Quill, and, erm, Rose and Crant's."

He raised his eyebrow but then nodded shortly before turning into the shop. She scowled at his back, angry at his rude dismissal. She was not really in the mood to make a scene, so she simply made her way to the robe shop.

An hour later, she found herself entering Rose and Crant's, wondering how much longer it was going to take Severus. She wondered if he was still in Slug and Jiggers or if he'd made his purchases and had returned to the castle, intent on avoiding her. She knew that was an ungenerous thought, but she was feeling rather ungenerous toward him.

"May I help you with anything, dear?"

Hermione looked up from the bottle she had unconsciously picked up to see the somewhat familiar face of Mrs. Crant, one of the owners. She put the bottle of body oil back on the shelf and shook her head. "Not right now, thank you."

Mrs. Crant nodded pleasantly but looked at Hermione speculatively while returning to her place behind the counter, as if she was trying to remember something.

Hermione felt slightly awkward, but didn't want to leave just yet. She would give Severus a few more minutes to find her here before going to find him. Fortunately, Mrs. Crant gave up her examination and retreated to the back room after only a minute or so, relieving Hermione of the observation.

She looked around the shop, trying to remember which of her supplies were low. Finally, it occurred to her that she could always use more of their special conditioner, as well as their gorgeous body powder. As she made her way to the counter to purchase them, the lipstick display caught her eye. She found herself drawn to a particularly pretty shade of red; it looked like it would actually suit her.

On impulse, she picked up a tube, then hurried to the counter, concentrating on not looking at any of the other charmed displays.

Mrs. Crant smiled at her as she came out from the back room and started ringing the items up.

"Do you have a big date?" she asked with a wink as she marked down the price of the lipstick.

Hermione started to shake her head, but then stopped. "I guess I do."

Mrs. Crant smiled again. "Is it with that redheaded boy you were seeing last time?"

Hermione looked up, shocked. Mrs. Crant took that as an affirmative and started gushing. "I try to remember all my clients, you see, no matter how long it's been. And it has been a while, hasn't it? You haven't been here since last summer, but then, a lot has been going on since then, hasn't it? It might have taken me a while, but I do remember you. You came in here all aglow, hand in hand with that nice young man. Whenever you would look at something, he would stare at you, giving you the most devoted looks. The fact that he didn't seem to mind being in the store said a lot about his devotion to you, you know. Most men seem to be terribly uncomfortable in here, which is silly. It's not as if I'm selling lingerie, now is it? But anyway, your young man was a very pleasant sort. He has a very kind and loving soul."

Hermione nodded dumbly, only a few of the words sinking in. Swallowing, she softly replied, "Yes, he did."

Hermione's demeanor and words finally sunk in, and Mrs. Crant leaned back, observing Hermione carefully. "Did? Oh, my dear, I just assumed you were still with him. You seemed so very much in love."

Hermione laughed slightly, trying to will away the tears gathering. "We were very much in love. He died in the war."

Mrs. Crant looked appalled. "Oh, my dear, I am so sorry!"

Hermione shook her head dismissively. "You weren't to know."

"Still, it's... oh, my dear, I'm so sorry for your loss!"

Hermione felt her control slipping and fished out her money. She paid the proper amount and grabbed the pink bag Mrs. Crant offered, shaking her head as the shop owner continued to apologize, looking mortified.

"Thanks," Hermione muttered and turned to leave. She stopped in surprise when she found Severus standing just inside the door, watching everything.

Of course he would turn up when she wanted nothing more than to retreat somewhere solitary to cry. Before she had a chance to recover, he came to her, took her bag and guided her out of the store, his hand placed on her shoulder in a gesture of support.

They stepped outside, and he continued guiding her to an isolated spot where he wrapped his arms around her and told her to hold on. She looked up at him questioningly, and he gently said, "This isn't the place for it," before Disapparating them away from London.

She closed her eyes as she felt the squeezing sensation and left them closed after it had passed. She hid her face in his chest, gripping his robes as she lost control and started sobbing. He held onto her, his arms still wrapped around her supportively, rocking her gently.

It seemed to take forever, but eventually, the tears receded, leaving Hermione feeling very snuffly and puffy. Sensing the end of the storm, Snape dug out of his pocket a cleanish handkerchief, which Hermione gratefully accepted. She turned away from him to clean herself up and was shocked to find herself in the middle of a field. A field of flowers. A very *pretty* field of flowers.

She paused in the middle of blowing her nose and looked up at him curiously. He raised his eyebrow imperiously and calmly stated, "It was the most soothing place I could think of."

She looked around again, slightly bewildered. In her shock, she blurted out, "But how do you know about it in the first place?"

He smirked at her and pointed down at one of the blooming plants. "Chamomile." He pointed to another plant that wasn't yet blooming. "Mugwort." He pointed to a third plant. "St. John's Wort."

Hermione nodded her head. "Ah." Looking around again, she had a sense of *deja vu*. She was sure she had been here before; the rolling hills full of flowers were terribly familiar.

"Where are we? This all looks very familiar."

"South-central Aquitaine."

France! She frowned. She and her parents had made their way down to Nice, but they hadn't been further west than Montpellier. They'd talked about going over to Bordeaux, but had run out of time.

"Funny. I swear I've been here before, but..."

"Perhaps it just reminds you of other fields you've visited?"

She shook her head meditatively. "I suppose that could be, but... I swear I recognize *this* field." She walked toward the crest of one of the small hills, Severus following a step behind her. When she could look down the other side of the hill, she gasped, suddenly placing the scenery before her.

"You've remembered?"

She nodded, everything rushing back. It was the last dream she'd had featuring Ron. This was the river she'd followed to the lake. She started walking downstream, wanting to see if it really was the same place.

"Is there a lake around the bend there?" she asked, pointing up ahead. Severus looked at her with an upraised brow and nodded.

"A small reservoir, yes. So you have been here before?"

Hermione hedged. "Erm, yes and no."

She heard Severus sigh. "And what does that mean?"

She looked over at him and found him looking on the edge of frustrated. "I haven't ever been here in person, but I dreamt of it the other night."

Something flickered in Severus expression. "Oh?"

She noted his interest and flushed beet red. "Yes."

"You can't just leave it at that, my dear. What happened in the dream?"

She shook her head, blushing even more. "It was nothing."

He made a tching sound. "No, I don't think it was nothing. By your expression, I would wager that it was a very... vivid dream."

She didn't think she could blush any further. Her face was starting to throb with heat, and she was looking anywhere but at Severus.

He chuckled beside her. "Was it a particularly good dream perchance?" he asked in a teasing tone.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying unsuccessfully to shut out the embarrassment. "Please stop."

"It was, wasn't it?" he continued smoothly, seemingly unaware of her mortification.

"Severus..."

"Was I in it?"

Her tolerance for teasing snapped, and she yelled, "It was about RON!"

His face, which had been almost merry, dropped. She looked away from him, ashamed. She closed her eyes, wishing she could just Apparate away, but resisted the urge. She'd never Apparated such a long distance before and had no wish to splinch by Apparating while so upset.

A hand on her arm startled her, and she looked up to find Severus was looking down at her with a pained expression.

"Hermione, I didn't mean... I was trying to distract you. I had no intention of increasing your suffering."

Her shoulders sagged, and she closed her eyes again, though she let herself lean against Severus when he pulled her into a hug.

"If you think it would help to share, I would be willing to listen," he offered quietly.

She sighed again, but otherwise remained silent. It didn't feel right to tell Severus about making love to Ron, even if it was only a dream.

After a few minutes, she withdrew from his arms, wiping her face again. "You said it gets better over time?"

He made an aborted move to stroke her hair, but then dropped his hand and just nodded. "It does if you let it."

She nodded her understanding, sighing once again. "I'm trying," she whispered with a sniff.

He cupped her cheek. "It's not something you can force either."

She nodded again, liking the warmth of his hand against her face but uncomfortable with his undivided attention.

She looked around again, seeing the field for the herbal paradise it was.

"How did you find this place?"

Severus looked around as well. "My master introduced me to it."

"Voldemort?" she gasped in shock.

He looked startled, then burst into laughter. It was incredibly contagious, and after only a few moments, she was giggling as well, although rather nervously.

"No," he finally said after he'd controlled his laughter a little. "My *Potions* master, the one whom I apprenticed under."

Feeling slightly foolish, Hermione made an 'ah' of understanding.

"Although, while the idea of the Dark Lord strolling about in these flowers seems rather ridiculous at the outset, he was, after all, an accomplished potions maker himself. It seems only slightly more ludicrous for him to be here picking flowers than me."

Hermione shrugged. "Yes, well, the idea of Voldemort finding the location 'soothing' is patently more ridiculous than it is for you."

Severus shot her a sideways glance. "I don't know whether to be insulted or flattered."

Hermione snorted. "Be flattered. I consider you far more acceptable company than Voldemort."

He chuckled again, took her hand and started walking downstream.

"I must confess that I thought of this location as much because I had been planning to bring you here than because it is soothing, though."

Hermione looked up at him.

"When were you planning on bringing me here?"

"Today. After I'd finished dealing with the ingredients."

Something niggled in Hermione's mind. "So... were you in Slug and Jiggers all that time?"

Severus looked almost shifty for a moment. "No. I didn't think you'd appreciate the risk of getting blown up if I carried Erumpent oil around with us all day."

Hermione sighed, not sure whether she was annoyed or just exasperated. "You could have told me that was your plan."

"I could have, but that might have ruined the surprise."

"What surprise?"

They rounded the bend, and there, right where she'd made love with Ron in her dream, was a picnic set up. She was breathless, although she didn't know whether it was a good thing or not.

"Do you like it?"

"It depends," Hermione replied cautiously. "Did you use Legilimency on me to plant that dream?"

He looked affronted, which actually set Hermione's mind at ease. Unfortunately, just because her mind was at ease didn't mean he wasn't still offended. He turned on his heel and stalked away.

"Severus!" Hermione called out, running after him. "I'm sorry, but don't you think it's a bit much of a coincidence?"

He turned around suddenly, causing Hermione to run into him. He caught her, but immediately backed away.

"Do you really think I would do that to you?" he hissed.

Hermione shook her head, but, at the same time, said, "I don't know. I would like to think not, but..." She gestured to the fields around them. "I have never been here before, but it is exactly like it was in my dream! It's not reminiscent of my dream, but *exact*. How can that be?"

Severus crossed his arms and frowned, though she could sense his mood had shifted away from anger. His eyes were still narrowed, though, as if he was distressed and trying to hide it.

"What was your dream?"

Hermione frowned back at him. "I came across the fields, followed the stream down to the lake and met Ron there."

"Where you made love?"

Hermione blushed, but nodded. He frowned further, and his distress was now palpable. "Albus assured me that involuntary Legilimency was rare, and it wouldn't happen again now that I was aware of it."

Hermione blushed further. "You mean you dreamt... You saw me and Ron..."

Severus shook his head impatiently. "Of course not. I dreamt of *us* making love under that tree. You and me. It's what gave me the idea of the picnic."

Hermione wanted to be indignant, but found she was too confused to be.

"So, um," she said haltingly, blushing a deeper red, "do you often have dreams about me?"

His face took on a pink tinge. "Define 'often'..."

Hermione looked down, pleased, embarrassed and still confused. She started pacing as the problem niggled at her. She wondered if Severus *had* unintentionally forced himself on her mind again. If it was a case of uncontrolled Legilimency, she wasn't sure what to do. She still had Dumbledore's words ringing in her ears: *Telling him it was actually his fault would have only served to send him over the brink. He doesn't need that right now. When he's in a better place, then I'll tell him.*

And also, the physical distance between the two of them made Legilimency a remote possibility. Not unless he had been standing over her thinking of the picnic while she was sleeping...

Her skin prickled with the possibility, remembering another dream that had settled her nerves weeks before. She'd thought it was a dream, but now she wasn't so sure. What if he had been in her room, watching over her?

The feelings that washed over her at that thought surprised her, as indignation was only a very small part. Mostly, she felt a rush of affection for her husband. The fact that he would watch over and comfort her even after she'd hurt him...

"When did you have your dream, Severus?"

He thought for a moment. "Two weeks ago, Friday. When did you have yours?"

Her heart sank. He'd had his dream after her dream of his visiting her. "Last weekend."

"You sound rather disappointed, my dear."

She looked up at him with a small, embarrassed smile. "You just eliminated a possible theory is all." He looked interested, so she sought to distract him. "Was your dream of this place different from the other dreams you've had? Was it more vivid, or did either of us act differently?"

He thought for a moment before catching her arm to stop her pacing. "Not significantly. Perhaps you were a bit more... realistic than usual, but otherwise you were as you always are."

They stood there thinking about it, but after a few minutes, Hermione shrugged. "I don't understand. If you did subconsciously impose the dream on my subconscious, why did I dream of Ron instead of you? It doesn't make sense."

"Unless, of course, the idea of sex with me was so offensive that your mind automatically switched to someone more acceptable?"

Hermione's stomach flipped unpleasantly at that thought. "I don't think so. I'll admit I was a bit disturbed when I called out your name instead of Ron's, but I thought that was just because... because of the circumstances."

"You called out my name?" He looked intrigued, though his tone remained cool.

Hermione bit her lip. "Yes."

"Do you think you would have been as disturbed if the circumstances had been reversed?"

"Gods, yes! Disturbed, mortified..." Severus' face smoothed out a little more, though his mouth tightened when she glumly added, "Depressed."

Not wanting to think about such a sad state of affairs, she quickly said, "I don't understand this, Severus."

"It is rather curious," Severus muttered, then a sly smile came over his face. "Perhaps we should go over the details of the dream. It's possible that the location and plot are the only things the dreams have in common."

Hermione laughed, slapping his arm lightly. "You just want to hear my sexy dream, don't you?"

"Of course not," he said with a smile that belied his words. "It's solely in the interest of solving this puzzle."

Hermione chuckled and shook her head. "How will it solve the puzzle?"

"There could be valuable clues in your dream of how you came to know of such a location. Perhaps you saw it in a photograph in my quarters. Going over the dream in great detail might refresh your memory."

She looked at him, amused. "Is there a photograph of this place in your quarters?"

"No, but that is beside the point."

She laughed. He offered her a pleasant smile, reminding her how attractive he could be. "Shall we go back to the picnic blanket?"

She nodded in agreement, her emotions all a-swirl as he led her back to the lakeshore. After they had walked a little ways, she asked, "So what do you mean by my dream-self being 'more realistic'?"

Snape winced and his face went pink again. "In some dreams your limbs are perhaps... a little more *bendy* than is physically possible."

Hermione looked at him, astonished, before breaking out laughing. Severus scowled at her, but it did nothing to dampen her humor.

"Men," she tried to exclaim through her giggles. Severus continued scowling, though she could see his eyes crinkle just slightly in amusement.

They walked to their picnic site amiably enough, though as they neared it, Severus asked, "What was your theory?"

Hermione stilled for a moment, then sighed, looking down.

"It was nothing."

"Even if it was nothing, I would like to hear it. Perhaps you were onto something."

She frowned, wondering how to phrase it without sounding accusatory or revealing what she ought not reveal.

They reached the picnic site, and Severus motioned for her to make herself comfortable, as he did so himself. After they had settled in, he looked at her expectantly.

"It relates back to a dream I had a few weeks back, when I'd just moved out of your quarters," Hermione started. "I remember I had had a few disturbing dreams that night, then, I dreamt that I woke up and you were there, sitting on my bed. You got up, smoothed out the covers and gave me a gentle kiss before leaving through the Floo. It was... very reassuring and comforting. I didn't have any more bad dreams that night."

Severus frowned slightly as he bit into an apple, but otherwise made no sign of admission or ignorance. He just watched her expectantly.

"Anyway, it occurred to me that Legilimency, whether it's uncon-- involuntary or not, is dependent upon time and space restrictions. Eye contact is almost always needed, but even more so, the... participants need to be in close proximity. Well, Harry and Voldemort excepted, of course." She shrank in on herself a little, feeling like she was bringing up a forbidden topic when she added, "That's how it was with the incident in Potions."

Severus frowned a little more, but nodded for her to continue.

"So, assuming that this was a case of Legilimency, and assuming that we don't have a connection similar to what Harry and Voldemort had..."

"I would have had to be in the same room as you when you had the dream."

Hermione nodded, blushing.

"Why did you dismiss the theory?"

Hermione looked up at his words, feeling the odd prickling again.

"I was thinking that perhaps it hadn't been a dream visit you made. Perhaps you really had come to my room to make sure I was okay that night." She blushed, but continued looking at Severus, who was still giving nothing away by his expression. "And I thought that, if that was the case, that maybe you had been thinking about this site, or that dream, while you were there watching over me, thereby getting it into my subconscious memory."

"But, as you confirmed, the timing was off," he said as he continued frowning at his apple core.

"Yes."

She looked at him as he stared at his apple. He was being very impassive. Almost too much so.

"Severus?"

"Yes?" He didn't look up.

"Were you in my room that night?"

His lips twitched. "Yes."

Hermione blinked twice. "You were?"

He finally looked up at her, though his expression was wary. "I found I couldn't sleep that night until I knew whether you were all right."

A breath escaped her that she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Then she smiled. "Thank you, Severus. It was a lovely safe feeling you gave me that night."

He nodded, then looked back at his apple core. Hermione thought he was acting as if waiting for something.

Then the missing puzzle piece showed up.

"Have you been watching me ever since?" she asked incredulously.

He stilled, and she could see him thinking. After a few moments, he slowly nodded his head. He then looked up and saw her waiting for an explanation. "Not every night."

Hermione's mind whirled. She opened her mouth, but found she was speechless.

Severus looked back at his apple core and grimaced angrily. He stood up and threw the core as far as could into the lake before standing there rigidly, his back to her.

"Albus had assured me that it wouldn't happen again." He looked down at her, his eyes hard but apologetic. "If I had known that you were so susceptible, I would have been far more cautious about..."

"Entering my chambers uninvited?"

He grimaced again and looked out over the lake, nodding.

Hermione stared at him wordlessly. On the one hand, she was livid that he would be so careful about his own privacy and yet so cavalier with hers. On the other hand, she did recognize the motivation behind his actions was not malicious. He hadn't harmed her, even with his unconscious Legilimency.

She took a deep breath. "I take issue with your word choice, Severus, as I am not necessarily 'susceptible,' but I *was* rather defenseless, being unsuspecting and asleep."

She snapped her mouth shut before she said anything about his force of will being the real issue.

He turned his head slightly in her direction. "Perhaps I chose unwisely."

She heaved a sigh and got up, joining him on the shoreline.

"I am upset, Severus, but more at your hypocrisy than your actions. In a way," *an adolescent and stalkerish way*, she thought harshly, "your actions are really sweet. I'm just offended that you take your privacy more seriously than mine."

The furrow in his brow deepened, and she mentally sighed as she felt his defenses go up.

"But," she said more brightly than she felt, "what's done is done. I'm famished and can't wait to see what you packed in the hamper."

She turned and walked back to the blanket. Kneeling down, she peeked under the lid and then looked up at Severus, still standing rigidly by the shore.

"Please come eat with me, Severus. A picnic is only as much fun as the company."

He remained still and tense for a few more minutes, but then he sighed, and his shoulders relaxed. He turned to face her with nary a glimmer of a smile and wordlessly joined her on the blanket.

She knew it would take a while for him to truly relax, but she also knew they would end the day on good terms if that's what they both wanted. And she found that was indeed what she wanted. Very much so, in fact.

She smiled warmly at him as he passed her a roll, and when his face softened slightly in return, she knew that was what he wanted as well.

Neither said anything for quite a while after that, and when she'd finished eating, Hermione looked out at the lake.

Out of the blue, Severus said, "I apologize for invading your privacy."

Hermione looked over at him. "And I forgive you." She looked back to the lake before adding, "But I'd rather you not watch me sleep like that anymore."

She could sense Severus tensing and looked over to find him frowning down at the blanket.

"Of course, if you're feeling restless or the like, you're welcome to come over and sleep with me, like last night."

He paused and then looked up at her. "That seems far more presumptuous than simply watching you."

She smiled and shrugged. "And it would be far more unacceptable if you did it without my invitation. But, well, sleeping with you last night was very nice. I felt... It felt *right*."

Severus was silent, but she could sense that there was something he wanted to say, so she stayed silent. Finally, he said, "The nights I watch you... they're usually the nights I would not be welcome in your bed."

Understanding dawned on Hermione. "Oh. Well, I'd rather not limit nights spent with you to days we argue."

He snorted softly, but didn't weigh in on the subject. Hermione frowned, suddenly feeling nervous.

"Do you want to spend the night again? At some point in time, that is. I'm not necessarily asking you to spend the night with me tonight, although I wouldn't object to it either, but I don't want you to feel pressured into spending the night with me. And just because I'm asking you to spend the night with me doesn't mean that I'm propositioning you or anything and--"

She was cut off by Severus' finger on her lips. He was smiling at her softly, amused. "I enjoyed spending last night with you very much, Hermione. The only reason I am at all hesitant is because..." His finger moved down slightly to play on her lower lip. When she opened her lips in invitation, he groaned and pulled away to collapse onto his back.

"You are far too tempting, my dear."

