

Out of the Depths

by laurielove

Hermione has returned to Hogwarts for one term to take her NEWTs and finds herself once again being taught by a man who had only ever tormented her. Can she cope with her life as it is now? Or with him?

One

Chapter 1 of 34

Hermione has returned to Hogwarts for one term to take her NEWTs and finds herself once again being taught by a man who had only ever tormented her. Can she cope with her life as it is now? Or with him?

This story takes place on the assumption that Severus Snape did not die in the Shrieking Shack, although he was still bitten and only just managed to survive, having been as near death as it is possible to be. There is more explanation in the chapter. It takes place starting in the September following the war. Hermione has returned briefly to Hogwarts as a world-weary nineteen-year-old to refresh her knowledge and take her NEWTs. She is trying to maintain the charade of enjoying student life, but in reality is finding herself increasingly disenchanted with routine and regulation. Snape too has returned as Potions Master. Apart from the obvious difference of the survival of Snape, I have tried to be as faithful as possible to JKR's plot and characterisation, following on from the end of *Deathly Hallows*, but ignoring the epilogue.

The version I am posting here, I hope, will be a tighter and more fluid version of this story's previous incarnation.

None of the characters or canon situations belong to me, only to JK Rowling.

Enjoy! x



Hermione Granger stood in her private dormitory examining herself in the mirror. As she knotted her Gryffindor tie ready for the day ahead, she questioned briefly why she was doing it.

She was now nineteen and had lived through more in those years than most people experienced in a lifetime. She was a brilliant witch with one of the sharpest, most intuitive minds of her generation.

Yet she was still at school.

She finished the knot on her tie and sighed deeply.

Admittedly, there was not much longer to go. She had merely returned to Hogwarts for one term to freshen up her knowledge before taking her NEWTs at Christmas.

Clearly, she had a very good reason for having missed the exams at the proper time. As excuses went for absence from school, ridding the world of evil was not a bad one.

And Professor McGonagall had been understanding and accommodating. She had given Hermione her own room, granted her permission to wear her own clothes, and had even offered her a place at the end of high-table with the staff.

But Hermione had turned down most of her kind offers, although was grateful for the privacy of her room. With regard to uniform and seating at dinner, she had felt she needed to show solidarity with the other students. It had been tempting to rise above them; she certainly did not feel like a schoolgirl anymore, neither did she look nor act like one. She was a fully formed woman. Not only was she nineteen, but she was an achingly mature nineteen, with a world-weariness even she regretted. But she wanted to get on with the others, and she knew they appreciated her decision to conform with them in appearance and behaviour.

Still, as she sat in the classes with her fellow students, she could not help but feel detached. She easily took on board the knowledge that was imparted to her and felt well-prepared for the exams at the end of term. But the institutional regime was starting to cloy, and she frequently wanted to escape to the real world, whatever that might be.

Most of her professors admired her, regarding her virtually as an equal. They respected her decision to associate with her fellow pupils, but at the end of a lesson she often found herself lagging behind, questioning them on a theory, chatting, laughing. She got on well with them and regarded them as friends.

All except one.

As Hermione looked in the mirror now, she realised why she was feeling particularly dreary this morning.

She had Potions first lesson.

Once again, she sighed deeply, cursing the man under her breath.

Severus Snape had lived despite the odds after that day in the Shrieking Shack. For hours it was assumed he was dead. His body had lost all sign of life; no breath seemed to pass through him, and no heartbeat could be detected. His body had been returned to Hogwarts and placed in a makeshift mortuary. After talking to Harry, Hermione herself had visited to pay her last respects. It was only then as she was leaving, several hours after the battle had ended, that the wizard preparing Snape's body for burial noticed the twitch of a finger. It had taken deep and unfathomable magic to coax his body back to life, aided partially by Hermione's knowledge.

All summer his body had slowly, almost reluctantly, recovered. Harry had told Hermione a little of the final thoughts Snape had entrusted to him, believing he was dying. It was not enough to betray Snape's confidence, but she knew of Lily and his love for her.

After the war, he had withdrawn from life for some time and had been heard of little. Many doubted he would return to Hogwarts again, especially under McGonagall's headship, having been Headmaster himself. It was only late, even after Hermione had announced she would go back to take her NEWTs, which in itself had been a delayed decision, that he had said he was returning, as Potions Master once again.

Hermione had at first been pleased to hear he was coming back. She had obviously had to re-evaluate her opinion of him after the war and had developed a huge respect and admiration for the man. His survival alone amazed her. He had suffered so much, had been so noble in the sacrifices he had made. Surely, having faced death for her, for her friends, for decency, he would now allow himself to live his life renewed with openness and enjoyment. When she returned to Hogwarts she had been determined to face him with a new outlook, a new perspective.

But almost immediately she had found his attitude had changed little. It had pained and wounded her to detect no development in his bitter, cynical, mean-spirited approach to lessons, to humanity... to her. Any goodwill she had felt towards him had evaporated within two weeks of being back in his classes.

Hermione tried to suppress her antagonism towards him, reminded herself daily of what he had been through, what she knew he felt, for Lily in particular. But it didn't help. One look at the hair hanging over his pale features, the mouth fixed in a straight line of determined misery, the black eyes set darkly, shutting out the outside world, and any warmth she may have mustered for him was gone. It was frustrating as much as anything. She resented the fact that he did not seem to have made the slightest effort to amend his opinion of her, despite all they had been through together.

The other professors had even gone so far as to allow her to call them by their first names when in private. Not Snape. In any case, she had no wish to do so. She felt so pained by him on a personal level that she couldn't even think his first name in her head. It hurt her to try.

Hermione glanced at the time and groaned. She had been up late studying and had missed breakfast. She would now be late for Potions and have to sit through the lesson on an empty stomach. Grabbing her books, she rushed out.

She eventually got to the dungeons ten minutes after class had started. Hermione knocked politely, but on receiving no reply after trying a second time, she hesitantly opened the door and crept in. She tiptoed over to a desk at the back of the room, but just as she thought she had got away with it, the voice spoke, cold and abrupt over the heads of the other students.

"Late... Miss Granger."

She closed her eyes momentarily before lifting them to meet those of the Potions Master. She should apologise, but as she could detect no humanity in the black eyes at all, could not summon the depth to do so. He drawled over to her again, deep and measured, before lowering his head to his work, "See me afterwards."

Hermione rolled her eyes, keeping her head down and opening her books. She hadn't a clue what she was supposed to be working on but did not want to interact with him long enough to find out. She simply read through her notes from last time.

Footsteps approached her, slow and deliberate. Her heart sank. She sat up a little and waited.

He came and stood near her, his robes draping around him. She could smell him, a deep smell of concoctions, cordials, spices, herbs and aromatic plants. It was unique to him and she had long associated it with belittling torment. However, it was not unpleasant. Hermione had noticed this before, and she now strangely found herself breathing it in deeply as he stood there. She did not look round.

"Miss Granger." Her name dripped from his tongue like ice. The hairs on her head tingled. "Could you please explain to me how you seem to be working away fastidiously when you have not the slightest idea what on earth it is you are supposed to be doing?" Through the deep underlying fluidity, each word was emphasised with tongue-tip precision.

"I am reading my notes from our last lesson, sir."

He leaned down, his hair falling into her eye-line, and placed a parchment on the table before her, pressing it down hard with his hand. *This...* he hissed, so softly only she could hear, "is what you are working on today. You do not have much time left. I suggest you apply yourself with some urgency if you do not want to be kept behind after class. Your presumption has resulted in ten points being taken from Gryffindor."

Hermione glared with sharp suddenness at him. "Many members of staff... *Professor*... no longer feel that I need to adhere to the normal code of sanctions in this school."

"Many perhaps... *but not I*. You are still a student, Miss Granger, no different to anyone else. Do not presume otherwise."

He returned her stare, his black eyes sparking as his voice, still menacing, curled through the air to her.

They stared at each other for a while, both seeming to dare the other to lower their gaze first. Hermione felt her breathing becoming deeper and more rapid. A throbbing ache developed deep inside her. She assumed it was anger. After a time his gaze became almost painful and she dropped her head, closing her eyes as if they had been scorched.

She heard a slight derisive sniff out from him and his footsteps retreated away from her.

Their encounter had been more raw, more intense than any she could remember, and she wondered why she had been so affected by it. But, resorting to her Granger common sense, Hermione tried to put it behind her and for the rest of the lesson focused on the task they had been set. Despite being late, she managed to complete her potion well in advance of anyone else, and when it came time to test, showed that hers was by far superior to the others. As usual, Snape could not commend her in any way and managed to find one meagre thing to criticise which he did with unnecessary vehemence and exaggeration.

His reaction was no less than she was used to, but since the war she had found it increasingly hard to accept his cold, barricaded demeanour. He had displayed such bravery and humanity at the most dangerous of times, why could he now not let his guard down with her just a little?

After they had tidied away, she remembered regretfully that he had asked to see her at the end of class. She considered leaving and seeing what would happen but thought better of it. She didn't want to lose Gryffindor any more points. She approached his desk, feeling little but recrimination towards the man.

He knew she was standing before him but did not look up. She waited. Nothing.

After a while she had to speak; she had other classes to get to.

"Professor Snape... you asked to see me." Hermione spoke flatly.

Still he did not immediately respond but continued writing on a parchment. She noted curiously how easily his hand flowed over the page, producing a fine cursive script. Finishing with a final sharp dot, he at last raised his head to her, once again fixing her with his eyes, the irises almost blending into the pupils within them.

"Miss Granger. What is the reason for your tardiness this morning?"

She sighed. There was no point in being deceptive. "To be honest, Professor, I was tired. I had to stay up late last night preparing an advanced paper for Transfiguration. I must have over-slept."

Snape sneered. "Such lack of discipline and poor organisation are reprehensible. Ensure it does not happen again or you will suffer the consequences." He returned to his parchment.

"I apologise for my lateness, sir, but, I think you will agree, I produced a potion of remarkable accuracy and efficiency in a shorter time than it took most people to assemble their ingredients."

"I have already given you my opinion on that." He kept his head down.

"Yes," she said with hint of cynicism. "Thank you for that." She saw him tense. "May I go now? ..Sir."

He inhaled sharply in annoyance, still not looking up. "Yes." The word was spat out.

With that, Hermione turned and left the dungeon. She didn't see her Potions Master following her under hooded lids as she walked from his room.

The rest of Hermione's day passed much more pleasantly than it had started. She managed to put the incident with Snape out of her mind. The week wore on and she threw herself into her studies. It was late September, and the summer which had lasted long into the month suddenly seemed to have abandoned them. The air became chillier and the nights were closing in.

Hermione missed Harry and Ron, although her relationship with Ron had ended amicably a few weeks into the holidays. As a couple, they had soon grown apart. He was increasingly interested in Quidditch, and she in intellectual pursuits. Still, they remained good friends. And now she missed his companionship, such a familiar part of her old life here.

Hermione spent much of her free time walking in the grounds. She was allowed free access to all areas now, although her fellow students weren't, and as such, she enjoyed exploring the woods and walks alone.

She would return in time for supper in the Great Hall and sit with Ginny and her friends at the Gryffindor table. Despite the fact that they were only a year younger than her, Hermione often found the conversation juvenile and unengaging.

This is how she found herself the Thursday evening of that week. Ginny's friend Rose was extolling the virtues of the latest Gryffindor seeker in a gushing, vapid way. Hermione tuned out. Perhaps she would take up McGonagall's offer of a seat at high table after all. She turned to look up at the row of professors as they sat and ate, optimistic that she may detect in them a kindred spirit. There seemed to be none amongst the students. But on perusing the staff intently, she realised with dismay that their conversation too seemed to be virtually nonexistent.

Hermione continued to scan the line of teachers, stopping abruptly when she came to one.

Her eyes met those of Severus Snape. He was staring directly at her.

She froze, unable to lower her gaze. He was frowning slightly, not with displeasure, but with an intense interest, as if desperately trying to read something in her face. Her mind told her to look away, but she did not. Neither did he.

After an age, Ginny reached across for the salt and jogged her elbow. It jolted her out of her daze. Hermione looked quickly away from him.

"You alright, 'Mione?" Ginny asked curiously. "You've gone bright red."

"Have I?" she mumbled. "I'm just a bit hot, that's all."

Ginny turned away from her again to listen to more gossip of the seeker.

Hermione could not hold back. Keeping her head lowered as much as possible, she raised her eyes to look once more at his spot on high-table. He had gone.

For a reason she did not care to acknowledge, her stomach flipped.

Hermione continued to sit at the table, picking at her food, but could not focus on it or her friends. She suddenly found herself having lost all appetite and being quite unable to sit and listen to the giddy chat any longer. She stood up, complaining of a headache, and walked as calmly as she could from the hall.

Once outside she hurried along the corridors, trying not to think too much about what had just happened or more importantly, her reaction to it. She just wanted to get away, get to her room, shut herself in and sit, read, anything.

She rushed round a corner and collided with someone. It was him.

"Oh god, I'm sorry!" She moved swiftly back, not looking at him.

Snape did not speak but made a strange noise, halfway between a sniff and a grunt.

She tried to move past him again, but he had just stepped aside to let her pass and she chose the wrong side, finding her progress once again impeded by his tall black form.

"Sorry," she mumbled again. She could smell his scent once more. Heady, not unpleasant.

This time she moved to the left to try to get past, but again they both moved inadvertently the same way, and she bumped against his solid frame once more. This time he huffed in exasperation.

"Miss Granger." An urgent hiss.

At last she raised her eyes slowly to look at him. He was breathing rapidly, his brows furrowed in concentration. Their eyes met for the second time that night, and once again, Hermione found she could not look away.

She was inhaling desperately, trying to fill her lungs with oxygen, but somehow unable to. There was a strange feeling in her body, as if she had a lump of lead in her very centre. He did not move, nor lower his gaze, and his eyes now were somehow different. She thought she could detect in them for the first time ever... something as yet indefinable.

She wanted to ...

There was a noise behind her as students started to leave the hall.

Snape suddenly lowered his eyes, stepped back and held his hand out to let her pass. She dropped her head and walked, running once around the next corner.

Once she had reached her room, she shut the door hard behind her, flung herself down on her bed and grabbed the largest, most boring book on the history of magic she had. She opened it and read aloud, fast and furious, determined to blot out any other thought from her head.

More soon. I'd love to hear your thoughts. LL x

Two

Chapter 2 of 34

Can Hermione put the apparent shift in Snape's attitude, and her own, out of her mind? I doubt it somehow.

As Hermione went to sleep that night she tried her hardest to clear her mind, but try as she might, one image kept reappearing: black eyes set in a long pale face, thin mouth, tight red lips.

She picked up her pillow and puffed it violently as if it were a punch bag. Flinging herself down again, she squeezed her eyes tight shut in an attempt to eradicate the face of Severus Snape from her thoughts. She could not.

As the slow final hours of one day slipped into the unearthly silence of the next, Hermione finally allowed her mind to ask herself the questions she had been trying to avoid all night. Why had he been staring at her at dinner? Why did she return his gaze? ... Why did she react the way she did in the hallway? She had felt like ... *No*.

She had clearly been distressed.

He was vile. He was miserable. He was ugly She told herself these things over and over again until she was sure she believed them.

In any case, things were always magnified at night.

Everything would be alright in the morning.

The next day Hermione awoke early. Ginny came bounding into her room at eight o'clock asking to borrow her notes for a Herbology test. Her friend's exuberant anxiety focused Hermione on matters far from those which had been occupying her thoughts in the night.

Good.

The two went to breakfast together. Hermione did not look once at high-table.

Things felt normal.

She did not have Potions that day. Transfiguration was held outside, working with large rocks and trees, and the cool air further pulled her mind back to where she felt it should be.

She had not thought of him once.

The class returned in a bright mood to the castle; it was the end of the day. Hermione and Ginny strolled along the corridor, chatting animatedly about news of Harry's Auror work.

"And he's only been there a few months ...!" laughed Ginny.

Hermione joined in her laughter, pulling her head up so that her eyes rose to look down the length of the corridor.

At the end of it, talking to Professor Sprout, was Snape.

Immediately, her breath caught in her throat and a deep ache stirred within.

In her school life, how many times had she passed him in the corridor? She could not count them. Before, she would barely have been aware of his presence.

She breathed deeply, putting her reaction down to the contradictions which now faced them both in the aftermath of the war. It meant nothing.

Nothing.

She and Ginny drew closer.

Hermione was aware that she was becoming over-animated in her conversation with her friend, punctuating her discourse with exaggerated gestures something she abhorred in others.

Snape did not look at her once as she approached.

That was how it had always been.

She should be reassured.

She was nearly level with him now. Just as her conversation had flowed over-freely as she got closer, once she drew very near, she was suddenly consumed by her own silence.

He seemed completely unaware of her presence and continued talking with that familiar and predictable low throb to his colleague.

Fine.

She had almost passed him.

She wouldn't look at him.

She wouldn't.

She did.

Before he moved out of her eye-line, Hermione drew her eyes up furtively.

At the last moment, his head turned slightly and the black of his irises looked into her, quickly, suddenly, but with the same searing intensity she had witnessed the previous day. Her insides twisted so violently she almost staggered.

But her feet carried her forward and she was past him.

As they continued through the castle, it was Ginny alone who kept up the chatter.

Back in her room that evening, Hermione tried to make sense of her sudden confusion.

She could not.

The moment of eye-contact between them in the corridor had once again disturbed her. But beyond that, she knew the reality of her reaction. That lurch inside could not be ascribed entirely to dislike or annoyance.

But equal to hers, she could not deny the shift in his attitude. His cold demeanour seemed to remain, but was now coupled with a definite interest. And that interest appeared to be far from academic.

Why now? The moment between them in the classroom had been the start of it.

It?

What exactly was it? There had been an increased awareness of the other: a recognition perhaps of ... an affinity ... an understanding even?

Her eddying emotions riled and frustrated Hermione. She had resigned herself to the fact that on returning to Hogwarts he was going to make no effort to treat her any differently to before, that he had not appeared to develop as a human being.

But now, through her, there had been a shift: a shift which only tormented and confused her more.

Hermione slept worse than the previous night. It took her an age to pass into an unconscious haze of ignorance.

The next days and nights were a repeat of what had started. At dinner times, try as she might to ignore it, his presence seemed to be magnified, sitting in his usual imperious way above her. She was almost relieved when she would glance up and find him merely staring into his plate of food or conversing with the person next to him.

But increasingly so, that was not the case.

His head would raise itself at times, his eyes moving over the assembled student body. And then they would come to her. And they would stop.

At those times, Hermione knew she did not lower her gaze as she should. At those times, she had no wish to.

And again, it was not with disdainful rebuke that he was looking at her.

The end of meal times would provide an odd mix of relief and tingling disappointment. Returning to the Common Room with her friends was the only way for Hermione to dispel the feeling.

Saturday passed slowly, Sunday even more so.

Despite aching exhaustion, Hermione lay in bed that night wide awake once again. She desperately needed sleep to come to her, but it resolutely refused to oblige.

She had Potions the next day. Every Potions lesson she had had since being at Hogwarts she had anticipated with the same feeling of apprehension.

But now, despite the whirlpool of her mind, she acknowledged one thing: she was not dreading Potions anymore.

The next morning dragged. For a reason Hermione cared not to admit, time was crawling.

She had lunch, turning her back to the staff table, not looking at it once, trying to ignore the now familiar feeling building in her very core.

And then it was time. Her next lesson.

Potions.

Hermione picked up her books, making a conscious effort to examine each one in an attempt to steady herself.

Walking to the dungeons, she found she had to slow her steps occasionally. She looked at the time. She was nearly ten minutes early *At least she was making up for last time.* The door was open. The dimly lit room smelt strongly of dangerous spices and intoxicating concoctions. She went in, closing the door behind her.

There was no sign of him anywhere, and she walked confidently to a desk, this time closer to the front. She did not ask herself why.

Putting down her books, Hermione glanced around. Still no sign of anyone. The room was so familiar to her, but she realised with a slight sense of shame that she had never before taken the time to appreciate any details. She looked around now. She could not deny the intriguing and fascinating nature of the place, and scolded herself for not taking more notice before. Thousands of vials, bottles and tubes lined the high shelves. Jars of exotic and unheard of ingredients were placed tightly but neatly on others, and many strange instruments and paraphernalia filled glass cases and cabinets. She inhaled deeply. The smell which she had breathed in so often hit her suddenly as if for the first time. It was rich, stimulating ... sensuous.

At last, she moved to his desk, hesitating momentarily. But her curiosity got the better of her, and she slid her hand over the smooth dark wood, studying the parchments, quills and bottles of unidentifiable liquids which lay neatly on it. What wonders and mysteries had been pondered and deliberated at this desk? The question filled her with a sudden rush of excitement.

She leant down, perusing a particular bottle carefully.

"Miss Granger."

Gasping with sudden shock, Hermione spun around. He was standing a mere foot behind her.

"What on earth do you think you are doing?" Snape's deep voice was more languid than she might have anticipated, seeing as he had just caught her spying at his own desk.

"Sorry ... sir ... I was a bit early ... and I suppose I was bored ... It won't happen again."

She found herself taking a step backwards and came up against the hard wood of his desk. She could not move. His eyes flicked to hers. She could detect little anger in them, just intense curiosity.

There was an odd silence between them which seemed momentarily to stall the passage of time.

Hermione allowed herself to study the features of the man before her as if for the first time: his eyes, his high cheekbones, his skin which she had always thought sallow, now appeared pale but smooth, almost luminous. Even his hair she noted was not greasy, but in fact so silky that it was imparted with a deep sheen which in the dim lights of the dungeon merely seemed oily. No, she allowed her mind to acknowledge, he was not ugly.

They had been standing staring at each other for a while now. Hermione could feel her heart beating furiously in her breast. Surely he could hear it?

Noises sounded outside the door in the corridor.

"You had better go and sit down." His voice was low and silky.

"Yes."

She did not move. Their eyes had not left each other's.

"Did you not hear me, Miss Granger? Go and sit down." He spoke, but his words lacked any insistence.

Again she did not move, could not move. Neither did he make her. The strange feeling in her stomach grew.

There was more noise from outside the door. Her legs moved by themselves, seemingly aware that she must not be seen in this position. She found he was too close for her to get out.