Hermione frowned and straddled him. "We are married, you know. We are allowed to do this."

He smiled up at her wryly and placed his hands on her hips. "I do not want to rush things."

She ran her hands over his chest. "I'm not feeling rushed."

Severus smiled softly and moved one of his hands up to caress her cheek. "I'm a greedy bastard, Hermione. I don't want to share your heart."

Her hands stilled. "This is about the dream?"

He nodded. She closed her eyes and slumped back against his raised knees. "Severus... I don't know that Ron will ever leave my heart. I loved him so much, and..." She opened her eyes and looked at Severus, trying to will him to understand. "That dream I had, though... I don't know that it was about missing Ron as much as it was about moving on."

"Why do you say that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's just a feeling."

He was silent, but he looked thoughtful. Finally, he said, "I don't want to be used, Hermione. I've had enough of that this lifetime."

She bent over to touch his cheek. "And I don't want to use you, Severus. I want to be with you and share myself with you. I want to make love with you again."

They stared into each other's eyes for a heated moment before she lowered her head and kissed him. He kissed her back, slowly, thoroughly. The kiss went on like that, gently simmering, until he rolled them over and pulled away. She pouted a bit, but not with much feeling, as his body was pressing into hers most delightfully.

"As wonderful as it was in my dream to take you here in the open, I don't really fancy having a sunburned arse. And I would get a sunburn if I did things as I want to."

"Shall we go back to the castle, then?" she asked hopefully.

He looked at her intensely and then let his lips curl up into a smile. She smiled back when he nodded.

"I would like that very much," he said gruffly as he got up. He offered her his hand, which she gladly accepted, feeling with pleasure tingles where their skin met.

"I would like that, too," she concurred.

He pointed his wand out at the field, and she brought hers out to clear up their picnic. Soon, a pink bag rushed toward them, the picnic trappings were safely stowed in the shrunken hamper, and they were ready to go. He offered her his hand again, and she accepted, letting him Apparate them home.

XXIII

Chapter 23 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

AN: *Huge thanks go to Keladry and Southern for their awesome betaing powers. *Hugs them both**

They Apparated beside the castle gates with the smallest *pop* and promptly made their way up the hill. Hermione felt rather giddy as they rushed toward the castle, their sense of propriety having properly given way to their hormones and only maintaining enough say to get them into a more private domain, because neither of them were naturally exhibitionists.

Hand in hand, they made their way down into the dungeons. Hermione found it hard not to giggle and even more difficult not to let her smile grow out of control, though

several reminder scowls from Severus as they passed by some students did help. A little.

They finally made it into his chambers, closed the door behind them, and had thrown themselves at each other when a little cough sounded from the settee.

Instinctively, they both had their wands trained at the person who'd coughed in an instant, though Hermione dropped her wand arm as soon as she recognized Professor Dumbledore. Severus didn't.

"What are you doing here, Albus?"

Dumbledore rose from his seat and said somberly, "My apologies, Severus. I received a note today and felt it best that you deal with it immediately."

Severus' wand didn't falter. "And you could not have charmed it urgent?"

"I was going to, but then I noticed you had arrived, and judged, by the manner of your arrival, that my charms may not be as effective as usual." He looked at Severus and Hermione's joined hands and then back at their rosy faces. Hermione blushed and broke away.

"Modesty is not your strong suit, old man," Severus snarled while dropping his wand. "So give me the note and then kindly leave."

Dumbledore serenely nodded and handed over the parchment. He then laid a hand on Severus' shoulder and squeezed.

"I am sorry, Severus."

And then he left. Hermione closed the door behind him, and when she turned back to Severus, she found him reading the note, his body rigid.

She stepped up beside him, placing her hand on his arm, and was startled and alarmed when he looked at her with unconcealed fury. She stepped back immediately and gripped her wand more securely, just in case, but all he did was look back at the parchment in his hand.

He fisted his hand, crumpling the parchment, and dropped his arm to the side. He looked at the wall as he tried to store his emotions behind the stony facade.

"Lucius is dead." His voice was dangerously soft, and Hermione wasn't sure she'd heard him properly, but before she could wonder, the tea tray across the room exploded.

"DAMN HIM!" Severus roared, and several wineglasses shattered, the shards flying everywhere. Hermione cast a shielding charm and stepped further back, unsure what Severus was going to break next. As if answer to her question, Severus roared and picked up the chair next to him and threw it as forcefully as he could. She jumped as it smashed against the wall, breaking into a mangled mess of limbs and torn fabric.

Hermione looked at the broken chair, shocked and horrified. She looked up just in time to see Severus grip a vase with every intention of hurling it against the wall. She also noticed that his face and hands were peppered with cuts from the flying debris.

"STOP!" she yelled and was surprised when he did. He looked at her, and she could see that the fury was being held in check for the moment, but it wasn't gone.

"You're hurting yourself," she explained and cautiously approached him as he looked at his hands. She waved her wand at the settee, clearing it of shards before gently taking his arm and guiding him to sit.

As soon as he sat down, his fury seemed to evaporate, and he deflated. He bent over to hold his head in his hands, though Hermione forced him back up, looking at his face to see if any shards were embedded in his skin. When she was sure there weren't, she cast a couple of quick cleansing charms, then summoned the dittany from his bathroom.

"I didn't realize you were still so attached to Lucius," she said softly as she applied the herb to his face.

He winced. "I wasn't. I'm glad the bastard is dead."

"Then why the rage?" she asked, looking at him obliquely.

He sighed and shooed her away so he could put his head back in his hands. She simply treated his hands as she waited for his answer.

"He didn't die soon enough," he finally said.

"What do you mean?"

Severus sighed again and sat back, allowing her access to his face again. "He died only after he had thoroughly and completely corrupted Draco."

He closed his eyes, his face a grim mask of grief. "I know you've never got on with Draco, and that it's been mostly his fault, but as a small child, he was such a delight. He was so warm-hearted and eager, always trying to impress us grown-ups, especially his father. As a baby, Lucius did nothing but dote on him, but as Draco grew, so did Lucius' demands. By the time Draco entered Hogwarts, he knew what he had to do to impress his father and gain his acceptance. And now look at him. He's a replica of his father. Elitist, bigoted and a murderer to boot."

"Murderer?" Hermione asked, shocked.

Severus held up the crumpled parchment as if it were proof of Draco's guilt. Hermione took it, scanning it quickly, but found nothing beyond the official report. Lucius had been found dead in the morning. Manner of death was likely the Killing Curse.

"I told Draco that revenge rarely solves anything. I told him that being sent back to Azkaban in such circumstances was the worst fate Lucius could suffer, but the idiot boy had to go through his plan."

Hermione frowned at Severus. "Plan?"

Severus sat up again and slouched back, defeated. He didn't look at her, and she doubted he was focused on anything in the room. "I could tell he was planning something. His look at the trial... I know that look. Lucius had that look on his face when he started planning Fitzwilliam's downfall by Amortentia. Because how dare Fitz look at Cissy that way..."

"I tried to correct Draco's course," Severus said, suddenly looking Hermione. "And when he helped Potter in the battle, I thought it wasn't too late. I thought he had a chance to avoid Lucius' fate."

"How do you know that... that he was the one to kill Lucius?"

Severus just shook his head. "Oh, I'm sure his wand holds no record of it, but..."

"Lucius was a horrible man. I'm sure there were more than a few people who wanted him dead. It might not have been Draco's fault."

He shook his head again, first slowly, then more quickly as if to regain focus. He stood up.

"Perhaps you are right," he said with obvious doubt. "But, whoever is to blame, I need to go congratulate Draco on his status as an orphan." His tone was stiffer and more

cutting than she'd heard in weeks.

Hermione stood as well, unsure of what to do. Severus, however, didn't even glance back as he left. Hermione looked around the wrecked room, her mood now far from giddy. She waved her wand, repairing the destroyed tea set, chair and glasses. Looking around the room, she tried to think of anything else she might be able to do for Severus to improve his mood, but besides an air cleansing charm, nothing came to mind.

Standing in the empty room, she noticed a chill creeping into her bones and decided she'd rather be in her rooms. She wrote Severus a quick note, then left the dungeons promptly.

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Dinner came and went, but Severus wasn't there. Nor was Draco. She tried not to let it worry her, but she couldn't help feeling disappointed and a bit worried. She hoped Severus hadn't done anything drastic and tried to reassure herself that he only seemed to lose control around her. Which wasn't particularly reassuring, but if it meant that he hadn't vented his anger on Draco in a magical or physical way, she would be glad for it.

Her friends noticed her mood, but wisely remained silent, though she caught them watching her warily a few times throughout the meal, and she'd been sure Harry wanted to ask her what was wrong. She was grateful Ginny could read her, at least, and had a pointed elbow to silently guide Harry. She did not want to talk about it. She didn't feel it was her place to talk about it.

She barely touched her food, but she managed to give her friends a reassuring smile as she left the hall for her room. They waved goodbye, though they were obviously worried and unhappy at her behavior. She winced at the thought that they might think she was relapsing and made a mental note to eat a good meal at breakfast to reassure them that all was relatively well.

When she finally made it to her room, she opened the door to find a lovely fire going in the grate, a pot of tea steeping on the coffee table and a furious husband pacing back and forth, muttering obscenities to himself. Silver sparks were shooting from his wand at random intervals, although Hermione wondered if he was even aware that he had his wand out.

Observing how tightly wound he was, and how oblivious, Hermione decided it was best to lean on the doorjamb until Severus caught sight of her. She really didn't want to startle him; his display earlier had reminded her of just how scary he could be.

She was rather amused, though also quite alarmed, that it took Severus four turns around her couch before he noticed her. What humor she had felt was quickly banished when his reaction to her presence was to growl, "Are you waiting for a bloody invitation?"

Hermione frowned dangerously, but was careful to close the door behind her quietly.

"Good evening to you, too," she said as she turned back to find him pacing again. She crossed her arms, the relief at finding him there safe and sound replaced with anger. "I see you've made yourself at home?"

Severus shot her a look usually reserved for Neville, at which point Hermione found herself losing control of her temper.

"Don't you dare look at me like that, Severus Snape! After our conversation earlier today TODAY! about the invasion of privacy and the like, you dare to growl at me in my own home?"

Snape stopped pacing long enough to grab a pretty glass vase full of flowers and throw it at the wall with a resounding crash. Hermione jumped, startled, and then felt all control slip.

Before she knew what she was doing, she had her wand out and had petrified Severus. Then she advanced on him.

"You have crossed the line, Severus," she hissed, controlling her voice by the skin of her teeth. "You've already let it be known that you're angry. You've already destroyed your own belongings in a violent fit. That's your prerogative. But if you think you can break into MY ROOM and destroy MY THINGS and generally take your anger out on me, THINK AGAIN!"

She flicked her wand, and Severus lifted off the floor from where he'd fallen. She couldn't decipher his expression, but she guessed a portion of it was shock as she relatively calmly levitated his body to the door and then out into the hallway.

"Come back only when you have some semblance of control and a grasp of civility, Severus. I will NOT be your whipping post in ANY way! EVER!"

She then canceled the Full-Body Bind, slammed the door and put up her best wards, all in very quick succession. She had no idea how Severus would react to her hexing him like that, but she guessed that in his current state of mind, he could well be murderous.

She wondered if she should have canceled the body bind, in fact, though she was positive that he wouldn't actually harm an innocent bystander.

Quite certain.

Pretty sure.

She worried her lip, wondering if she should Floo Dumbledore to let him know Severus was on the rampage, but after listening at the door and hearing nothing, she decided that Severus had probably regained some of his mental faculties. Either that or he was lying in wait for her to open the door to check the hallway, thereby making herself vulnerable.

She shivered at the thought and quickly shoved it from her mind. He hadn't been a raving lunatic. He hadn't lost all his senses. He'd just been very, very angry and obviously thought she was safe to vent to. On some level, she thought she should be flattered that he felt comfortable enough around her to be able to show his darker, more violent side. It implied some sort of trust. Didn't it?

That's when she noticed she was shaking. She quickly moved to the couch and sat down just as her legs gave way.

She was terrified. He had terrorized her. Again.

Her shaking became almost convulsive as she brought her legs up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. She didn't know what to do. She could only barely deal with his temper when it came out verbally, but the physical violence... it made her ill.

This is how it starts, a voice inside her mind said. First, he'll only destroy things, but eventually, it won't be the wall he throws the vase at.

She felt dizzy at that thought. And nauseous. Suddenly overwhelmed by the nausea, she untangled herself and staggered blindly for the bathroom, barely making it in time.

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An hour later found Hermione curled up on the couch in her dressing gown, a mug of tea in hand and rational thought once again rearing its reassuring head as she stared blankly into the fire.

She still hadn't sorted out what to do, precisely, although looking back over the evening, she came to the conclusion that she certainly wasn't helpless. She was a witch.

Not only was she a witch, but she was a powerful, talented witch. He was a powerful and talented wizard to be sure, but she had managed to deal with him efficiently and, depending on his reaction to the whole affair, effectively. Granted, his reflexes had probably been hampered by his rage, but then, he wasn't a threat when he wasn't raging.

That was the sticking point, though. She was almost positive that while he was in his right mind, he would uphold his promise to never hurt her. His sincerity had been palpable. But...

She hated that she didn't trust him completely. She hated that niggling of doubt. She hated that she'd had to raise her wand against him.

And then she wondered if she'd had to. The first tantrum she'd stopped with a word. Perhaps he would have stopped again if she'd only asked him to. But she'd lost control of *her* temper...

What if she'd hurt him? What if, one day when he was angry and out of control, she used something more harmful than a Full-Body Bind? How would she live with herself? And how could she be certain she wouldn't?

A knock on the door roused her from her musings. Not sure who it would be, she went to open the door cautiously and was only somewhat surprised to find Severus on the other side, looking thoroughly repentant, as well as a trifle drunk.

"May I come in?" His tone was unsure and vulnerable, and her heart ached for him.

"Of course you may," she said, opening the door for him. He walked in and sat down on the couch, looking up at her invitingly. She wanted to sit by him, but she chose the chair by the fire instead. His face dropped slightly, and he looked down at his clasped hands.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I didn't mean to take everything out on you."

Her heart ached a little more. "I know you didn't. That's what scares me. Well, that and the fact that I lost control of *my* temper."

He looked up at her, and she had the impression that he was surprised to be able to see her. She smiled at him softly, wondering how much he missed his long hair.

"You had every right to hex me. I was out of line."

"Yes, you were, but what if a more dangerous hex had come to my mind? I don't want to hurt you."

He looked down again, a pained expression on his face. "I deserved it."

"Don't say that!" Hermione cried. "No one *no one* deserves to be abused! I wouldn't tolerate it if you harmed me, and you sure as hell shouldn't tolerate it if I harmed you!"

He stood up, obviously agitated, and walked around the couch a few times before stopping behind it. He bent over to grip the back as if in need of support and shook his head.

"You need to defend yourself and your boundaries, though."

"But not with offensive spells. There's no need for offensive spells when there's an entire litany of defensive spells to use."

He peeked up at her, and she thought she could see the barest glimmer of a smirk. "Some would deem the Full-Body Bind as offensive."

"Yes, well, some would say using magic at all is offensive."

It was definitely a smirk, although it was already fading back into a somber, melancholy expression. After a few moments of silence, he said, "I promised I wouldn't hurt you, but I never did make a wand oath to that effect. Would you like one?"

Hermione thought about it. Wand oaths were serious matters. He would be effectively binding himself to a promise. She didn't know exactly what the consequences were for breaking a wand oath, or if it was even possible, but the idea of being bound to obey a promise, even if it was willingly made, smacked of coercion. It did not feel right. And it also felt like making a wand oath would undermine what faith and trust they already had in each other.

"No," she said hesitantly. "I don't want to ask that of you. I don't want to bind you in that manner. Even if I were to make a similar oath to you, it wouldn't feel right. It would feel like we're cheating."

He walked over to her and knelt before her, lightly placing his hands on her knees. "I don't want to hurt you, Hermione. I want you to feel secure in the knowledge that I would never hurt you."

She smiled and placed her hands over his. "And I don't want to hurt you, Severus, but wouldn't it be better to use our own wills to not hurt each other? With the compulsion of the oath, it feels like there would always be an edge of mistrust. I don't want to mistrust you, and I don't want you to resent me."

"I wouldn't resent you! I meant it when I said I would rather die than hurt you."

"And I believe you."

"But..."

"Perhaps," she interrupted, "if you ever *do* harm me physically, or if I ever do harm to you, perhaps then, if it happens, we can make an oath. But since we're both loath to do such harm... why take away that trust in our intentions?"

He gazed up at her with conflicted eyes. "Because I don't want to hurt you even one more time."

She smiled again. "Then don't."

He shifted till he was sitting on the floor and lowered his face to her lap, resting his cheek on her knees while his hands wound their way around her calves. She ran her hand through his hair, unconsciously trying to soothe his troubled soul.

"How can you trust me, Hermione, when I don't trust myself?"

"Well, you didn't harm me today, and I don't know that I've ever seen you so upset before. You scared me, but that's a different matter.

"I've also seen how hard you try," she said, still caressing his head. "I've asked a lot of you these past weeks, and you have more than lived up to my expectations. You've been wonderful to me, Severus. You've been wonderful *for* me."

He gave her legs a squeeze and her exposed knee a kiss.

They sat like that for a while, content to just feel one another's touch. But Severus' position was not a comfortable one, and soon he was shifting, trying to find a better position. When he sat up, she was concerned to see how upset he looked.

"What's wrong?" she asked before she could think better of it.

He closed his eyes with a sigh. "Draco..." He paused as if looking for words. She took the opportunity to get up and silently suggest they move to the couch. He nodded and got up carefully, stretching his joints with several pops and cracks that made Hermione shudder.

Once they were settled on the sofa, side by side, Severus let out another sigh.

"I never expected to have children. First, I didn't think that any woman would have me, then I was trapped in the Dark Lord's service and completely unwilling to give him any further leverage on my loyalty. So when Cissy and Lucius had Draco and named me his godfather... It wasn't proper parenthood, but I think only Lucius was prouder than I was."

He stopped and buried his head in his hands. "I've failed him, Hermione. I was supposed to help raise him, watch over him, guide him, and somewhere in there, I failed him."

She reached out and stroked the back of his head and let her hand rest on his shoulder.

"He was *happy* to hear his father had died. Not only was he happy, but he knew what news I brought. He *knew*. He as good as admitted to arranging the murder."

Hermione closed her eyes, hearing the pain that Severus was experiencing. She didn't know anything she could say that would comfort him, though, so she just wrapped her arms around him. He tensed at first, then leaned into her embrace, wrapping his arms around her as he sought solace.

She hugged him tightly, wanting to ease his guilt and suffering, but unable to do anything more than hold him. When he pressed his head to her shoulder, she found herself murmuring, "How do I help you?"

He withdrew and, for a terrible moment, she thought she'd offended him. But when his hands wove themselves into her hair, and his lips descended on hers, she knew he was responding to her instead. She felt his plea and opened herself to him, willing him to take what comfort she could give him.

He plundered her mouth eagerly for a minute, but then pulled back again. She opened her eyes to see him looking at her tentatively. He opened his mouth to say something, but she shook her head, placed her finger on his lips and made a quiet, soothing sound. She then guided his lips back to hers.

He melted into her, his kisses remaining slow and almost tremulous, though his hands found their way out of her hair and down her torso, caressing her back and hips, flexing impatiently. She shifted slightly so that his arms could encircle her completely, and he immediately did so, pulling her toward him firmly.

Too soon, they found their positions restricted, and Hermione stood once more, motioning that they should find a more comfortable location. He took her offered hand and, without a word, kissed it before he stood up and accompanied her into the bedroom.

She felt almost shy as she reached the bed and turned to face Severus, but he didn't give her time to fully realize her modesty before his hands were on her, pulling her into his kiss once more. She was all too eager to feel his lips against hers again.

When she noticed his hands sliding underneath her dressing gown, she reached up and started the arduous process of undressing him. Her raised arms prevented her robe from falling off completely when he slid it off her shoulders. Instead, it bunched up at her elbows, exposing her shoulders and breasts to the cool air of her room.

She pressed against him as close as she could, feeling his wool coat rub against her skin while still working at his buttons. He pulled away a little, though his lips never left hers. He parted just enough to bring out his wand and tap his jacket, charming all his buttons, coat and shirt, undone.

Murmuring her pleasure, she helped him shrug out of his clothes, barely noticing when her own garment slipped to the floor in the process. His hands quickly found her breasts, cupping them tenderly.

He broke away from their kiss and looked down at her breasts, delicately stroking the areola, making her nipples tighten. Uncomfortable with his scrutiny, she pulled his face up to kiss her again as her hands found their way to his cock. He groaned as she wrapped her hands around him, all of his attention being focused for that moment on what her hands were doing, but an instant later, he had Hermione on her back in the bed and was beside her, kissing her like a demon.

She was somewhat startled at the sudden change of his demeanor, but she didn't object as his fingers slid down through her curls. She moaned her approval as he felt her up, and parried his tongue for every thrust. Her grip on his cock tightened as she felt the beginnings of an orgasm start to swirl, and she thrust her hips up to meet his hand.

Suddenly, the hand was gone. Instead, his thighs were pressing their way between hers, and soon she felt him at her entrance. He pushed in without preamble, making her gasp and tense at the tight, rough feeling of not being quite ready. He paused at that, rising up to look at her with worry etched on his face.

She smiled at him and lifted up her head to kiss him before he could apologize, trying to let him know it was all right. He kissed her back, his body relaxing into hers, but didn't move again until she wriggled against him, asking for more.

When he did move, it only took two thrusts before he gasped and looked down at her again, this time with a wild, desperate and apologetic face. She understood and smiled encouragingly, knowing that this time was for his comfort, not her pleasure. He started to shiver, and she rocked her hips forward. He closed his eyes and groaned, and then he lost his self-control. He tried to keep it slow and even, but it wasn't long before he was fucking her desperately, unaware of anything but the need to be *in*. It was over before she could come, but that allowed her to watch him as he came undone above her. She was amazed at how much emotion he showed and how large the gamut was.

He shakily dropped down onto his elbows and kissed her on the forehead before rolling off her in an exhausted motion. He was breathing heavily with his eyes closed, but when she propped herself up onto an elbow so as to observe him better, he cracked open an eye and looked her way.

"I'm sorry."

She shook her head and pulled his arm away from his chest. He didn't object, but he looked at her warily. "Don't worry about it," she said and cuddled up next to him, her ear to his heart. "Holding me will make up for it."

He ran his fingers through her hair, lingering around the nape of her neck before coming to rest on her shoulder. She was just drifting off when he said, "I should go soon."

She tensed, at once offended and needy, but then reminded herself that he might have other engagements that required his attention. However, she couldn't quite keep the put-out tone from her voice when she asked, "Why?"

"People will talk if they see me leaving from here in the morning," he said hesitantly.

"In case it escaped your notice, we are married," she huffed. "Married couples are expected to have intimate moments now and again," she quoted.

"Yes, but do you really want the students to speculate on that?" he replied with a smirk.

She chuckled slightly, but said, "Humph. Well, that's what the Floo is for, isn't it?"

She felt his laugh vibrating his chest. "Don't tell that to the students."

His hand started running through her hair again, and she allowed herself to relax a little, hoping that he wasn't going to leave after all. When his motions stopped with a pat

and he started moving out from under her, however, her stomach tightened nervously.

She grabbed his arm as he sat up, getting his attention. "Please don't go, Severus."

His face instantly softened into a gentle smile, and he bent down to kiss her tenderly. When he straightened up, he said, "I just need to use the loo, my dear."

She smiled and relaxed again, bringing up the covers to snuggle under. She watched him enter the bathroom and lazily closed her eyes as the door clicked shut, a smile on her face. She cuddled the covers happily, replaying his smile in her mind until it was embedded in her memory.

She figured she must have dozed off when she opened her eyes to see Severus putting on his frock coat. She sat up, holding the covers up modestly.

He stilled his motions and looked over at her, slightly consternated. "I didn't mean to wake you."

She didn't say anything as she felt her throat closing with emotion. She did try to smile, though, as he leaned down to kiss her.

"Thank you, my dear," he said, stroking her cheek tenderly before straightening up and resuming the buttoning process.

She watched his fingers moving, hiding him away, and had the urge to grab his hands to still them. Thinking about it, she saw no reason not to, and did so.

His hands did stop, but she found she couldn't look up at him as she whispered, *Please* don't go."

He didn't say anything for a long moment, but then said, "I snore."

She laughed weakly, appalled to find a tear had escaped. She looked down at the bedspread and hastily wiped the evidence away.

"I don't care."

"There are classes tomorrow; we have to be up early."

Her heart sank at the pitiful excuse. They'd been spending their mornings together for the last week. She knew his schedule.

"Oh, right. Okay." She didn't look up, not wanting him to see how hurt she was. She lay back down, rolling over immediately to keep her back to him. "Please turn out the light when you leave."

She heard the rustle of his clothes again and wished he'd leave quickly so she could cry in peace. The light turned out, and she held her breath, waiting for the sound of the door closing behind him. She was very surprised, therefore, when the bed dipped beside her, and she felt his arms reaching out for her, followed shortly by his body as he curled around her.

"I do owe you a cuddle, don't I?" he said, giving her a squeeze and kissing her shoulder. She didn't trust her voice, so she nodded. He gave her another squeeze and kiss.

"When I came out of the bathroom, you were already asleep. You looked so peaceful I didn't want to disturb you."

She let out a shuddering breath at his explanation, earning her yet another squeeze. She squeezed his hand in response, unable to find the words to explain to him the reason she had been so peaceful in the first place.

Instead she whispered, "Just... please don't leave without saying goodbye."

He gave her another squeeze. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Although she believed him intellectually, she didn't relax into sleep until his even breaths and heavy arm soothed her worried soul.

AN 2: *Oh, and for your pleasure (and to challenge myself), I drew an illustration for this chapter. You can find it at: <http://averygoodun.deviantart.com/art/Comfort-78351484>*

XXIV

Chapter 24 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

AN: *First, let me apologize for how extreeeeemely long this chapter has taken to get out. I had hoped to have the story finished long before now, especially now that the end is in my sight. Alas, it wasn't to be. I'm sorry.*

Second, please bow down with me and pay your respects to the lovely ladies who beta this: Keladry and Southern. They keep me real. Ish.

And third, thank you for your patience. I will *finish this story. It is not abandoned. It just comes second to real life. I hope you understand.*

Hermione woke up to the sound of snoring. She smiled sleepily at both the reassurance of Severus' presence and the fact that he hadn't lied; he really did snore.

She rolled over and adjusted her pillow before closing her eyes and relaxing back into the mattress, intent on getting back to sleep. The unfortunate thing about a snoring bed partner, though, is that it is very difficult to ignore them. Hermione listened to the irregular snorts and snuffles for a minute before covering her head with her pillow. It did no good. It was just muffled snorts and snarbles and snuffles. It wasn't on par with a Silencing Spell.

Hermione perked up, suddenly very awake.

Did she dare? How angry would he be to wake up and find himself silenced?

She shook her head and relaxed again, dismissing the idea as a very bad one. She'd already hexed him enough for one day, and although he'd forgiven her for that

offense, she doubted he'd be quite so sanguine the second time, what with being defenseless.

He snorted particularly loudly at that moment, making Hermione press the pillow around her ears. The snores were, if anything, getting worse, and she was aware of an odd grinding noise that didn't sound healthy at all. Then she realized she was grinding her teeth.

Forcing herself to relax, she sat up and summoned her slippers and dressing robe from the other side of the bed. Slipping them on, she padded quietly out of the bedroom, shutting Severus' noises out by closing the door.

As she made her way to the settee, she yawned and waved her wand at the fireplace, making a cozy fire spring up. She looked around for a blanket or something to cover herself with but didn't find anything larger than a quilted tea cozy. Resigning herself to transfiguration, she raised her wand and stilled as a partial memory made its way forward.

She couldn't quite remember where she'd read it, but she knew she'd seen a reference to a spell that silenced snoring. It might have even been a cure. She wracked her mind, hoping it hadn't been one of the countless library books she'd read over the years. It didn't seem like something she would have taken notes on, as Severus was the first snorer of her acquaintance.

Standing, she made her way to the bookshelves and ran her finger along the spines, pulling out a likely candidate here and there. After collecting ten such tomes, she retreated to her desk and began reading.

She was halfway through the pile when she found it. *Soundless Sleeping Spells for the Sonorous Sleeper's Spouse*. She snorted at the overdone, even for the Wizarding world, alliteration, and began reading, only to be interrupted by a sleepy, "Hermione?"

Looking up, she found Severus squinting groggily at her. "Why on earth are you up at this hour?"

She blushed and automatically covered the open book with her hand. "I couldn't sleep."

He blinked and then slowly smiled. "I did warn you."

She smiled in response. "Yes, you did. Fortunately, I think I've found something that should help."

He came over, placed his hands on her shoulders, looked at the page and snorted. "I don't know that I'd trust anything with such a title."

"Mm," she replied, reading through the spell's instructions. "The theory sounds solid enough, though. Are you willing to let me have a go?"

He gave her shoulders a quick squeeze. "If it will get you back to bed..."

She stood and placed one hand on his throat while the other hand covered his nose. "Pipio gluttio."

Severus swallowed involuntarily, and Hermione eyed him cautiously, taking away her hands. "Are you okay?"

He gingerly pinched his nose and nodded. "Yes," he said. "It feels a bit odd, but fine."

"Well, hopefully it worked as it's supposed to."

"And if it didn't?" he asked with a smirk as he placed his hands around her waist and drew her into him while backing them up to the wall.

She smiled back. "Then I'll just have to resort to the Silencing Spell I was originally considering."

"That would definitely be considered an offensive spell, madam!" he said severely, though his hands belied his humor by stroking her lightly in a ticklish fashion. She squirmed in response, trying to get away from his fingers.

"That's why I didn't – stop it! – why I didn't use it when your snores first woke me up!"

He smirked and continued tickling her even as she slapped at his hands. "But the fact remains that you considered using it against me at all!"

Hermione let out a high-pitched sound that might have been a giggle or a screech and tried to escape her husband's fiendish hands. "Severus! Stop it!"

"And why should I?" he growled in her ear, though his fingers did still around her waist, gripping her snugly. Suddenly, Hermione was very aware of Severus' proximity, his breath on her ear, and she felt herself tingling deep inside.

"Because it's almost impossible to kiss effectively while laughing," she replied and stretched up to kiss him.

His lips were still soft from sleep, but as she traced his lips with hers, she felt his body go taut with excitement. He moaned quietly as she nibbled his lower lip and responded by gripping her to him tightly. His large hands spread across her back, pulling her closer still. He withdrew from their kiss slowly, lingering on her lips softly as if loath to ever let go.

Hermione smiled against his kiss and mumbled, "Bed?"

"Mm, yes. Bed," he said.

She pushed him back with her hips, which brought another moan from him, this time more guttural, and she smiled again. She grabbed one of his hands off of her waist and led him back to bed.

Getting out of her slippers and robe and under the covers as quickly as she could, Hermione looked over just in time to see a wistful expression leave Severus' face. Catching her look, he smirked and joined her under the covers, curling his arm around her and drawing her close. She responded by kissing his shoulder and stroking his back, expecting him to make a move.

Except he didn't move.

She raised her head to look at him in the dim light, and though she couldn't make out much visually, she recognized the meaning of his deep breaths.

Sighing with a mix of disappointment and amusement, she rolled over and snuggled up to him more comfortably. Her last thought before falling back asleep was that the spell seemed to have worked at least. He wasn't snoring any longer.

XXX

Hermione woke to the feel of a hand running along her side. It was a gentle touch but just firm enough not to be ticklish. She lay there with her eyes closed, enjoying the feel of Severus' touch but wondering what time it was. The room was light already, so she suspected she would be in for another disappointment. He was probably just waking her to say good-bye.

She didn't realize she'd sighed until Severus drew her hair back and stroked her face.

"Do you always sigh sadly upon waking in the morning?"

She snorted softly and then turned over to look at him. She was somewhat surprised to find him still naked. She was also surprised that his expression was almost apologetic.

"No. It depends on the morning," she replied.

"Ah." Severus frowned for a moment. "And this morning is deserving of sighs?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. It might not be as bad as all that."

"Oh?"

"Yes, well, I hadn't opened my eyes yet when I sighed, so I didn't know if you were... that is..."

Severus' face tightened slightly. "I do seem to recall a bit of a disappointing evening for you."

"Mm. It wasn't as bad as it could have been."

"No, I suppose I could have begged you for pity sex while I was drunk and miserable..."

Hermione winced at his tone and turned away, deciding she wasn't up to dealing with him this early in the morning. Her progress was stopped when he wrapped his arm around her chest and pulled her back.

"I... my apologies, Hermione. For last night's behavior, last night's sex and this morning's awkwardness."

"Is that what you call your attitude? Awkward?"

He clenched his jaw briefly, but then let it go with a sigh. "I'll admit that I am not exactly comfortable at the moment, and that... I..."

Hermione took pity on him and raised her fingers to his lips.

"I understand, really I do. I guess I just don't like being woken up so nicely only to have my head bitten off."

He raised his eyebrow. "So you liked this?" he asked and resumed the strokes up and down her torso.

"Mm. Quite a bit, actually."

"And how about this?" he asked as his hand moved to include her breasts.

She hummed again and rolled onto her back to give him more access. He took that as the encouragement it was, and soon his hands and mouth were roaming all over body, expertly coaxing shivers, sighs and other nice sounds out of her.

XXX

Severus collapsed on top of her, panting heavily. She stroked his back for a few seconds, then nudged him to move off of her. He complied, but left his arm draped across her chest.

Hermione tried to catch her breath but mostly concentrated on the quiet hum of satisfaction that was encompassing her body and mind. Even though it had only been a few weeks, she'd forgotten how powerful her orgasms were with Severus. And she hadn't known that he was able to string out her pleasure for so long that it was almost painful. He'd been too sick, and probably insecure, for that their first time.

Taking a big breath in, Hermione let out a long, satisfied sigh.

"And here I thought I had made a good case for it to be a sigh-free morning," Severus said, though it was somewhat muffled by the pillow he'd buried his face in.

Hermione laughed. "That was an entirely different sort of sigh, as I'm sure you well know."

He moved his head so as to look at her, and she noticed he was smirking rather smugly. "So it was good for you, then?"

She laughed again and stroked his back appreciatively. "You know it was far better than good, darling. There's no need for false modesty. Especially when you can't repress your own smirk of pleasure."

He grinned rather boyishly at her, then raised his head up to look at the bedside clock.

"Shit."

Hermione lifted her head and was rather shocked to see that it was ten till nine. She repeated Severus' exclamation and tossed the covers off. Severus had already put his pants on and was shrugging into his shirt as she rushed for the bathroom and her toothbrush. She was brushing her teeth vigorously when Severus called out his good-bye; she hastily spit and hurried to the door to say good-bye in return.

He was standing by the fireplace, and when she entered the room, he turned to look at her.

His lips quirked up as he looked her over, and she sensed his amusement. She assumed it was due to the toothpaste foam she could feel around her mouth.

They met in the middle of the room, and he pushed her hair back from her face.

"Thank you, my dear." He bent down to kiss her cheek. "I will see you at lunch."

She couldn't tell if that was a question or an order, but she assumed it was the former. "Yes. We can scare all the first years by making eyes across the Great Hall."

"Mm. You do know how to tempt a man."

He kissed her again and then threw the handful of Floo powder he'd been holding into the fire. Three seconds later, he was gone. Hermione felt wistful for approximately four seconds before she remembered the time and set to getting dressed as quickly as possible.

XXX

Hermione was out of breath from sprinting when she reached the door to the Arithmancy classroom, but she was still late. Only a minute, but it didn't make it any easier to open the door knowing *why* she was late. She dreaded to think what Professor Vector was going to say to her now that she had a valid reason to be upset.

Taking a big breath, Hermione opened the door and walked inside, trying not to look as guilty as she felt. It must not have worked, for Professor Vector took one look at her and went red in the face.

Standing up, she placed her hands on her hips and looked Hermione up and down, very slowly. The class went silent as everyone collectively held their breath.

"Ms. Granger. I suppose I should feel honored that you decided to show up for class when it's obvious you had somewhere more... *attractive* to be."

Half the class tittered nervously as Hermione flushed angrily. She knew she deserved to be criticized for being late, but to snidely attack Severus like that was unfair.

"Of course, perhaps I shouldn't feel honored as I suspect your husband, at least, felt the need to fulfill his duties to his *job* rather than just his wife."

Hermione bit down on her tongue, but could feel the air around her starting to swirl. She breathed deeply, trying to calm herself. Vector must have sensed the growing danger, for she turned her back and lazily said, "Fifty points from Gryffindor, Ms. Granger. Now take your seat."

Hermione had to breathe deeply three more times before she trusted herself to move without lashing out, but then she walked to her seat beside Teddy with her head held high. She noticed no one, not even Teddy, was looking at her, though. Everyone was busy pretending to work.

She sat down and got out her work, trying to expel her pent up rage gradually and discreetly while also trying not to burst into tears. Not only was she humiliated and mortified, but she also suffered the last nail in the coffin of disillusionment. There was no way she could ever respect Vector again after this – there were no excuses left.

Noticing the problem on the chalkboard, she focused her mind on her work, determined not to let Vector destroy her concentration.

No one was more grateful to hear the bell ring than Hermione as she hastily scooped up her work and stuffed it into her bag. Glancing over at Teddy, she found that he was moving a bit slower and reluctantly. Not wanting to be in the same room as Vector for one minute more than necessary, Hermione decided to wait for Teddy on the other side of the door.

It became annoying how everybody avoided looking at her as they left the room, so Hermione moved further down the hall to wait for Teddy, tucking herself out of the way behind one of the buttresses lining the stone wall. As Teddy went by, she darted out and caught up with him.

"You were right," she said, making him jump a little.

"I thought you'd gone." Teddy looked upset and wouldn't quite meet her eye.

"I'm sorry I didn't wait for you. I just couldn't stay in the room with her."

Teddy smiled. "Can't say I blame you. She was pretty nasty to you today, even by recent standards." He didn't look at her as he said it, though. Like all her other classmates, he was carefully looking anywhere but at her. Concerned that she'd offended him more than she'd thought, she reached out to touch him. He jumped again and finally looked at her.

"I didn't mortally offend you, did I? By leaving you behind, that is."

Teddy smiled again, though it seemed a little tighter than usual.

"I did offend you, didn't I? Not only was I late, but then I left you in the dragon's lair all alone! Can you ever forgive me, Teddy?"

Teddy's smile eased up a bit at that as he chuckled. "I'd like to think that I could deal with that dragon all by myself. Especially as she hasn't shown any indication of wanting to roast *me* on a spit."

Hermione snorted and bumped into him affectionately. "Yes, that does ease my burden of guilt, doesn't it?"

"Not that you should ever forgive yourself for abandoning me, however."

Hermione smiled at Teddy, glad he could joke with her again. He smiled back warmly for a moment before his smile froze again. He took a conscious step away from her, and although he'd tried to make it look casual, Hermione looked around to see what was making him nervous. Nothing was there, however.

She looked back at Teddy with a curious face. "Teddy?"

Teddy smiled tightly again and forced a laugh. "Sorry. I just had a vision prophesying that I'm about to be late for Divination again."

Hermione laughed as she ought, but still felt something was off. "We're still on for our study session, right?"

Teddy nodded. "Of course. Why wouldn't we be?"

Hermione returned his tight smile with one of her own. "I can't think of a reason."

He swallowed and nodded again. "Well, I really should be off, else the vision might come true."

He raised his hand in a feeble goodbye wave and then turned to sprint down the hall, leaving Hermione feeling like she'd become the big, bad werewolf in his grandmother's clothes.

XXX

By the time lunch came round, unrelieved confusion had had its usual effect on Hermione and had made her rather testy. Everyone had been avoiding her eye, and though she hadn't caught anyone, she felt sure they were laughing at her behind her back.

Although she'd surreptitiously run her hands through her hair to make sure there weren't any flying notes or other objects stuck in there, she couldn't think of any reason people might be laughing at her appearance, as they knew she didn't really care how she looked as long as her clothes were clean (they were), tidy (mostly) and fit her properly.

That meant that people were laughing at her being late for class, but that didn't make much sense, either, as less than half of the people she swore were laughing at her hadn't been there for Vector's dressing down; being late for class, even if it was out of the ordinary for her, was not sufficient for the rumor mill to circulate.

Catching a third year peeping at her, Hermione scowled and put her books away, very much ready for lunch. She wasn't really looking forward to eating in the Great Hall, but at least she was pretty sure no one would openly laugh at her in front of Harry or Severus.

Not that most people dared to laugh at her with *just* her around anymore.

Fortunately, few people were around as she made her way to the Great Hall, and those in the hall were busy eating, so she mostly escaped notice until she sat down. Unfortunately, when she sat down, Harry took one look at her and nearly sprayed his pumpkin juice all over her and started coughing.

"What!" Hermione snapped, briskly waving her wand to clean up the mess. "What is it?"

Harry continued coughing, but confirmed something was wrong by refusing to look at her. Just then, Ginny sat down, giving him a pat on the back. She looked at Hermione to greet her and paused her patting for a beat before smirking and turning back to Harry.

"Harry, you really need to get over this sensitivity to Hermione's thriving love life. One of these days, you're going to choke and she's not going to save you."

"Wha- How did you know?" Hermione cried, flushing in mortification.

Ginny snickered, but also took pity on Hermione. "You've a rather impressive lovebite there."

Hermione's hand sprang to the offending spot, and she closed her eyes. She briefly, but seriously, wondered if she could summon her powers to create a hole big enough to swallow her up. Deciding that would only ensure her humiliation would last through the ages, she resigned herself to living out her embarrassment.

"Has it been all around school?"

Harry shook his head while Ginny nodded.

"Should I even ask?"

Ginny grinned and shook her head. Hermione groaned.

"Do you think Severus will be mad?"