"Excuse me, Professor Snape." The words came instinctively out, but she did not hear herself saying them.

He did not move.

They heard the door handle being turned.

With that he seemed to come to his senses and took a step back from her. She immediately moved out from behind his desk and hurried to the table where she had put her things. The door opened and students flooded in.

Snape stood quite still for a while, staring at his desk. Hermione busied herself with getting her things out. She was grateful for the sudden rush of people and noise. Ginny came and sat next to her. "You're keen aren't you?" she mocked lightly. Hermione did not answer. "What's wrong with him?" Ginny motioned to Snape who was still standing motionless behind his desk. Hermione shrugged with feigned disinterest. "What a weirdo," Ginny muttered with a snigger. A twinge of annoyance pricked Hermione.

At last, Snape moved, swiftly and suddenly, pacing to the back of the classroom and the storeroom, his robes billowing familiarly out around him. Hermione did not look up as he swept past her. He entered the storeroom and shut the door behind him.

The other students waited for him to return. Several minutes passed. There started to develop a murmuring around the room. A few nervous giggles escaped one or two, but nobody presumed to go and knock on the door to see if he was alright. In similar circumstances one or two years ago, Hermione would not have hesitated, but not today.

After at least five minutes, the storeroom door suddenly burst open and he swept out rapidly. "Cauldrons! Stag sinews! Scarab legs! Baobab bark! Now!"

The students were startled into action and dared not argue with his tone of voice. They hurried to gather the ingredients. All except Hermione.

Her mind was still in such a state of disarray, that she could not muster the physical motivation to move. She remained seated, not entirely sure what she was doing.

Snape had his back to her, busying himself at the board. When he had finished writing on it, he turned and froze on noticing her sitting before him, the only student doing so. At first he did nothing. She did not look at him.

"Miss Granger." His voice had regained the cold belittling tone of previously.

She darted her head up, almost surprised to find him there.

"Yes?" she asked, genuinely bemused.

"I have clearly specified the ingredients for today. Kindly mobilise yourself and get them before the animals they come from become extinct." His drawl was as sarcastic and snide as it had always been.

She fixed him with her eyes. His change of mood to the familiarity of his past did not surprise her. Before, only days before in fact, his words would have ignited her fury, but now she merely found the throb in her belly intensifying. Trying to ignore it, she decided to comply with his demand.

She rose and selected her ingredients immediately, returning to her place. She focused as hard as she could on the lesson and the potion she was brewing. But the strange ache inside would not go away. She glanced up at the Potions Master as he moved around the room, dismissively berating students and deriding their efforts. She could do nothing but study him intently. He was suddenly fascinating her.

Hermione's concentration was compromised, and on adding the bark, her potion bubbled excitedly, turned an extraordinary shade of fuchsia and sent a fountain of pink slime three feet into the air.

It was not supposed to.

Snape hurried over.

"Focus, Miss Granger, focus!"

Hermione and Ginny managed to evade the slime as it descended, but it covered their table and the floor around it. Hermione instinctively and swiftly muttered a cleaning spell, and the area was immediately returned to normal. Snape's wrath was peaked.

"Miss Granger." It was a cold hiss. "Do not presume to take the easy way out. Your inattention and lack of forethought resulted in the slop you produced earlier. Such atrocious errors must not be repeated. You will learn your lesson accordingly." He flicked his wand, and the mess she had created earlier instantly reappeared. With another flick of his wand a bucket and sponge appeared on the floor beneath him. He bent down and picked it up, slamming it down in front of her on the slimy table. She flinched a little at the noise but then raised her head and searched out his eyes. This time, he did not return her stare.

"Perhaps I should stay behind after class and clean it up then, Professor?" She surprised herself with her own bravado. She wasn't entirely sure why she had said it, but was desperate to see how he would react.

Snape's eyes darted to hers, widening with anger and something approaching intrigued alarm. His breathing was rapid. "Clean it now!"

She stared back at him, trying to find some answers in his eyes. For now, there were none. The black orbs had returned to their usual impenetrability. She felt a twist of disappointment and lowered her gaze.

It took Hermione the rest of the lesson to clean up the mess. Snape remained at the back of the class, out of her line of sight.

When she had at last nearly finished she was exhausted. Her clothes were dirty and her hair dishevelled. The other students were dismissed and Hermione lagged behind at the desk as she completed her punishment. She tried to raise anger within her. It would have been so easy before. But none was forthcoming. She cleaned up the mess assiduously, using the task to try to steady her mind.

At last she had finished and stood, dropping the sponge into the bucket. Footsteps sounded behind her. She turned to face him, breathing heavily, her hair curling into her face.

He stood, his head lowered slightly, but his eyes upturned. She saw them flick up her body to her face. Despite the humiliation he had made her endure, she raised herself up tall, her determination to understand these eddying emotions stronger than ever. Had he made her do anything similar in the past, the resentment within would have consumed her. Not this time. Now, she was acutely aware that the curious sensation deep inside her had returned.

Was it anger? No. Passion, intrigue ... but not anger.

"I hope that is satisfactory ... sir." She emphasised her words with the sort of force normally employed by him.

He lowered his gaze. She thought she could almost detect shame in his posture. "Yes. Good," he mumbled tersely.

She did not move. The peculiar clenching of her belly grew stronger.

"Do you wish me to go now?"

Again his eyes darted to her. Her choice of words was deliberate. She held his gaze.

With no warning, he suddenly stepped into her and stood a mere foot away. She gasped in surprise but maintained her stare.

"And *why* ..." his voice snaked icily into her, "... would I wish you to stay ..*Miss Granger?*"

"I don't know, Professor. I thought perhaps you could tell me that."

She saw his adam's apple bob up and down as he swallowed hard. The knot in her belly twisted violently. She looked back to his eyes. They were the definition of infinity.

"You must go *now*." He spoke with a desperate urgency, stressing the last word.

Hermione hesitated.

"Get out." It was low, almost a plea. Still she did not move. She could feel him breathing rapidly before her. His body suddenly tensed and this time he shouted at the top of his voice, "*Get out!*"

Hermione turned and ran, his words a release from herself. She ran through the corridors, up staircases, she knew not where. Her fellow students turned to her in confusion as she hurtled past them. When she had at last reached a deserted corridor, far from anyone else, she slowed and stopped, leaning against the cold stone and closing her eyes, her head falling back.

She could deny it no longer.

She wanted Severus Snape.

And what is more, she was quite certain he wanted her too.

Well, now that she's admitted it ... will things get any easier? Hmm ... this is Severus Snape we're talking about.

Any comments gratefully received, as ever. LL x

Three

Chapter 3 of 34

Hermione tries to make sense of her new feelings. Is the answer at her fingertips?

At supper that night Hermione sat as usual at the Gryffindor table, the conversation around her growing ever more childish and puerile. She pushed the food around her plate with a faint sigh. The staff had been in a meeting and had not yet appeared at high-table.

At last she was able to admit to herself what that strange feeling in the pit of her stomach had been. It was longing. It was emptiness without him.

It was desire.

The professors started to come in and sit for dinner. Hermione waited. His seat remained empty. The ache in her belly intensified. She did not speak a word to her fellow students.

She waited.

Distractedly, she pushed the bowl of dessert away from her and it was cleared away. Still she waited, her eye almost permanently trained discreetly on high-table.

He did not come.

Hermione returned to the Gryffindor Common Room in a foul mood. Ginny tried to chat, to ask her what the matter was. She mumbled something about a headache and took herself off to her room.

Once inside, Hermione shut the door tight. It was raining heavily, and she glanced out over the distant mountains beyond the Forest before closing the shutters. She could not deny the beauty of the place, but it did little to appease the sense of emptiness inside. With silent frustration, she collapsed down onto her bed.

She missed him.

The acknowledgement of her feelings came as a complete shock, but at the same time, deep down, she felt they had been there for an age, ignored, buried, repressed.

Hermione was suddenly and utterly consumed by him.

Surprisingly, she found herself now accepting, almost welcoming the revelation. Her unforeseen but undeniable obsession with Severus Snape seemed the most natural thing in the world. She questioned how she could not have seen it before. Allowing the notion to sink in, the longest breath of relief escaped her.

She had found him.

Snape was one of the few people she considered her intellectual equal. He was insightful, perceptive, highly articulate ... brave.

It was not only his body that now consumed her desire; it was his soul, of that she was certain. She wanted to understand him, wanted to open him. His anger, his cold dismissive attitude towards her suddenly made him more attractive in her eyes. He had seen something in her too, of that she was sure, and she would grab that spark and pull, pull him into her.

Had it always been there, that connection between them? As she was now, adult, experience behind her, she supposed it had. Before, it had been masked in animosity, revulsion even: a compliance with the established view of him. Her childish prejudice had simply accepted what was in fact misperception.

But to the mature, searching mind of a scarred and battle-weary woman, he was now a man of infinite depth and intrigue.

Admittedly, in her first week or so back at Hogwarts, there had seemed little change in either his attitude to her or her perception of him. His reluctance to acknowledge her in any other way other than that which had been most familiar to him struck her as being due to hardened habit or even fear.

But Hermione could not back away now.

It was not going to be easy whatever 'it' may be. The confused, tormented emotions he presented her with were obviously perplexing him as much as her. Whatever she had stirred in him was certainly not something she felt he would readily accept.

Severus Snape was clearly struggling.

But the scales were falling from Hermione's eyes and, as ever, once she had made up her mind about something, she would not let go.

But would he even contemplate exploring these feelings? His own confusion was understandable. After all, she was his student.

Hermione groaned.

Relationships between student and teacher were forbidden. Rightly so. Hermione herself had no objection to that.

But she was nineteen, She had lived so much already. Except for the circumstances of last year, she would no longer be a student. She certainly did not feel like one.

There seemed no future to a relationship founded on illicit, secretive meetings behind closed doors and away from prying eyes. However, she had to admit that the dynamics between her the student and he the teacher were what made his attraction all the greater. They existed together solely within Hogwarts. Hermione's mind did not allow her, did not want, to imagine them beyond the castle walls.

But for now she could not dwell too hard on the problems thrown up, she could think only of wanting him. The realisation of her feelings, although so sudden, swiftly took a tight hold, gripping her very being. It was like a fire that starts as a tiny flame but spreads rapidly to engulf and consume. She knew that the desperate ache in her depths would not go away. And she knew there was only thing which would assuage it.

She lay in the dark and allowed his image to enter her mind. The face, so reviled and mocked in the past, seemed now to possess an austere beauty reflecting the complexity within. She heard his voice in her head, low and dangerous, a ribbon of black silk snaking its way towards her. How could she wait to hear it again? Her back

arched and her hand quested instinctively down over her breasts, over her belly, resting in the dampness between her thighs. She could not stop. Her fingers caressed, coaxed and stroked the needy bud until she came against them, a cry of lonely pleasure sounding gently into the room. At that moment, she saw in her mind two black eyes staring into her very soul.

Hermione awoke early the next day, rising and showering before anyone else. She hurried to breakfast, desperate to see him.

She was rewarded almost instantly. Shortly after she arrived he came and sat next to the Headmistress. His face looked sour and remained resolutely lowered.

Her eyes hardly left his figure all meal. *Look up. Look up.* She ached from the exertion of willing him from afar. It did no good.

His brows were deeply furrowed, but still she saw him so differently to before. His eyes seemed larger, more profound than ever, his cheekbones carved high, giving him an air of elegance that set him apart from the other staff. The lips, albeit thin, were a deep red which contrasted with the pale skin surrounding them. His rich black hair framed all these features in dramatic contrast. At that point, clearly and obviously to Hermione, he was beautiful.

But he did not glance once in her direction. The ache inside threatened to make her sick.

Snape finished his breakfast and got up to leave, sweeping from the hall quickly.

She almost sobbed aloud with disappointment.

She did not have Potions for three days.

Those three days were the most agonisingly painful Hermione could remember. He often missed meals, and on the occasions he was there Hermione had either not managed to sit in a position where she could see him or he did not look once towards her. Still, when she was granted a tantalising glimpse, he seemed distracted, as if concentrating hard to block something out. She guessed what it may be.

The hours and nights ticked slowly by. Her desire, her need, her passion grew by the minute. How could she have been so wrong for so long? But the answer was clear. She had now at last grown into a woman, and a woman of profound depth and knowledge, despite her forced need to conform to the constraints of schoolgirl pretence. She had grown ... she had survived.

So had he. Yet he seemed almost to have wished he hadn't. That awareness made her despair, to ache with grief. It was only now, now that she was at last fully formed, that she could see him for who he truly was: a man, not her tormentor and derider, but a soul: noble, heroic ... yet in anguish still. Here was a man who had experienced the depravities of his own soul for goodness, for nobility ... for love. And yet he still could not rest. She felt almost unworthy.

Hermione spent the next few days thinking of nothing but him, desperately willing the passage of time to carry her closer to him. It only did so teasingly slowly.

The following Monday at two minutes to three, Hermione at last found herself standing outside his classroom. The wave of expectation was overwhelming, and she leant briefly against the wall to steady herself. Then breathing in deeply and drawing herself up, she entered.

She saw him immediately. His back was turned; he was writing on the board. Hermione sat in the middle of the room and tried to apply herself to the start of the lesson.

Snape turned swiftly and glanced around at the students sitting before him. He did not look at her.

As he lectured, walking up and down across the front, her eyes swept over his body as if for the first time. He was taller than she had realised, with long legs. His shoulders were broader too, but his frame slender, elegant and firm. It was strange; she had never looked at him in that way before. His appeal seemed so clear now. Her belly twisted.

As the lesson wore on, Hermione became increasingly frustrated by his inability even to acknowledge her presence. She had raised her hand to answer and ask many questions but had been passed over each time.

They were now working on their potions. It was a simple task, and Hermione could not think of a complex enough question to justify asking him.

He was walking up and down the rows, perusing the students' work. As he passed her, she caught his scent on the air and inhaled deeply. She longed for him to turn back, but his robes billowed past her and his back continued down the aisle. She thought she may cry out in desperation.

Ginny, who was working at the same broad table as her, suddenly swore under her breath and raised her hand for assistance. Hermione saw Snape roll his eyes, but her heart leapt when he turned towards them and came over, round to the back of their table.

He was standing between them.

Hermione felt his presence as if he was electrified. Her senses filled with his rich aroma. His deep black robes hung perilously close to her arm. She wanted to reach out, touch them, but every time she thought she would, he moved slightly and they swayed out of her reach. She struggled to catch her breath, and the molten lead in her belly churned mercilessly. Her heart beat so hard and fast she was sure he could hear it.

"Professor, I just can't seem to get the consistency right. I'm sure I've done everything exactly as you said." Ginny sounded dejected.

Snape sniffed derisively. "Clearly you have not, Miss Weasley. Attention to detail cannot be underestimated." Although scolding and not directed at her, his words were like honey poured around Hermione.

He leaned over the cauldron, placing his right hand on Hermione's side of the desk, next to where her left hand already rested.

His little finger touched hers, innocently, inadvertently.

Hermione drew in a sharp breath. She sensed him tense momentarily.

Neither moved their fingers away.

He continued berating Ginny for her poor preparation of the potion.

Their skin continued to touch. Less than an inch of warm, smooth flesh made contact, but Hermione was suddenly alight, her breathing rapid. She dared not look down, for fear the touch was not real: a figment of her feverish imaginings. But she knew it was not; the tiny point of contact between them was the focus of their beings. Still neither moved.

Hermione raised her finger slightly. Slowly, exquisitely slowly but deliberately, she brought it up, up and over, running it along his finger, until it rested gently on top. She pressed the soft undertip down a little, rubbing it delicately but perceptibly along him.

Snape stopped his volley of criticism for an instant but did not move from his position over the cauldron, stirring it with his left hand, while his right remained firmly on Hermione's desk.

Her finger continued to lie atop his. She could feel it warm and firm beneath. His body burned next to hers, sheathed beneath his voluminous robes. Still, they did not move.

Hermione's belly twisted again. *God, she wanted more.* He did too. She knew it.

There was a sudden crash from behind them. Instinctively, both moved simultaneously to look behind, mutually breaking the sublime contact.

Snape crossed swiftly to the student concerned, a stream of insults emerging from his mouth.

Hermione sat still, staring after him, incapable of anything else.

The lesson ended soon afterwards, and everyone left quickly, including Snape, who mumbled something about a meeting. Hermione watched him go with a mixture of loss and delirium. Her finger was still tingling.

They had not spoken a word to each other or made eye contact all lesson.

Closer and closer. I doubt it will be easy, but well worth it, surely ...

Let me know your thoughts. I do so love them. LL x

Four

Chapter 4 of 34

Things are getting rather more intense.

I am so sorry for the wait for this update. I have had great and rather unfortunate issues in RL which have distracted me from this world recently, but I am back on track now and should be updating regularly.

So ... get ready for the emotional pull ...

The twisting throb in Hermione's depths was now constant.

The incident in the dungeon had fired her desire intensely. Never had she thought such longing possible. His reaction had thrilled her. She now knew her feelings were reciprocated. But exactly how? How far he would want, dare, to take it she was not sure. Would he allow himself to give in to her? To be seduced?

She may be able to influence his body, but his mind was a different matter. And his soul would he ever open that to her? She knew she needed that as much as anything. This extraordinary man, who had been part of her life for so long, suddenly imprinting himself on her mind; it all seemed so clear now. The antagonism which had bubbled within her during her adolescence now seemed merely a prequel to what could be, what could always have been. Yes, he had aggravated her, tormented her. She had responded with aggrieved dismissiveness. But there had always been a passionate connection, albeit a resentful one. The reason they had sparked off each other seemed to her now a case of their similarities: an intellectual tussle which would eventually require resolution. As she had grown into a woman of remarkable fortitude and maturity, it suddenly seemed to her that some convergence of thought or common purpose was inevitable.

Her life after the war felt so empty; it required direction, meaning. Who better to travel with her through the continuing confusion of life than a man of remarkable intellect, who due to his own experiences would not pander to any perceived frailties left by the horrors of war.

And he, so beaten, tortured and desolate. Her mind replayed her own torture under Bellatrix Lestrange. She closed her eyes in remembered agony. The parallels in their lives hit her hard.

Empathy.

As well as her intellectual connection with him, Hermione's nurturing and caring disposition wanted at that moment to open him, tell him how much she understood, how much she wanted to share the torment with him.

She closed her eyes against the thought. He would not tolerate being patronised.

But they needed each other. Of that she was certain. Her body heaved with the realisation. It thrilled and terrified her equally.

But for now, her desire overrode her anxieties and concerns. The relentless tension in her depths pushed the questions to the back of her mind. The giddiness which consumed one in the early days of a revealed passion threatened to overwhelm her. But she was determined to control it, not to allow it to reduce her to the fawning simpers she had witnessed so often in her classmates.

But she had no doubt that she would pursue the emotions which had taken hold. She had never been so convinced that this was not something which should be ignored.

As she sat to supper that night, her view to high-table uninterrupted, her mind burned. He must be there.

After ten agonised minutes, the side door opened and the familiar black billowing robes emerged. His head was down, although she saw his features relaxed, calm even. The ache inside intensified immediately. She dared to hope.

Again, she ate virtually nothing. She knew she was staring openly, but luckily her companions were so engaged in their vapid discussion of who had the best things in Ravenclaw, that they did not notice.

He did not look up. Hermione thought she would pass out from the concentration of willing him to do so.

And then, just when she thought she must give up, his head moved.

Slowly, agonisingly, it came up, although his eyes remained hooded. And then the lids were raised, just as slowly, and his obsidian black eyes lifted to stare directly at her.

Her belly instantly somersaulted with darkest pleasure.

He did not lower his gaze. His eyes scorched her own, and she saw the same glow behind them that she had noticed only once before. She stared back, her breath held, the twisting in her core unbearable.

McGonagall turned to him, asking him something. Hermione saw his mouth move in a brief, terse response, but still his eyes bore into hers. She was exultant.

And then someone got up and stood between them. Hermione felt as if her guts had been pulled from her. She swore almost aloud. The person remained blocking her view for a while, and when at last they moved away, there was an empty chair where he had been.

The sudden withdrawal of the connection between them threw her, and Hermione gripped the table, confused, uncertain what to do.

She must go to him.

Standing, she left the hall, sprinting once outside, round to where she thought he may emerge. And indeed, on turning one corridor, she saw his black figure just before her, walking swiftly. She was propelled towards him but followed at a discreet distance, through corridors, up stairs, up again, to the very top of the castle. He finally reached a door leading outside.

Snape opened the door and walked out. The door led onto the castle battlements at the pinnacle of the highest tower. It was a part of the building that was hardly ever explored, although it provided breath-taking views over the surrounding mountains. She followed through the door and stopped.

He was standing quite still, leaning on the ramparts, his eyes fixed on the horizon, his hair blowing gently in the chill breeze. She studied him curiously for a while. Her nerves sparked, but she knew what she must do. She stepped out, stopping a few feet away. He had not noticed her.

"What do you see when you look out there?"

He spun quickly, clearly surprised by her presence. His eyes opened wider momentarily, then masked over, and his head turned back again to the view. He said nothing.

She came and stood next to him, only one or two feet away, breathing in deeply. "It is beautiful, isn't it? Nourishment for the soul."

He said nothing for a while before finally speaking, his voice icy and clipped. "I would not know."

"Why is that?"

"I no longer have a soul." His voice was empty.

She did not respond immediately, but at length said softly, "I think we both know that isn't true."

He spun angrily towards her again, his words spat out. "Do not presume to lecture me on the truth of my existence. You know so little *.nothing* ... about me."

She was taken aback momentarily, but her desire and need gave her fortitude and she raised herself up and fixed her eyes into his.

"Oh, but you see, Professor Snape ... I do."

He did not look away, but his eyes filled with such burning emotion that she struggled to remain upright.

Then he turned from her again, hissing, "Leave me."

She stood firm, but her mind tormented her. She was so used to complying instantly with what this man demanded of her. No longer.

She spoke evenly. "I don't want to. And I don't believe you want me to either."

He sneered. "Again you presume too much. Do not try to read me, Miss Granger. You will only be disappointed."

"I am prepared for that."

He spun to her. "What do you want? Why are you here? I have nothing for you."

"I do not ask anything of you. Why should your happiness be dependent on what you can give? Have you never thought that perhaps you could be the one to whom happiness is given? You simply have to open to it. I know you can."

"I have seen no evidence for this."

She laughed a little. "It's not a clinical trial!" He sneered. She stepped up to him. "Do not be afraid to be happy. You would not be here at all if you thought there was no hope. You wouldn't have come back to this place; this place that I also find myself in once again. I have seen what you are. Now that it's all over ... I know what you can be."

He moved to look out again, his voice dropping but still clear. "No." His words came with a chilling finality. "I have served my purpose."

She stared in astonishment. "You can't say that. You mustn't say that." Hermione breathed in deeply to draw strength. "If that is the way you feel, then you must find a new purpose."

"I do not want a new purpose. I have been through it all *...all*. I will not repeat one moment of that." His words were stark and desolate. He leaned heavily on the parapet, his back bowed. At that moment, she had never seen anyone so broken.

She struggled with his words, with the sight of him before her, and tried again, fearful of what she should say.

"You must only allow yourself to be guided."

He shook his head, forcing his words out as much to himself as her. "Stop it.*Stop it*. I have nothing left *...nothing* ..." He spun his eyes to hers. "You say I have a soul. If I do then it is empty, it is barren, desolate. It is incapable of holding onto anything ... Nothing can change that now."

"That isn't true. There is always hope."

"Hope ..." He sniffed derisively. "The folly of youth rages more wantonly within you than even I would have anticipated, Miss Granger."

His words seared her, but still she continued. The fact that he was conversing at all was enough to motivate her. His physical presence was so alive and tangible beside her she struggled not to reach out to touch the black robes blowing tantalisingly within her reach.

"No, Professor Snape. I know that there will always be hope ... and ..."

He turned to her. Even in the gloom of dusk his dark eyes were alight. "And what, Miss Granger *..what?*" He was daring her to voice it.

"Love."

The face before her drained of all life. It made her heart freeze. For a time he merely looked at her. Her breathing became painful within the tightness of her chest. At length the low baritone reached her ears. "That word is meaningless to me."

"It wasn't before." She knew she should stop, scared of what he may say, but couldn't.

He shook his head slowly, menacingly. "*Do not speak of that...*"

She knew she should give up, leave him, but she could not, for his sake alone. She spoke once more. "You have done it once. You can do it again."

Snape turned to her, his words now more unequivocal than ever. He spoke with a deep certainty. "I do not want to do it again."

Hermione looked in desperate grief at the man before her. Perhaps, after all, the agony of his life had destroyed him for any future joy or even anticipation. Perhaps indeed she was simply a young idealistic fool. Her youth struck her forcefully, and she hung her head in shame.

But why was he now here? Why had he simply not allowed death to slip him away, away from it all, away from the memories and the thwarted dreams?

Frustration and incomprehension raged through her. She could not, should not give up, but for now, there seemed no way forward. He stood before her closed and barricaded. After all he had been through, could he not muster one more ounce, open a mere inch? Now that she was standing here with him, giving her soul to him, he gave her nothing in return.

She looked in anguish at him, and asked, her voice almost empty with despair, "Will you never allow yourself to love again?"

There was a long pause. Then his voice broke the cold air, so icy it seemed part of the atmosphere around them. "No."

She hung her head, pain and desolation squeezing her heart in a vice-like grip, breathing in hard to steady herself. She had tried: for her sake, for his. The ache inside was burning stronger than ever, but now, she could go no further.

"Then, indeed, Severus ... there is nothing I can do for you."

With that she turned and started the heavy walk away from him. She could no longer feel her heart within her. A deep sob began to well up from her depths, and she struggled not to collapse. But still she walked, leaving him behind.

Then sharp, quick footsteps.

Fingers closed swiftly, hard, around her arm and she was pulled back, suddenly and desperately. He caught her and spun her into him. She landed with a jolt against his chest and the breath was pulled out of her.

His hands came up, claspng her head hard in them, pulling it up to sear her eyes with his momentarily. Then his head descended, his lips crashing into hers, frantically and brutally. He opened her mouth desperately and she parted her lips willingly to his onslaught. Amidst the urgent lust, she noticed him; he tasted like his aroma, only sweeter, more honeyed. She could not prevent a small groan bubbling from her depths. Her body started to melt into him. She pressed every inch of herself along him, feeling his firm muscles, taut and ready. Her hips ground instinctively against him and were rewarded by a desperate hardness, a force seeking her out between his own legs.

His hands still held her head hard, his mouth engulfing hers. His tongue now quested deep into her, as if trying to possess her. She responded with equal ardour, their tongues swirling, darting, mingling. The fire in her belly threatened to engulf her. *Please, please.*

Suddenly an owl swooped noisily, close over their heads. Snape abruptly broke off, his eyes filled with a look of agonised confusion. He took a furtive, unsteady step back, lowered his head and hurried away, leaving her heaving for breath, burning with unrequited lust.

Hermione collapsed slowly down along the rampart, leaning her head against it, unable to stop the gasping sobs tearing their way out of her body.

Keep going, Hermione! No one said it would be easy.

Let me know your thoughts. LL x

Five

Chapter 5 of 34

Someone's running away, but for how long?

Hermione did not know how long she had remained up on the castle battlements. When she finally came to her senses she was freezing, shivering relentlessly, and it took all her remaining strength to stagger back inside. Eventually reaching her room, she quickly lit a fire and felt feeling and warmth slowly return to her icy limbs.

She had cried her emotion out, and now, like her body had been, her mind felt strangely numb.

What now?

The kiss had seared itself onto her soul. Despite his words and the conversation in which she had almost given up on him, she knew now she could not. She would not let him go. She was sure he did not want her to. He could not have kissed her like that and not wanted ... something.

Something.

It seemed so strange; after the intensity of the conversation on the battlements, where they had laid themselves bare for the other, and the kiss which had revealed the deepest needs of them both, she was unsure how to proceed. She could not imagine the next step. The situation had happened so rapidly, had taken them both so much by surprise that she almost expected a return to their familiar institutional roles of student and teacher.

But this was not the end, merely the beginning, but such an extraordinary beginning that she had no way of envisaging the future. Hermione did not feel she could go to his rooms, and was certain he would not come to her, but the anticipation of what lay ahead filled her with urgent lust.

In spite of the cold which had numbed them, her lips still tingled with the memory of his kiss, so violent and desperate, as if he was trying to imprint himself on her, and she on him. As she lay under her covers she felt him again, pressing urgently against her, the hardness between his legs further proof of his need for her. She could not forget that. She would not. Her physical desire for him was filling her mind and body, making her almost shake with need. Her skin was primed, desperate for his touch.

Images sprang to her mind. Hermione closed her eyes tight and pictured him above her, pounding into her over and over, filling her, bursting into her, making her cry out with his violent ardour. She realised her fingers were rubbing frantically over her swollen clit. She did not stop, focusing on the face in her mind, the imagined feel of him inside, and she came violently, crying out into her silent room.

Her orgasm gave her some peace from the agony of what had passed between them, and she at last was able to drift into a troubled slumber.

She woke early, and after getting ready and checking her appearance carefully, she hurried down to breakfast.

He wasn't there. Neither did he appear as the meal wore on. Hermione felt as if she had been punched in the stomach. But her spirits rose as her third lesson approached Potions.

She hurried to the dungeons and sat near the front, trying to appear nonchalant. There was an unbearable, burning ache inside her, and as she closed her eyes, his image came to her mind, his eyes boring into her. Her stomach clenched with pleasure. She could hardly suppress a groan sounding from her.

How could she cope with a whole lesson? She had already decided to stay behind afterwards. She was reluctant to pressure him, but needed to gauge his reaction to the previous night, needed to address the flames of desire which were dictating her world. She craved him, body, mind and soul. It must go further. She knew nothing else.

There was no sign of him; all the students were assembled, waiting. Hermione at last heard the door open and the heavy, rapid tread of authoritative footsteps. Her belly somersaulted once again. She breathed deeply and glanced out of the corner of her eye at the approaching figure.

It was Professor Vector.

Nausea flooded through Hermione. She gripped the side of the table for support, her face flushing red; she struggled to suppress a gag.

No-one else seemed to have even noticed and certainly did not care that their usual teacher was not there.

Vector flicked through a book before asking the students to turn to a page in theirs.

Hermione could stand it no longer. "Where is Professor Snape?" It was blurted out. Vector looked up in surprise.

"Professor Snape had been called away. He will be away all week. Right, remedies for dragon burns. As you can see, this is a highly effective but powerful potion which ..." Her voice droned on, but Hermione had not heard a word after the first two sentences. The nausea which had been brewing threatened to overwhelm her. She was desolate, despairing ... angry. *How dare he?* How dare he deprive her ... deprive himself? She sat for a few minutes longer, but then knew she could stay no more.

Standing swiftly, she excused herself with a mumble and hurried from the room. She ran as fast as she could from the dungeons and out of the castle. She did not want to be anywhere near the place; he was not there.

Hermione did not return all day but simply walked. The initial anger she had felt dispersed and she was left with an aching hollowness.

His absence provoked a claustrophobic frustration within her. She could not bear the thought of him not being there. How could she survive without the knowledge of his presence somewhere within the castle grounds? It would have been bad enough without the events of last night, but now ... She knew that he had left because of that. He had run from it, from her. She leant against a tree and forced back the tears prickling behind her eyes.

It was dark by the time she returned to the castle. Walking into dinner, she sat at the table sullenly, not saying a word to her companions.

"Hermione! Where have you been? We were worried when you left Potions early."

"I'm fine. I've been out, that's all."

"You look like you've been pulled through a hedge backwards. Are you alright?" As their meals arrived, Ginny turned to her in concern.

Hermione nodded briefly, prodding the food on her plate, unable to eat a mouthful. "I went for a walk."

"Gods, Hermione, it must have been some walk. You left the class so suddenly this morning. We couldn't find you anywhere afterwards."

"I felt sick."

"So you went for a walk?" Ginny was confused.

"That's right." Hermione's voice was terse, tetchy.

Ginny leaned into her friend, concerned. "Mione. You haven't been yourself at all recently. What's going on? We haven't had a good chat for ages."

Hermione turned to face Ginny, an impassive look on her face. "I'm fine, thank you, Ginny. Sometimes we all just need some time to ourselves, don't we?" With that she stood suddenly and swept from the hall, leaving her friend dumbfounded and a little offended at the table.

The rest of the week passed torturously for Hermione. She absented herself from the castle as much as possible, going to Hogsmeade, walking in the Forest, anything to take her mind off the crawling passage of time and his absence from the castle. Nothing helped.

She forced herself to go to lessons, although they seemed more tedious and trivial than ever. The hardest of all was Potions. She had had another lesson with Vector, and it had been torture to sit in that room and endure her dreary babble and earnest suggestions for improvements. She could provide no advice for Hermione whose work was impeccable and had been achieved in half the time of the others. The final Potions lesson of the week was on Friday, and Hermione comforted herself with the knowledge that it would be the last time she would have to put up with Vector.

As usual, she sat waiting for the teacher to arrive, and after a while the door opened and she heard footsteps. Hermione breathed in a sigh, then smelt him. Her head spun round. Black robes swept in.

Snape was back early. Her heart leapt into her mouth.

He swept past without a glance in her direction and launched immediately into his introduction to the potion they were to brew that day. Hermione did not hear a word he said, merely stared at him, her breathing heavy and rapid, the ache in her belly suddenly throbbing with need.

He did not look once at her.

Hermione could not take her eyes off him. She was hardly focused on the task, but it was an easy potion and she could have done it in her sleep. But after half an hour of

receiving no acknowledgement of her presence, she could stand it no longer. She must act.

She picked up a ladle, glanced up at him, and allowed it to drop with a loud clang onto the floor. She did not apologise or go after it, simply waited to hear the reprimand that was sure to follow. She got none.

Snape walked swiftly but calmly over to the ladle, picked it up silently and replaced it on her desk without getting close to her or giving her the merest hint of eye-contact. Her breathing quickened. The fire in her belly, now tinged also with anger towards him, flamed uncontrollably.

Still, he resolutely ignored her. She had to do something. She would go mad otherwise.

Calculatingly, she picked up the wrong ingredient, knowing the effect it would have, and deliberately added a large amount to her potion. It promptly exploded, creating a large hole in the cauldron and covering her in red liquid. She looked triumphantly at him. Now, *now*, he must speak to her, look at her ...

Snape looked over at the mess, refusing still to glance up at her, withdrew his wand, and mumbled some words. The cauldron, potion, and Hermione immediately returned to the state they had been in a few minutes before. Snape turned his back and continued to assist other students.

All other eyes in the room turned and looked in amazement at Hermione.

Hermione thought she would pass out. She was furious with him for denying her his attention. She could hardly contain herself from rushing up to him and ... her eyes closed. *She would rush up to him and take his head, pull him down to her in a searing kiss. Reach up to the many buttons on his coat ...*

"Hermione!" Ginny's voice whispered suddenly and insistently in her ear. Hermione turned to her in frustration at being denied her fantasy. "Can you believe that? I've never known Snape not to go mental if something like that happens! He didn't even flinch. Why the hell hasn't he asked you to stay behind?"

Hermione huffed. "I don't know. I suppose I should say something. I'll see him afterwards."

"God! I wouldn't bother if I were you. Let sleeping dogs lie and all that."

The lesson was at last coming to an end. The students tidied away their ingredients and cauldrons and gradually left the room. Snape was busy at his desk, writing swiftly and fluidly as usual. Hermione could only stare at him. She and Ginny were the last in the room. "You go ahead, Ginny. I think I'd better say sorry at least."

Ginny shrugged her shoulders and left, shutting the door behind her.

Still he did not look up. His hand continued to move frantically over the parchment, his brow furrowed in concentration. Hermione started to walk up to him, slowly and deliberately. She came around the back of his desk, stopping a mere foot away. His head remained lowered.

She spoke calmly. "Where have you been?"

He did not answer. She waited.

She repeated, more insistently, "Where have you been?"

After another age he spoke, not pausing in his writing, his voice the usual deep drawl. "I had some business to attend to at the Ministry."

"Did you have to go when you did?"

"It seemed the most appropriate time to do so."

"Did it?"

"Yes."

She paused. The tension between them was heavy and oppressive. Hermione could feel his presence burning beside her.

"I missed you."

At last the hand stopped. She could sense the tightness gripping his body. Leaning down, Hermione slowly placed her hand on top of his, encircling each finger in hers.

Immediately, he snatched his hand away from her hold and jumped up, moving rapidly round to the front of his desk, his back to her. She followed him round, coming to stand before him. He did not turn away, but neither did he look at her.

She stared up at him. His features were tight and anxious; it was not something she was used to seeing on his normally sombre visage. She slowly reached up a hand and delicately cupped it round his face. He twinged but did not flinch away. Her voice came to him, low, soothing, warm.

"Severus."

He closed his eyes, his chest rising and falling increasingly rapidly.

She moved her hand down to his chest and brought her other up to join it. "I am here." She rested her fingers lightly where his top buttons started and breathed out to him, "Let me in."

Her fingers closed around the buttons and slowly started to undo them. She undid one, two, reached for the third.

Suddenly his hands flashed up, grabbing her wrists hard and pulling them off his jacket. Her eyes darted to his in alarm. He was staring intently at her now, his eyes burning into hers. Hermione was startled and gasped with shock. *He must not push her away again.*

He did not push her away.

Still holding her wrists, he turned her suddenly and pushed her hard against his desk, so that she lay back upon it. Snape leaned over her, his eyes roaming over her body. One hand released his hold on her to reach roughly down. Grabbing the hem of her skirt, he pulled it frantically up.

The longing inside Hermione surged, and she could not stop a gasp of surprised needful lust escaping her. Yes.Yes.

Snape spoke not a word nor hardly looked at her. He was swift and desperate and driven. He pulled her underwear down with a grunt of need and ran his hand quickly back up her leg. Despite the rapidity of his movement, it left a trail of fire in its wake. Hermione's head fell back and her mind clouded. She glanced down and saw his hand at his belt and buttons. With a swift movement he released himself from his clothing. He was at last there before her, smooth, rigid and glowing in the candles of the dungeon. Hermione only had a moment to register the sight. He was broader and longer than she would have thought. She inhaled sharply with desire.

His hands came up swiftly again, drawing themselves with sensual but rapid exploration over her naked flesh, up the insides of her thighs until they were at her very core. She sobbed with longing as she felt agile fingers parting her, surprisingly tender amidst the frantic need their bodies conveyed. But then the tenderness was banished as almost instantly he positioned himself and thrust hard and deep, fully into her.

Hermione gasped in with shock and sudden pleasure. Her eyes widened in thrilled surprise and her mouth opened in silent awe. She was jolted up the desk, knocking the parchment he had been writing on to the floor. He was pressed hard against her cervix already. He paused for a moment, the only sound in the room his heavy breathing. Hermione forced her head up to look at where they were joined. She could feel every inch of him within her. Never had she felt so full. Her mouth remained open in blissful astonishment and her eyes came up to meet his. He was staring down at her, a look almost of shock on his face. His brows were furrowed with a mixture of wonder and confusion, and his mouth was slack with pleasure. She squeezed her tight, slick walls around him and his face flinched. He inhaled sharply.

Then his hand came up to her shoulder and he gripped it hard. His other found her hip. With that he started to move. There was nothing gentle or tender about his movements. He plunged into her quickly, desperately, withdrawing almost fully each time, before driving in to the hilt. The knowledge of him filling her, pounding her, was too much for Hermione. She lay back and gave herself over to him. She had never known such deep satisfaction; at this point, she wanted him no other way.

This had been sudden and unprepared, but never had pleasure been so swiftly delivered; foreplay had been ongoing since that first moment in the hallway. Hermione's body was so needy, so primed for him that the coiling of her body towards release soon took hold. She focused on his hard flesh coursing through her, stroking along that sensitive place inside, and she came suddenly and completely, a faint cry of wonder breaking from her lips.

It did not take long for him to follow her. The sight of the woman beneath him, the feel of her flesh pulsing around him, was all it took. After only a few more frantic thrusts he came desperately. Hermione felt him swell and release within her. He allowed himself a slight exhaled moan of pleasure, and looking up, she saw his eyes roll back in his head, then close in ecstasy. Apart from that, he had remained silent.

He collapsed on top of her, his heavy breathing pressing her hard into his desk. She wanted to reach up, clasp him to her, but it somehow did not seem right.

After a while of lying atop her, he rose suddenly, and without another glance at her pulled out quickly. The loss of him from within pierced her heart, but she did not show it, remaining quite still.

He quickly tidied himself, adjusting his clothing. He stood momentarily, staring out into the room, before hissing down to her, "Go!"

She expected no more, and quickly pulling up her underwear and rearranging her skirt, she hurried from the room.

Never had a partner spoken so dismissively to her or treated her with such little respect after sex.

But as Hermione Granger ran through the corridors of Hogwarts School, she did not care less.

She was ecstatic.

Well, it was never going to be easy, was it? Still, it's only the beginning. Any thoughts appreciatively received. LL x

Six

Chapter 6 of 34

Methinks it is time for Hermione to even things up a little.

Despite the sudden and extraordinary nature of their coupling, Hermione spent the next few days replaying the moment between them endlessly: his hands gripping her, forcing her back on the desk, plunging into her, his face as he came so desperately. No matter where she was in the castle, she was unable to shake the image from her mind, not that she wanted to, and found herself in the common room, in the library, at a Quidditch match, pretending to be busy, but with her breath growing ragged and her belly clenching with familiar agonised lust.

She had wondered what she should now do. At times she found herself perilously close to going to the dungeons, knocking on his door, even entering his classroom and searching ever more into his private world. But she resisted. His taking of her had sated a deep need and longing at that moment, a need that Hermione was only too happy to give in to. It was a chink, a crack in the cage he had built for himself. For him to allow himself to be truly free would take much more from both of them. Hermione knew this, but was reassured by her firm belief that their journey was only just beginning; they both still burned for each other. She revelled in the tension, knowing that when they did see each other again, the anticipated pleasure would be heightened.

As Hermione lay in bed each night, her body drifting into semi-conscious fantasies of her teacher, she contemplated his mystery, his complexity. She must provide no less. Although she had no intention of shying away from him, or denying him her body, she believed he would benefit from some resistance.

Hermione deliberately avoided looking at him at meal times, although it was agony for her to do so. She could feel his eyes burning down onto her from high table, knew he was willing her to look at him, as she had done to him so often before. But she resisted, a small smirk playing around her mouth. She wondered how he was enjoying a taste of his own medicine. She knew his torment would simply serve to fuel his desire and she delighted in her power.

At last Monday came, and with it another Potions class. Hermione waited in her room. The start of the lesson came and went. Still she waited. Half an hour late, she started to walk slowly down to the dungeons.

Without knocking, she opened the door to his room suddenly and stepped in. Snape was lecturing the class. He tensed momentarily, but without looking at her continued his discourse. Hermione noticed a slight catch in his voice. She saw that Ginny had saved a seat next to her near the front and walked purposefully toward it. At any other time, Snape would already have let loose with a tirade of criticism and denigration. Today, he had not even glanced in her direction.

But Hermione could tell he was struggling to contain himself. His cheekbones had acquired a faint flush, and his words were increasingly hesitant and distracted. Still, he carried on as best he could.

"If one should find oneself in the unfortunate position of having been hexed simultaneously by two Dark Wizards or Witches, the results can be far worse than a mere summation of the two curses. As such, it is prudent to have at hand this particular potion which I have been trying to illuminate your feeble minds on today. The ingredients ... are rare and ... often found only in ... *Miss Granger, can you explain why you find yourself forty minutes late for my lesson?!*

She knew he would not be able to last long. But still, his sudden outburst startled her, and she darted her head up to his. Their eyes locked. His were more immeasurable than ever, but Hermione could see his desire clearly in them. She knew it was mirrored in her own. As they stared at each other, her belly twisted its need and she felt her inner thighs dampening.

Trying to focus, she stuttered out, "I ... was in the library ... I must have lost track of time ..."

"*And ...?*" He spat the word towards her.

She knew what he needed to hear. She considered denying him, but looking into his burning eyes, she saw not only lust, but pain. She had clearly tormented him with her deliberate tardiness.

As clearly and meaningfully as she could, she spoke. "I am sorry ... Professor Snape."