Harry surprised both of the girls by answering. "Considering he was actually laughing with the staff before he left, I'd say he doesn't mind. And, really, why should he mind that you're wearing his... mark?" Harry made a disgusted face as he said the word, glancing at her neck. Ginny just laughed.

"Harry has a point. Guys really do like marking their territory, so to speak."

Harry and Hermione both snorted, though Harry at least pretended to look offended. "We're not animals!"

Ginny laughed. "You sure like being called one," she said and nudged him.

Hermione snorted but put her hands over her ears, singing, "La la la, I can't hear you!"

Ginny and Harry both laughed at that, and the topic of love-lives was dropped once Ginny offered to heal the hickey. Hermione declined, realizing the damage was done, and erasing the mark now would only make things worse.

There was also the realization that Severus was now becoming happy, and she was a good part of the reason. It was worth enduring her classmates' stares and whispers if wearing his mark would make him laugh in public.

Assuming he wasn't just putting on another front like he had all those weeks ago.

She mentally shrugged and attended to her friends' conversation, letting the quiet hum of satisfaction dull the edges of doubt.

The rest of the day went by rather uneventfully, given that Hermione's curiosity had been satisfied and therefore her temper had been restored. It was still annoying that people wouldn't meet her eye, but she could also see the humorous side of it all. As she ate dinner, she hoped Severus was taking it as well as Harry had suggested. It would be nice to laugh about it with him.

As if her thought summoned him, he appeared at her shoulder.

"Done?" The greeting would have been rude had it not been said so tenderly. She didn't even bother looking at everyone's reactions, but just smiled up at him.

"Yes."

She accepted the hand he offered and said a quick goodbye to her friends before tucking her arm in his as they left the hall. Once they were out of sight of any curious eyes, he stopped and drew her hair back, revealing the lovebite in all its glory. Smirking, he bent down to give it a tender kiss.

"You needn't have left it for all to see." He did not sound displeased.

She blushed and smiled. "To be honest, I didn't notice it was there this morning. It wasn't until lunchtime..."

He laughed, though looked rather incredulous. "Did you never go to the bathroom?"

"Erm, not before lunch, no."

"You brushed your teeth this morning."

Hermione shrugged. "I was in a hurry. I rarely look in the mirror in any case, and this morning was so rushed, I barely even saw the toothpaste tube."

He blinked, then shook his head slowly. "It's rather nice knowing that vanity is not one of my wife's traits, but I must confess to being surprised you missed it."

Hermione shrugged again. "I'm assuming you aren't upset."

He chuckled and surprised her by taking her in his arms and twirling her around. "Upset? To have my beautiful wife show the world she belongs to me? Hardly."

Hermione raised her eyebrow. "I belong to you, do I?"

He smirked. "Mm. According to the law you do, and I don't see any reason to tell them that it's really the other way around at this point."

Hermione relaxed, though she still wasn't very comfortable with the idea of ownership, even if it was more theoretical than practical. He took advantage of her relaxation and pulled her close for a kiss. She was smiling when they parted.

"Aren't you worried some student is going to come by and see us?" Hermione teased, lacing her hands behind his neck.

He snorted. "There's no reason for a pretence of celibacy now, my dear."

She laughed as he leaned in for another kiss, though she pulled away when she heard footsteps. Despite his bold words, Severus also withdrew and smoothed down his robes just as Professor Vector came into sight. Everyone stopped where they were for a tense second, then Vector nodded icily and hurried on her way.

As soon as she was out of sight, Hermione caught Severus' eye. She had to smother her giggles as he raised an amused eyebrow at her.

"Septima was barely civil to me this afternoon. The obvious conclusion is that you have been getting yourself into trouble, Miss Granger, and are dragging me down with you."

Hermione giggled. "It's almost always the other way around, you know. I was usually the one who was trying to talk everyone else out of doing stupid things."

"What about the troll?"

"I lied."

"You lied? To teachers?"

Hermione almost laughed at his skeptical tone. "Yes, I lied. It was better than telling everyone how I'd been minding my own business crying my eyes out over how mean Harry and Ron were, and how nobody liked me and how I should go to greenhouse one to find some flobberworms to eat when I was rudely interrupted by a great, big, ugly, *smelly* troll. Harry and Ron heard me scream, and the rest, as they say, is history."

"You lied."

"Yes."

"To teachers."

"Yes." Hermione was about to roll her eyes in exasperation when something in Severus' expression caught him out. "You knew, didn't you?"

Severus snorted and then laughed outright. "Hermione, I have yet to meet a first year who can pull the wool over my or Minerva's eyes. And you are and always have been pants at lying. Of course we knew it wasn't true! Of course *you* didn't go looking for trouble, although at least you were clever enough to use your swottiness against yourself. Heavens, girl, did you think we were stupid?"

Hermione blushed and ducked her head. She heard him laugh softly beside her before his hands reached out for her face, gently forcing her to look up at him. "You do realize what this means, though."

She shook her head in his hands, not sure what the mischievous look in his eyes meant.

"I'm afraid I will have to deduct points."

She opened her mouth in automatic outrage before he burst out laughing. She took a deep breath and then smacked his arm in protest. He continued laughing as she pummeled his arm, though he ineffectively tried to retreat.

"Your face was such a perfect picture of righteous indignation, my dear," he laughed, still allowing her to smack him. "I almost wish Creevey had been here."

Hermione relented at that and leaned against him, listening to his laughter come from deep inside his chest. She shook her head.

"Will you ever stop teasing me?"

"No," he replied honestly, still chuckling.

She shook her head and laughed along with him. "Well, at least I can make you laugh. That's something, I suppose."

He chuckled and wrapped his arms around her in response,

"It's more than most can do."

She returned the favor and wrapped her arms around him but grumbled, "Maybe someday I'll know enough of your foibles to be able to tease you as mercilessly."

"Perhaps someday my foibles will be laughable," was his sober response.

Hermione found herself hugging him tightly, at a loss for words. It seemed as though words weren't necessary, though, so they just held each other in the shadows of the corridor. Eventually, reality forced them to continue on their way, but they continued touching each other, holding hands, bumping against one another and the like, as they slowly made their way to Hermione's room.

Eventually they arrived at their destination, and Hermione opened the door for him with a smile. He looked into the room longingly, but shook his head.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but I have rounds tonight as well as marking to catch up on."

Hermione tried not to look as disappointed as she felt, knowing that *hedid* have duties other than to her, but it was hard.

"Well, if you want, you're welcome to come here after you're done."

Severus thanked her with a kiss and then left her to her own devices. As she looked around the room and all the things she should be doing, she realized with a start that she would much rather spend time with Severus than work. Even on homework. She sat down on the sofa, overwhelmed with the sudden epiphany: she was falling in love with Severus.

She should have seen it. Harry had. Teddy had. Hell, even Goyle had probably seen it. But she'd just gone on, blindly ignoring the obvious because she was too scared to look.

Still too scared to explore the depth of her feelings, Hermione turned to her tried and true source of comfort *Hogwarts: A History*. She brought the book down, summoned a blanket, cuddled up on the couch and prepared to lose herself in the minutia contained therein. Opening the front cover, her attention was diverted by several pieces of loose parchment.

Smiling at what she'd found, she unfolded the first one, chuckling at Severus' dry tone. *Having recently been chastised for not taking other people's feelings and opinions into consideration, I thought it prudent to consult you on how you wish to "make a day of it."*

The next note brought a laugh with the snide *My Dearest Darling Hermione*, and the third brought color to her cheeks as she cringed in remembrance of her use of "befrozen."

Re-folding them tenderly, she put them back in the protection of the front cover, remembering that those weren't the only notes the book contained.

Carefully closing the front cover, she turned the book over and gently opened the back cover. There, waiting for her, was Ron's folded note. His last note to her. Feeling a wave of nostalgia wash over her, she picked it up with trembling fingers and carefully unfolded it.

Her lips twitched fondly as she saw Ron's messy scrawl covering the paper, but her gaze sharpened when she realized there was more writing there than she remembered. Quickly, she skimmed through it and realized Ron had managed to put a Death's Rider Charm on the note without her noticing. She smiled even as her vision went a little blurry; Ron was capable of surprising her even now.

Wiping her eyes, she read:

Dear Hermione,

Harry's head is hurting again – he's moaning in his sleep. It makes me think of you. What I mean is I wish we could get away from the castle and do some moaning of our own. Maybe after all of this is over, we could do that? No hiding in classrooms worrying that Snape is going to catch us at it. No worries about curfew. No worries about anything. Just you and me. And maybe some food.

I love you. I just wanted to make sure you knew before, well, you know.

Love,

Ron

That was the note she remembered, but there was more below that.

Hermione,

If you're reading this, it means I didn't make it through the battle. I hope that you won't ever read this and that the future will be open and clear for us. You know I want to marry you, and I can just picture our lives after Harry kills You-Know-Who once and for all. It's beautiful, that picture in my head. You're happily reforming the Wizarding world from the inside out, I'm helping enforce the laws you're making, and at the end of the day, we go home together to our cottage by the sea and make love. At least until the kids come along. Then I guess I'll have to take a leave of absence to raise the kids, right? Although you will be a wonderful mother. And Merlin knows that if anyone can be a working mom and make it work, you could.

But, that's not what this note is about. If you're reading this, I'm guessing you don't really want to be reminded about things that can't happen, do you? Sorry.

I just... Merlin, this is hard. I just want you to know that although I love you, and I will ALWAYS love you, what I want more than anything is for you to be happy. I'd like to think that I could make you happy if I live. I'd devote my life to it. But if I don't make it... Hermione, please... I want you to be happy. Whether that means devoting yourself to freeing all the oppressed house-elves in Britain or marrying some lucky bloke and having a million kids, whatever it is, go for it. Be happy. Consider it my dying wish. Or not, if that gets your goat.

I love you, Hermione, always and forever.

Ron

Hermione set the note aside when she realized her tears were blurring the precious words. She looked at it sitting beside her, and everything she had been suppressing burst out of her. She curled up in the corner of the couch and cried for what could have been, for the love she lost, and the release of any guilt she'd felt for finding happiness with Severus. She cried until she fell asleep, curled up and alone and aching for her lover's arms around her.

XXV

Chapter 25 of 28

Sequel and continuation of "Marry A Choice." Now complete.

AN: Huge thanks to Keladry and Sun for their awesome betaing skills as well as their patience.

Hermione woke up in bed the next morning with a hairy arm wrapped around her. She blinked for a moment, confused and not sure why she was confused until she remembered that she'd fallen asleep on the couch. Alone.

She shifted a little and the arm tightened reflexively. She turned to look at the man beside her just in time to see him opening his eyes to squint at her.

"Good morning," she said.

"Mmm, is it?" he croaked.

She was about to say that it was obviously morning, but he took that moment to stretch, pushing his hands against the headboard as he reached out tautly.

She was shocked at how decidedly attractive he looked.

As he relaxed, draping his arm over her again, he quirked a half-smile and looked at her expectantly.

"What?"

"I'm awaiting your answer."

"Excuse me?"

He sighed in what she hoped was mock exasperation. "Is it a good morning?"

She smiled at him bemusedly until he narrowed his eyes in impatience.

"I'm sorry, darling, but I just woke up. My mind isn't quite up to par yet. What are we talking about?"

She was surprised how much his mien changed at the word 'darling,' as his glare faded into a soft smile. It didn't make him any less infuriating, though.

"It's a simple question, my dear. Is it a good morning?"

"When I said it, it seemed to be, although I must admit that 'good' isn't what I'm feeling at the moment."

"Oh?" he asked, moving his hand slightly so it rubbed against the side of her breast. "And what are you feeling?" he purred.

She didn't bother to repress her huff of frustration.

"Why did you ask me whether it was a good morning, Severus? Did you have a purpose behind the question, or are you just trying to start the Hermione-baiting early?"

He smiled fully and leaned in to kiss her cheek. It did nothing to soften her mood, only confirming her suspicion that he was purposely riling her up.

"Ah, finally the correct question. I asked for three reasons, my dear."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath in to keep her frustration from exhibiting itself. Of course he had been waiting for the proper question. Of course he would tease her mercilessly. Of course his mind would be up to speed before hers. It all made perfect sense he was still a bastard, after all.

"First, I asked because often people say it is a good morning, afternoon or evening just to be polite. It is a minor fiction and a necessary one for the most part, but I would prefer you not perpetrate even such a minor falsehood on me."

Hermione's eyes popped open in indignation, but before she could open her mouth to object, he placed a finger on her lips and said forcefully, *Second*, in the recent past you have had mixed reactions to my coming into your room without your express permission, and it may have been a gross miscalculation of mine to assume that your invitation to come by last night meant it was alright to join you in bed, especially when you weren't even in the bed in question.

"Which brings me to the third point. I have reason to doubt that it may be a good morning for you." He removed his finger from her lips, which were in no danger of venting at the moment, and cupped her cheek.

"When I came by last night, I found you curled up on the couch looking like you had cried yourself to sleep. I was concerned."

Any anger that had remained melted away. Hermione's breath caught at her conflicting emotions. She was overwhelmed with the care and love Severus offered, but also with the grief she'd felt last night. Tears forced their way to her eyes, and she blinked hastily.

"Oh, Severus," she sniffed and hid her face in his chest. His arms came around her, gently holding her as she quietly cried. It felt good.

It didn't take long for her emotions to settle, but she kept her head hidden as she asked, "I'm assuming you saw the letter?"

"I should be outraged that you think I'd pry into your private correspondences," he replied in a dry tone while stroking her hair.

"I'll take that as a yes, then," she said, earning her an amused snort.

"As I said, I was concerned."

She hugged him briefly and then glanced up at him. He was looking at her with disconcertingly soft eyes, though they seemed rather sad at the moment.

She smiled at him reassuringly. "Your concern is appreciated. And I must say, last night, all I wanted was to be held by you, even if that is terribly selfish."

He looked at her intensely for a long moment and then raised his head to kiss her. The kiss was awkward until he rolled them over, his body heavy on hers. She groaned as he smoothed one hand down her torso, feeling her pulse speed up.

"Severus, as good as this feels," she gasped as his fingers found a very pleasurable spot indeed, "I don't think I could stand to be late to class again."

He didn't stop, though. In fact, she could feel him smirking as he kissed her neck.

"We have plenty of time."

She wanted to shake her head in denial, but was too busy shuddering as he sucked on her nipple.

"Ah, god, that's good! But... but..."

"I assure you, Hermione," he breathed as he moved back up her body, "you won't be late today."

"What makes today so very different from yesterday?"

"Today..." he said, smirking down at her as he positioned himself between her legs, "I don't have to make amends."

As pleasure took over, one corner of her mind noted that he was being careful he wouldn't have anything to apologize for afterward, either.

XXX

The week slipped by in a rather pleasant manner. Classes caught her interest again, especially her extracurricular classes with Professor Dumbledore, and she found her thirst for knowledge was finally returning.

The time spent with Severus, however, was the highlight of each day. They spent each morning together, most often from having spent the night together, and continued to exit the Great Hall every evening, arm in arm.

The student population had stopped noticing or whispering, and, except for the occasional wary glance from first year Hufflepuffs, everyone now seemed content to just accept them as another strange fact of Hogwarts life.

The only downside was the decidedly cold looks she and Severus garnered from Professor Vector, but Hermione found it rather easy to ignore them, knowing Professor Vector wasn't worth the energy.

She and Severus were both looking forward to Saturday morning, where they could laze in each other's company without any outside schedule to consider. They had made plans to have a nice *relaxing* lie in, then bathe, take a nap and, after lunch, maybe go into the Forbidden Forest for some potions ingredients Severus wanted. Unfortunately, it wasn't until Friday afternoon that Hermione realized she did have a commitment to consider.

She bit her lip as she walked up to the Slytherin table at dinner, hoping Teddy would be amenable to a slight delay. She and Severus could put off the majority of their activities until Sunday, but he had rounds Sunday morning, so Saturday was their only chance for a lie-in together.

Most of the Slytherins eyed her impassively as she approached Teddy, though Draco and Pansy immediately got up and moved to the other end of the table. Hermione smiled apologetically at Teddy and Blaise for interrupting their conversation.

"Hi, Teddy, Zabini," she said, acknowledging Blaise, who nodded back before politely turning his attention to his plate. "Teddy, I was wondering if we could start our study session a little later than normal tomorrow?"

Teddy kept the polite smile on his face, but something about it looked off. He certainly didn't look as friendly as she was used to.

"Why am I not surprised? I'm not the only one who's noticed you and the professor have given up on breakfast lately."

Hermione stared at Teddy, hurt at his snide tone. "Yes, well... Severus and I have taken to having our morning tea together. Our schedules don't allow much private time together, after all."

Teddy's smile wavered, but when it came back, it was apologetic. "Of course. Spending time with your husband would be paramount, wouldn't it?"

"Well, until NEWTs get closer, it is, yes," she joked.

Teddy smiled fully. "Yes. NEWTs take precedence over everything, though."

"Except possibly breathing."

"Yeah, it *would* be difficult to achieve optimum results without the occasional breath or two."

Hermione giggled, and Teddy relaxed into a true smile.

"So can we delay until lunchtime, please?" Hermione asked hopefully.

Teddy sighed as if in resignation. "I guess I just have to accept that I'm not the most important man in your life." He grinned. "After lunch it is."

"Thank you!" Hermione said, giving him a quick hug. "I'm looking forward to it!"

Teddy smiled but looked uncomfortable. Hermione realized the whole table was looking at them, though their eyes were flickering up to the head table where Severus sat. She rolled her eyes, but looked up to acknowledge Severus with a smile. He raised his eyebrow questioningly but otherwise didn't seem perturbed in the least. She knew him well enough to know he probably wouldn't show it if he were upset.

She shrugged and turned back to the table of Slytherins, who were trying to figure out what had just been communicated. She smiled at them, then at Teddy, who still looked uncomfortable, and finally said goodbye.

When she got back to the Gryffindor table, Harry and Ginny gave her a curious look, but before they could say anything, Seamus asked, "What was all that about?"

Hermione smiled ruefully. "There are some things I will not miss about life in a bottle."

"Eh?" Seamus asked, playing dumb. "What bottle?"

She rolled her eyes, but laughed as he winked playfully.

"Careful, Seamus," Ginny warned, "Professor Snape is watching you."

Seamus immediately straightened in his seat, distancing himself from Hermione. Harry, Ginny and Hermione all laughed, though Hermione quickly glanced over her shoulder to see if Severus was looking. As he appeared to be in deep conversation with Flitwick, she knew they'd just been giving Seamus the mickey. When she looked back, they were giving her amused looks as well, and she knew Seamus wasn't alone.

She grinned back and filled her plate.

XXX

Hermione swore that Severus had planned his arrival to coincide precisely with her swallowing the last bite of dinner and not a second later.

"Finished?" he asked, looming over her shoulder.

She nodded as she took one final sip of her pumpkin juice. She then gathered her bookbag and took his outstretched hand, smiling when his fingers wrapped around hers. His face didn't react at all, it never did, but his thumb brushed over the top of her hand in a gentle caress.

In keeping with their pattern, they left the Great Hall without saying anything. Once they were out of hearing range, though, Severus asked, "Your display with Mr. Nott tonight was quite the spectacle."

Hermione snorted. "Yes. Friendly hugs are so very scandalous."

"Some people might not interpret it as just a friendly hug."

"Some people can go bugger themselves for all I care."

"Such language, Ms. Granger," Severus said tonelessly.

Hermione stopped and looked up at Severus to gauge his mood. "Severus, let me say first that if you are included in those people you're speculating about, jealousy is not attractive. Not to me, anyway. It's an insult to my character and, in this case, my intelligence. And second, if you want to know what Teddy and I were talking about, just ask, would you?"

Severus snorted. "No, you needn't repeat that particular lecture, my dear. But you do take all the fun out of conversing with these demands for plain-speak."

Hermione chuckled. "Yes, well, what do you expect from a Gryffindor?"

He smirked and raised her hand to his lips. "Much less than what you provide."

Hermione blushed despite herself. "Yes, well..." she stammered, flustered at such a blatant compliment.

"Erm, as for your non-question, I had forgotten that Teddy and I have a study session scheduled for tomorrow morning, and I wanted to see if he would be willing to postpone it till after lunch. Speaking of which, could we postpone the harvesting till Sunday after your rounds?"

Severus smirked and kissed her hand again. "Since keeping you all to myself might be regarded as an act of jealousy, I have no objections."

"You're most kind, sir," Hermione responded dryly.

His lips rose in a shockingly good imitation of Lucius Malfoy's haughtiest smile. "I know."

The resemblance was a little too canny for her, and she slapped him lightly on the arm, saying, "Stop it or I'll have nightmares again."

It was supposed to have been a joke, but Severus dropped the act so quickly, she knew he'd taken her seriously.

"Well, we can't have that," he said gravely. "Those are even worse for our sex life than your headaches."

She smacked his arm playfully again, and they resumed walking, heading, as usual, for her room. It wasn't until they were in her corridor that she realized they had been spending all of their spare time in her quarters. That struck her as rather unfair.

"Severus, is there a reason why we're spending all our free time in my rooms?"

He gave her an odd look. "I... I am not an exhibitionist by nature, Hermione."