He was silent for a moment, simply looking at her. But after a while his features softened, and she noticed his body visibly relax.

The other students started mumbling, glancing round at Hermione.

"Silence!" The voice had returned to its deep dictatorial throb. Hermione smiled to herself, but glanced at the clock. She had only forty five minutes until the end of the lesson. She rubbed her legs together, her eyes closing in anticipation.

Snape hardly seemed to look at her once for the rest of the lesson, and she tried her hardest to keep her eyes on her work. However, she knew that when she wasn't glancing across at him, his eyes were boring into her body, and vice versa. The energy flowing between them was undeniable. Hermione wondered even if it would manifest itself as inadvertent magic.

When it had come time for them to demonstrate their potions, he had merely indicated her brusquely with his hand and she had obliged, with predictably perfect results. Snape had sniffed in, before moving onto the next student. She smirked at his reaction. *Some things would never change.* Still, she noticed that now it merely fuelled her increasingly desperate need.

At last the end of the lesson came. Again, going against her needs, she decided to tantalize him and, picking up her books, headed for the door. She had nearly reached it and feared he may actually let her go, when he spoke.

"Miss Granger." His voice was cold and insistent, but merely reinforced her desire for him.

"I'll see you later," she whispered to Ginny.

"Good luck," mouthed her friend, leaving her alone with her Potions Master.

Hermione shut the door and started the long, slow walk back towards him. He was standing in front of his board, having just erased the words scrawled across it, and had turned to face her.

"Yes ... *sir?*"

"Why did you not feel the need to come to my lesson on time today?"

She could hear that she had offended him by her extreme tardiness. The time for games was over. She spoke truthfully.

"Because I do not feel I belong here anymore."

His features froze. He looked increasingly hurt. "Explain yourself."

She continued her slow walk towards him. "I mean, Professor, that I no longer feel I have anything to learn ... I am tired of being a schoolgirl ... tired of being treated like one ... You cannot be a pupil when ..."

He looked across at her, his eyes aflame. *Go on.*"

She paused, then spoke, plain and clear. "You cannot be a pupil when you find your teachers have more to learn from you, than you from them."

She had stopped in front of him. He held her gaze impassively, but his chest rose and fell rapidly. Hermione's belly clenched uncontrollably with yearning, but she forced herself to hold back.

They stood a few feet apart for the longest while, simply staring at each other. Then he took a step towards her and she saw in his eyes a glow of undiluted need. His voice came to her, thick with lust, but still as smooth and silky as ever.

"*Teach me.*"

It was her undoing.

Not removing her eyes from his, Hermione lifted her hands to her tie, undoing it and letting it fall to the ground. Her fingers rose again to the buttons of her shirt, and she undid each one, slowly, deliberately. Snape's eyes watched her every move, but he did not move forward an inch. She reached the last button and pulled her shirt from her shoulders. It too fluttered to the stone floor. Standing before him in her bra, she at last allowed her hands to reach behind and undo the clasp. Slowly, she pulled the satin material off her breasts, revealing them full and ripe in the cool air. He could not take his eyes from her body.

They both stood, his gaze fixed on her heaving chest as it rose and fell rapidly before him. He was waiting for her.

Hermione took a step forward so that their bodies nearly touched. She gradually brought her hands up to cup his face and, searing his eyes with hers, gently pulled his head down to her. Their lips touched: warm, gentle, exquisite. It was so tender compared to the last time that Hermione could not prevent releasing a soft moan into his mouth. He responded by moving his lips against hers, opening her mouth. She immediately let her tongue flit out and tentatively quest into him. He tasted even more of honey than she remembered.

She felt for his tongue and licked, flickered around it. His lips were moving more urgently now, but still the kiss was gentle. Hermione gripped her fingers in his hair, pulling him deeper into her. They remained fused in this way, time passing them by, entirely focused on the pleasure their mouths, lips and tongues were drawing from each other. But at last her need grew too much, and with a vast effort she moved back, her lips breaking from his. His eyes looked confused for a moment, but she merely smiled gently. Her hands were still clasped to his head, and she pulled, bringing it down. Tenderly, but surely, she brought it to rest at her breast.

With a brief look of agonised bliss at the sight before him, his mouth opened and he latched onto the nipple. A dart of pleasure shot through Hermione. Snape's lips closed around the taut bud and he sucked hungrily. His tongue flicked over the very tip as his mouth continued to pull it hard within. A soft gasp of delicious pleasure escaped Hermione into the cool silent air of the dungeon as her head fell back uselessly.

Her professor's hands came up, one to each breast, and his agile fingers kneaded and plied the tender flesh while his tongue continued to draw the nipple in his mouth out to a peak of sublime sensation. Hermione dragged her gaze down to look at the smooth black head before her. He was entirely absorbed in his task, and she felt the tight pink bud pulsing with spark upon spark of pleasure. It was nearly impossible to maintain her silence, but the atmosphere of the room was charged with a potent headiness she had no wish to break. Occasionally, she could not prevent a small moan of ecstasy escaping her lips, joining the faint sound of his contented suckling, teasing the silence.

The neglected point of Hermione's other breast cried out, raw and taut for attention, and no sooner had she become aware of this than he abandoned the sated one to the cool air and moved his attention to the other. It had been so primed, so ready for his moist touch, that at the first contact of his tongue, Hermione jerked up into his mouth, a bolt of focused bliss shooting through her. Again, a suppressed groan floated up into the heavy air between them.

He remained fixed to her hardened peak for an age: twirling, laving, sucking it deep into his hot mouth. Only when he was sure he had given it as much attention as its twin, did he at last pull himself contentedly away, releasing the nipple from his mouth with a satisfied pop. He rested his head momentarily on her soft, heaving breast, her heartbeat resounding in his ear, her hands warm on his scalp.

Then his hands came up to grasp her hips, and with surprisingly strong arms he lifted her swiftly but smoothly the short distance onto his desk.

Hermione's mind was so clouded with lust that she could not anticipate what was to come but became aware of his mouth once more on her burning flesh, hot kisses planted firmly on her abdomen, moving down, ever down, to the place she craved him above all others. His left hand came up to her chest, and he pressed her down to lie back on his desk, her hips placed just near the edge. She felt his hands tugging down her skirt and underwear.

Snape's lips and tongue moved ever downwards towards her very centre: the swollen kernel of flesh in such need of his touch. Hermione pulled her hand up to her mouth and bit down hard on the plump join of her thumb to stifle the moan threatening to tear its way from her. He was nearly there. His fingers moved first over her, then she felt his breath tickling as it too passed over. Then at last, at last she felt something parting her sodden folds. Again, she jolted up to him, but he moved back, waiting for the wave of anticipated ecstasy to pass. She calmed and waited, her body heaving inwardly.

Then she felt it: firm, focused wetness, soft and gentle at first, then ever more urgent, tasting, probing, questing along her. His tongue darted, flicked, teased her womanhood, then suddenly his mouth pressed in hard to her, pulling, sucking, licking her essence out of her. She could take no more. The groan which had previously been stifled was finally rent from her, and her hand came down to his head, pushing him hard into her. He responded with renewed vigour. She felt a finger pushed up into her, stroking and exploring her velvet walls. Then another joined it, rubbing against that delicious spot inside.

Hermione's mewls and moans could no longer be contained and served only to increase his fervour. His tongue laved hard along her now, sucking in her continuous pleasure with each pass but never quite reaching the engorged bud at the top. Hermione could hear the blood pulsing furiously around her head. So close, *so close*. Her belly was filled with molten lead, churning and pulsing its agony out to her. A weight seemed to press down on her chest, preventing air from filling her lungs, but still her body waited, primed, ready for the final drop.

And then his tongue swept up, and his lips followed, enclosing around her ripe, expectant clit at last. Hermione froze, paralysed as every muscle in her body clenched. He sucked hard, and at that moment she fell, plummeting down into ecstasy. A cry of complete rapture was pulled from her depths and her limbs twitched and spasmed as wave upon wave of pleasure coursed through her.

Snape remained at her sex, drinking in her fulfilment until there was no more and the last shudder of delight had left her body. Hermione could do nothing but let her head fall back, her mind blurred in a hazy delirium, and breathe his name out in fulfilment. "*Severus.*"

She lay atop his desk, the minutes ticking by, her body panting, at last able to draw in enough oxygen. When her senses had finally recovered enough to focus, she blearily opened her eyes and raised her head heavily to glance around her.

The room was empty. He had gone.

Slowly, slowly ... this man was never going to be predictable. Hermione would have it no other way. Reviews greatly appreciated and pondered on. LL x

Seven

Chapter 7 of 34

Now that things are out in the open, it's about time things were explored a little more evenly ...

Hermione continued to lie on the hard surface of the table in her Potions Master's deserted room, her body heavy and limp with the after-effects of the pleasure which had just flowed through it. At first her mind allowed her no coherent thought, but as it slowly started to flicker back into consciousness she found it besieged by conflicting messages.

His acquiescence to her desire and skill at delivering her such rapture thrilled her and filled her with the deepest satisfaction. But this was tempered by the fact that he had once again run from her. Their intimacy had been the polar opposite of last time, where he had taken for himself. Now, he had denied himself his own release. She recognized his offering to her and could not ignore how sublimely he had given it, but he seemed scared, shamed by what had happened.

Hermione knew he would want more, knew she would too, but his abjuration of what they shared troubled her. She needed more of him: physically, mentally, emotionally. Her pleasure had been exquisite tonight, and yet still she had missed feeling him where she most needed him: deep inside, filling her body and soul. Their first coupling had been so frantic and brutal. Although she had delighted in it and had felt triumphant in her ability to destroy his self-control, she needed to share the deep connection she knew they had, to allow it to be manifested in mutual pleasure.

And she wanted to talk to him; to tell him she understood; tell him she realised now how profoundly she needed him, longed for him, knew he needed her equally.

She wanted him to talk to her.

Hermione knew that would be harder to achieve than harnessing his lust and desire.

But still the thought of them sharing more furtive glances, touches and forbidden moments sent an immediate quiver of delight shivering through her. The thrill of their illicit lust, the tension and dynamics in their institutional relationship, was so delicious in itself she thought she could survive on it alone.

As much as her mind ached with the thought of trying to understand him, her body could not wait for more desperate intimacy, more pleasure.

At last she raised herself from the desk and stood up. Her knickers lay on the floor beneath her feet, her shirt, tie and bra not far from them. She bent down slowly to retrieve them, awaiting the sense of shame she was sure would engulf her. It did not. As Hermione picked up her underwear from the floor of the Potions classroom, a place in which she had spent so many hours since her childhood, she felt no shame whatsoever.

Hermione dressed leisurely, running her hands over her breasts, remembering his mouth on them. Her body tingled again. She could not deny it further satisfaction for long. It was the start of the week; there were many more lessons to come. A slight smile graced her lips.

Once she had dressed, Hermione reluctantly left the room, looking back into it as she shut the door.

He was not at lunch. She was not surprised. She wondered what was going through his own mind, but knew he did it partially to torment her. She had done it to him. It served only to fan the flames of constant desire within her.

Snape remained away from the dining room all day and the next.

His absence started to rile her. On Monday and Tuesday nights she had made her excuses and left the Common Room early, retreating to her room where she immediately flung herself onto her bed and reached desperately between her legs, her mind filled with the memory of his tongue on that same ripe bud. She had come rapidly with a cry of remembered bliss and had then spent the nights curled tightly in her lonely bed, imagining him beside her, around her, within her.

Wednesday at last brought another Potions class. She toyed with the idea of making him wait again as he had denied her his presence at mealtimes. But her need to see him prevented her. and that afternoon she at last found herself outside his classroom, her breathing rapid, her belly clenched in anticipation.

Hermione entered with Ginny, her eyes immediately falling on him. He was at his desk, writing as usual, not looking up. She spoke loudly to her friend, alerting him to her presence. His head remained resolutely lowered.

Hermione sat, anger welling up within her. She had resisted. She had waited. It was long enough; she needed her reward now. Her eyes bore into him.

Look up, you bastard.

He did not.

The lesson began. His low silken drawl may as well have been directed straight at her clit, so sodden with desire did it make her. Why she had not noticed his voice before was beyond her. To her ears now, it was the most erotic sound she had ever heard. Still he avoided eye-contact. She feared she would go mad.

They started working on their potions. Luckily, it was a concoction Hermione had made many times before or else she would have been struggling to fulfil the task; she had not listened to a word of his instruction, only allowed his voice to wash over her.

As Snape moved around the room, occasionally sweeping rapidly past her, tantalising her with his scent, she knew she must act. Thinking about how he had left her the last two times, thinking about how their encounters had been so one-sided, her mind was suddenly set.

She reached for a parchment, tore a small section off the corner and, turning away from Ginny, wrote on it:

I want you inside me. I want you to make me come, screaming your name. I want you buried in me, feeling me coming around you, squeezing your pleasure out of you. I want to feel you come undone within me, filling me. I want you now.

Hermione folded the piece of parchment flat and bided her time.

She knew he would not acknowledge her however many times she thrust her hand high into the air. When Ginny wasn't looking she surreptitiously slipped a modicum of badger spleen into her potion, knowing it would not spoil it but confuse Ginny enough to seek advice.

Duly, Ginny's potion became thick and turned a strange shade of green. Her friend frowned in confusion, staring blankly at her textbook. Then, emitting a deep sigh, she reluctantly raised her hand in the air.

"Professor Snape. I don't know what's gone wrong here. I know I've put everything in exactly as it says. But I think you need to see this."

Snape's face was set straight, but he did not show the annoyance he normally exhibited on these occasions. Hermione suspected he knew the reason why Miss Weasley's potion wasn't behaving as it should.

He swept over to them and Hermione's heart started pounding furiously within her. As before when Ginny had needed assistance, he came and stood between them around the back of the desk. Hermione gripped the table with her right hand to prevent the overwhelming longing inside from engulfing her.

His aroma was intensely powerful and his robes swayed next to her hypnotically. Their teacher leaned over Ginny's cauldron, muttering about incompetence and lack of attention.

Hermione held the parchment under the fingertips of her left hand. Slowly and unobtrusively, she pushed it along the table towards his hand which rested on the table so close to her. Her professor continued his verbal humiliation of her friend, but she registered none of it. When the corner of the parchment made contact with his fingers, he paused in his tirade for a moment before swiftly resuming it.

Hermione looked down at his hand, the parchment resting next to it. She could hardly breathe.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, his fingers moved over it and he enclosed it in his hand, finally clenching his fist tight around it. Then suddenly he drew himself up, waved his wand over Ginny's cauldron, and hurried away, mumbling, "There, that should suffice. Proceed."

Ginny looked stunned. She glanced into her cauldron. The potion was back to normal. For the life of her, she could not understand why the Potions Master had just spent two minutes insulting and haranguing her, only to suddenly and instantly restore her work to its original state without another thought.

Turning to Hermione, Ginny twisted her face in confusion. "What the hell ...?"

Hermione smiled benignly and shrugged.

Her eyes then turned immediately to Severus Snape.

He had returned to his desk and, pulling the chair out, sat down. For a moment he did nothing, simply stared out at the room, his eyes exhibiting no discernible emotion. Then she saw his hands move together on the table, manipulating something held in them. His eyes at last moved down to the object held in his fingers.

Hermione forgot to breathe. Her eyes were trained on his face, gauging his reaction.

Snape gave little away, but Hermione was so absorbed in every nuance of the man that she noticed the slight flush tinging the cheeks and the chest rising and falling more rapidly than before.

After a moment, his right hand encircled the thing he had been studying into his fist and moved it to his pocket.

He did not look at her. He did not get up. Professor Snape sat at his desk until the end of the lesson, ignoring the needy students before him. Hands which had remained raised for several minutes eventually gave up. The resulting potions were dreadful.

When it was time to dismiss the class he at last roused himself and glanced distractedly into the cauldrons of his students. Moving to stand at the front, he spun to face them.

"Failed. All of you." His wand flicked briefly before him. Their cauldrons, potions and all evidence of their hard work vanished. "Get out."

The students looked at each other in confusion and annoyance, but they knew better than to argue with Snape. They started to leave.

Hermione hung back. He had returned to his desk and remained there, head down, writing once again. She burned with longing and struggled to breathe, but she would play it his way. She would be patient; her action would eventually be acknowledged.

She turned to leave, the last student to do so, following behind a Ravenclaw boy. She could hardly drag her feet away from him, but forced herself towards the door. *Come on. Come on.* How long would it take?

Her hand was at the door handle, holding it wide for her to exit. She moved to pass through it.

"Miss Granger."

She stopped. Her eyes closed. She could not prevent a smile of relief breaking across her face.

Slowly, she turned. He had stood and moved away from his desk. His face was calm, relaxed. In his right hand he held her scrap of parchment.

Hermione walked assuredly towards him, stopping within a foot. He was breathing heavily. Her insides twisted with familiar agony.

Snape remained upright, but his black eyes looked down at her from above and he drawled, low and smooth, "Passing notes in class is strictly forbidden, Miss Granger."

Biting her lip coquettishly, she turned her face up to him. "I'm sorry, Professor Snape. What are you going to do about it?"

He raised his eyes to look beyond her, and she thought she could detect the merest hint of a smile play around his mouth. He lowered his gaze to hers once more. Hermione waited, wondering how things would proceed this time. She had made her feelings abundantly clear. But still she was not sure if he would respect them.

They seemed to stand, merely staring at each other, for the longest time. Then, at last, he reached down and with the softest touch, took her hand in his.

Turning, pulling her gently with him, he led her behind the board, to a door she had strangely never noticed before. Her blood coursed fast around her veins, making her light-headed with need.

He opened the door and led her through.

Hermione found herself in a small sitting room. It was surprisingly cosy and well-appointed, but she had little time to take in the details as he continued to pull her towards another door on the far side. They passed through it into another room in which stood a wardrobe, chest of drawers, chair and bed. Hermione allowed herself a slight inner laugh at the extraordinary nature of the moment. She was in Professor Snape's bedroom. Again, the room was not large, but welcoming, warm, with rich furnishings and ancient paintings on the walls. She glanced at his bed. It was not large: a single bed. His solitude over the years hit home.

Hermione looked across at him. Now they were standing here together he looked shamed, nervous. It was such an unfamiliar thing to behold in him that her heart swelled and she moved rapidly towards him, her arms coming up around his back and clasping him to her. Her head descended to his chest and she breathed him in, hearing his heart beating steadily within.

His arms slowly, hesitantly enclosed around her and he gradually held her so tight she could scarcely breathe. She did not mind. At length she raised her head to look at him, fixing his eyes with hers. She spoke, openly and honestly. "I meant every word."

Slowly, almost indiscernibly, his head moved down, until at last his mouth hovered over hers. She could feel his honeyed breath warming her lips and longed for him to close the remaining distance between them.

He leaned ever more downwards and at last she felt his warm, firm lips, surprisingly full on hers, moving, parting, questing inside. She immediately acquiesced and opened to him, allowing his tongue to slip inside and taste around her mouth. She met it with her own and increased the urgency between them, twirling and caressing him. Her hands reached up to his buttons as she had imagined doing so often, and at last he allowed her to continue. She undid them slowly but surely, working her way down the long front of his coat.

At the same time his own hands came up to her tie, unknitting it and pulling it from her collar. Then he moved to her shirt, mimicking her actions with the buttons. They worked in perfect harmony, each divesting the other of clothing at an even pace. She had finally undone all his buttons and reached up to push his coat from his shoulders. It fell to the floor. Beneath she found a crisp white shirt with luckily not nearly so many fastenings. She made light work of it and when at last it parted, she could not prevent a gasp sounding from her at the sight of his pale torso finally revealed to her. He stopped his own ministrations for a while, and she felt him, hot and desperate beneath her fingers, breathing rapidly. He tensed slightly. She ran her hands tentatively at first under the open shirt, her fingertips grazing his burning flesh. Hermione looked up at him. His eyes were alight, but she could detect an anxiety within them, as if he was worried he would disappoint. She held his gaze and smiled tenderly, then raising her hands, she pushed his shirt back so that it rested just on his shoulders, and slowly lowered her head to his body.

At the first touch of her lips he jerked. She pulled back momentarily, allowing him to adjust. He had been so long without tenderness, without gentle contact, that the agonised pleasure she was imparting to him now was almost unbearable. She knew it and waited. Then when she sensed him relax, she once again lowered her head, planting delicate, warm, wet kisses along his flesh. This time his muscles remained slack but his breathing became increasingly rapid and heavy.

As she moved over his pale skin, Hermione noted the many scars and abrasions which covered it. She soothed and kissed each one, causing slight moans to be drawn out of him. If she had been looking up, she would have seen him gazing down at her in sheer wonder.

At length she drew her hands up and pushed his shirt fully off him, letting it flutter to the floor. His body was slender as she had imagined, yet firm and rigid, his lean muscles taut and sinewy under the surface. To Hermione, he was perfect.

She moved up again to his mouth, wanting to feel his tongue in her once more. He obliged, opening her mouth with renewed vigour and plundering her wet, velvety depths. He tugged increasingly urgently at her clothes. Her shirt fell to the floor and his hands came up to swiftly undo her bra. She helped by wriggling out of it. Once naked on top, they pressed themselves into each other, their hot flesh almost melting the others.

Then all Hermione's awareness moved to her hips and the ardent throb which pulsed unremittently. She pushed in hard to meet him and was met with a rock-hard resistance. He groaned loudly into her mouth. Her belly clenched, and she needed him suddenly and desperately. Her hands came down to his belt and she fumbled to undo the clasps quickly. He reached down to help her, and quickly his trousers and underwear fell to the ground and he was there before her, rigid, engorged, seeking her out. She gazed down at him. She had felt him within her, glanced at him before, but to have him now so real and vital in front of her filled her with the deepest longing.

She found herself instinctively starting to bend at the knee, to be nearer him ... but his hands held her up *Not now*. She acknowledged that. For now, they both needed a deeper fulfilment. He had not forgotten what she had written in her note.

He reached around to undo her skirt and, with help from her, she was soon completely naked. Swiftly, he removed his remaining clothes, and they stood before each other, exposed and open.

They moved for the other at exactly the same time, kissing, caressing, hands, lips, tongues questing over each other's bodies. He pushed her gently backwards until they reached the bed and lowered her to it.