Surprised laughter bubbled out of Hermione before she could stop it, and soon she found herself leaning against the corridor wall, trying to catch her breath.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Sev'rus," she laughed as she caught sight of his stony face. Taking a few deep breaths, she regained enough control to add, "I'm not laughing at you, I promise. It's just that was the furthest thing from my mind. You surprised me."

The stony look didn't budge, and her urge to laugh died. She took his hand in hers, and though he didn't pull away, he also did not cooperate.

Deciding that privacy was the best option, even if he did react violently, she pulled him along to her room. She felt his hesitation when she crossed the threshold, but another gentle tug from her brought him in.

She closed the door behind her, never looking away from Severus, afraid that if she lost sight of him, he'd either disappear through the Floo or change into Mr. Hyde. Neither was a particularly productive option.

"Severus," she said as soon as she heard the door snick shut, "I'm sorry if I offended you by laughing. I swear I was laughing at the dichotomy of our thought processes, not at you."

His expression didn't thaw, though he raised one eyebrow.

"I was thinking of how we've only been using my rooms since we've become intimate and how that isn't necessarily fair to you, as your rooms are your home, although I could see that maybe you don't want to bring me there either for fear that the rooms hold bad memories of me or just because they're your rooms and you don't really want me invading your space because I do know you're a private man, and I swear the thought of exhibitionism never entered my head although I can't say that I wasn't thinking about us being together, being intimate that is, because of course I was thinking about that because it's always close to the top of my mind when we're alone together and..."

"Stop!" Severus said with a chuckle, raising his hands in defeat. "I give up!"

Hermione bit her lip to keep any more words coming out, though it looked as though the effort stained her cheeks red.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "Nervous habit."

Severus laughed outright at that and stepped forward, wrapping his arms around her. "I know, my dear. I know. But you really must learn to breathe when babbling."

She snorted good-naturedly and leaned forward to rest her head against his chest.

"You're not angry?"

"It's disturbingly difficult to be angry at you when you're being so defensive."

"Disturbingly?"

"Yes. I rather thought I was immune to all things *cute*."

"You're saying I'm cute when I'm defensive?"

"Like a puppy."

Hermione smiled into his chest, deciding to have a little fun. "Are you calling me a bitch?"

He tensed, and she could almost hear his mind working. She looked up and was rewarded with the sight of Severus looking truly flustered.

She took pity on him and chuckled. "Well, you're cute when you're flustered."

He took a step back, looking affronted. "Madam! You are perilously close to using forbidden words!"

She caught the glint in his eyes and took a risk. "Like 'sweet'? 'Nice'? 'Charming'? *'Sennnnssssssitive?'*"

He growled and advanced on her. Her stomach clenched in fear as she realized she'd lost on her gamble. She backed away from him, but he was too quick. With one lunge, he grabbed her, picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder.

"You leave me no choice but to show you how ill-suited those words are, wench," he said, tickling her bum with his free hand.

Hermione released her breath in a peal of relieved laughter at his playfulness. He continued tickling her, stopping only to toss her onto the bed, and even then, it was only a momentary break before he was kneeling over her, his hands finding all her ticklish spots.

"Mercy! Mercy!"

He stopped tickling her, but his grin was positively feral.

"And why should I give you mercy after such an affront to my character?"

Still panting, Hermione smiled up at him mischievously. "Because you're too nice to torture me like this?"

The only warning he gave her was the broadening of his grin. Her resultant shriek of laughter wasn't quite loud enough to pierce the innate Silencing Spells, but it was close.

XXX

As Hermione walked down the stairs to the library the next afternoon, she realized she was grinning absently at everyone and everything. And she didn't care. She was feeling good, and it wouldn't bother her at all if everyone in the entire world knew it.

She was refraining from singing from the rooftops only because she knew that she'd lose points for breaking perfectly sensible rules. Well, that and she didn't want to inflict her voice upon any would-be listeners.

But even without singing, she was fully able to convey her newfound happiness. Only the weight of her bookbag was hindering her from a full-out skipping spree, but even so, there was a definite bounce to her step.

When she saw Teddy sitting at their table, books already open before him, she was overcome with a contented glow. Life was good indeed.

"May I join you?" she asked with a smile as she sat down across from him.

Teddy looked up and instantly mirrored back all her good humor. "I saved that space especially for you, my lady."

She beamed at him. "Thank you. I'm honored you didn't just give up on me and coerce the nearest Ravenclaw over."

Teddy dropped his smile, looking affronted. "I would never do that!" Hermione quirked her head, not sure what to say when he continued: "Why coerce when flattery works so much better?"

Hermione laughed in relief and nodded.

"Yes, flattery does work rather well, especially on us swots."

"Speaking of which, you're looking particularly nice today, my lady."

She snorted and rolled her eyes. "There's no need to flatter me, silly. I'm already here!"

"I'm not flattering you, just stating the truth."

Hermione blushed, despite herself. "Fact or fiction, you'd better stop it. If anyone overheard you, they might think you were trying to seduce me or something."

"Oh, everyone is already convinced I'm madly in love with you, so there wouldn't be anything fresh to report."

"Yes, well, not *everyone* believes that rot. Besides, it makes me uncomfortable." She smiled broadly to try and make a joke out of the truth. "I fear I can only handle one seductive Slytherin at a time."

Teddy's brows rose. He opened his mouth to say something, but closed it again with a bemused expression.

Hermione watched with amusement.

"Yes, it may be hard to believe, but Severus is quite seductive when he wants to be. And lately..." She looked at her wedding ring, smiling contentedly.

When she looked up, she found Teddy watching her with shrewd expression. His grin was still in place, but it looked different, strained. It looked like his expression from the night before.

Hermione sighed. "Sorry. I know the thought of Severus and sex is an odd and repulsive one to most."

Teddy straightened in his seat and blinked. His posture was still stiff, but his face relaxed into his former genial mien. "I'm just surprised you mentioned it, that's all. You've been rather mum about your relationship, up till now..."

"Ah. Yes, well..." Hermione shrugged, barely repressing a brilliant smile. "I guess I'm finally getting used to being in a relationship again. It also helps not being quite so intimidated by him, you know. There are still some things I'm never going to talk about because they *are* private, but now that I'm getting to know Severus a bit better, I can better sense where his and our boundaries are and, well..." Hermione stopped and bit her lip, realizing she was starting to babble defensively again.

"Erm, Transfiguration first?"

Teddy nodded slowly, then turned his attention to the pile of books at his side. Hermione released her lip to smile fondly at him, then dug into her bag for her book.

XXX

"Question."

Hermione marked her place and looked up at Teddy. "Yes?"

"These..." he looked down at his textbook, "compact discs. Professor Burbage showed us one in class, and I don't understand how it works. How can Muggles store music in there without magic?"

Hermione grimaced. "Erm, I'm actually not that clear on the process. I know that information, whether it's music or data, is recorded on the discs by burning it on, but honestly, it's a bit mysterious to me as well. All laser technology is a bit beyond my scope of Muggle knowledge."

"Laser technology? You mean those red light pointers?" Teddy asked, looking very confused.

Hermione grinned and was about to explain that there was a bit more to lasers than making pointers when she felt a tap on her shoulder. Turning, she found Harry and Ginny grinning at her and Teddy.

"What class deals with lasers?" Harry asked curiously.

"Muggle studies, of course. Although it sounds like they aren't covering the full scope of the subject."

"Have they shown *Star Wars*?" Harry asked Teddy.

Teddy just looked back at Harry blankly until Hermione pointed out, again, that Muggle technology didn't work at Hogwarts. "Honestly, Harry, how many times do I have to tell you to read *Hogwarts: A History*?"

He beamed down at her and gave her shoulders a friendly squeeze. "Why should I when I have you here?"

She tried to scowl at him, but her lips kept twitching. She finally settled on patting his hand fondly.

Ginny took advantage of the quiet moment to stick out a roll of parchment, saying, "By the way, we are officially here as messengers. Your husband bade us give this to you."

Hermione raised her brows at the odd language and Ginny giggled.

"No, he did not say that, but his tone was so...*arch* that I thought I ought to pass along the tone as well as the note."

"He probably wanted to make sure no one mistook him for a student passing notes," Harry joked.

Everyone snorted, though Hermione felt guilty laughing at Severus' expense. Shaking her head, she took the note. Opening it, she read:

Dear Hermione,

I just received news from a contact that one of my potions ingredients sources has received a shipment of Abernathian Horehound spleen. As you should know by now, this is an incredibly rare ingredient, and every potion master in Europe will be clamoring for the stock. Therefore, I must leave now to ensure I get my share. I will probably not be back for dinner.

I would say that I will be thinking of you while I'm gone, but as Abernathian Horehound spleen is absolutely foul smelling stuff, I think you might agree it would be best if you're absent from my mind till I've bottled it properly.

Yours,

Severus

Hermione smiled wryly, but shrugged off any disappointment she felt. Not having Severus around meant more time to study, guilt and distraction free.

She looked up to find all three of her friends looking at her expectantly. She looked back just as expectantly.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "So? Is he taking you to some swanky restaurant for dinner?"

"Or has he bugged off and left you with just a note?" Harry added, not quite jokingly.

It was Hermione's turn to roll her eyes. "Neither. He's gone out to get a rare ingredient and won't be back for supper. That's all."

Harry feigned disappointment for all of two seconds before saying, "Speaking of dinner, want to walk with us?" Hermione and Teddy both nodded. "We should go; they'll be serving any minute now."

Ginny eyed Harry warily. "You aren't channeling Ron, are you?"

Harry grinned crookedly. "Nah. I'm channeling my inner teenager." He paused. "Oh right! I *am* a teenager!"

Both Ginny and Hermione swatted him, but let him lead them out of the library to the Great Hall without much of a fuss.

XXX

"The library is closing," Madam Pince said, eyeing Hermione suspiciously, even as she gave Teddy an encouraging nod.

"Already?" Teddy said with some surprise. "How time flies when reading tomes."

Madam Pince smiled fondly at him, then left them to pack up their things for the night.

"It still astonishes me how different Madam Pince is with you compared to just about everyone else. I know you said she prefers Slytherins, but I don't think she treats most of them as well as she treats you."

Teddy smirked. "I pride myself on choosing my friends carefully and making enemies even more carefully. It is never a good idea to be on a librarian's bad side, so I have applied myself in wooing Madam Pince's good opinion of me."

"And the only reason you've succeeded when I've failed is because you happen to be in Slytherin?"

"Well, that, and I'm also a charming young man."

Hermione snickered. "Right. I imagine if I tried flirting with her I wouldn't get nearly the same reaction."

Teddy's face split into a grin. "You never know. She might prefer girls."

Hermione laughed outright. "Based on observational evidence, I think we can eliminate that option. Besides, even if it were likely, I'm not in a position to try currying her favor that way."

Teddy shrugged in agreement and picked up his bag. "May I walk you home tonight?"

Hermione smiled fondly at him. "I would like that very much, thank you!"

She noticed his arm twitched as he waited for her to join him, almost as if he wanted to offer his arm, but then had thought better of it.

"It's the least I can do, my lady."

Hermione rolled her eyes, but grabbed his arm on the way out. They walked arm in arm through the library doors, but then Teddy turned toward Gryffindor tower and she didn't. Teddy rammed into her shoulder, knocking her off balance. She stumbled to the side, and as their arms were still linked, she brought him with her. They each tried to keep their footing, circling around each other in an impromptu dance of sorts, and only as they were on their way down did they think to let go of one another.

Landing hard on their bums, they both winced, looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"What just happened?" Teddy asked.

"I think we were literally going at cross purposes."

Teddy snickered. "I suppose it's my fault for assuming that you wanted to take the direct path home?"

Hermione blushed. "Oh. I suppose I should have mentioned sooner that I wanted to go see how Severus did. I assume he's back by now."

"Ah." A flicker of something crossed Teddy's face, but it was gone before Hermione could interpret it. He smiled at her and replied, "Yes, you should have said sooner, as that's far more convenient for me!"

She laughed. "Yes, and it's all about you, isn't it?"

"Of course! You don't think I take *your* wishes into consideration, do you?"

Hermione beamed at him, then moved to get up. Teddy managed to get up a little faster and offered his hand as he did so.

"I don't know if I should accept your help," she joked.

"You were the one who offered your arm, my lady," he said as he pulled her up. "The fault lies not with me!"

She giggled. "You're right. I should know by now that it's a woman's duty to follow the man's lead, not the other way around."

Teddy gave her an odd look, but didn't say anything.

"Sorry. Inside joke. I don't actually believe that."

Teddy nodded bemusedly. "Right. You've never seemed that type."

"Meaning I'm a bossy cow?"

Teddy looked very awkward. "Um..."

Hermione laughed. "It's okay. I've accepted my role's title. Harpy, shrew, bossy cow, what-have-you. They're all just envious people's ways of saying that I am a natural leader."

Teddy smiled. "That's as fair a way of looking at it as any, I suppose."

"Glad you agree." Hermione smiled, then led the way to the grand staircase. They descended in comfortable silence, though the comfort level became a bit strained when they were stopped on the first floor landing as the stairs decided to go off elsewhere.

They stood there awkwardly for a few moments until Teddy asked, "So, what was the ingredient Professor Snape was after?"

Hermione quickly catalogued any reasons why she shouldn't tell him, but found there weren't any. "Abernathian Horehound spleen."

Teddy's brows went up. "Really? Wow. No wonder he blew you off."

Hermione looked at him in surprised umbrage, but before she could voice her displeasure, she noticed him grinning.

"Yes, well, I have NEWTs and he has spleens. Everyone should have a hobby."

Teddy laughed out loud and Hermione smiled, relishing the sound; not many people found her sense of humor amusing. She thought it rather funny that the two who instinctively got it were both Slytherins. And Ginny.

The staircase came back, and they descended, Teddy still chuckling. As they crossed the Entrance Hall, Teddy asked, "So what should our hobbies be after NEWTs?"

"Getting jobs, I should think."

"What do you want to do?"

Hermione let out a puff of breath. "I'm still not sure, but I'm leaning towards law. I want to do something where I can really make a difference."

"Even if that means working at the Ministry?"

"Mm. Well, change has to start somewhere."

"True, and they say that real change can only occur from within."

Hermione looked at Teddy. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Muggle Studies."

"Ah. It certainly didn't sound like something the Wizarding world would come up with."

Teddy smirked. "No. Why change yourself when you can hex those around you?"

Hermione laughed along with Teddy, though somewhat uneasily. It was a bit too close to the truth.

"It sounds like you're getting a lot from your Muggle Studies course."

"Yeah," he said with a defiant shrug. "There's a lot to be said for Muggle ingenuity. Did you know that Damocles Belby credits the creation of the Wolfsbane Potion to his interest in Muggle forensics?"

Hermione shuddered and nodded. "Yes, I read something about that," she said coolly.

"But don't you think combining Muggle and magic has the potential to produce amazing advancements?"

Hermione nodded, but uneasily.

"Why do you seem so reluctant?"

Hermione sighed. "It's just... The Wizarding world, or some within it, are fascinated with 'Muggle ingenuity,' as you put it, but at the same time, there's a paternalistic air about the whole thing. An 'Oh, look what the clever Muggles have done! Aren't they bright?' type thing. Wizards still tend to think they are of a superior race to Muggles rather than just people with different needs and necessities.

"The Wizarding world is reluctant to change mostly because, as you pointed out, there hasn't been a need for it. After all, what was Voldemort banking on but the ingrained resistance to the change that Muggle-borns bring with them."

"I think there was a bit more to the war than that."

"Well, yes, of course there was. Voldemort was a power-hungry homicidal psychopath, but still. He got his power through the systemic belief that Muggles are *inferior* when really, Muggles are just *different*."

"I don't understand. Why should the societal attitude toward Muggles be a reason against trying to get better magic through Muggle thought processes?"

Hermione closed her eyes and pursed her lips.

"I'm not saying that we shouldn't use whatever we morally can to advance magic. I'm just saying that we need to be careful, as a society, to make sure we see Muggles as a people, not as a resource."

Teddy hummed in thoughtful agreement. "I can see what you mean, but that wasn't where I was going."

"I do know that. It's just... Belby is a great example of a wizard from a wizarding family, wizarding ethos and wizarding morals who took something Muggles do and, really, perverted it. He wouldn't have made his discovery if he hadn't thought that werewolves are just beasts rather than cursed people. He would never have thought it okay to capture a *person* then kill and dissect it while it was in wolf form. That would have been murder. Instead, it was just pest control."

"But werewolves *aren't* people when they transform."

"Yes they are! They are **cursed** people! When you kill a werewolf, they change back into their human form because that's what they are inside!"

Teddy raised his hands in defeat and backed away from her. "Okay, okay, they're people. You win."

Hermione rolled her eyes but calmed down.

"I didn't realize you were a werewolf activist."

"I almost married Remus Lupin, didn't I?"

He chuckled. "So you did, but you looked terribly relieved to get a different groom."

Hermione smiled wryly. "Yes, well, that had little to do with Remus being a werewolf."

Teddy's brows crept up. "Did you fancy the professor already?"

Hermione swatted his arm. "No! Not really, anyway. He was just better than Remus at that point."

Just then, a door a few feet ahead of them opened, and out came Severus. All three of them started, though surprisingly it was Hermione who recovered first.

"Severus!" she cried and ran forward to hug him. Severus opened his arms reflexively, but his body was stiff against hers as she hugged him.

"Is everything all right, Hermione?"

She let go of him enough to look up at his face. "Of course everything's all right. I'm just happy to see you."

He pushed her away from him, holding her at arm's length, examining her with a mischievous eye.

"Mr. Nott didn't curse you, did he?"

Hermione pulled away and swatted him. "Don't be an arse." She then turned to say good night to Teddy only to find him standing there with a bemused expression.

"Thank you for the company today, Teddy." Another flicker of something crossed his face, and on an impulse, she ran over and gave him a hug. He stood stock still, receiving the hug just as Harry and Ron had early in their friendship. She giggled and backed away, shaking her head.

"You are such a boy," she teased, eliciting a small grin from him. "Now you better run to your room before my big, bad husband is overcome in a jealous rage."

She heard Severus snort as Teddy's eyes darted over to him. He must have been reassured by what he saw, however, because he immediately grinned back at Hermione.

"Twas a pleasure as always, my lady," he said, giving her a courtly bow. "Should you need your Teddy again, you have but to call."

She laughed and he left with a flourish. Hermione turned to face Severus, slightly nervous to see whether he was indeed in a jealous rage or not. She hoped he wasn't, as she didn't know what she might do to him if he were.

Fortunately, his mood seemed mild enough.

"He isn't cuckolding me, is he?" Severus asked without bite.

"Of course not! How can you even suggest that?" she replied lightly.

"I just wanted to make sure. But now that's cleared up, perhaps we can take our evening stroll?"

She took his proffered arm and turned him in the direction of his quarters. He balked.

"Your rooms are the other way, my dear."

"I know that, darling. I was hoping you might invite me to yours, seeing as they are much closer."

Severus raised an eyebrow, but turned toward his room.

"Any particular reason you want to go to my place, besides the proximity?"

"Remember my defensive ramble from last night?" Severus nodded, his lips quirking up slightly. "Well, in it I believe I told you how I don't think it's fair to you that we only use my rooms. Assuming, of course, that you *don't* object to sharing your space with me, that is."

They reached his door and he pulled her into his arms.

"You are my wife. You are always welcome in my home, wherever that may be. Come as you please."

She stood up on tiptoe and kissed him. "Thank you, Severus. And know that you are welcome in my home, wherever that is, as well. Anytime."

He whispered the password for the wards and opened the door.

"Welcome back to this humble abode, my dear."

And, before she had time to react, he swept her off her feet and carried her over the threshold.

AN: Huge thanks to both Keladry and Sun for their help with this chapter. All mistakes are my own, but without their help, there would be a whole mess more than there currently are.

Monday morning came too quickly for both Hermione and Severus. They'd spent what felt like the majority of Sunday traipsing through brush and nettle in the Forbidden Forest looking for mooncalf droppings and lacewing colonies. They had ultimately been successful, but only after they'd each lost their temper once (Hermione) or twice (Severus). Hermione decided on the walk back to the castle that ingredient hunting was something Severus could do on his own from then on.

The rest of the day had been spent much more pleasantly, however. They'd stolen into one of the prefect's bathrooms and luxuriated in the water and each other's bodies. Afterwards, they retreated to Severus' rooms for a private dinner. *That* part of the day had been as wonderful and relaxing as Hermione had anticipated.

But Monday eventually came, and with it, the stress of reality. Hermione realized as she woke up to Severus' phone alarm that she needed a shower and a change of clothes before class. Severus was reluctant to let her go, but it didn't take long before she was through the Floo and on her way to class; the certain threat of public humiliation was a great motivator. Hurrying, she made it to Arithmancy with nearly a minute to spare.

She set her books down on the desk beside Teddy's and chirped out a good morning. She was somewhat concerned when his reply was monosyllabic and chilly, but she didn't get the chance to ask what was wrong before the bell rang and Vector hustled into the room, her arms full of rolls of parchments, which she immediately started handing out.

"Good morning, class! Here are last week's essays back to you, and I must congratulate you on the progress you are making. It's a pleasure to see you thoroughly integrating logic and magic into a seamless talent after all your years of hard work."

She dropped a roll of parchment onto Hermione's desk without a glance. Hermione eagerly unrolled the essay and nearly choked when she saw a large "D" at the top.

"Only one essay did not meet the requirements I set out, so brava to all of you! At this rate, I think most of you will be very well prepared for your NEWT come June."

Hermione listened in stunned silence as she watched Vector wind through the room, bestowing her normal smiles and winks to everyone but her. Even though she had determined that Vector's behavior wasn't worth wasting energy on, she couldn't help feeling like she'd been stabbed in the heart, nor could she stop the burning sensation from overtaking her eyes.

A nudge in the ribs broke her trance, and she looked over at Teddy.

"What's wrong?" he whispered, watching her with concern. Hermione unrolled the parchment enough to show her grade and was gratified when Teddy hissed with outrage.

"She's taken this too far," he whispered fiercely. "You need to report this."

Hermione shook her head. Although she was outraged, she didn't think it warranted reporting Vector. Yet. She would talk to Vector first. Find out what the reason was behind the grade. If the reason was unjust and Vector wasn't willing to remedy it, *then* she'd report her. Even with Vector's attitude shift, she couldn't help but feel that there must have been some mistake.

Class went by in blur of mixed emotions and note taking; she couldn't get the heartache to go away, nor could she quite come up with a reasonable explanation for Vector making such a mistake. The guidelines had been clear, and Hermione had put in at least 100% effort, if not quite her normal 150%. She knew the material. She knew she'd written at least an "E" worth essay. Unless someone had switched her paper for theirs, she knew she didn't deserve a failing grade.

Not surprisingly, she was more than ready for class to end when the bell finally rang. She was hurriedly packing away her books and supplies when Teddy grabbed her by the wrist.

"Hermione, you know you don't deserve that grade, right? I read through your essay, and I can't think of a single reason to give it less than an "O." You need to report this."

Hermione shook her head. "I know it's an unfair grade, and I am not going to just let it pass, but I want to know her reasoning before I report her. She might be willing to concede she made a mistake."

"And will you do this for every paper you have to hand in for the rest of the year? Because you know it's just going to get worse."

"I *am* going to talk to her, Teddy. I am not going to just roll over and let her have her way with my grades, but before I report her, I need to know why she's doing this. Reporting her is the last resort."

Teddy shook his head in disapproval, but patted her shoulder in support. "Have it your way. Just be sure to let everyone know where you're going when you do talk to her, so if you go missing, we'll know who to question."

Hermione grinned. "Well, I was planning on talking with her now, actually," she said, looking around the empty classroom, frowning when she noticed that Vector was gone as well. "Assuming she isn't hiding from me, that is."

"If I were her, I would hide."

"Gee, thanks. But now you know. If I don't show up for lunch or any of my afternoon classes, alert the WWN."

Teddy grinned. "My lady's wish is my command."

Teddy then ran off to get to his next class on time, leaving Hermione looking around the bare room. Vector had tidied up particularly quickly.

Shrugging, she made her way to Vector's office and knocked on the door. After three minutes of knocking without an answer, Hermione assumed Vector either wasn't inside or was actively avoiding her. She would need to take the professor by surprise after the last class of the day seemed as good a time as any. That way, she reasoned, she'd have time to quell her emotions a bit and look through her essay. It was always better to be prepared, after all.

Thus reassuring herself that she was not running away but was merely doing a strategic withdrawal, she headed for the library, prepared to write a convincing argument for a passing grade.

XXX

As she put her quill down, finally satisfied with what she'd written, she felt a tap on her shoulder. Looking up, she was somewhat surprised to find Ginny standing there.

"How about we have lunch away from the others today?" Ginny asked.

Hermione looked at Ginny, concerned, but pleased. "Sure. Do you have a plan?"

"Meet you in the fifth-floor nook in ten minutes?"

"Sounds good."

Ginny hurried off, probably for the kitchens, and Hermione gathered all of her things, wondering what was wrong this time. It didn't take the requested ten minutes to get to the nook, but Ginny was already there, laying out a very nice looking spread.

"What's the occasion?" Hermione asked, dumping her bookbag on the floor and kneeling by the roasted chicken.

"The usual," Ginny replied curtly.

"Harry is being a pain in the arse and you don't want to talk to him?" Hermione guessed.

"Right in one."

"Do you need an ear or just company?"

"I think company just now, thanks."

Hermione shifted to sit down properly. "Not a problem, love."

They both filled their plates, though Hermione noticed after a few minutes that Ginny was only picking at her food. When her friend didn't eat her chocolate eclair, Hermione couldn't keep her concern to herself any longer.

"Okay, Gin, something's obviously wrong, and it has to be serious if you're spurning the eclairs. So talk."

Ginny looked down at the eclair she'd been mutilating and laughed weakly.

"Thing is, it's *not* serious. I guess all the little things are adding up and... What's bothering me the most is that I know it's not Harry's fault, not most of it, but I can't help but be mad at him. That and I just haven't felt like myself lately and it's driving me nuts." She put what used to be the eclair down on the plate and wiped her fingers off. "What's far more serious than any of that, though, is that I don't want to even *think* about eating that eclair."

Hermione laughed. "Maybe you're pregnant," she joked.

Ginny turned deathly white. "Oh Circe!"

"I was just joking. I mean, surely you've been using birth control of some sort, right?"

"Of course we have! I don't let Harry near me without a spell or three. But it would explain so many things and... Oh, Merlin, Hermione, what if I am?"

Hermione could see Ginny was working herself into a fit and thought it would be better to cut it off at the pass.

"If the thought scares you this much, why don't you go to Madam Pomfrey and find out? If you've been using birth control, the chances are slim that you are."

As she said that, she realized with a sinking feeling that she and Severus hadn't been using protection.

"Tell you what. I'll go with you and get tested as well."

"There's no need for you to embarrass yourself like that just for me. But you're right. That can't be what's wrong."

Ginny still looked frightened, though. Hermione waved her wand and packed up the picnic.

"Come on. Let's go."

Ginny agreed reluctantly. "Right."

They walked at a snail's pace to the infirmary and checked in with Poppy, who was busy with a herd of Hufflepuff boys.

"I'll be right with you, dears," she called after giving them a sharp-eyed once over.

The girls sat down on a nearby bed. Hermione looked around the familiar room while Ginny studied her shoes.

"Do you honestly think you're pregnant?" Ginny asked very quietly.

Hermione waved her wand to soundproof their conversation. She didn't need any more rumors following her around.

"I don't feel pregnant, but then, I don't know what I would feel like when pregnant. My mum didn't realize she was pregnant with me until she was three months gone and then only because she had to have a medical exam prior to going to Zaire. But well, I *could* be pregnant." She paused and admitted quietly, "It seems more of a possibility for me than for you as we haven't been careful at all."

She bit her lip, but Ginny just smirked. "Been having fun, have you?"

Hermione blushed. "A bit, yes."

"Good. It would be horrible to be married to someone like Snape only to find out he was shit in bed."

Hermione snorted, even as her blush darkened. "It would be. Fortunately..."

"Yes." Ginny grinned. "Fortunately..."

They giggled, though Hermione stopped short when she heard the bell.

"Oh no! Lunch is over!"

"You'd better run, then."

"What about you? I don't want to just leave you here all alone!"

Ginny smiled. "Don't worry about me. It looks like Madam Pomfrey is finishing up, and then it'll be a quick embarrassing tic before she tells me it's all a false alarm. Besides which, I'd rather you not be here for that, anyway."

"You sure?"

Ginny nodded. "You would just make me nervous being all twitchy about missing class."

Hermione smiled wryly. She hugged Ginny, then canceled the privacy spell.

"You'll find me after class?"

"Yes. Now go!"

So Hermione went. She ran to class and managed to be only one minute late. She was amused to see Teddy wilt with relief she had thought he'd been joking. With a quick apology to Flitwick, she rushed to her seat next to a disgruntled looking Harry and tried to put all thoughts of pregnancy behind her.

After class, Hermione looked for Ginny, but she wasn't in any of her usual haunts. Deciding that it would probably be best to let Ginny come to her, she set off for her room to drop off her books before heading up to corner professor Vector. When she got to her room, however, she noticed the wards were down. Wand in hand, she slowly entered her room, on guard for any kind of attack. She wasn't expecting to see Ginny curled up on the settee, fast asleep.

Sheathing her wand, Hermione shut the door behind herself. As she neared her friend, she noticed signs that Ginny had been crying.

"Oh dear," she whispered, looking on with sympathy. All thoughts of confronting Vector fled as she tried to figure out how best to help her friend. She Accioed a blanket to spread over her friend and then dithered for a bit on whether to wake her up or not. She eventually decided against it. She'd always heard that pregnant women needed their rest. Picking a book from her bag, she settled down on the floor in front of the settee ready for several hours of work. It turned out, however, that Ginny's nap was almost over, as she started stirring only a few minutes later.

Hermione closed her book and moved to where she could see and touch Ginny. Stroking her hair, she whispered a faint "hey" as Ginny's eyes fluttered open. It took Ginny a moment to remember everything, but when she did, she immediately started crying.

"What do I do now, Hermione?" she wailed. "I don't want to be a mother yet! I don't want to have a baby!"

Hermione sat in the middle of Ginny's fetal curl and continued to stroke the red hair, making gentle shushing sounds as she did so in a futile attempt to calm Ginny down. But all the stress the younger girl had been feeling not to mention all the grief she'd suppressed was spilling out now, and there was little that Hermione could do to stop it. However, when she sensed that her friend was on the verge of hysterics, Hermione got up and reached for the Floo powder.

"Madam Pomfrey's office!" she called as soon as the flames turned green. She stuck her head through and called out for the matron before she even opened her eyes.

"Poppy!"

"No need to yell, child. I'm right here."

"Poppy," Hermione cried much less forcefully, "Ginny's in my room and she's becoming hysterical. What should I do?"

The mediwitch stood up and summoned a blue vial from her stores. "Stand aside."

Hermione immediately withdrew and blindly crawled to one side of the fireplace. Her eyes were still closed against the nausea of Floo connections when she heard the whoosh of Poppy coming through.

She cracked her eyes open a notch to see Poppy leaning over Ginny, forcing her mouth open even as the young witch sobbed frantically. With a firm hand on Ginny's jaw and a gentle hand stroking her forehead, the matron somehow got Ginny to swallow a dose of whatever was in the vial. Ginny's cries lessened in their intensity almost instantly. She was still crying, but it was more natural less frightening.

"Calming draughts are safe for her?" Hermione asked quietly.

Poppy shot her a look that was both approving and caustic. "This one is," she replied, keeping the 'you ninny' silent. "It's a milder version than most and can only be a benefit to her when she's in this state."

"Of course. Sorry. I wasn't doubting you..."

Poppy's expression softened. "I know. You're just worried about your friend's condition."

Hermione nodded, marveling that they could converse in euphemisms so effectively.

Poppy nodded, then leaned over to talk with Ginny eye to eye.

"Mrs. Potter. Ginevra. I need you to sit up for me. I need to make sure you are all right."

Ginny nodded minutely that she understood, but was sluggish responding. On Poppy's cue, Hermione went over and helped Poppy maneuver Ginny to an upright position, though there was little they could do to keep her head from lolling disturbingly.

Poppy scanned Ginny with pursed lips. "I'm afraid I miscalculated the dosage, dear, but it won't cause any damage. It's just going to make it difficult to move independently for a few minutes until the brunt of it wears off. I suggest you take advantage of the effects and just relax, both in body and mind."

Ginny nodded infinitesimally again with tears streaming down her face. Poppy gently wiped them away with a conjured handkerchief and murmured, "I thought you had taken the news a bit too blithely. So cry now, child. It's good for you. Blow," she then ordered as she held the cloth to Ginny's nose.

Ginny complied and then let herself drift more toward Hermione, who wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close.

"It will be okay," she murmured. "As Poppy says, rest now, and we'll figure it all out when you're ready."

Ginny sniffed, but nodded her head again slightly as Hermione swayed them to and fro. In only a few moments, the younger girl was asleep.

Poppy looked on approvingly, but her brow was creased. "Does Mr. Potter know yet?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Do you think she will tell him?"

Hermione glanced down at Ginny before looking back up at Poppy. "I'll make sure she does."

Poppy snorted and shook her head before sighing. "I'm afraid I need to get back to the infirmary now. Is there anything I can do for you before I leave?" Hermione shook her head, so Poppy wished her luck before disappearing through the green flames. As luck would have it, it was less than a minute later that there was a soft knock on the door.

Before Hermione could do more than look down at Ginny resting comfortably on her shoulder, the door opened.

"Hermione?" Severus' voice called out, making Ginny twitch.

"In here," she responded quietly.

Severus stepped forward to peek around the door, furrowing his brows at what he saw.

"If this is a bad time..."

"Actually, you have perfect timing... if you're willing to do me a favor?"

He raised a brow, but didn't object vocally.

"Would you go get Harry, please?"

The brow went down and joined the other in a furrow. "Is there something the matter with Mrs. Potter?"

"Um, yes, in a way. Poppy just gave her a calming draught, so she's not really able to fetch Harry herself."

He stared hard at the two of them before nodding and slipping back out the door, still frowning. As soon as the door closed with a gentle snick, Hermione was surprised to hear Ginny ask, "Is he gone?"

She nodded before remembering to say, "Yes."

Ginny tried to sit up on her own, but ended up needing Hermione's help.

"Thanks," she said, once she was sitting. The potion had already worn off enough so that she could hold her head up on her own.

"That's what I'm here for."

"Mm," Ginny said, looking troubled.

"It will be okay, Gin. It isn't the end of the world."

"I know," Ginny said with a sigh, "but I don't want to tell Harry. I know I have to, but... What is he going to think of me? I know he wants a family eventually, and I do too, but I don't want one now. We're too young! We've only just started!"

Ginny sniffled. "I don't want to end up like my mum. I love her, but that's not the life I want. I want a career. I want to finish school! I want to enjoy life, not change dirty nappies on too little sleep!"

Hermione reached over to rub her friend's shoulder. She didn't know what to say as that was exactly how she felt. Except...

"There are options, you know."

Ginny grimaced. "I know, but those aren't fabulous, either. I know I would always regret... Especially since Harry and ~~are~~ married. We love each other. He, at least, would be out of school and would almost certainly have some sort of job before the baby was born, so..."

Hermione continued rubbing Ginny's shoulder, not willing to counsel her, but hoping she could find her own way to an acceptable answer soon. They sat there in silence until an urgent knock on the door disturbed them.

Hermione got up to answer it, finding a worried Harry on the other side.

"Snape said there's something wrong with Ginny?"

Hermione inwardly groaned. Of course Severus would take advantage of the opportunity to upset Harry. Ginny saved Hermione from having to answer, though.

"I'm fine, Harry."

Harry rushed into the room, barely giving Hermione a glance. She smiled sadly and decided to use the opportunity to slip out. They needed privacy more than they needed a mutual friend. Besides, she needed to talk to Severus to thank him for the favor and to take him to task for preying on Harry.

Her journey to the dungeons went quickly, as it seemed only moments later that she stood in front of Severus' office door, still trying to think of what to say. Knocking, she heard his familiar, angry "Enter!" before she stepped into his lair. As she walked to his desk, she marveled at how different it felt to be in his office like a student as opposed to in his quarters as his wife. Fortunately, he seemed to feel just as awkward and conjured a chair for her beside his own.

"What brings you by, my dear?"

"I just wanted to thank you for fetching Harry, but also ask why you find it necessary to make his life more miserable than it has to be?"

Severus looked a bit taken aback by that. "What are you talking about?"

"Harry was obviously worried when he arrived. He said you told him Ginny was ill."

Severus glared at her. "I merely told him what I'd observed that his wife was asleep in your room and that you were requesting his presence. If he took that to mean that she was dying, that's his own fault."

Hermione pursed her lips, knowing full well that Severus could imply something false without veering from the strict truth, but she backed down, not wanting to fight about it. "He does tend to overreact to everything."

Severus snorted but continued glaring at her, recognizing that she had not apologized. She raised her eyebrows questioning his complete innocence and, reluctantly, he backed down as well. He didn't stop scowling, though.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked at length. She agreed happily, and they settled into more comfortable poses.

"Just out of curiosity," Hermione asked as she added a lump of sugar to her tea, "why did you come to see me so early in the day?"

Severus' scowl became more thoughtful. "Mr. Nott mentioned that Professor Vector had been worryingly unfair today?"

Hermione raised her brows again. "Did he?"

"Mm. He was under the impression that you were going to let it pass and thought it best to consult me."

"Humph. I hope you haven't gone to confront Vector for me?"

"Of course not. I was waiting to do that until after I'd heard the whole story, including whether you were planning on taking any action, from you," he said with a significant look.

She blushed slightly, but still refused to apologize. "Good. This is one battle I really don't need any help with at the moment. In fact, I was planning on confronting Vector this afternoon, but I was sidetracked when I found Ginny in my room."

"Is she all right?" Severus asked neutrally, taking a sip of his tea.

Hermione grimaced. "Yes and no. She's unexpectedly fallen pregnant."

"Oh, sweet Circe, no!" Severus exclaimed, looking horrified. "Not more Potters already?"

Hermione made a disapproving face at him, then shrugged. "If it's any consolation, she's not that thrilled with the timing, either."

Severus winced. "*Not thrilled* enough to need a calming draught?"

"Yeah."

"Will she be alright?"

Hermione shrugged. "Eventually. I don't know what she and Harry are going to do. I don't know what I would do." She paused, biting her lip. "What would you do if I were pregnant? What would you want?"

Severus' eyes snapped to hers before he leaned back in his chair and let his gaze drift to one of the jars of pickled body parts lining his office walls.

"Hypothetically speaking?"

Hermione's insides bunched up as she nodded. "Of course."

"Honestly, I don't know. I can't deny that I've dreamed of you having our children, but at the same time, I would hate for it to happen so soon. I would prefer you have a chance to enjoy adulthood, and our marriage, a bit before adding such a chaotic element into play." He smiled almost shyly at her and her heart melted. She was so touched by his admission that she went over and kissed him on the cheek before sitting down across his lap, snuggling into his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, and they sat like that for a quiet, happy moment until he added, "In the end, though, I would leave it up to you. You're the one who would be changing the nappies, after all."

She moved around so that she could smack him on the arm before snuggling back into his chest.

"Trust me, darling, I will not be the only one on nappy duty."

He chuckled, the sound reverberating through his chest.

"Well, perhaps before we try to have children, you can convince me of the merits, if there are any."

She frowned and clutched his robes a little tighter.

"What if I were pregnant?" she whispered.

He stilled, then pushed her back till they were looking at each other. "Do you believe you are?"

Hermione simultaneously wanted to nod and shake her head, so she ended up making a confused gesture, nibbling on her lip all the while.

Severus looked at her curiously. "Hadn't I told you that I am on an infertility potion? There is virtually no chance of you being pregnant." He quirked a brow at her with mock suspicion. "Unless Mr. Nott *has* been cuckolding me?"

Hermione shook her head, letting out a breath ragged with relieved laughter. "Hardly. Oh, I am so glad one of us was thinking about those possible consequences!"

He pulled her into his embrace. "I want to father your children, my dear, but I really would prefer to wait a few years before doing so."

Hermione smiled into his chest before tilting her head back to kiss him. He brought his hand up to her face, cradling her cheek as he kissed her back tenderly, lovingly. Just as things were starting to get a little heated, though, they were interrupted by a silver horse flying into the room.

"Hermione, may I stay in your room tonight?" Ginny's voice asked as the horse pawed the floor before evaporating. Hermione's heart sank. She climbed down from Severus' lap and smoothed out her robes. Taking a deep breath, she looked up and smiled ruefully at him.

"I have to go to her."

Severus nodded, smiling almost wistfully. "Of course you do."

She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the lips. "Hopefully I'll see you at dinner."

He nodded again, though this time almost wryly. "Forgive me if I don't hold my breath."

She smiled and turned to leave when he said, "Perhaps the Floo would be faster?"

She blushed and nodded. "Of course. Thank you for the reminder."

He handed her the powder pot, and she grabbed a handful, offering a sincere, "Thank you, Severus," as she did.

He rolled his eyes sardonically. "You're right. Floo powder is far too precious a commodity to waste on helping your friends. Give it back."

She smiled, kissed him again and twirled through the flames into her room. As she blindly rolled into the room, she was momentarily disoriented by the sound of pounding and someone swearing from her bedroom.

She looked around just in time to see Ginny open up her front door.

"What are you doing here, Harry? I told you..."

"I'm sorry for how I reacted before, but I would like to talk to you now. Can we?"

"There isn't much to talk about. You know everything there is to tell."

"This isn't just going to just go away."

"It could if I chose."

"No!" Harry shouted, though he quickly restrained himself and said in a quieter tone, "It's my child, too, or don't I get a say?"

Ginny paused. Hermione could only imagine what her expression might be.

"What do you want, Harry?"

"I want this child!"

"And what about me? What about my schooling? What about my career? I am NOT going to be my mum, Harry, and if you think that I will, you can just leave right now!"