His mouth continued to move over her flesh, pausing at her nipples, taking them deep into him as he had before. The pleasure coursed through her and she arched up to meet his lips and tongue, a moan sounding into the room. He became ever more desperate and moved down to the apex of her thighs. His long, nimble fingers parted her folds, finding her slick with anticipation. She felt two, maybe more thrust into her, probing deep and hard within. She pushed down onto them, crying out her delight. His mouth descended to her. She jolted up to it, a bolt of electric delight shooting through her. Her hand came down and twisted in his hair. He groaned against her, increasing her pleasure yet more and merely laved ever more ardently at her.

His firm, hot tongue moved ever upwards. Her swollen bud of nerves craved his touch, but equally she knew what she needed above all else. He licked so close to it she thought she would pass out. His agile tongue encircled, enticed, teased her clit until she was sure she would explode. But just as she thought she would fall, he moved away. Hermione gazed down bleakly.

He was kneeling before her. She saw him jutting out, so long and magnificent, the head purple with expectation. Hermione threw her head back and bucked towards him, thrusting her hips up for him, unable to maintain her silence.

"Please ... *please*, Severus ... god, you know what I want, what you want ... don't deny me anymore, or yourself ... take me ... I give myself to you .*take my pleasure* ... take your own ... god ... *now* ... *now* ... *fuck!*"

With that word, so extraordinary coming from her, his features set in an expression of complete wondrous abandonment. He settled himself, grabbed her hips, pulling her roughly towards him. Then positioning himself, he thrust into her. Her eyes rolled back in her head and a cry of sheer rapture was pulled from her. He looked down, seeing her impaled on him, and allowed a hiss of equal pleasure to force its way out of him. Then he turned his eyes back up to hers, and they locked. Her mouth hung open in deepest satisfaction. She could feel every inch of him inside her, full and throbbing. She needed as much of him as she could get.

"*Move ... move inside me ... hard ... do it ...do it now!*"

Again her words were too much and he could only comply. He started to pull out, then plunge back in: deep, long strokes which flamed her agonised walls. She was so hot, so tight, his mind blurred with ecstasy. She squeezed him hard as he pounded along her. Each thrust caught her already electric, primed clit and she felt her muscles shifting, moving towards that ultimate disintegration. He gripped her hips ever more tightly. She knew he would bruise her, but did not care. Snape was moving desperately along her now, jolting her up the bed with each drive forward.

Hermione was ready. She glanced up at him, her breathing ragged, uneven, her eyes widening in anticipation as her muscles clenched. He locked eyes with her and Hermione felt him tense and swell within her. He spoke suddenly and unexpectedly.

"Come! *Come for me now!* Let me feel you!" His words were poured down in sublime pleading as he caught her clit one final time.

Her mouth dropped open and she came, plunging over the edge. A light seemed to flash behind her eyes, and her body melted in wave upon wave of ecstasy. She spasmed uncontrollably around him buried deep within her, pulsing around his iron shaft, his name torn from her lips. "Severus! God, oh god! *Yes!*" With that he was lost. He convulsed into her: long hot bursts of his pleasure shooting up into her, over and over. His head fell back and he let out a groan of unspeakable rapture.

When at last their pleasure had subsided, he leaned over her, his hands on either side of her head. She was smiling up at him, her eyes dancing, her face glowing. He had never seen anything so beautiful. Reaching down, he captured her mouth in his, ardently but tenderly. She brought her hands round his back, pulling his heavy weight down onto her. He had not wanted to crush her, but she seemed to need it. Snape let his body sink firmly down onto hers, careful to remain deeply buried within her.

They spoke not a word, but lay for what seemed like hours, breathing each other in, their bodies melting together, indistinguishable.

Later they moved to relieve the cramp which had started to creep into their muscles. He had softened, but when he finally slipped out of her, her features flinched in momentary despair. Immediately, he moved her onto her side and slid behind her, spooning his long limbs and torso tightly into her, planting a gentle kiss in her unruly damp hair. They closed their eyes and fell swiftly into a long and dreamless slumber.

As you may have gathered, this is an erotic story, exploring the development of a relationship through sex. There is plenty of plot, dialogue and character exploration to come, but also much more erotica. Let me know your thoughts so far. I love hearing from you.

LL x

Eight

Chapter 8 of 34

And when they awake ...?

Hermione woke after what felt like a few hours. She was completely relaxed. The man lying pressed against her on the small bed was still there; she could feel every inch of him along her body. His breathing was heavy and regular, his chest rising and falling strongly against her back. He was still asleep.

Hermione smiled to herself and, ensuring she did not move, allowed her eyes to look around the room. It was dark now, but the dying embers of the fire cast a faint warm glow around the small chamber. It was not large and contained only a little, albeit comfortable and surprisingly opulent, furniture, but nearly every inch of available wall space was covered with books and vials and instruments. Hermione would enjoy examining them at some point, but at this moment she could not imagine ever leaving the position she was in, pressed tight against the man still lying behind her.

She wondered what the time was. They may well have missed supper; her stomach was feeling annoyingly empty.

Severus inhaled suddenly and deeply behind her. She pressed more tightly into him, but allowed her mind a flicker of concern about how he would react when he awoke.

He hardly moved, but she could tell by the change in his breathing and tension in his muscles that he was awake. She became slightly fearful.

Then he spoke, just one word, but low and smooth as ever, an immediate balm of honey soothing her anxieties. "Hello."

She smiled warmly, her eyes shutting in relief, and replied softly, "Hello."

There was a contented silence for a while, and then his silken voice came gently to her ear again, querying in wonder, "Are you real?"

She smiled softly and paused before answering. "Only as real as you."

More silence. His hand was resting tenderly on her hip. She queried gently, "Is this as sudden as it seems?"

He took a while to answer. "No."

"In that case, you did a good job of hiding it," she smirked.

"So did you," he drawled sardonically.

Hermione smiled a little more broadly. "So when ...?"

Severus drew in a deep breath. "Sometime during the last year."

"But I hardly saw you then."

"I knew full well what you were ... going through."

"But ..." She had so much to ask, she hardly knew what to say next. But he then leaned his head to her again and stroked and kissed her.

"Shh ..."

The questions could wait. Her physical need for him overrode all others, and she turned her head to meet his. Severus brought his lips down onto hers. They were remarkably warm and tender. She opened for him immediately and he delicately, hesitantly almost, slipped his tongue into her, exploring softly around the inner edges of her warm mouth.

Unlike their first two encounters, where he had been almost detached from her as if, as was likely the case, he had been starved of affection for so long, now he opened himself completely to their mutual pleasure. His sensitivity and fluidity staggered Hermione, and she groaned longingly into his mouth. She moved back to press harder against him, and felt him rock-hard nudging at her.

Not taking his mouth from hers, he drew his hand along and under the thigh of the leg resting uppermost and lifted it slightly, moving to position himself and slowly but deliciously inching his way into her sodden opening. She was not fully expecting it, and even though he moved leisurely, she gasped in wonder as his considerable size stretched her aching walls. He started to rock in and out, still holding her leg up slightly. He was positioned perfectly within her, and with each stroke, teased her magical spot deep inside, sending jolts of building pleasure coursing through her.

His whole body was still firmly pressed against her, and now he lowered her leg and brought his hand round to nestle between her thighs. Not only did she feel herself squeezing him ever more tightly inside, but his agile fingers now moved deliciously along her wet folds, occasionally stroking up to her throbbing clit. Her muscles prepared themselves for her pleasure to rip through them. She moaned long into the room, unaware she was even doing it.

As her mind started to fog, she wondered momentarily about his skill as a lover suddenly manifesting itself with her. Surely these things did not happen by chance? But as his iron cock stroked her exquisitely and his fingers coaxed her ever closer, the question disappeared from her mind.

Her breathing came in short gasping breaths now, and she gripped the sheets around her. She never wanted him to stop. He was remarkably quiet in his efforts, totally absorbed in the pleasure he was drawing from them both. The complete peace of the moment was sublime. Snape withdrew almost fully from her, then surged along her one last time, while his fingers rubbed her expectant clit hard. Hermione's mouth drew in a final gasp and she melted, her body shuddering around his cock and fingers. Her walls clamped down on him hard and he came deep and long, his seed pulled from him time after time. He stifled a groan of delirium into her neck.

Hermione was not so restrained in her expression of the pleasure she felt, and she cried out incoherently, a wrenching gasp of ecstasy. The sound alone drew one last pulse of release from him.

Afterwards they lay again, silent, enjoying the feel of their bodies, heavy and relaxed in the aftermath of rapture.

"What now?" Hermione dared to question after some time.

He did not respond immediately. She was not sure she expected him to at all. But at length he spoke, his voice oddly formal.

"You are my student. You are here to take your exams. If we were discovered you would be expelled, I would lose my job. I need my job. You want to take your exams. We must not be discovered."

A sudden fear overtook her. She heard herself asking, uncertain why; she hardly wanted the answer, "Do you not want to carry on?"

He raised himself on an elbow and looked down at her in complete bewilderment, as if she had asked something ridiculous. She wondered what on earth he was going to say. His voice came to her, so certain as to make her feel ashamed for even suggesting it.

"I cannot let you go."

She gazed up at him and smiled gently, reaching up to capture his lips again.

He returned the kiss, then after they had finally moved apart, remained hovering above her, before speaking clinically. "I am expected at supper. If I hurry I will make it. I said I would discuss a tedious matter regarding a house ruling with Flitwick. My absence will be noted if I do not attend."

She felt him withdraw out of her with a pang of sadness. The mood in the room changed quite suddenly.

He spoke no more to her, but dressed silently and swiftly. She felt compelled to do the same. His demeanour and attitude had changed. He was withdrawing into the familiar persona of respected and feared member of staff. He hardly looked at her again, and moved to the door, declaring, "Depart no sooner than five minutes after me and ensure you leave a similar time before arriving in the hall." He turned again and walked from her. Her heart ached. She called after him.

"Is this it then? When we're not together? It's back to Miss Granger and Professor Snape?"

She did not think he would even turn around, but he moved slightly towards her, not quite able to meet her eye, and said abruptly and tersely, "Yes." With that he was gone.

Hermione sat on the little single bed, a sweeping desolation suddenly taking hold of her. Their time together had been more than she could possibly have hoped for, but the reality of their relationship, if you could even call it that, suddenly hit her hard. The exquisite erotic tension wrought by their illicit glances and fumbings could not be denied, but here in the privacy of his rooms, she realised she had enjoyed the promise of a normal life with him, and his sudden departure and eagerness to comply with the institutional regime which bound them both felt like a punch in the gut.

But her body immediately ached with his loss, and despite the frustration she felt at the situation, she knew that she would do and behave exactly as he wanted in order to have him: have him anyway she could. Before she left, she re-administered the contraceptive charm which she had been applying to herself for the last year or so, and after the amount of time he had specified, carefully and discreetly left the dungeon.

Hermione walked into supper, trying her hardest not to glance up at him. She sat with her usual friends, and for once they found Hermione good company. Her face glowed, she chatted freely and frequently punctuated the conversation with her bell-like laugh. It was a relief to them all, and Ginny in particular was delighted at her friend's new found happiness.

Hermione could see Snape out of the corner of her eye. She noticed that he too seemed to be conversing quite freely with Professor Flitwick, a rare occurrence at the best of times. She smiled secretly to herself. They so far had not made eye-contact, but the connection between them was more tangible than ever. Despite the odd nature of their parting, Hermione was still ecstatically happy.

It was only during dessert that she at last looked up long enough for there to be a moment between them. And sure enough, still talking to the professor beside him, Snape's eyes rose slowly to meet hers. Her insides jerked, but this time were accompanied by a deep warmth which spread through her body. He continued his conversation, but held her gaze for longer than she thought he would. She could not stop the corners of her mouth raising themselves into a tender smile. It was only at this point that his lips stopped moving and he remained staring only at her. He did not return her smile, but his face exhibited a gentleness she had never seen before. The glow inside her spread further.

Just then Ginny told a joke which made the table laugh out loud. Hermione took in the punch line, turned towards her friends and joined in the raucous giggling, her head falling back in glee. She did not see Snape at last allow a slight tug upwards at the corners of his mouth before returning to his dessert.

Her table got up to leave. They were all in such a good mood. Hermione tried to mimic them, but the thought of leaving his presence suddenly made her ache. Ginny linked her arm through hers, leaning in to impart some gossip about their friend's latest boyfriend, and pulled her down the hall towards the doors. Hermione felt a tug in her gut and turned her head to glance back at high-table. He was staring down the aisle as she went, his eyes fixed on her departing figure.

Hermione spent a pleasant enough evening in the Gryffindor Common Room, and admitted that her good humour allowed her to enjoy the light-hearted company of her friends for a change. But the euphoria which her relationship with her Potions Master had imbued her with was soon tempered with a feeling of emptiness which threatened to eradicate her happiness. As she lay in her lonely bed that night, thinking of him in his, the ache in her belly intensified to the point of nausea. It was a curious mixture of agonised desire and profound yearning brought about by their enforced absence.

She turned over, pulling the covers tight around her, moving her body into the exact position she had lain in together earlier. Her hollow core, so filled with him before, throbbled its need. She tried to imagine him pressing against her and closed her eyes, picturing his endless black ones burning into her soul. After a long while, she at last fell into a lonely sleep.

Nine

Chapter 9 of 34

An illicit relationship within school grounds ... still, where there's a will, there's a way.

There was no Potions class the next day. Hermione had not had a good night; in fact it was so bad that she had overslept and missed breakfast.

The hours spent away from him already felt like days, and she wracked her brains to think how they could spend some discreet time together. She sensed he would not wish her to do anything that contained the slightest risk of exposing their relationship. Again, she had considered going to his room late at night; the throb in her core nearly demanded it, but she knew the halls were patrolled fastidiously by Filch. He had a nasty habit of popping up in the place you least wanted or expected him. Never had she wished for Harry's invisibility cloak so much.

Even if she had gone to his classroom during the day, it would have been noted and queried by her fellow students.

Hermione looked forward to lunch, the one time she knew she could be guaranteed a sight of him. Sure enough he was there. Immediately, her heart leapt and her belly surged. She sat down triumphantly in full view of him. Again, he seemed relaxed and rewarded her with surreptitious glances, the lust in his eyes clear even across the distance separating them. Her stomach refused to be still, leaping and dancing with the expected reward of his touch. She wondered if she would come right there and then.

Ginny came in late, rather out of breath. "Have you heard?" She sounded flustered. "There's been a really bad accident during Quidditch practice. Lawrence Filmore has broken tons of bones apparently, and has several internal injuries. Madam Pomfrey's doing her nut. She's run out of ideas on how to heal him. I reckon she'll have to ask Snape. You know she hates having to grovel to him for help, but this time I think she's going to have to!"

An excited chatter broke out around the table. Lawrence Filmore was a popular boy, and although there was concern for his welfare, they knew that between them Snape and Pomfrey would heal him. Hermione glanced up at high-table. Just as she had been settling down to enjoy lots of significant, knicker-wetting eye-contact, her pleasure was threatened with curtailment. Sure enough, only a moment later, the side-door opened and Madam Pomfrey bustled in. She looked perturbed and awkward but went straight to Snape and tapped him reluctantly on the shoulder. The Potions Master, whose eyes had been fixed on Hermione's, turned frustratedly away and glanced with annoyance up to the witch beside him. Pomfrey whispered urgently in his ear and Hermione saw Snape's eyes roll. But he rose swiftly, throwing his napkin down, and without another look, hurried out after her.

"Shit." Hermione swore quietly under her breath.

She spent the rest of the meal in bored disinterest. Her friends continued to talk excitedly about Lawrence Filmore; he was considered one of the hottest boys in the seventh year. The conversation then moved on to good-looking Quidditch players in general. Hermione did not listen to a word. Her body ached with longing and the sudden withdrawal of Snape's presence.

After lunch break, which Hermione had spent walking in the grounds, desperate to take her mind off her lover, she got ready for her afternoon lesson. It didn't start until three o'clock and the prolonged wait did not ease the throbbing desire which threatening to overwhelm her senses. The Arithmancy lesson was in a classroom near the hospital wing. Hermione walked heavily towards it, her feelings of empty longing no less assuaged. Turning a corner, she raised her eyes to survey the corridor before her.

A dark figure in voluminous black robes was standing outside the door to the sanatorium talking to Professor McGonagall. Hermione's heart leapt into her mouth. It was Snape.

Hermione wondered if her legs would continue to propel her towards him; they suddenly seemed to have melted.

But managing to put one foot after another in front of her, she found herself walking closer and closer to the two eminent professors. When about ten feet away, Snape's eyes wandered from McGonagall and he saw her. Hermione watched as his adam's apple bobbed and he forced his gaze back to refocus on the Headmistress.

Hermione was perilously close to them now. She could feel her cheeks burning and knew she must be bright red. She was level with them. His back was turned, but as she passed, his head twisted slightly in her direction. She inhaled, smelling his rich aroma. Her insides twisted, protesting their urgent need. She started to hurry; she would pass out otherwise, surely. But just when she thought she had succeeded in getting past him without fainting she heard a commanding female voice call her back.

"Hermione!"

She stopped and reluctantly turned. McGonagall was smiling broadly at her. Snape stood, eyes lowered.

"Come here, my dear. It has been a long time since we had a chat. How good to bump into you."

Hermione started the agonising walk back to the two of them, managing a watery smile in the direction of her Headmistress.

She stopped about as far from him as she thought she could manage.

"My dear, it has been too long. You must pop into my study, you know." McGonagall's hand touched her arm, drawing her in closer to them both. Hermione sensed her Potions Master tensing. She could feel his heat emanating towards her.

The Headmistress continued. "How are your studies going? I don't suppose they are taxing you too much, but it's important you've ticked all the boxes, so to speak, before your NEWTs. Are you feeling happy about everything?"

Hermione nodded, trying to focus. "Yes, Professor, everything's going ... very well, thank you."

"Good. Professor Snape and I have just been trying to provide some assistance to Madam Pomfrey. Poor Lawrence Filmore ... you've heard, I suppose ... came a cropper off his broom. Still, you know what these Quidditch boys are like. I'm sure you do ... they all worship you after all ... can't keep their eyes off her, can they, Severus?"

Snape looked as if he had swallowed a dung beetle.

"And Potions ... how is that going? Is our good Professor here managing to keep you interested?" She glanced up at Snape before fixing her eyes back on Hermione.

Hermione felt her cheeks blushing puce. She stammered out amidst a nervous laugh, "Oh, yes ... naturally ... Professor Snape is as ... skilled ... as ever." She dared not look at him. She thought she heard a strange strangulated noise emerge from his throat.

"Hmm ... that may be, but your knowledge is such that I should think you could teach him a thing or two now."

"Oh ... I ... I wouldn't presume ..." Hermione was burning up. The rest of her sentence was mumbled incoherently and trailed off into a silence which quickly threatened to become awkward. They did not look at each other, but the electric tension sparking between them was palpable. Hermione was sure McGonagall would sense it, but she was luckily suddenly distracted by the time.

"Goodness!" exclaimed the Headmistress. "I must go. Do pop up to see me as I said, my dear. Goodbye for now. I should think you both have classes to get to. Don't be late, either of you." With that she bustled off in her usual officious manner, leaving her Potions Master and star pupil alone together in the hall.

Hermione could hardly breathe, and she sensed Severus was going through a similar experience. They could hear people in the corridors around them and stood for a moment, the tension unbearable. But then responsibility weighed down on her, and his words about not being discovered resounded in her head.

She dropped her head, muttered, "I have to go," and hurried away from him. She had hardly gone five feet, when she heard rapid footsteps behind her. Snape caught her, grabbing her elbow with his hand and guiding her rapidly into a dark side-corridor, hidden from view, but not entirely secure.

She was immediately pressed hard against the wall. Hands came up, tearing at each other's clothes. Their mouths met desperately, open, hungry, trying to disappear into the other. He held her shirt in his hand and pulled it brutally, ripping the material to reveal the heaving breast beneath. Grabbing the flesh in his fingers, he withdrew it from her bra cup and instantly lowered his head to it, sucking and biting it desperately into his mouth.

Hermione cried out with the agonised pleasure which tore through her body. His hand came up and clamped hard down on her mouth to stifle her cries. She breathed heavily into it, her teeth grazing the flesh of his palm.

His hot, frantic mouth continued to assault her nipple, sending her lust skyward. She felt herself soaking for him and drew her leg up around him to pull his raging erection close into her. Her constant groans of need were muffled against his strong hand while his other reached down roughly and tugged her skirt up, then pulled her sodden knickers down. She kicked them off haphazardly and her own hands reached down to his belt and fastenings. His fingers were also there. He released himself, and she felt him dripping already onto her thighs. Her clit was throbbing incessantly, and her need for him inside her was almost painful.

He released his mouth from her breast long enough to glance down. She raised herself up on tiptoes, supporting herself as much against the wall as possible. At the same time, his free hand came under her backside to help hold her up. He locked eyes with her and paused a moment. Then he thrust, hard and insistently.

She could not make a sound, his hand was pressing so tightly on her mouth, but her eyes widened in sudden exquisite pleasure. The pressure of her body bearing down on him brought a feeling of fullness she had never thought possible. She continued to stare in open-eyed awe at him for some time, his features reflecting an expression of equal amazement. His brows were furrowed slightly and his mouth hung open, breathing deeply but silently.

Then he started to move, holding her against the wall, one hand still on her mouth. He stroked hard but sensuously in and out, stroking, flaming her delicious walls. Never had he known anything to be so hot or tight. Their eyes remained seared together. She forced her groans, captured against his palm, to subside, and as he sensed her stillness, he relaxed his hand on her, ever the while pumping regularly, sublimely, in and out.

But he did not remove his hand completely. The only sound she made was now a gentle gasp to accompany each thrust. He brought his palm down to rest on her chin, pushing it up and back so that her head fell against the wall. Curling his fingers over, he pushed his forefinger and middle finger hard into her mouth. She clamped around them, sucking them deep inside, twirling her tongue on their dextrous strength.

With his own slight groan, Snape adjusted his position slightly and started to move again. This time he rubbed against her clit with each thrust. Hermione's eyes widened as her pleasure quickly came to a head. She knew he too was nearly there and stared deep into him, his fingers still buried in her needy mouth.