"I never said... I want you to be happy! If you want to finish school, then finish it! If you want a job, go for it! I'm not asking you to stay home!"

"Oh, and that'll be just *so* easy, won't it, what with feeding and changing a little, screaming, helpless being at all hours and still have time to commute to school, attend classes, study and all that? For fuck's sake, Harry..."

"So we'll hire a nanny or something. We'll get through this somehow."

Ginny was silent for a long moment, and Hermione could see her fingers go white from clutching the door. Harry's voice was very soft as he added, "Have you forgotten I'm rich? I certainly have enough to provide for the three of us and hire a nanny if that's what it takes to make this work."

Ginny let out a sob and allowed the door to swing open enough for Hermione to see her fall into Harry's arms, crying. Harry hugged Ginny to him as if he never wanted to let her go.

"I don't know if I can take eight months of you being the sensible one," Ginny muttered, sniffing into Harry's shoulder.

Harry laughed. "I know it's scary, but we've managed to survive this long, haven't we?"

"Only because Hermione, Dumbledore and Snape have always been there to save us."

"Yeah, well... We could always invite Hermione to stay over if things get too dangerous."

Ginny looked up at Harry. "And Snape, too?"

Harry shuddered, making Ginny giggle.

"Let's go home, Gin."

"I need to let Hermione know I've changed my mind. She'll worry otherwise."

Harry smirked. "This is Hermione we're talking about. She'll figure it out." His eyes flicked over to catch Hermione's. "Plus, she's just arrived, so you can tell her yourself."

Hermione coughed and sat up, smiling apologetically at her friends.

"So, what did you want to tell me?" she asked innocently.

Harry rolled his eyes while Ginny smiled wryly. "I'm sorry I bothered you, but I guess I won't be staying over after all."

Hermione got up and rushed over to her friend, enveloping her in a bear hug. In her best attempt at impersonating Ginny, she said, "Don't be an idiot, Gin. You can bother me whenever you need me."

Ginny chuckled, then pushed away, looking stern. "I'll hold you to that, you know. And who knows how often I'll need you now that I'm on this emotional rollercoaster from hell."

Hermione nodded seriously. "I'll warn Severus, then."

Ginny burst out laughing and hugged Hermione. "I'll see you at supper. If I feel like eating."

Hermione hugged her back and then snagged Harry for a quick hug as well. "Good luck," she whispered in his ear as he hugged her back. He snorted and muttered back a "Thanks."

Harry and Ginny left holding onto each other. Hermione closed her door and leaned against it, a small smile tugging at her lips. She could only barely imagine what Ginny was going through emotionally, and she couldn't help but think Harry was lucky Ginny loved him so much. If Severus had acted like Harry and put his foot down, demanding she keep his child...

She would have kept it.

She felt the air rush from her lungs with that realization. She *would* keep Severus' child if he asked her to. She would because she wouldn't want to hurt him. She didn't want to hurt him because she... she loved him. She *loved* him. She was in love with Severus Snape.

She'd known she was falling for him, but it hadn't occurred to her that she was already head over heels in love with the bastard.

A full smile blossomed on her face.

She was in love with Severus Snape, and it was a wonderful thing. She suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to hug him. She grabbed her pot of Floo powder and shouted, "Snape's office" into the fireplace.

Seconds later, she spun into his office only to find it empty. Disappointed, she tried to leave, but found the door warded shut. Shrugging, she took the Floo powder from his desk and shouted "Severus' quarters". Upon landing, however, she found herself not in the familiar sitting room, but in Dumbledore's office, looking at the bemused wizard himself.

"Can I help you, child?"

Hermione stood up somewhat awkwardly, brushing the soot from her robes. "Um, is Severus here?"

Dumbledore twinkled. "Not at this moment, no, but may I take a message? I'm sure I'll see him soon enough."

Hermione blushed. "Erm, no thanks. I..."

Dumbledore's mustache twitched. "You didn't happen to Floo from his locked office, did you?"

She nodded with an "ah," everything falling into place. "Crouch."

"Indeed. We implemented much more careful measures after that disastrous year."

"But... wouldn't it be more dangerous to Floo someone directly here?"

"I expect you'll find your wand missing, if you check," Dumbledore said, scratching his ear absently. Hermione did check, and sure enough, the wand was gone.

"Clever."

"Yes, it is, rather." He opened a desk drawer with a key and drew out her wand. "That was my doing, of course."

Hermione muffled her snort at the headmaster's typical egoism while he just twinkled at her even more.

"Well, I apologize for the interruption, sir. I'll just be on my way now."

Dumbledore smiled and stood up to see her to the door. "Then I shall let you out, though I must say your timing was rather excellent. I was just preparing to leave for dinner myself. May I escort you down?"

Hermione looked at her watch, amazed to see how late it was already. "Erm, yes, that would be lovely, thank you."

Dumbledore smiled benignly and offered his elbow. She placed her hand on his arm, he touched his wand to the door to unlock it, and they made their way down the spiral staircase.

"To be terribly nosy, I've noticed that it seems as though things are going well between you and Severus?"

Hermione barely kept herself from rolling her eyes and nodded. "Yes, I think so."

Dumbledore smiled down at her, obviously happy. "Splendid, splendid. I thought the two of you had been getting along quite nicely, recently."

Hermione couldn't restrain a mild snort. "Yes. I gather we're scaring the first years."

Dumbledore chuckled as the gargoyle opened to let them out. "I'd heard that. But I shouldn't be afraid of a few faint hearts here and there."

"I don't think either Severus or I could be accused of that, sir."

He beamed down at her. "Excellent." When he looked up again and said, "Oh look. There's the man of the hour as we speak!"

Hermione followed Dumbledore's gaze and saw Severus standing in the middle of the entrance hall looking at them, arms crossed and one eyebrow raised. He looked mildly amused, although she could feel his unexpressed questions. Hermione's heart surged at the realization that she could read him. That this was the man she loved.

Hermione squeezed Dumbledore's arm before disengaging and running toward Severus. His other brow rose in alarm, but he still opened his arms to receive her, twirling her around once to dissipate the energy of her attack. She squeezed him tightly, and he chuckled happily despite all the curious onlookers.

"I thought you were with Mrs. Potter."

"I was. She and Harry reconciled and so I came to find you."

"You Flooed to my office?"

"Yes."

He chuckled again. "And what did the old man say to make you commit such a spectacle of yourself?"

"Nothing." She looked up at him, beaming. "I'm just happy to see you."

His head bent down, but a mild cough from behind them kept them from actually kissing. Severus looked around with an aggrieved expression masking his embarrassment. Hermione hid her face in his robe to muffle any stray giggles.

"As lovely as it is to see the two of you so very happy, I'm afraid I must do my duty and remind you that such acts are against school rules. I'd hate to have to deduct points from your respective houses," he said, twinkling at them over his half-moon glasses.

"Plus, we're scaring the firsties," Hermione whispered.

Both men's lips twitched, though on Dumbledore it looked like his mustache was alive while on Severus it was halfway between a smirk and a sneer.

Severus released her, and she reluctantly pulled away, though she grabbed his hand on impulse. His fingers wrapped around hers and squeezed. Dumbledore somehow noticed all of this while never looking down, but his twinkling increased alarmingly. She looked up to see how Severus reacted only to find him looking down at her, his expression mellowing into a tiny, private smile.

"Well, I believe it is time for dinner, if I'm translating what my stomach is saying correctly. And, Severus, may I take a few moments of your time this evening?"

Severus nodded warily. Dumbledore smiled reassuringly. "You aren't in trouble, dear boy, so no worrying."

Severus tensed up. "Headmaster, I am always amazed at your ability to ease any concerns I might have," he said dryly.

Dumbledore patted his shoulder and gave Hermione a significant glance. "Well, this time you have nothing to fear, I do believe."

"Your assurance is noted."

Dumbledore smiled and shook his head, departing for dinner with a friendly good evening.

"What was that about?"

Hermione looked up at Severus. "What?"

"He looked at you."

Hermione snickered at how that sounded and he narrowed his eyes. "You know what I meant."

"I do know what you meant, but I don't know what he meant. I guess you'll just have to wait until tonight to find out."

"Humph." Still, despite his displeasure, he squeezed her hand tenderly and placed it in the crook of his elbow, leading them into the Great Hall for dinner. Hermione could

only smile.

XXVII

Chapter 27 of 28

Manic Monday, part two.

Important AN: *Here it is the last chapter. I will save most of my rambling and thanks for the author's note at the end of the epilogue. Here I would like to remind you that this tale is a continuation of "Marry A Choice." Actions that took place in that story are crucial to this chapter in particular. If it's been a long time since you've read MAC (it has been for me!), I suggest (with gritted teeth) that you review the last two chapters of that tale to refresh your memory before venturing further.*

Without further ado, Chapter XXVII:

Hermione was three-quarters of her way through her dinner when Teddy walked into the room. Seeing her, he changed his course and had the temerity to sit down beside her when she patted the bench. The few Gryffindors who had already shown up for dinner looked at him askance, but seeing Hermione's cheerful reception, they didn't dare to say anything.

"So," Teddy asked, "was it a mistake or malice?"

Hermione looked at him, trying to think what he could be talking about until it clicked: Vector.

"I don't know. I haven't managed to talk with her yet."

Teddy gave her a disapproving scowl, but she forestalled any comments that might be coming by raising her hand. "I *am* going to talk with her. I am. It's just today has been rather eventful."

"One of which was Vector..."

"More important things."

"Things more important than your grades?" Teddy looked skeptical, though his smile was full of humor.

She swatted him on the arm. "Yes. There *are* things that matter more than grades, you know."

He gasped. "Name one."

Hermione smiled innocently. "I'll name three. Life, death and the consequences of marriage."

He dropped his mocking role as confusion took over. He looked up at the staff table, saw Snape, then back at her, mystified. Hermione smiled and started counting. She'd only reached four when he blanched.

"You're not..."

"No!" she said, cutting him off before he said something she would regret. She added much more quietly, "*I'm* not."

He wilted in relief, then grimaced and looked embarrassed. Wanting to ease his discomfort, she said, "Fortunately, Severus and I are on the same page there. We'd rather wait a while, get to know each other a bit more before doing anything drastic like that."

Teddy tried smiling, though it looked rather sickly. When he'd regained enough composure, he asked, "Who is... oh."

Hermione nodded. "Yeah. It was a bit of a shock. Found out today."

"What was a shock?" Seamus asked, sitting down across from them, keeping a distrustful eye on Teddy.

"Hermione's grade in Arithmancy," Teddy said without hesitation. "Vector apparently has something against Hermione, and today the grades proved it beyond a doubt."

Seamus suppressed a snort, then widened his eyes. "That *is* shocking, innit? And here I thought you were talking about Ginny being preggers."

Hermione snorted into her pumpkin juice while Teddy looked put out. "You knew?"

Seamus snorted. "Mate, everyone knows by now. You should have heard Harry..."

Teddy sighed mournfully and shook his head while Hermione patted his back consolingly. "It was a good bit of subterfuge, Teddy. Really, it was."

He shook his head again. "I should know better than to waste my talents on Gryffindors."

Seamus looked up at that, the distrustful look back on his face. Hermione just laughed and said, "Yes. Your talents will only get you into trouble around here."

Teddy sniffed disdainfully. "Well, then. I will take that as my cue to go where my talents are appreciated. Needed, even." He stood up. "However, before I go, may I offer you one piece of advice?" Hermione nodded, smiling up at him cheerfully. "Go talk to Vector while she's still up at the staff table. It might be a bit rude, but talking to her there, in front of Professors Dumbledore and Snape, will make it impossible for her to ignore you."

Hermione nodded again, no longer smiling. "That's a sound strategy. Thanks."

Teddy snorted. "No need to sound as if I'm sending you to your death. You're the one with the awesome powers, remember."

Hermione chuckled. "Right. Thank you, Teddy."

Teddy gave a courtly bow, then left for his own table. Before he was five steps away, Seamus said, "What, you mean that was true? That bit about you getting a bad grade?"

Hermione laughed despite herself. "Yes, Seamus, it is true. But it isn't the first time I've been bad at something, so you needn't look so scandalized."

"Yeah, you were pants at Divination, weren't you? And flying. And..."

"Yes, Seamus."

Seamus grinned at her before going back to his food, leaving Hermione free to finish her supper. A few bites later, she was done. Taking a big breath to steel herself, she got up and made her way to the staff table.

The teachers didn't pay her much mind until she veered away from Severus' side of the table. She nodded to each teacher she passed, but kept the corner of her eye on Vector the entire time. When she saw Vector move as if to get up, she hurried forward.

"Excuse me, Professor Vector, I was wondering if I could speak with you for just a moment?"

If she hadn't been used to observing Severus, Hermione would never have noticed the slight sagging of Vector's shoulders. As it was, it was fairly obvious that the witch was struggling not to show her panic.

"This is... I'm in the middle of..." She sighed, obviously resigned to the fact that she couldn't avoid Hermione without her credibility suffering, or worse. "I'll be done here in a few minutes. Shall I meet you at my office?"

Hermione pitied the professor, but knew an escape plan when she heard one.

"Oh, that's okay. There's no need for you to go to all that trouble. If I may, I'll just walk with you wherever you might be going."

Vector pursed her lips, but nodded. "Fine. I'll fetch you when I'm done."

Hermione smiled, though perhaps a bit too brightly to be polite, and turned back to the Gryffindor table. If Vector left without at least approaching her, she would raise questions amongst the staff as to why she was avoiding Hermione. As it was, Hermione's breach of protocol was probably enough to get those who might be curious wondering. It more or less was guaranteed that Vector would talk to her tonight.

She sat back down across from Seamus and watched the staff table. She tried not to watch Vector too obviously, but knew she had failed when on flicking her eyes away from the witch, Severus gave her a smirk. Hermione rolled her eyes, but became more circumspect, earning an approving nod from Severus the next time she looked at him.

Not surprisingly, Professor Vector took her time, chatting with the Defense teacher over a third cup of tea. When he finally left the table, fifteen minutes later, Hermione saw Vector look down at her teacup and sigh. The cup must have been empty, as it was only a few seconds afterwards that she got up and looked around for Hermione.

Hermione smiled and waved discreetly. Vector nodded and indicated she should meet her as she walked out, but Hermione was already out of her seat. They met in the center aisle and walked out together without attracting any attention other than Severus' and Teddy's watchful gazes.

Once they were beyond the Entrance Hall, Vector turned into the first empty classroom. Hermione followed, hand on her wand just in case.

"You wished to speak to me?" Vector asked facing Hermione, her back rigidly straight.

"Yes. I would like to know why I received a 'D' on my essay."

"I thought I was quite clear in class. It didn't meet my requirements."

"I reviewed the assignment and the essay I turned in. Pardon me for exhibiting hubris, but I know that my essay met and exceeded your requirements, ma'am."

Vector glared at Hermione with all of her might. If Hermione hadn't been used to Severus' foul moods, she might have been intimidated, but as it was, she merely stood straighter and glared back.

Vector eventually huffed and looked toward a wall with a moldering poster hanging askew. "I cannot remember the specifics of what was wrong, but there were serious flaws in your argument."

"Then why didn't you mention them? Point them out so that I would know?"

"If you can't accept my teaching style--"

"But it's *not* your teaching style! It's Snape's teaching style, and it's horrible! I've always admired *you* as a teacher. I offered him the respect due to authority, and I now love and respect Severus as a person, but his teaching is horrible and unfair and... and so far beneath you."

Vector looked at her, rather stunned and hurt looking, shaking her head. "How could you throw yourself away on him?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're far too good for Snape! You're a good, honorable, kind, intelligent and beautiful young woman. All he's got going for him is that he's powerful and knows a good deal when it falls in his lap!"

"That's not fair! Severus is a good and honorable man, and I am flattered at his attention! Besides which, you highly underestimate him, and I expect that all of the traits you listed for me could apply to him! Well, except maybe kind, and he's certainly not beauti..." Hermione faded out as she realized what exactly Vector had said. A look at Vector's flushed face confirmed it.

"Oh. This isn't about Severus at all, is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Vector said coldly, not looking at her.

Hermione briefly closed her eyes, trying to think above the bitter disappointment.

"Should I withdraw from the course?" she asked softly.

Vector did look up at that, piercing Hermione with sharp eyes. She held her gaze for several seconds before sighing sadly and looking down.

"It would seem counterproductive to withdraw from something you obviously love."

"I do love it," Hermione admitted, knowing they were talking about more than just Arithmancy, "but... I won't tolerate abuse, Professor Vector. Not from *anyone*. If

circumstances have made it impossible for you to offer me the basic respect due to a student..."

Vector regarded her carefully, no hint of her private feelings on display other than her rigid posture. She held her silence, though, making Hermione uncomfortable. Finally, she said, "I will review your essay again. Have it on my desk before first class tomorrow morning."

Hermione blinked. "Thank you."

"If that is all?"

Hermione bit her lip to keep it from wobbling and nodded. Vector turned and walked out of the classroom, leaving Hermione wondering what the hell had just happened. She circled around for a place to sit and collapsed in a nearby desk, overwhelmed.

Closing her eyes, she leaned forward, resting her head against her propped up hands. Her heart ached as if Professor Vector had betrayed her, even as her vanity gloated at inspiring such feelings in someone like Professor Vector. She also wondered, with a sinking feeling, whether her grades had been fair before she married Severus.

All the emotions roiling inside her made her want to throw up. She groaned.

"I know you value your grades highly, but I promise you, it isn't the end of the world."

Hermione jerked up to find Severus there smirking at her. She groaned again and put her face in her arms on the desk. A warm hand on her back made her jump slightly, but she quickly relaxed into his gentle rubbing.

"Is it as bad as all that?" He had the temerity to sound amused.

"She loves me," Hermione muttered into her arms.

"Pardon me?" Severus said, still sounding amused.

Hermione sat up and sniffed, looking at him. "She fancies me. She thinks I'm wasting myself on you."

Severus looked at her rather stunned for a moment before he recollected himself and said, "Ah. How completely unprofessional of her."

Hermione laughed despite herself, though she couldn't find it within herself to relax. "Quite."

He smirked down at her before conjuring a chair facing her. "That begs the question, though, why are you so bothered by this? Is it because she's a witch?"

Hermione shook her head slowly. "No. I don't think so, anyway. I just... I liked her so much, Severus. She was my favorite teacher until I married you. I thought... I thought she liked and respected me for my work, not... not because of her hormones."

Severus snorted. "My dear, if it's any consolation, I doubt her *hormones* would have taken notice of you if you hadn't been as brilliant as you are. Even hormones can be discerning."

She chuckled again, though quickly sank back into her posture of despair.

"It's so disappointing, though. She's supposed to be my teacher, not human and fallible."

Severus quirked a brow at her. "And what am I?"

She blushed. "You're different."

"Oh?" He sounded amused, though his face was disconcertingly blank.

"You're... To be honest..." She paused, but he motioned for her to continue. She took a deep breath. "I hate your teaching method. Yes, there are very few accidents, and somehow the majority of us manage to scrape an OWL in Potions, but you *enjoy* terrorizing and bullying us. You *enjoy* abusing the power differential. The only way I was able to put up with your classes was to search for reasons behind your attitude. As a result, I had seen you more as a fallible human than as a teacher and have done so for a very long time."

She bit her lip as she looked at him, but his only reaction was to quirk his eyebrows up a bit more.

"You pitied me?"

She shook her head, smiling wryly. "No. I disliked you too much to pity you."

He snorted a bit, though he didn't look particularly happy.

She reached out and grabbed his hand, giving it a squeeze. "You did master the bastard persona quite admirably."

"You're so kind."

Hermione sighed. "Severus..."

"What? I should receive the *compliment* in the manner it was intended?"

"You yourself have said you're not nice, and you have asked me to be honest with you. Well, the honest truth is that I thought you were horrible." Severus withdrew his hand and stood up, but Hermione continued. "THOUGHT, Severus. *Thought!* I now know better."

Severus stood facing away from her, but didn't move to retreat further.

Hermione took a deep breath and let it out. "Since we got married, you have shown me the private side of yourself, and I am humbled, Severus. Humbled that you care enough and trust me enough to let me see past the bastard persona you've erected. You aren't a nice person, and I seriously doubt you ever will be. I will never approve of your teaching methods, nor respect them. But that is not to say that I don't respect *you*, because I do. Wholeheartedly. And I trust you, too. Otherwise I would never have told you that I used to think you were horrible." She took another trembling breath. Severus still hadn't turned around, though, and suddenly she was overcome with fury.

Standing up, she said, "But if you can't see that I do respect you, that I do trust you, then screw you. I am not going to constantly defend myself. Not to you, not to Vector, not to anyone! If you're going to assume that everything I say is said maliciously, then you can just go fuck yourself!"

Severus turned around slowly, and Hermione braced herself for his retaliation, even as she blinked back her tears.

"I should fuck myself, should I?" he purred. She tensed, waiting for the explosion. He rubbed his chin and gazed at her thoughtfully, putting her off-guard. "While it might be enjoyable, I don't see how it would help in this situation."

Hermione's lips twitched as she looked at him, sensing he wasn't angry after all. "Well, it is known to reduce tension."

"But I'm not the one who's tense right now. Maybe you should take your own advice and go fuck yourself?"