With a final look of desperation, he pushed brutally and fully into her, catching her tender expectant clit at the same time.

Hermione dissolved; pleasure so intense heaved its way through her body she could not support herself and was held up against the wall only by his cock and hand. At that moment he withdrew his fingers to clamp his hand down hard on her mouth again, stifling the cry of ecstasy he knew was being torn from her depths.

It was too much for him, and as he felt her hot walls pulsing around him, he spasmed uncontrollably, coming in long hot bursts up into her. His face twisted in what looked like pain, and he could not stop his eyes squeezing shut as he focused on the rapture this woman had ripped from him. His pleasure was at length released in a long slow hiss from his lips, but no other sound came from him.

They could not stay like that for long. He had to pull out of her, and she glanced at his slick, still swollen cock; how had such a thing given her such extraordinary pleasure? Hermione slid her body down the wall, breathing heavily. Her shirt was ripped, her breast still exposed above the bra cup. Her skirt hung up over her hips, and she sat awkwardly in the aftershock of ecstasy, her legs splayed so that her dripping sex was clearly visible.

Snape did not sit, but stood, adjusting his clothing, looking down at her. When she had recovered a little, she returned his stare, still panting. "Thank you," she breathed

amid an exhausted, sated smile.

He allowed a slight smirk to ghost his features. His voice was deep and genuine. "Thank you." Then he raised himself up and set his face straight. She noticed the change in expression immediately. He spoke again, now the familiar sardonic drawl. "Miss Granger, you appear to be late for your next lesson. Ten points from Gryffindor."

With that he turned from her and walked swiftly away.

Hermione felt a brief spark of anger, then stopped, and found herself smiling secretly instead.

If it was games he wanted, games he would get.

Let the games commence! Let me know what you think ... x

Ten

Chapter 10 of 34

Just establishing the extent of desire ...

Hermione eventually worked her way to Arithmancy. Her body still sparked with the pleasure of her encounter with Snape, and it was virtually impossible for her to concentrate on the lesson.

As Professor Vector's voice lulled her further into a semi-catatonic state, she replayed the moments between her and the Potions Master so far, and was struck by the contrast in them.

This was not going to be a straightforward relationship.

She would neither expect nor demand any less from Severus Snape.

She knew, after their tender moment of connection in his bedroom, of the gentle intimacy that could exist between them, and she was sure that would be repeated, but her belly twisted and throbbed at the memory of the desperate, illicit encounters on his desk, and now in the dark corners of Hogwarts School. She could not deny that she longed for those as much as anything.

And now he was fuelling that longing: toying with and teasing her. She delighted in it and was determined to give as good as she got. If they could not live their relationship out in the open, they would make the most of the need and play between them that their deceit and secrecy elicited.

After the way he had left her in the corridor (not that she was complaining), she was determined to wrestle some control back from him.

Hermione walked into supper deliberately late, only just in time for a small bite of main course. She kept her eyes lowered, but felt his presence immediately and knew his eyes were burning into her from high-table. Her skin tingled and her insides clenched. She imagined him again, so hard and deep inside her, his hand clamped roughly on her gasping mouth. It took all her willpower not to look at him.

For dessert, heaving bowls of fruit were placed before the students. A pang of hunger suddenly overtook Hermione, and she reached for a peach voraciously.

She bit into it, the sweet ripe flesh of the fruit succumbing to her sudden need. As she raised her eyes, they inadvertently fell into his. Desire was written clearly on his face. She paused, her own body alight with longing.

Slowly, Hermione brought the peach back up to her mouth, ensuring her bright eyes did not leave his for a moment. Her lips parted and she allowed her tongue a brief flicker around them, then she lowered her mouth again onto the velvet skin of the fruit, and sank her teeth deliberately into it. Snape was frozen, his hand clasping a knife until the knuckles turned white.

Hermione slowly chewed and swallowed the tender flesh in her mouth, her lips now glistening with the juice. She saw his breathing quicken. Her tongue flitted out to capture a stray trickle of juice running down the side of the peach. She held it there briefly before drawing her tongue back into her mouth and sucking, biting down on her bottom lip.

Then again, she agonisingly bit into the ripe fruit, not so carefully this time. The side of the peach burst open, juice spilling out and running down the sides of her mouth. She left it there, her eyes clouding as her belly throbbed its lust painfully to her.

Slowly, she raised a finger to capture the trickles on her chin and pushed them back into her mouth, sucking the finger and pulling it out deliberately sensuously.

Her eyes had not left his. She saw his features cramp in a slight grimace but knew exactly how he was truly feeling. A surge of power coursed through her and her insides twisted so suddenly and violently she wondered if she had actually come.

Hermione's face involuntarily broke into a smile of triumph as she saw his mouth fall open to draw in a deep gasp of oxygen.

They were at least twenty feet apart.

The meal ended and the students on her table rose suddenly and loudly. Hermione stood with them, and without another glance at him, she swept out radiantly, her curls bouncing as she walked.

After a while, Severus Snape rose from his seat at high-table and left the Great Hall, walking rather more awkwardly than usual.

The next day brought another Potions Class. Hermione could hardly contain her anticipation. She had to wait all day as it was the last lesson, and by the time it finally came, she found herself unable to focus properly.

He swept into the room, his aroma reaching her immediately. She gulped it in; it travelled straight to her throbbing core.

As usual, he avoided eye-contact with her. His voice started its low, smooth intonation, vibrating through her being straight to her agonised clit.

"Antidotes to fairy bites. These are rare unless you deliberately taunt and aggravate a fairy they will not react. However, if you antagonise them, something I unfortunately

would not put past many of you uncultured louts, the bites inflicted, which inject a small but highly venomous toxin, can quickly lead to blood poisoning and occasionally ... death." He let the last word drip ominously from his tongue.

"I would recommend carrying a small vial of this potion when out in forests and enchanted woodland. Pay special attention when in Ireland; the bite of the leprechaun can be particularly ... uncomfortable."

Again, he had not glanced at her once, and Hermione desperately needed to connect with him. She thrust her hand in the air. It was so obvious that she did not see how even he could ignore her.

His head was lowered, but his eyes flicked up under the heavy lids. The spark between them was instant. He held her gaze silently for a while. She kept her hand firmly in the air. Several students turned to look at her curiously.

Finally, he drawled deep, with a touch of cynicism, "Miss Granger?"

She spoke back, boldly, and as sensuously as she could afford to under the circumstances. "Professor Snape I thought that the best thing to do if bitten with the venom of a fairy was to suck it out."

His features remained impassive, but he did not take his eyes from hers. She waited for his response and allowed one eyebrow to arch expectantly in anticipation of it.

At last he spoke, a deep, smooth throb.

"Indeed, using one's mouth can sometimes have a quick and advantageous effect, but it is usually the case that it does not produce the deepest and most fulfilling results. Eventually, one should endeavour to seek out the most complete solution to one's needs."

She smiled at him. "For a fairy bite?" she teased, reminding him of the original topic.

"For a fairy bite," he repeated, firmly and pointedly.

"Thank you, Professor Snape. I'll remember that." She smiled her sweetest smile before dropping her head.

The class progressed. They began to prepare their potions, Snape walking languidly around the room, picking holes in their efforts. Hermione tried her best to maintain her calm exterior. Inside, her stomach churned with hunger for him.

He was at Ginny's cauldron, lamenting the consistency of her solution. Hermione's breathing quickened and her skin shivered deliciously as his voice snaked its way across to her.

Then he stepped behind Ginny to stand beside Hermione. He leaned over and peered into her cauldron.

"Miss Granger?" he inquired languorously. "I trust your efforts are progressing satisfactorily?"

As he leaned over, she felt something pressing insistently into her arm. She realised instantly that it was his rock-hard urgent erection.

He did not move away. Even through the layers of clothing that separated them, she still felt him vital, throbbing, desperate. She moved her arm a little, knowing how agonising the resulting friction would be. His hand suddenly descended to her table for support and she saw his fingers flexed tightly for control.

His voice hissed down to her. "I asked you a question, Miss Granger. Kindly have the decency to answer it."

She continued the movement of her arm, pressing it ever harder into him. Turning her head, she gazed up into his eyes. They were alight with frantic arousal.

"Oh yes, Professor Snape." She was still rubbing. "As you can see, things are progressing most satisfactorily indeed."

He did not move. She continued to subtly but firmly rub her arm along the sheathed head of his swollen cock. They were in the middle of the classroom, surrounded by other students. Still, Snape made no move away from her. His knuckles were white from his grip on the table.

"Professor Snape, sir?" An earnest Hufflepuff boy in front had turned to him hesitantly.

"What?" Snape spat the word out in annoyance, still not moving.

"I think it's the end of the lesson, sir," the boy continued nervously.

Snape inhaled, clearly irritated. "Very well," he hissed coldly. "Tidy away and get out."

With a great effort he pulled himself away from Hermione.

She tidied up along with everyone else, but lingered to ensure she was the last to leave.

Ginny had hurried out to catch up with some others and Hermione walked to the door behind another Gryffindor boy. He had exited a few feet ahead of her and as she reached the door a hand suddenly appeared on it, slamming it hard in her face.

Snape moved smoothly to lean heavily against the door, blocking her path. She knew instantly what they both wanted and needed. She dropped to her knees, her books tumbling loudly to the floor. He was fumbling for the buckle of his belt but her own hands came up and brushed his aside.

Working quickly, she released him from his clothing and he was suddenly revealed, rigid and desperate before her, the head purple with intense need. She could not suppress a groan of pleasure rising out of her. He was so magnificent, so beautiful. The need to taste him, engulf him in her mouth was suddenly overwhelming.

She parted her lips, her tongue tingling with anticipation, and glanced up at him. He was gazing down at her, his face twisted in longing, his breathing heavy and rapid.

"Do it! Do it now, witch!"

She had never heard him so desperate.

She immediately plunged down onto him as hard and deep as she could, her tongue swirling around him as she moved.

He drew in a shuddering gasp of air, but she sensed he was trying to maintain the heady silence of the room.

She pulled back along him. *God, he tasted so good. Aniseed*, she found herself thinking.

Hermione let him pop out of her mouth, the cool air evaporating her wetness off him and causing him to jerk once again towards her.

She flicked her tongue out, swirling it around the head. A drop of pre-cum formed on the tip. She ran her tongue idly up through the slit, licking it up as she went. He tensed, but this time remained quiet.

She breathed onto the head, before enclosing her lips around it once again and slowly pushing down, taking him as fully as she could, right down to her throat. She had always loved giving pleasure this way and had quickly realised she had a skill for it, but the knowledge of whose cock she currently had in her mouth fuelled her need to feed off it even more. She held him tight in her mouth and throat for a while, then pulled up again, before repeating the process.

Snape could only gaze in awe, the throbbing pressure building rapidly towards release. Hermione moved quickly now, her hot, tight mouth dragging itself up and down, pulling him ever closer to ecstasy. Her hand gripped his lower length, and with the final twirl of her tongue, he reached down, clasping her hair painfully and pushing her hard onto him.

He came violently, unable to stop a guttural grunt exploding from him. He held her against him as he shot out in hot bursts, deep into her mouth and throat.

Only when she was sure the last twitch of pleasure had left him, did she tenderly release him from her warm wetness and, raising her eyes to meet his, swallowed hard.

His eyes closed momentarily in bliss, and he staggered to the nearest chair and slumped into it, panting heavily in numb rapture.

Hermione stood, picking up her books, and looked over at him. "We'll seek out the - most complete solution another time. But that seemed to have a somewhat advantageous effect." She smirked and turned to leave. Her fingers encircled the door handle, but then she moved around to face him again. She brought her hand up to her lips and rubbed over them as if wiping any trace of him which remained. "Aniseed - an acquired taste. Luckily for you I can't get enough of it."

With that, she flung the door open and was gone.

Have no fear, there is plenty of plot and dialogue to come, but at the moment, in the first flush of an attraction, these two clearly can't keep their hands off each other. It is important to establish their physical dependency at the beginning, as if that hadn't been overwhelming I am not sure either would have made a further move.

Again, I love your reviews. Thank you and keep them coming! x

Eleven

Chapter 11 of 34

Now ... what did we say about being careful ...?

The moments between them had sated Hermione's ardent lust when needed, but she found not only did it continue to burn undiminished, she also missed seeing him, talking to him. The brief times they had been able to converse had opened a window, allowing her a glimpse of what could be but not permitting her to search any deeper. As controlled as they were by the daily ritual of school life, they had played out their games within the confines of it. It was delicious and desperate, but Hermione knew it was not enough. Her mind and soul seemed to be protesting that they were being denied what her body was receiving.

Hermione had noted his reluctance to open too much to her. The time in his bedroom had revealed so much, but since then he had seemed to retreat emotionally from her. Not physically; his sexual need for her was abundantly clear, but she wanted to recapture those moments of tenderness and intimacy she knew they could share.

Yet he seemed to feel safe, secure within the institutional confines of the school and scared of what may lie beyond. Indeed, he had never known much else. Her mind tinged with anxiety. She was not to stay at Hogwarts for long. What on earth did the future beyond school hold for them? She tried to imagine one and tried not to admit to herself that she couldn't actually picture it.

The weekend came. She had never felt so lonely, knowing he was there, in the same building, but unable to see him, touch him, speak to him. Her whole body heaved with desire and need, physically, intellectually and emotionally. Her friends were fun and could be soothing company, but she acknowledged that she had left them so far behind as a person that there was none among them that she felt equal to.

She missed him.

And on Saturday night, Hermione could stand it no more.

It was late, nearly midnight, and Gryffindor Tower was silent save for the ticking of the clock in the Common Room and the heavy breathing of exhausted students. Hermione arose, dressing in jeans and a top, and slipped on her quietest shoes. She opened her door as silently as she could and slipped down the staircase. As she left the Common Room, the portrait of the Fat Lady stirred in her sleep but did not notice the young woman as she slipped unobtrusively down the dark corridors.

Hermione's heart beat frantically. As well as Filch there were plenty of other ways she could be detected on her way to the dungeons: ghosts, professors working late. She knew she was taking a dangerous risk.

Hermione clung to the dark corners of the castle, moving swiftly and silently through the shadows. She occasionally saw a ghost float by before her, but she remained undetected.

At last she reached the hallway leading to his classroom. Moonlight fell through the narrow windows high up in the corridors and illuminated the passage enough for her to see it was clear. Her heart leapt ... she was almost there. Emboldened, she stepped out and hurried along.

As she passed a pillar, her foot caught on something and she tripped and fell awkwardly, her hand coming out to stop herself and scraping along the stone floor. The object she had tripped on emitted a vile high-pitched screech and hissed violently at her. She spun her head round to look at it. It was Filch's cat.

Hermione froze. The cat stared at her, its hackles raised, its ears flat, a low hiss sounding from it. Hermione knew Filch would not be far behind. She dared not move too fast for fear it would strike, but she needed to get away quickly.

Her heart raced. She could hear heavy shuffling footsteps approaching around the corner. "Pss ...pss ... where are you, my sweet? Have you caught something for me? I'm coming." Hermione's stomach turned at the sound of Filch's low rasping voice.

Then suddenly the cat screeched and darted rapidly away. Before she could grasp the moment, strong arms had caught her shoulders, pulling her up and into a dark corner between two pillars. A hand reached around, clamping over her mouth. It was a hand which had done the same only two days before. Hermione pulled in a long breath through her nose and inhaled the delicious smell of Severus Snape.

He was standing behind her, clasping her hard to him, his hand still covering her mouth. She felt his heavy, honeyed breath on her face, and his voice snaked into her ear, deep and throbbing. "Not ... a ... sound."

She remained as still and silent as she could, yet despite the danger of their situation, she knew there was already a relentless dripping from her core.

They were concealed in the shadows, but Hermione was sure they could still be seen. Filch's footsteps drew closer and closer, as did his wheezing voice. "Mrs Norris? Where are you, my sweet? Mrs Norris? Are you alright, treasure?" The wizened man stopped directly opposite them. Hermione's eyes widened. Filch looked determined, angry. He knew something was not right. He turned his head and looked directly at them.

Hermione gasped involuntarily, but the sound was caught in the strong hand on her mouth. Filch stared at the spot they were standing in but seemed not to be able to see them. Hermione was sure he could hear her heart beating loudly and violently within her chest. Filch's eyes narrowed and he took a step closer, peering intently towards them.

They would be discovered, of that she was certain. But just as Hermione could stand no more, Filch stepped back, turned and headed further along the corridor. They waited until his footsteps had died away completely then Snape suddenly released his hold on her body, but grabbing her wrist, pulled her roughly along the corridor and into his classroom, shutting the door rapidly but silently behind him.

Immediately, he spun to her, anger contorting his face. "You little fool! What do you think you are playing at? Do you realise how close that was?"

Hermione's face burned with shame, and she could hardly look at him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I thought I could manage it."

"Clearly you were mistaken. It was a stupid thing to try."

His breathing was deep and rapid, and his temper emanated towards her. There was silence between them for a while. Hermione could not raise her eyes to his. Eventually, she stammered out, "Thank you. If it hadn't been for you ..."

He merely humphed in response, his body still taut with fury. She continued.

"How did you ...? I was sure Filch could see us ... he was looking directly at us."

"I used a concealment charm. But I did not have the time to make it very strong. It could have worn off at any moment. That is not an experience I wish to repeat."

"No. Sorry." Hermione did not know what else to say and was unsure even whether to stay or go.

After a long while he spoke again, the anger less evident now. "What are you doing here?"

She could not help but smile slightly. "Isn't it obvious?"

He looked at her, his brows still furrowed in annoyance. She continued. She had got this far, she may as well make the most of being here. "I missed you." She stepped into him. He was breathing heavily, and she could see the desire flicker in his eyes, supplanting the anger of before.

Hermione reached him and stood looking up into his face tenderly. His features had softened and she knew he had calmed. She ran her hand up along his arm, but flinched and withdrew it sharply. There was a deep, angry graze where she had fallen.

Snape's eyes moved immediately to it. "You have hurt yourself." His smooth deep tones were a balm in themselves.

"It's nothing. It doesn't matter." She drew her hand down, but he caught it gently in his and brought it up to him. Studying it carefully, he then slowly lowered his head to it. He planted a tender, soothing kiss on the wounded flesh, his tongue flitting out softly to lick and caress the sorest points. Hermione drew in a shuddering breath. Severus continued his ministrations for some time. Never had she known anything so sublimely comforting. She saw his mouth moving silently over the wound, his breath and tongue caressing it, and before her eyes, the graze vanished and her flesh was restored to its former health. She drew in a breath of surprised appreciation. The ability to heal with only words and touch was rare indeed.

Snape did not react but continued to kiss her hand, travelling slowly up the underside of her wrist, his tongue idly touching, tasting the sensitive flesh. He spoke between touches, the familiar deep drawl: "Why are you here now, at this time exactly? I have told you to be careful, have I not? I had expected better of you." His low admonishing tone now simply fuelled her lust further as his tongue continued its progress up her arm.

Hermione gasped in, unable to take her eyes off his smooth black head as it slowly worked its way up her tingling skin. "I ... I wanted to talk to you."

He glanced up at her, but did not take his mouth away. "Talk to me?"

"Yes. I was lonely." His mouth was scorching her arm now, pushing the material of her top up as he went. "I thought perhaps ... you were too."

Again, he glanced up, an eyebrow cocked. "Just because one is alone, it does not mean one is lonely."

Her heart twinged a little. He had reached her neck. He kissed away her disappointment. "In that case ... I'll go again ... shall I?"

He silenced her with his mouth, parting her lips gently and slipping inside to idly taste her sweetness. She had her answer. He brought his hands up to cup her face, not moving his mouth from hers, and pulled her tenderly but firmly backwards, through his classroom and into his private rooms. When he finally stopped, she found herself once again in his bedroom. It was dimly lit with a few candles. The bed was still made; he had not yet been in it.

At last Severus moved apart from her. In stark contrast to the heated anger he had exhibited earlier, his face was now calm and relaxed, shimmering in the candlelight.

They stepped towards each other, reaching up slowly, delicately, and undressing each other. As their naked flesh was revealed, they each dipped in, kissing and soothing the skin they found before them.

Once naked, he pulled her into him and they stood, clasped together, rocking slightly in the middle of the room. But she felt him pressing hard against her, and eventually he reached for her arms gently and pulled her towards the bed, lowering her down onto it. Not taking his eyes from hers, Severus pushed tenderly into her. It was so sublime, so different from their frantic lust of the last few days that she could only gasp in with surprise. He moved along her, stroking and filling her as perfectly as before, but with a tender sincerity she exalted in. Their eyes remained locked together.

Severus reached behind her back and pulled her up, kneeling at the same time, then moved his legs in front, careful to remain firmly inside.

They sat, joined together, gazing deep into the other's eyes. It was such a indulgent moment, Hermione almost wept. Then holding behind her back, he started to move her along him, slowly and gently. They rocked against each other for the longest time, drawing out their pleasure sublimely, little by little. Hermione felt her muscles starting to clench, and as he rubbed along her clit one final time, she came slowly, a wave building, radiating out from her very centre. She released it with a sharp intake of breath. Her eyes closed and her head fell back. With the sight and feel of her, Severus shuddered, his own pleasure shooting deep up into her. He met her rapture with a small groan of his own.

They sat for a while longer, fused, just looking at each other, their faces quite neutral, but a glow within their eyes so rarely there.

At length they lay down together on the bed, Severus pressed hard into Hermione's back, just like the last time.

"I don't want to go back to my room."

"It would be foolish to try."

"May I stay here tonight?"

"That would seem to be the most obvious solution." The sarcastic drawl had returned. Hermione smiled to herself.

There was silence for a while, but Hermione felt the time had come to try to satisfy her curiosity. "You said before that you ... realised about me sometime last year."

"I did not ... 'realise' ... about you."

"But ... you said ..."

"I know what I said." He was stroking her arm and paused before continuing. "Looking back, I can see that it was then that I first thought about you as something more than ..."

"An insufferable know-it-all?"

"Hmm ... something like that. But I did not 'realise' until the other day. I cannot be certain when exactly. You were late for my lesson. I noticed your absence immediately. It riled me. I resented it ... I ... missed your presence. My reaction to your tardiness surprised and confused me. My mind started to tell me things I found hard to accept." His voice was low, but he spoke quite freely.

"Is that why you kept denying yourself?"

"Meaning?"

"To start with, when something had happened between us you would shut down, run."

He did not respond. She spoke again, tenderly.

"I told you ... I will guide you."

"Those moments took me by surprise, I acknowledge, as did my feelings. As you yourself realise, this situation and the emotions evoked through it are all unfamiliar to me. I suppose I did not feel in control."

"Do you need to?"

"Yes."

"But you have experienced similar things before. With Lily."

He flinched on hearing her name. Hermione began to regret broaching the subject, but he eventually spoke, a bitter edge to his voice.

"You said that I should allow love to be given to me. She did not do that."

"I don't think that's true. She cared for you very deeply."

"She did not love me."

"She did in many ways."

"No. Not in the way I wanted."

Hermione stopped. His feelings on that matter were still so painful, so raw. She did not want to exacerbate them now that she had gone so far with him. She changed the subject.

"You are a very sensitive lover."

"You sound surprised," he drawled cynically.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"I am a grown man. I have needs as I think you have gathered. And the Dark Lord elevated me to a position of some authority. With that came ... opportunities: perfunctory, detached, entirely unsatisfying except to relieve an urgent need, partially brought about by power and ..."

"And what?"

"Fear." His voice was strangely empty. "The fear of death."

Hermione felt a sharp pang pull at her heart and nestled into him more closely. She spoke gently, but still curious.

"Was there ever anyone with whom you connected at all?"

"No. And anyway, this was a long time ago. I was still young. I grew to hate it. I stopped all that many years ago. It was sordid, dirty; they were never ... right."

Hermione said gently but plainly, "They were never her."

He tensed and did not respond. Hermione continued. "I am not her either."

"No." Severus glanced down, searching her eyes. "You are ... you."

"And what about me, Severus? Why me? What have I done to draw out this life, this pleasure, your skill in delivering it?"

He stared at her deeply.

"You have believed."

Hermione stared at him. His eyes were wide and open; she could see the stirrings of his soul within. Still his meaning lacked clarity and understanding, but his words moved her beyond reason. Her eyes misted over and she breathed increasingly desperately up to him, "Come inside me again. Please. I want to feel you inside me. Please, *please*."

He had hardened rapidly while gazing down at her and immediately, with a swift, fluid movement, plunged deep into her. Her eyes widened in ardent satisfaction and she

gasped in, locking into his. He did not move for the longest time, and they merely lay, she impaled on him, revelling in the feel of his hard shaft filling her so profoundly. To Severus, the sensation of her sheathing him, enclosing him, was so exquisite that his heart swelled as he had never known before. As he gazed down into her deep brown eyes, looking up at him with such tender awe, he knew this was where he belonged.

Thank you for all the lovely reviews and kind words regarding this story: so glad you are enjoying it! At least Hermione won't be lonely tonight and Severus won't be ... alone. Any comments greatly appreciated, as always. More soon. x

Twelve

Chapter 12 of 34

Time to walk, time to talk ...

They lay together after bringing each other yet again to palpitating but tender climaxes, their bodies holding tight to the other. Hermione lay looking up, her hand resting across Severus' belly, the desperate ache she felt nearly constantly within for now assuaged and replaced by a warm glow.

"I am taking my exams in less than two months time."

"They will not tax your abilities."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know."

Again, she kept her silence after his last response. It was clear he did not wish to speak about it. Neither did she. She thought of his initial words.

"Do you realise that is the first time ever you have complimented my academic abilities?"

"Hmm ... but you were a stupendously annoying student."

She turned towards him, glaring. "No, I wasn't!"

"Yes, you were. Even your fellow students ... even Potter on occasion ... tired of your incessant sycophantic tendencies."

She sat up fully now, her anger flaring. "I was not a sycophant! And certainly not towards you! I would never have ingratiated myself with you." She paused but was so riled that she spoke the words hanging on the tip of her tongue. "I hated you."

She watched him carefully, but he did not waver and spoke without skipping a beat: "You constantly sought my approval."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest but realised he spoke the truth.

She flung herself back down on the bed, a petulant pout on her face, her face turned away from him.

After a while, his hand came up and she felt his fingertips running along her hip, up over the curve of her waist until they came to rest, gently cupping her breast, running over the nipple lightly and instantly drawing it out in ripe anticipation. He leaned down and whispered smoothly in her ear, "I take it you don't hate me anymore?"

She closed her eyes, trying to ignore the lust flaming strong within her again. His hand continued to stroke her nipple, and his mouth had descended to her throat. Hermione could not hold back any longer. She turned her head and Severus moved his mouth to hers immediately. She opened, darting her tongue out to meet his. After a delicious tasting of each other, he travelled down to latch onto her nipple; an immediate surge of pleasure shot through her. His tongue swirled around it before he sucked hard, plying the point deep in his mouth. Hermione felt his hand questing down, parting her thighs and rubbing smoothly, reaching into her and pulling her arousal out before drawing it up to the swollen nub throbbing for his touch.

Severus remained at her breast for some time. Hermione allowed her mind to cloud. He continued to stroke her sodden folds, occasionally dipping into her, sometimes rubbing lightly on her ripe clit. It was the most relaxed, delicious pleasure she had ever experienced, and he seemed to be enjoying it as much as her even though he was receiving no attention himself. At length he coaxed and sucked her stimulated points beyond containment, and with a tender sigh of release she came exquisitely, her body raising itself up to press hard into his mouth and hand.

He pushed his fingers deep inside her, soaking up her essence, then brought them out but kept his hand resting between her legs. His mouth released her nipple, and he turned his head to rest it gently on her breast. Hermione brought her hand up to stroke his hair. At length, it slowed and stopped. They were both fast asleep.

For Hermione and Severus, it was not a night spent in complete slumber, but when day finally roused them the next morning, they found their bodies more rested and relaxed than they could remember.

Hermione stretched lazily, a broad smile breaking out across her face. She turned to the man next to her. He was looking at her in awed curiosity. She leant over and kissed him delicately on the lips.

"Sunday," she sighed out deliciously. "I have absolutely nothing to do."

He stroked up her belly. "I can think of one or two things to occupy your time, if you so desire." Leaning over her, he kissed her deeply again.

"You know I always so desire."

He had entered her again. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world. He moved steadily along her as her muscles squeezed tight around him. His eyes closed in delirium, but he spoke.

"There is breakfast."

Hermione gripped her lover's back hard. "There is indeed."

Sunday breakfast at Hogwarts was a relaxed, sumptuous affair with steaming plates of bacon, eggs, sausages, toast, everything one could wish for. It started late and lasted half the morning. Copies of newspapers and magazines appeared, and students and teachers took the opportunity to relax and catch up with news of the outside world and each other. Still, Hermione wasn't sure she wanted to go. As she felt his rigidity pressing hard up to her very core, her motivation to leave dwindled even further.

"God, don't stop," she breathed out.

For the first time, the thought of merely being able to look at him from afar in the Great Hall was not enough. Their time in his rooms was so perfect, so natural, that she could no longer contemplate being away from him. He thrust harder now, stroking along her inflamed clit. She drew in a gasping breath.

Severus' face flinched with pleasure, but he spoke again, not stopping his strokes, but still with calm, measured tones.

"We should go up."

She smirked. "One of us is already up."

He shot her a reprimanding glare. "Now now."

A juddering breath was caught in his throat. He was so close. She pulled him ever further into her.

"Everyone goes to Sunday breakfast." He spoke between groans. "Our mutual absence may be noted."

She arched into him.

"Oh god, Severus. Just shut up and fuck me."

He complied.

After lying a while longer Hermione herself felt a pang in her stomach and sighed deeply. "I have to confess ... I'm bloody hungry." She turned to him. "Come on."

With that she pushed him off her. It hurt to do so, but she enjoyed her little exertion of control. He moaned as he fell out of her. She went into the little bathroom off his sitting room and re-emerged clean, dressed and radiant.

Severus slowly got out of bed, still naked, and walked over to hold her. She rested her head against his smooth, pale chest. "Maybe we could do something today ... away from here ... together."

He did not reply. His silence unnerved her. "Not much. Maybe a walk or something," she persisted.

He remained quiet. She pulled back to look up at him. His face held an expression of tense confusion. He spoke low down to her. "There are prying eyes all around the castle and its grounds."

"Severus. I think between us we are just about accomplished enough in magic to manage something without detection."

He sneered slightly. Although he was a master of it himself, her use of sarcasm disagreed with him.

"We could even get out of the grounds and Apparate somewhere quite far away. I'm quite good at Apparition now."

He looked increasingly alarmed causing her unease to deepen.

After more silence from him she gave up, sighing deeply. "It doesn't matter. It was just a suggestion. I'll go to breakfast. You can come in a few minutes. Don't worry. I'll be really careful. There won't be anyone around now anyway. Even Filch doesn't miss Sunday breakfast."

She turned to leave. He finally spoke.

"We will go for a walk in the forest. I'll meet you by the ash tree on the far side of the lake at two o'clock."

After clearing the expression of shock from her face, she beamed over at him. Then unable to stop herself, Hermione flung herself back across the room to plant a hard kiss on his lips. As she hurried from the room to breakfast, she did not see the slight smile caress his features before he himself turned to get ready.

Hermione was ridiculously happy as she ate her huge plate of sausages, tomatoes, bacon, eggs and toast. Her appetite and good mood did not go unnoticed by her friends.

"Don't forget the Quidditch match this afternoon, 'Mione. I'll meet you at half one and we'll walk down together," Ginny said.

Hermione flushed a little and struggled to appear nonchalant. "Oh, I thought I'd give it a miss, actually. I was going to pop into Hogsmeade, then maybe catch up on some work later."

Ginny looked at her friend quizzically. Hermione usually enjoyed a good Quidditch match as much as anyone. She felt snubbed. "Oh. Right. Suit yourself." Ginny shrugged.

Hermione knew she had offended Ginny, but could not look her in the eye or think of a better excuse. She kept her head down.

After a few minutes she glanced up and saw Snape come in. She could not stop a smile forming on her lips and her cheeks flushing once again. He sat and was served his food. Hermione noticed him turning to the professor next to him and chatting quite animatedly. She was staggered but thrilled. He was clearly happy.

They hardly looked at each other; there did not seem to be such an urgent need to do so, but each was aware of the other's presence despite the distance between them. At the end of breakfast, Hermione stood to leave, and it was only then that she allowed herself a look up to him. He raised his head slowly to meet her eyes. The corners of her mouth turned up in a cautious smile. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, he returned it.

Her heart swelled and she followed her friends out of the Great Hall, feeling as if she may take off.

At half past one, as the others left for the match, Hermione slipped unobtrusively out of the castle in the opposite direction and headed for the Forbidden Forest.

It was a pleasant autumn day, and as she made her way to the other side of the lake, a faint mist rising from it, the changing leaves fell idly around her.

She got to the ash tree. There was no sign of him. Hermione glanced at her watch. It was a minute before two. She grew slightly anxious. What if he didn't come? Was he too circumspect to risk being seen together even out here?

She pulled her arms around her and shivered, suddenly noticing the chill breeze. There was still no sign of him. Then she heard a noise behind her and spun around. There, stepping out of the shadows was Snape. Her lips broke open in a wide, ecstatic smile. He approached her, his face as yet unreadable. "Good afternoon, Miss Granger."

She smiled. "Good afternoon, Professor Snape. What a pleasant surprise bumping into you like this."

He smirked a little before lowering his eyes to hers again. "I thought perhaps you would choose instead to accompany your friends onto the stands."

She looked at him. His face remained strong and impassive, but his words belied an insecurity which equalled her own. She took his hand. "Why on earth would I want to sit growing cold and miserable watching boys with raging hormones flinging themselves through the air after a flying testicle?"

He allowed himself a slight smirk. "The rest of the school seem to wish to do so."

"They're not with you."

He raised his eyebrows. "Thank Merlin for that."

She smiled more broadly and squeezed his hand, pulling him as she started to walk into the forest. "Come on."

They walked hand in hand, finding a path through a less densely wooded part of the forest. The sun flickered down through the branches, spilling out in random pools of light onto the forest floor. Occasionally, a deer or hare would dart past them. She noticed Severus tensing at these moments, fearful of what or who was nearby. But Hermione was undeterred. She held his hand more firmly and walked ever more deep into the forest. As they left the castle far behind them, she felt him relax. His hand held hers warmly and gently.

She smiled to herself. Here she was, walking hand-in-hand through the Forbidden Forest with Severus Snape. A little giggle bubbled out of her.

"What?" he turned to her in query.

"Nothing. It's just ..."

"Go on."

"Well, you have to admit, this is a little odd ... you and me ... going for a Sunday afternoon stroll."

He raised himself up, his voice slightly defensive. "It was your idea."

"I know. I love it. I'm not complaining." Hermione stopped and looked up at him. "It's just too wonderful to believe."

Severus leant down and planted a tender kiss on her lips. "Believe it," he breathed gently into her mouth. She returned his kiss, then smiling against him, she moved back and continued to walk with him through the forest.

As they walked they settled into easy conversation, discussing potions, spells and the changes in the magical world. They avoided any mention of the war, the Dark Lord, or the events surrounding Snape's encounter with death and his miraculous survival.

Hermione talked more than Severus, but he listened with quiet interest. Then suddenly asked a question which surprised even her.

"Do you enjoy your job?"

His features tensed and he looked at her curiously. "I'm sure you have formed an impression as to whether I do or not."

"I want to hear it from you."

"My presence at Hogwarts has not always been due simply to the extraordinary pleasure gained in attempting to enlighten the feeble minds of slack and idle adolescents." His voice had regained its most sarcastic drawl.

Hermione could not help but laugh. He darted his eyes to hers. He did not laugh.

She knew what he was referring to: his likely spying for Voldemort, his work for Dumbledore, his need to protect Harry. But he had been at Hogwarts for nearly twenty years ... his whole career. Surely there had been times when he had merely had to settle into a regular pattern of teaching ordinary students.

"You've been there a long time. When not acting as a double agent, protecting the foolish Potter and his chums from their own arrogant ignorance, or enforcing Unbreakable Vows, there must have been times when you simply sat in your classroom and ... taught." She teased him, her eyes twinkling. "How do you feel about that?"

Snape spun to her abruptly, spitting his words out coldly. "How do you think I feel about it?"

She held his gaze, not intimidated by his sudden anger. "It would be easy for me to say that I think you hate it, that you feel undervalued, unappreciated, wasted ... but I think I would be wrong."

His features did not waver, but Hermione detected a burning in his eyes. She wondered if she had gone too far. But she could not stop now. She continued, gently but deliberately. "I don't think you can imagine a life outside Hogwarts. I think it makes you feel safe, secure; it provides you with meaning and order ... so different from the chaos which you have experienced on the outside."

He was silent for a while, then turned and walked on again, but not fast enough for her not to keep pace with him. "Even if you have vindicated your idealistic perception of me, that does not mean I enjoy my job."

"I think it must be quite comforting after years of facing unfathomable horrors, torment, shame ... death ... I think it must be comforting to look out on a sea of anonymous faces, looking to you for guidance, holding you in fearful respect, never questioning you. What does it matter if you are popular or not? They provide a framework for you ... a scaffold to cling to amidst an otherwise desperate world."

He stopped suddenly and turned to her. "Do you want me to answer your question?"

Hermione was taken aback. "Yes," she mumbled out.

"I enjoy it more than I could ever imagine because you are there. When you are no longer there, I shall hate and despise every minute of it once again. Come, we must get back. It will grow dark soon."

He turned and strode away from her.

Hermione could not move. She stood stock still, her heart beating rapidly. Then she rushed after him. When she eventually caught up, she caught his hand and pulled. He resisted momentarily, then slowly looked back at her.

She reached swiftly up to his head and held his face tenderly in her hands, pulling it down into a deep and desperate kiss. "Severus. What are we doing? What do you

want from me? I won't be here in two months. What then?"

He stopped, breathing heavily, then slowly looked at her, a haunted look in his eyes that she had rarely seen. "I don't know."

To see this man before her, uncertain, this man who had always been so strong, so assured, Hermione felt her soul melting within her. She pressed herself against his chest, and slowly he raised his arms and held her close to him.

They said no more, and she eventually became aware of the dusk descending into the deep forest around them. She raised her head. "We should go."

He met her eyes, and his hand came up to her face. Hermione smiled, then took his hand, leading him back through the forest, until they could see the lights of the castle flickering before them.

It was nearly dark when they finally reached the lake. It was here that they would re-enter the school grounds. They were grateful for the cover of night to hide their return. Hermione turned to him. "It's nearly supper. I'll be in class tomorrow." After the conversation they had had, she felt unsettled and thought he needed time to himself. She reached up to kiss him gently before turning for the castle. He caught her wrist and pulled her back.

"You must stay with me again tonight."

She looked up in alarm. She had not been expecting anything. But looking into his eyes, alight with need and longing, she could not deny him, or herself.

"Yes." She kissed him again. "Yes, of course, of course."

"Go now. Come to me after supper."

He kissed her urgently once again, then she hurried from him, back to the castle.

She went swiftly into supper and ate quickly. He came in fifteen minutes later but she left immediately after eating and went straight to the dungeons.

Hermione walked so purposefully and confidently that the few people she met on her way to his rooms did not bat an eyelid.

She entered his classroom and waited. The familiar room and its smell soothed her. Never had she felt she belonged somewhere so much. After a few minutes the door opened and he came in, swiftly and silently, shutting it behind him.

He said not a word, nor touched her, save for encircling her fingers and pulling her rapidly through into his bedroom.

They quickly found themselves naked, their bodies falling onto the bed, joining urgently. Then Hermione Granger and Severus Snape fell asleep in each other's arms for the second night in a row.

sigh

Any thoughts gratefully read and pondered. x

Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 34

Well, it wasn't going to be all plain sailing, was it? This is an intense one.

The following week passed in a happy haze. Hermione and Snape settled into a contented pattern of life. The intense desire that existed between them remained unabated, but the knowledge that they could slake it enabled the need to be somewhat contained. Potions lessons came and went. Still Hermione stayed late after each one, at which point Snape ensured that the door was firmly locked and charmed.

When they felt secure enough they spent the night together in his rooms. Hermione could not remember when she had been so happy, and she sensed a gradual relaxing in him. His features softened, his posture became less tense, and he allowed himself to converse easily and freely with her. They talked about everything and nothing, yet always avoided any mention of the future.

On Friday it was the last lesson of the week. Hermione came and sat. Snape had not yet arrive and Hermione busied herself getting her books ready. Someone came and sat next to her. Hermione turned, expecting to find Ginny there. She didn't. It was Lawrence Filmore, the boy who had fallen from his broom.

"Lawrence! It's so good to see you. How are you? God, we were so worried about you."

The tousle-haired boy grinned broadly. "Yeah ... I'm good thanks. They mended my bones within a day or so, and I've had potions and liquids poured down my throat all week, but y'know, I can't just sit in the hospital wing all day. I want to get back to practice as soon as I can."

Hermione smiled warmly at the boy beside to her. "Well, yeah, I knew you couldn't stay away for long. I've really missed seeing you around." She reached over and rubbed his arm affectionately. His eyes sparkled and he ran his fingers through his thick blond hair.

Hermione lowered her head, wanting to ask the next question: "And I understand Professor Snape helped out with your healing?"

"Yeah ... apparently. S'pose I'd better say something to him."

"He'd appreciate that."

"Yeah, right," Lawrence smirked cynically.

Hermione tried to stem the annoyance she suddenly felt towards the young man and his sardonic arrogance.

Filmore sensed her tensing and asked uncertainly, "Sorry ... was there someone sitting here?"

Hermione looked up, smiling again. On the whole, she liked Lawrence. He was, after all, only feeling towards the Potions Master the way she had felt for most of her school life.

"No. You sit there. Ginny usually sits with me, but I'm not even sure she's coming today. I think she's got a magical future consultation with the headmistress."

Lawrence grinned and lowered his head. Hermione noticed a slight flushing of his cheeks. She tried to ignore the signals she was picking up on but leaned subconsciously away from him nonetheless.

She glanced up. Snape was standing before them.

Their teacher was rigid, stiff, his fists clenched beside him. The features on his aquiline face were frozen and his eyes bore into Filmore's skull. Hermione swallowed hard and tried to catch his eye to draw his attention onto her, to reassure him.

At length, Snape darted his eyes to her, and his face twinged. Hermione held his gaze and smiled tentatively. He did not take his eyes away from her, but she could not dispel the cold anxiety within them. She wished Filmore would suddenly disappear.

Snape remained standing stock still. Hermione was sure the whole room could tell he was staring at her. She raised her eyebrows to him, trying to stir him into action. He suddenly drew in a deep breath and hastened to his desk where he distractedly shuffled the papers in front of him. He began the lesson, his voice uncertain and tense, a cold terseness behind each word.

Hermione tried to catch his eye, but found him avoiding her as much as possible. When it came time for him to examine their work, he came slowly over and stood, hands clasped behind his back, staring down at Filmore after glancing into his cauldron.

"Mr Filmore. The injury you sustained due to your foolhardiness on a broomstick has clearly affected your brain more than we realised. I would not give this muck to my dog to rid it of its fleas."

He waved his wand. All evidence of Filmore's work so far disappeared. "Start again," drawled Snape.

Filmore smiled wryly to himself. "Typical. Insensitive old git," he mumbled under his breath.

Snape crossed quickly to him and slammed his hand down on the table. "Mr Filmore." He leaned in close to the young man and hissed into his ear. "I may be old, but I am still fully endowed with the sense of hearing. Detention ...tomorrow afternoon ... two o'clock ... for three hours."

"But ... that was gonna be my first practice back since the accident."

Snape eyed him coldly. "Exactly."

Filmore shook his head. Snape was still standing above him, arms crossed, a look of pure venom on his face. "Is there something you wished to add, Mr Filmore?"

"No, Professor Snape ... *sir*. I was going to thank you for your help in aiding my recovery, but I'll save it until tomorrow when I have more time." He spoke with a heavy tinge of sarcasm.

Hermione glanced up at the man towering above her table. He did not look at her. She willed him to do so. After a while he darted his eyes suddenly into hers. They were dark and empty, but she held his gaze steadily with a faintly reproachful glare. A shadow passed over Snape's face briefly, but it was enough for Hermione to read in it shame. He turned quickly away.