Hermione laughed, delighted at the turn the conversation was taking. That was one of the things she loved about him, that he could surprise her with such simple acts of understanding.

"I love you," she said, still laughing.

The change in his demeanor was shocking. He went from teasing to thunderous in less than a second. He stood rigid, but she could sense his desire to strike.

"This is how you repay my trust?" Severus said in his deadly quiet voice. "This is how you show your respect?" Suddenly, he thrust his arm out to the side and blasted a hole in the stone wall. Rubble flew everywhere, and Hermione brought up her arm to shield herself.

But Severus wasn't done.

"You..." He shook his head violently, then waved his wand again at the same wall. Another large hole appeared, blasting the rocks to smithereens.

"You *cow*! You heartless **cunt**!"

Hermione gasped and staggered back half a step, trying, all the while, to figure out why he was so upset. She was so bewildered that she didn't notice him approaching her until he was almost within arm's reach.

She moved before he could grab her, instinct guiding her steps around and away from him. She made her way to the door, flinching as another hole in the wall was made and she was pelted with the gravel.

As she wrenched the door open, she caught a glimpse of Severus staring after her, his face distorted with rage and loathing. He raised his wand, but she was through the door before she could tell where he was going to aim it.

She ran as hard as she could, fear making her blind to her surroundings. She ran until she was stopped by a pair of arms, twirling her around. She fought off the hold as hard as she could, but was stilled by a spell and a gentle, familiar voice murmuring, "Hermione, calm down! Calm down! It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you."

Hermione gulped and blinked until she could see the blurry form of Teddy standing there next to her. He was looking at her with concern that only increased as she burst into relieved tears.

He released the binding spell, and she relaxed into his arms, sobbing. He tightened his hold on her again, but this time in comfort rather than restraint. Hermione let him hold her, letting his embrace leech the fear from her mind and body.

After what seemed to be ages, she drew in a shuddering breath and pushed herself away from him. He hesitated for a second before releasing her, but kept his hands on her arms.

"What happened? Why are you bleeding?"

Hermione looked up at that. He conjured a handkerchief and wiped her cheek. Sure enough, when he presented it to her, there were tiny smears of blood on the white cotton.

She let out a shuddering breath, shaking her head in disbelief. "He blew up. He... he hexed the wall, and I guess the shards..." She shook her head again and tried to restrain the urge to cry.

Teddy drew her into another hug, and she wrapped her arms around him, hanging on as if for dear life. They remained that way for a few moments until Teddy drew back. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders while she wiped her face with the handkerchief, and she wasn't aware they were walking until he removed his arm and guided her to sit down on a transfigured sofa.

She was dully surprised, but the heartache was so severe that she spent most of her attention on restraining herself from breaking down completely. It wasn't until Teddy placed a hand on her arm that she remembered he was there.

She looked up and briefly glanced around, noting they were in the Restricted Section of the library. Teddy had considerably put up a Do-Not-Notice Charm as well as a fairly advanced privacy ward. No one would stumble upon them accidentally.

"What happened, Hermione?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know! One minute we were talking and joking, and then he suddenly went into full rage mode. And I don't understand why." She choked back another sob and took a moment to regain her equilibrium.

"I know Snape is a little on the unpredictable side, but surely there must have been some spark that set him off."

"The only thing I can think of is that I said, 'I love you.'" She laughed mockingly. "If that *is* the reason, I don't understand it at all. I mean, I'm pretty sure he loves me. I'm positive, in fact. The way he looks at me and touches me... even the way he talks to me, most of the time, says he loves me more than those three words could. So, why should it make him angry that I love him back? Is he so damaged that he can't accept my love, or is this just another way of manipulating me? I don't understand! Do you?"

She looked to Teddy, who seemed almost as emotionally torn as she felt.

He shook his head. "No. He should be thrilled."

Hermione huffed and shook her head. "Yes, but this is Severus we're talking about. He doesn't do 'should.' He has to be perverse in all things. Maybe that's it. Maybe he loved me as long as I didn't love him. Maybe he didn't want a happy marriage after all. Maybe he just thought it was impossible that I *could* love him and so set his heart on me, and now that the impossible has come to pass, he's feeling threatened by the reality of living life outside a fantasy?"

Teddy opened his mouth to say something but shut it again when she shook her head impatiently. "No, I don't really think any of that's the case. I just... I don't know how to deal with a man who responds so unpredictably. I mean, I love him. He loves me. It should be simple and happy and wonderful, shouldn't it? But instead it's this horrible mess of nastiness and fighting and fear. I don't know what to do, Teddy. I just don't know."

"It could be worse," he said slowly. "You could be in love with someone you're not married to."

Hermione looked at him blankly, marveling that he should empathize with her so strongly, judging by his sad, yearning expression. And then everything fell into place with a clunk.

"Oh, Teddy."

He smiled bitterly. "I must say I want to hex Snape for hurting you." His eyes took on a dreamy quality as he paused, looking up at the rafters. "And, you know, if I accidentally overdid it, and he died, you'd be free and..." He stopped, his gaze soft and sad as he looked down at her again. "But that wouldn't make you happy, would it?"

Hermione's chest contracted as she watched the hope fade from her friend's face as she shook her head no.

He smiled that bitter smile again and shrugged. Something about that made all of Hermione's defenses collapse, and she burst into tears.

"Oh, my lady!" Teddy cried as he gathered her into his arms. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Just forget it. I didn't mean... Just forget it."

Hermione cried harder as she heard his voice go hoarse with tears of his own. She held onto him, hiding her face in his chest as everything that could have been washed over her, enticing her. But the fact of the matter was that her heart already belonged to another.

"It's not fair," she whispered hoarsely into Teddy's shoulder. "I could have been so happy with you."

Teddy hugged her tighter for a long moment before sighing, "I wish I could be the one to make you happy now." He then released her, pushing her away.

She wiped the tears from her face with the palms of her hands before Teddy conjured her another handkerchief. She gave him a shaky smile of thanks as she wiped her eyes, cheeks and nose. Once she was reasonably clean, she held the handkerchief in her hands, examining it rather than the person in front of her.

Teddy didn't speak, leaving her to work out her thoughts and emotions in peace. Unfortunately, her overriding emotion at that moment was hopelessness.

"We could have had a happy life together," she murmured dejectedly, "but instead..." She gestured blindly, not willing to say out loud what she felt.

"Don't think that," Teddy said softly. "You'll make up. You'll be happy again." He paused for a beat, then added in a lighter tone, "But, you know, if Snape spurns you again, come find me, and we'll run off to Majorca together. You wouldn't even need to feel bad because he would have to be insane to do so."

She laughed hollowly and leaned into the sofa's corner. She tilted her head back against the bookcase beyond and rolled it side to side, closing her eyes as she did so.

"I don't know what to do, Teddy. The first fight we had was painful. He knew just what to say to hurt me. The second fight was even worse. And the third... And now... The fights just keep getting more and more painful." She hiccupped and sniffed as tears started falling again. "The longer we know each other, the deeper we cut into each other when we're angry. This last time, it felt like he was shredding my soul."

She sniffed again and wiped her nose with the kerchief. She took a deep breath and let it out before admitting, "It feels like I'm getting torn apart."

"For me as well."

Hermione's eyes shot open to find Severus sitting where Teddy had been. He was looking at her through his impassive mask, though she could tell he was still very upset.

She started to look around for Teddy, but Severus said, "He left for his common room. May I suggest we follow his example and find somewhere more private for this discussion?"

Hermione bit her lip to keep it from quivering. "Will you promise to keep your temper in check?"

He nodded sharply. She nodded faintly in turn and took his hand when he offered it, though she dropped it once she was on her feet.

They walked out of the Restricted Section separated by two paces. Hermione wanted to duck her head and scurry through the rest of the library but knew that she would only attract more attention if she did so. So she kept her head high and her shoulders straight. There was only one onlooker, however: Teddy was watching them closely as they strode through the library. She offered him a thin smile, but had to look away for fear she would start crying again.

As it was, when she turned her attention to her path, she found Severus already standing by the doors, watching her closely.

Her heart sank, knowing that it would not help soothe his mood. On thinking over things, she was sure he suspected how Teddy felt. If he suspected her of reciprocating or even just encouraging such feelings...

She passed through the door quietly, nodding her appreciation of his holding the door for her.

Their walk was a silent one, and she was somewhat surprised when they ended up in her room, rather than his. She supposed it was because it was closer, being only three floors away, but she still thought it strange that he would cede the familiar ground to her.

As soon as he closed the door behind himself, she turned and glared at him. He grimaced.

"Are you all right?" he asked, looking her over, his eyes lingering on the cheek Teddy had wiped.

"I'll survive," she answered curtly.

They looked at each other in stubborn silence, neither willing to make the first move. Finally, Snape rolled his eyes and took a step forward. He stopped when Hermione flinched backward.

"Hermione..."

"You terrified me down there."

"Yes, and I apologize. But... you must understand that mocking me on such an important matter is beyond cruel. It's heartless."

"What? How was I mocking you?"

Severus' face darkened, though his voice was controlled when he spoke. "You threw my feelings in my face." He laughed girlishly and quoted in insipid falsetto, "Gee, I love you."

Hermione gaped at him, horrified. "Severus, I didn't... It wasn't meant to be mocking. Spontaneous, maybe, but never mocking."

He looked at her sharply and asked, "How can you be so cavalier about those words?"

"I wasn't being cavalier at all, Severus. I might not have planned to say it, but that doesn't mean that's not how I feel. I love you. If I didn't, your words wouldn't be nearly so hurtful. They might strike at my ego, but not my soul."

Before she'd finished speaking, he'd crossed the room and gathered her into his arms. She struggled at first, wanting to have her say, but his warmth and care was so inviting that she relented and embraced him back.

"You need to stop assuming that I want to hurt you," Hermione said after a minute or so. He nodded, his chin rubbing the top of her head.

"It's difficult. I am trying, but... Old habits die hard."

"Because I'm a Gryffindor?"

"Yes. And a former student. And..." He sighed. "There are many reasons in my past for me to be distrustful. I am trying, however, to convince myself and my habits that you are the exception to the rule. Because I do know that you won't intentionally hurt me." He sighed again, but this time almost happily. "I do know that."

Hermione heard and felt the implied, "I wouldn't love you otherwise," and hugged him closer. She then tilted her head up, inviting him to kiss her. He accepted her invitation with fervor, devouring her mouth with all the emotional charge of their earlier fight. She returned his kiss with equal passion, battling him for control.

Not one to give up, Severus grabbed her by the hips, lifted her up and then turned and pinned her against the wall. She squeezed her thighs around his hips and moaned as he groped them. He continued to ravish her mouth, moaning with her as they rubbed against each other more and more urgently. Hermione broke away from his mouth to pant a spell into his ear, and they both gasped as their clothes disappeared.

He took a shuddering breath and looked into her eyes as his hands went from her breast down, down, down till he was holding her quim open for his cock.

She looked back at him and held her breath as he entered her, releasing it all in a deep moan as their hips finally came together.

They stared into each other's eyes, panting, relishing the feel of the other in and around them. They held still, both trying to contain their passion, both trying to remain in control.

And then the dam broke.

He lunged for her mouth and she pulled him into the kiss, her hands locked in his hair as he drove into her. She pushed against the wall and into him, and he pushed right back. Faster and faster they fought in tandem, feeling the tension rise in waves until suddenly, it burst over them.

He came first, rearing back his head with an inarticulate cry as his hips continued pounding against her, desperate to get further. She followed almost instantly, feeling his power, his love, his passion overwhelm her until nothing remained but her pleasure.

When it finally passed, they were left leaning against the wall, breathless and shaky.

"Fuck," Severus murmured half in awe and half in warning.

Hermione felt him trembling beneath her, so she unwrapped herself from him, slipping down to touch the floor. Once she was standing on her own, however, she felt how much she was shaking.

"You can say that again." She leaned against the wall.

He chuckled and leaned into her body, nuzzling her neck. "Shall we adjourn to a more horizontal location?"

She smiled. "As long as it's the bed. I don't think my back could take the floor so soon after the wall."

He nipped her neck playfully and then withdrew. Taking her hand, he pulled her along to the bedroom where they collapsed onto the bed. Neither felt much like moving, though after cooling down for a few minutes, they found themselves curled around each other.

They laid there drowsing in their bliss till Hermione started to shiver. Severus got up, retrieved his wand and did a nifty spell that tucked her in without her moving. She smiled lazily at him and stretched out her hand in invitation, but he shook his head.

"The headmaster awaits."

She pouted sleepily, but nodded in understanding. "Come back soon, please."

He smiled at her and then leaned down to kiss her. "Werewolves couldn't keep me away."

She smiled at him, though by the time she heard the Floo activate, her eyes had shut and sleep was fast approaching. Right before sleep took her in its arms, she smiled lazily at how right Teddy had been. Happily ever after was a possibility after all.

XXX

She woke up hours later, feeling refreshed and sated. She stretched lazily and then opened her eyes to look for Severus, as he wasn't in the bed with her. She turned her head and saw him sitting a few feet away, looking at her coolly.

"Going to join me?" she asked, extending her hand again.

He shook his head. "No. I don't think that would be fair to you in light of my recent decision."

Hermione felt her blood go cold. "Decision? What are you talking about?"

Severus stood up and banished the chair he'd conjured.

"After a most enlightening discussion with Albus, I have decided it would be best that our marriage exist only on paper. If you should wish for a companion, I suggest you ask Mr. Nott."

Hermione laughed. "I didn't know your humor went this way, but good joke."

"I am not joking."

Hermione's smile faded as she read her husband's face. He was serious. Deadly serious. "But... What?"

"It is very apparent that Mr. Nott cares for you, and he seems unlikely to attack you or tear you apart as I am wont to do. He is obviously the better choice for you, and seeing as I deprived you of that choice at the beginning, I feel it necessary to make reparations at this time."

Hermione stared at him in dismay. "Severus... what do you mean by this?"

"It is very simple, Hermione," he said through gritted teeth. "I want a separation."

Hermione stared at him, completely dumbfounded. It was a long minute before words came to her.

"Severus, a couple of hours ago you seemed happy enough to be with me... Thrilled, even. I need you to tell me what brought this on. There must be a miscommunication in there somewhere, and I'm sure we can work everything out if we talk this through."

"A miscommunication? Do you really think I'd leave you because of a simple miscommunication? **attacked** you, Hermione!" He stood there, breathing hard, but visibly reined himself in.

"I've assaulted you. I've played with you, and I've preyed on you. By your own admission, it is tearing you apart/am tearing you apart, and I refuse to do so anymore. You will go with Mr. Nott and be happier for it. He loves you."

Hermione's breath left her in a whoosh, and she was unable to recover it. She sat there panting, trying not to hyperventilate until she was able to speak, although she couldn't help the tears that rolled down her cheeks. She needed to say something *anything* to keep Severus from leaving her.

"What if I don't want to go with Teddy? What if I want to stay with you?"

"Don't be a fool, Hermione."

She tossed off the bed covers and stood up before him, completely nude.

"Are you saying you don't love me?"

He said nothing but looked away, defeated and depressed. She refused to let him shy away from her, though, and walked around him till he had to face her. He looked pained, but didn't turn away again.

"Do you or do you not love me, Severus Snape?"

He clenched his jaw, but didn't answer.

"Severus, I am not letting you leave until you answer the question. Do. You. Love. Me?"

His voice was hoarse when he ground out, "Does it matter one way or the other?"

"Yes, God damn it! I love you, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let another man I love throw away a life with me if I can help it!"

Snape paused at that, but quickly rejoined, "Well, it shouldn't matter! What good does it do for me to admit that you own my heart, that your essence is stamped upon every cell in my body? It does not *matter* that I will love you to my dying day because in the meantime, I am DESTROYING you!"

The air was heavy after that, but Hermione shook her head, crying.

"You idiot. Not only are you underestimating me again but you're also deliberately misinterpreting me. *Our fights* tear me apart, not you. You put me back together again, just as I try to mend you. You make me stronger, Severus, not weaker."

"But don't you see, Hermione?" Snape confessed quietly, almost in tears himself. "We fight. That's what we do. And those fights are destroying me, too."

She shook her head again, wiping away her tears. "Then we avoid fighting. I don't want to hurt you, you don't want to hurt me. So as long as we love each other, I don't see why we can't work around that problem."

He laughed despairingly and collapsed onto the bed, his head in his hands.

"Were it that simple, my dear. We can't do anything without arguing. The only way we could avoid fighting is if we never saw each other, which brings me back to my original point."

Hermione looked at him, concern churning in her gut. "Are you saying arguing and fighting are the same thing, Severus? Because to me they aren't. Arguing is simply a heated discussion, whereas fights... fights are where we shunt reason to the side just to hurt each other. But if you don't like arguing... I'll," she swallowed, "I'll agree with you that we should separate."

He looked up at her with hope.

"You enjoy our arguments?"

She laughed wetly and nodded vigorously. "Of course I do. Do you think I'd instigate them if I didn't?"

He got up off the bed and approached Hermione, wrapping his arms around her. "I thought... I thought you didn't like them. I..."

"You see? You were ready to toss me aside based on a simple misunderstanding."

"I was trying to be noble."

"Leave that to the Gryffindors, why don't you."

He didn't laugh, though. He let out a breath and softly said, "But you would be happy with Nott. I heard you."

She looked at him, really looked at him, and then shook her head, searching for the right words. "If it had been Teddy I had married, we would be happy. But it wasn't Teddy I married, and leaving you to be with him wouldn't make me happy at all. It would make me miserable."

She bit her lip and looked down, examining his buttons before looking back up at him with a watery smile. "If you leave me, I won't go with Teddy. I won't go with anyone because I will still be married to you. I will always choose you because I will still *love* you."

She sniffled and then pulled him forward so she could snuggle into his chest. His arms enfolded her without hesitation, wrapping her with warmth and love. He nuzzled the top of her head with his cheek for a moment before drawing away. She looked up with wary eyes, but he smiled down at her.

"You do realize that if this is your idea of marital bliss, it leaves something to be desired, don't you?"

She choked on a laugh. "Yes, dear."

He huffed out a laugh himself and then bent down to kiss her. She kissed him back, convinced that she had, indeed, married her choice.

FINIS

Epilogue

Final Author's Note: *Warning: Sappy utterings ahead. Snape would not approve.*

Considering this was supposed to be a "short" sequel, it has taken an extraordinarily large amount of time (energy and words) to complete it. My eternal gratitude goes to those of you who have not only remained patient with the long bouts between updates, but have continued to read and encouraged me with your reviews. I may not have responded to your reviews reliably (she says sarcastically, knowing full well that she was very reliable in NOT responding to reviews), but I read and cherished every single one. Multiple times. Thank you so much. There were days **your** words and **your** thoughts kept me floating when it would have been all too easy to drown.

I also need to put credit where credit is due. My everlasting gratitude and friendship goes to my two wonderful, beautiful betas, Keladry Lupin and Southern_Witch_69. They helped tremendously, not only in cleaning up the SPAG of this story to acceptable levels, but in their encouragement and excitement.

Special thanks goes out to Amsev for her excitement, cheerleading and general enthusiasm, as well as her introducing me to the whole betaing concept. And her insistence that I join LJ. Thanks to GinnyW for her nudges, squees and friendship, and finally, thanks to Shiv the Great, without whom the last chapter wouldn't have been nearly as good. I think. She's free to disagree, of course.

The excellent advice of those ladies has been invaluable to me both in the writing of this story and in the navigation of this fandom. Without you three, I probably wouldn't know half the people I count as friends. Thank you so very much!

smooches to everyone else You know I love you even if you aren't mentioned by name. Yes, you.

Thank you for reading this story of mine. I appreciate it heaps and heaps. And now that's said, you may go back to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

Minerva McGonagall

Headmistress' Office

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Scotland

June 14, 2010

Gods, woman! You should have warned me! I thought the miscarriages were difficult! And what sadists are the Healers to actually encourage the fathers to be in the same room, hold their wives' hands, *watch their wives being split apart!!*

Never again. Never. Even if we could.

Fortunately, this child is alive and well, as is Hermione. She, Hermione, insists we name her, the baby, after you, though I've tried to dissuade her (Hermione) of the notion. Perhaps you might offer a more persuasive argument against it? I do NOT need a goddess in the family. She already has too much power over us as it is, and that's while she's only capable of eating, sleeping and defecating. I shudder to think what the future will hold when she learns to smile.

If you could spread the word of birth and health matters amongst the curious, I would be grateful. I will soon have my hands full (of dirty nappies) and won't have the patience for such trivial matters.

Regards,

Severus

Severus Snape

Thistle Cove

Spurn Head

Yorkshire

June 14, 2010

Oh, Severus, congratulations! I am so happy for you two. I am also humbled at being your daughter's namesake, and I accept the honor with pride. Thank you.

I've told the Potters the good news, so you should be receiving well-wishes from the ends of the Earth within the next day. Hopefully, they'll at least take Hermione into consideration before choosing their owls. I assume you've warded your Floo by now.

Oh, I am so very happy for you! Be as good to your lasses as I know you want to be, dear boy, and everything will be fine. Just remember, a clean bum is a happy bum.

Much love,

Minerva