At the end of the lesson, the class packed away. Lawrence's good mood had evaporated, but he turned to Hermione and managed a slight smile. She noticed him once again running his fingers nervously through his unruly hair.

"Alright, Hermione? That's me done for the day. I thought I'd go and chill in the Common Room for a bit. You coming?"

"Uh," she glanced nervously at Snape. He had his head resolutely lowered, staring at a parchment, his quill poised. But he wasn't writing as he usually did. "I may be along a bit later. I have some work to do in the library. And I need to just check something with Professor Snape first."

"Right," Lawrence sounded disappointed. "I guess I'll see you at supper then. I'll save you a place if you want."

"Oh ... whatever ... don't worry about that. See you later." She smiled meekly at him.

He returned her smile much more firmly and backed out, raising a hand in farewell. "See you."

When he had finally left the room, Hermione let out a deep sigh and turned to Snape.

He still did not look up at her. His hand was now moving frantically over the parchment. She spoke firmly.

"What was all that about?"

He did not respond. "Severus?" she said sharply. "He didn't deserve that. I don't know what ..."

"Why were you sitting next to that boy?" He interrupted her suddenly, his eyes darting up to hers.

"Because that is where he chose to sit."

He raised his wand. The door slammed behind her.

"Where was the Weasley girl today?"

"At a meeting with McGonagall."

"You didn't have to let him sit there."

"He's a nice boy. It was his first day back since nearly killing himself. What does it matter where he sits?"

"He likes you."

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Perhaps a little. So what?"

"You seemed to be enjoying his company."

"Yes. He is in my group of friends. I've known him a while now."

His face flinched. Neither spoke again until Snape opened his mouth, his words bitter.

"Do you find him ... *handsome*?" He could hardly bring himself to say the word.

Hermione crossed her arms and rolled her eyes.

"I don't know. I don't think of him in that way," she shrugged.

"I don't want you to sit next to him again."

"Don't be ridiculous. It doesn't matter whom I sit next to."

He spat his next words out icily. "It matters to me."

She walked over to him. He stood immediately and turned away from her, pacing into the classroom. She followed him, more frustrated than ever. "Severus! Don't be so stupid. You spend your days berating students for behaving immaturely; now you are exhibiting the most childish behaviour of all!"

Hermione caught up with him and held his head in her hands, guiding it towards her. "Severus. You know how I feel about you. I could never look at another man as long as I have you. Why should I? He's just a boy. He doesn't interest me at all. I have you. You're all I want. But I'd prefer it if you acted like the man you are."

He couldn't look at her. Hermione could say no more; she had grown tired of his petulance. Picking up her bags, she started to leave. "I'll see you over the weekend." Her words were frosty. "Maybe we can go for another walk at some point. Goodbye for now, Severus."

He remained standing still, his eyes trained on the ground. She walked past him.

As she crossed in front of him he encircled her wrist in his hand, sharply and painfully. Before she had time to register what it was, she was spun around and pushed down on the nearest desk. Her hip scraped painfully on the hard wooden edge. He was breathing heavily and his hand reached roughly down to pull up her skirt and grab her underwear which he ripped off brutally. Hermione tensed momentarily and knew she should push herself up, protest. She felt him fumbling for his belt and buttons. His breathing was heavy, urgent. Her mind was suddenly tormented. *This was wrong. She must stop him.*

But her body did not allow her to, merely lay beneath him, waiting. She knew she was sodden already. Her legs instinctively parted to welcome him, her core longing to feel him within her.

Snape suddenly tensed, as if realising what he was doing. Hermione held her breath. She tried to tell herself to take his hesitation and get up, run. But instead she felt a sob of need starting to rise within her and heard herself breathing out, low and desperate, "Yes."

The next moment he thrust hard. She was jolted up the desk, her breasts scraping along the rough wood. She grunted with the shock, but delighted in the sudden feel of his engorged cock filling her so completely. She wanted to cry out, beg him for more, but knew she must not give him the satisfaction, not today. She would give her body; he would take it, but no more. Her teeth dug sharply into her lip to stifle her moans.

His right hand pressed down on the small of her back, pinning her to the desk, while his left dug painfully into her hip. He started to move, frantically, harshly, pulling out completely before plunging into the hilt over and over again. Each thrust forward caught her g-spot more perfectly than ever before, and she felt the rising tide of inexorable pleasure building within. She could not deny it. She wanted to fight it, deny him the shared pleasure, deny him the feel of her ecstasy, but it was impossible. She shut her eyes tight, focusing solely on the feel of his magnificence inside her.

He grunted deeply with each drive forward, but apart from that there was silence around them. Even through her shirt her nipples were being rubbed deliriously along the table, causing an exquisite friction which spread to her tensing core. He held her on a vertex: a point between pleasure and pain, adoration and admonishment.

But she was too close. He thrust again and again, and she could no longer stop herself. Her orgasm tore through her body and she pulsed around him, a cry of rapture at last unable to be stopped as it was pulled from her depths.

As he felt her squeezing the desperation of his swollen cock, he thrust hard up into her once more and came violently, his fingers digging hard into her hip, his head falling back in ecstasy. A groan rose up into the air between them as he exploded within her.

Snape stayed behind her for some time, panting heavily. Hermione lay impassively beneath him, not quite able to take in what had just happened. At length, he pulled out, swiftly but not harshly. He staggered away from her and adjusted his clothing quickly. Bending down, she picked up her torn knickers and pulled her skirt down. She looked at him. His eyes were lowered, his face flushed. It was not entirely with exertion.

They both stood silently in the heavy atmosphere of the room, their hair dishevelled, their breathing ragged. Then Hermione turned and left, leaving him alone in the middle of it.

Oh dear. Let me know your thoughts. x

Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 34

Something needs to be said ...

Hermione, for very obvious reasons, could not focus that afternoon. She took herself off to the library and buried her head in books, always a way to distract her from the complexities of life. But as her eyes poured over the words, she found her mind seeing only the image of him holding her down on the desk, thrusting hard into her time and time again.

It was her reaction that now occupied her thoughts more than anything. Although she had allowed it once he had started, he had essentially forced himself on her, and the moment she thought he may stop, reconsider, she had felt a desperate disappointment. At that moment, she had wanted him to take her in that way more than anything, and the orgasm she had achieved had been one of the most vivid ever.

And what of him? His puerile jealousy, his possessiveness they were reassuring in their own right, but they had clearly brought out a side to him he had only needed at his

lowest and darkest moments. Was she prepared to accept that too? She knew what he had been through, and the reasons why, but despite his self-confessed need for control and order, when pushed he had revealed his deepest insecurities and inner demons.

She knew it would be so, but she had never experienced it quite so viscerally with him. Is that what she wanted in a relationship? Sitting staring out at the rows of books before her, a fog seemed to clear from her mind and she came to a sudden realisation.

It was exactly what she wanted.

But now, could she go to him? Should she? He had acted in a way many would regard as reprehensible, a way she knew ~~she~~ he should regard as reprehensible. If nothing else, an enforced absence would bring him to a realisation of that. Her mind felt little shame over her reaction, but nudged her to force some from him.

But she wanted him. She yearned for him still.

The contrast between this complex, brilliant, tormented man, and the bright-eyed, vacant, innocent expression of Lawrence Filmore made it all the more clear. She, Hermione Granger, could not possibly survive on anything less.

She thought over their recent conversations. In her usual way, she had been abrupt, probing. Perhaps she had been too hasty, confronting him about Lily and love so early on. Shame at last poked at her; it was unfair to force him to confront the past. However, he had not been too reluctant to speak to her.

She needed him to see that the unrequited, unreciprocated love he felt for Lily, although undeniable, and noble and beautiful in itself, was not complete love. For someone to love completely, it was not simply a question of burning passion and unswerving allegiance. It was about respect, tolerance, compromise. It is only when you can accept love in return that you come to a full understanding of that.

Love the word rang hollowly in her head. Is that what she felt for him? Had she come so far already? It was not clear to her.

She knew she wanted to continue. Knew she wanted to work out what it was she was feeling, knew that there was the possibility that it could be love, but she could not quite pinpoint it as such yet. Was that unfair? Was she giving him false hope? Were they both so damaged that the leap towards true love was too difficult for her, as well as for him?

She found herself clasping her head in her hands, pulling her hair tight in her fingers. It had grown dark outside and glancing at the clock, she saw that it was well into supper time. Gathering her things, she rushed down to the Great Hall. He was not there. She was not surprised, but more disappointed than usual. What had happened between them had shaken him up as much as her, she knew it.

But now concern started to nag at her. She wanted to see him, know what he was thinking, know that he was alright. She ate quickly.

Glancing up at one point, she looked down the table and met the eyes of Lawrence Filmore who was staring at her with wide-eyed expectation. He grinned at her, his blue eyes twinkling optimistically. Hermione returned a polite watery smile and lowered her head quickly. "Shit," she mumbled under her breath. She supposed she should be flattered; he was considered the catch of the school, but he held no charm for her whatsoever. She could do without this as well. Life was complicated enough.

Hermione headed for Gryffindor Common Room, confused as to what to do next. But on turning into a corridor heading for the staircase she found a solitary figure standing in the middle of it, his head lowered, his shoulders hunched. It was the Potions Master.

Hermione stopped. He raised his head slightly to look at her but did not move. She approached him slowly but did not stop, merely relaxed her speed, allowing him to turn and keep pace with her. Instinctively, they both moved unseen into an empty classroom.

Snape stood awkwardly, nervously, unable to meet her eyes. She waited, silence heavy upon them both.

At last he turned, taking an uncertain step towards her but still keeping his distance. "I am sorry."

Should she stand her ground, play the part of victim, reinforce the disgrace of his behaviour?

Her breathing came in such short breaths it hurt. Time ticked away. She was with him and yet they were apart. It made no sense.

His eyes rose at last and looked into her. She had never seen his soul laid so bare, so open and humble and meek for her.

Her forgiveness was immediate and complete. Hermione reached out her hand to him. "It's alright it's alright."

Severus looked at her, still uncertain, then suddenly and unexpectedly moved to her, falling onto his knees and clasping his arms tight about her. He buried his face in her midriff, breathing her in, kissing her clothing, her fingers, anything he came into contact with. She held him as best she could, stroking his hair, grasping his robes, soothing and easing him.

Hermione at length lowered herself to kneel in front of him, still holding his head tenderly. "I wanted it too. I needed you so much, so much. You would have stopped if I had said, I know you would." She paused. "I didn't want you to stop."

Severus looked at her, his eyes containing both shame and astonishment. His brows were furrowed slightly, uncertain he could bear her forgiveness, her awareness of what they shared. Hermione bestowed upon him a smile of complete acceptance, and slowly they moved into each other and kissed.

"It has been so long. I find I am no longer able to deal with the ... emotions, the turmoil. I find it bewildering ... disrupting ..." He drew in a breath before continuing. "I never was able to deal with it."

His candid confession staggered Hermione, but deepened her need to comfort and cocoon him. She stroked and soothed his head. "Shh ... I understand. But you are no longer alone. You must let me share those emotions with you. I am prepared to accept them."

He drew in a deep breath and spoke, his voice low and wary. "With me ... that will mean accepting an awful lot. Some of which you may not wish to ... burden."

"I know that." She continued to hold him tight. "It won't be easy. It never is. It takes time."

"Do we have time?"

She hesitated before answering. "We shall see."

There was silence for a while.

"Shall I see you tomorrow?" He still sounded uncertain.

"Of course. Tonight." She looked to him as needy as he. "Tonight, Severus, please."

He gazed at her, clearly surprised, but nodded, then kissed her once again. "Go now. I shall follow in a moment. Be careful."

Hermione rose reluctantly and left the room, checking that no one was around. She hurried unobtrusively to the dungeons. There were few people around the academic areas at this time, and once again she passed unseen. She stood waiting in his classroom, her skin starting to tingle with anticipation. Apart from her moment of desperate need earlier, her lust for him over the last few days had been relatively contained. Not now. The wait for his arrival was impossible, and she found herself pacing the room

increasingly frantically.

At last the door opened. She stopped herself from rushing over to him immediately and silently but swiftly they walked into his bedroom.

Once inside their mutual need could no longer be buried and their mouths met instantly, searing, burning. Hermione opened her mouth to him and he pressed himself so hard onto her lips she tasted her own blood. His tongue was deep inside her mouth, moving ever more frantically in his need to possess and complete her. Her hands came up again, undoing his buttons. There were too many, and with a word from him they all parted instantly. Pushing his coat down from his shoulders, she reapplied herself to the buttons of his shirt. She was able to make shorter work of that and soon his chest was naked before her. But as she tried to move to it he held her back, stripping her of her own clothes swiftly. Her hands descended instead to his belt and the buttons on his trousers. The garment fell and the two of them were both soon naked before each other.

Severus lowered her onto the bed, but as he lay atop her she smoothly drew her leg around him, and using his own weight to help her, spun him onto his back. He looked up at her in mild surprise, but she merely smiled and sitting astride him, lowered her head to his smooth, lean torso. She kissed delicately and deliciously over his scarred flesh until she came to a nipple. Opening her warm mouth, her tongue flickered out, circling and teasing it into a hard tender point. He hissed but said nothing. She moved to the other and repeated the process, eliciting a moan this time as the tight flesh beneath her tongue stiffened yet further.

After glancing up at him, Hermione moved down once again, her tongue and lips caressing and nibbling as she went. On reaching his rigid member, protruding straight up towards her, the head full and ready for her touch, she allowed herself a brief look of delight at the beautiful thing before her before slowly opening her mouth fully and lowering her head around it. He could not stop himself anymore. Throwing his head back into the pillow, he arched off the bed, his hand coming down and pushing her further onto him. She allowed him to, so exquisite was the feel of him in her mouth.

She sucked with surprising restraint for a while before lowering her head and taking him as fully as she could, her cheeks pulling in tight about him as she went. Another groan sounded from the man above her. Her belly jolted with her own desire, and she pulled back up agonisingly slowly, tasting the pre-cum seeping onto her tongue in the process.

"Please."

Hermione glanced up, unsure she had heard correctly. He hardly ever spoke during sex, and the sound of his voice so desperate startled her. But she knew what they needed and reluctantly let him pop out of her mouth, knowing that what was to come would satisfy them both immeasurably.

Moving up, she positioned herself over his smooth purple tip and leaned down, resting her hands on the pale flesh. He was looking up at her with an expression of blissful anticipation, his chest rising and falling rapidly. Not taking her eyes from his, she started to move down, slowly, deliberately. The head of his throbbing member moved into her slick tight passage, and he moaned again. Hermione exhaled a breath of delight as she felt him parting her walls. She paused to adjust to the exquisite sensations, then descended again, slowly, down, down until at last she could go no further and she rested fully on him. Her head fell back in glee; he was deeper than she knew possible. Then throwing her head back over to look at him, she pushed down on his chest and started to rise up again, almost bringing herself fully off him. She held herself tantalisingly above him once more, a smirk flitting across her mouth as she gazed down, her hair curling haphazardly around her face. He could not stand it and once again broke his silence, low and urgent.

"Down."

She smiled more broadly and moved, just as slowly as before. With each inch she took in the groan emerging from him became more desperate. She revelled in her power. Her own delicious pleasure was building strongly, and she knew soon she would have to increase her pace. Adjusting her position slightly, she moved so that she could rub her swollen clit against him. Her own moan escaped, causing him to swell inside her. After another agonising pull up, she dropped down upon him. This time she did not stop, drawing herself back up immediately. Her fingers gripped his chest, drawing out red marks from the tender flesh. He was trying to maintain eye-contact, but as her speed increased, he could not help closing his eyes to concentrate on the sublime pleasure of her squeezing and pumping his engorged cock.

She moved rapidly now, always rising fully off him only to plunge deep and hard once again. Hermione felt her muscles shift within her. Her skin tingled and her fibres tensed as delicious anticipation took hold. Knowing she was close, she leaned back for him to catch her g-spot exactly, stretching her arms behind her to rest on his legs, her breasts rising into the air.

Severus opened his eyes long enough to see the sight above him and immediately came frantically, just as she thrust her body fully onto him once again. With sudden force, he gripped her hips hard for support as he convulsed, his cock exploding so hard he thought he would be seared into her. A guttural cry was torn from him and with this manifestation of his pleasure she froze, her mouth opening in wonder before her orgasm heaved its way in wave upon wave through her primed body.

Rapture continued to pour through both of them for longer than they had ever remembered before. Hermione felt him still hard inside her, their joint spasms continuing to twitch, and realised she would never again feel so complete.

After an age, she was able to pull her head back to look down at him. Never had he appeared so contented. She smiled with perfect happiness and lowered her body onto his. Drawing his arm around her, he nuzzled against her neck, and they fell asleep.

On awakening the next day, Hermione and Severus were still lying entwined. It was Saturday and there was no need to rush to get up. They were both awake but continued to lie quietly, not speaking, for many minutes. His hand was resting on her firm abdomen, the tips of his long fingers drawing lazy circles over her smooth flesh. It was a sublime and simple moment, one that Hermione never wanted to end. Whenever they were together in his rooms, any tension, any problems between them seemed to evaporate. It was as if they had been together, been a couple, for far longer than was even possible.

Lying in the thin morning light which filtered through the narrow windows high in his room, Hermione found herself speaking.

"Which do you prefer? Lying here together peacefully or screwing each other senseless around the castle?"

She felt a smirk nudge his features. "I must have words with your language professor. They are clearly failing in their duties to improve your eloquence and articulation."

She giggled a little. "Seriously."

He sighed before drawing, "Both have their ... merits."

"I know ... but when we're here, it's just feels so right, so natural. When we are in your classroom or elsewhere, it is so desperate, delicious ... but so dangerous and frantic. We cannot survive on that." She glanced up at him uncertainly. "Can we?"

He looked almost hurt. "Sometimes ... it has to be that way. I have so much ... inside ... I need you or I would not be able to go on. I need you ..." He left his words hanging.

"What?" She was listening, rapt, hearing her own desires described in his words.

"I need you ... all the time and everywhere."

She could only acknowledge the simple truth of his words. Laying her head back down on his chest, her brows furrowed at the complexity of their situation. It was as if they were in a dream: a nightmare where one is constantly searching for something; something so right and so real, but always just out of reach, never able to be grasped. There were too many obstacles: some real, some veiled and shadowy impediments of the mind.

But there was a way to banish them. Hermione was prepared to accept it.

"You asked me if we had time, Severus." She waited a little for her words to register fully before continuing, "I do. But you must ask ... can you grant yourself time?"

He still gave no response. For now, she did not expect it of him.

Thank you for all your wonderfully insightful reviews and comments, particularly for the last chapter. I appreciate and value them so much. Keep the comments coming. The feedback is so important. xxx

Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 34

Saturday in the castle ... what to do?

After allowing the morning to rouse them slowly, Hermione and Severus rose and went separately to breakfast.

They had said no more on the matter she had broached earlier, and despite the uncertainties that beset them, Hermione was happy in the here and now. She knew at some point she would have to leave and that they would have to confront their future. But for now she would survive on his passion and need alone, and hers.

Her need to maintain contact with him had abated somewhat once they had found themselves together regularly, but this morning was different. In the midst of conversing with friends, she found her eyes moving up to his frequently. He often had his head down, sometimes conversing with McGonagall on his right, but there were moments when his deep black pupils connected with her own, and the clenching in her belly intensified. Without the distraction of lessons to occupy her mind at the weekend, she knew she could not be apart from him all day.

As she and her friends got up to leave, she stood but could not resist turning and staring towards him. He was already looking down at her. Her mouth instinctively curved up into a warm smile. She held his gaze for as long as she dared, trying to communicate her need to be with him. He did not lower his eyes, and after a while she saw his eyebrows rise slowly in acknowledgement. Her smile broadened. She turned and walked out.

She had not noticed Ginny trying to catch her attention and when she could not, following her friend's eyes up to high-table where she saw them connecting with those of her Potions Master.

As she left the hall, Hermione came across a gaggle of students gathered around a notice, talking excitedly. Crossing to them, she scanned the poster which was commanding their attention.

"Winter Ball to celebrate this first new season of Frost and Snow clear of Darkness"

It was worded in an archaic way, but Hermione welcomed what must have been McGonagall's decision to banish all thoughts of winters past, spent under the shadow of Voldemort. There had not been an official Hogwarts celebration of the Dark Lord's death. This would be it. It was to take place two weeks before the end of term, just before exams. The student population, including Hermione, were euphoric.

As she turned away she collided with a firm, tall body. "Whoops!" Her giggle broke free in her excitement. Throwing her head back in laughter, Hermione's eyes came up to meet the sparkling blue ones of Lawrence Filmore.

The collision made her stagger slightly and she found him clutching her arms to steady her. Her laugh soon faded, but she tried to keep a polite smile on her face. She said nothing.

The boy's face was pink and at length he let go of her arms with a smile of embarrassment, but not as soon as Hermione would have liked. "Hi, Hermione. Sorry 'bout that. How's it going?"

She smiled warmly. It was hard not to respond to his easy, open manner. "Hi, Lawrence. I'm good thanks. Glad to see no damage was done that time." She laughed. "What are you up to today?" She had forgotten.

"It was gonna be Quidditch practice, but now I've got that bloody detention with Snape. Such a bastard."

Hermione visibly stiffened and shot him a venomous glare. He did not seem to notice. Lawrence indicated the notice on the wall.

"That's really great, isn't it? The ball. Not often we're allowed to party." He flashed his most gorgeous smile. It was wasted on her.

"Yeah ... yeah ... it'll be lots of fun." They stood awkwardly for a moment. Hermione knew she needed to go, wanted to go, but there were so many people surrounding them that she could see no obvious escape route.

Lawrence looked nervous. He stuck his hands in his pockets and looked at every point around her except her eyes. "Hermione ... uhh ... would you like to ..."

"Oh! I forgot I left my Transfiguration text book in the library yesterday. I've got to go because I really need it for this essay I'm writing for my NEWT dissertation. I'd better do that now. The library shuts after lunch today. Bye, Lawrence." Her words spilled out in a flustered rush of trivial, boorish excuses. She knew what he was about to ask and knew also that she did not have enough of her wits about her to respond sensibly. Pushing her way through the crowd, she lowered her head and hurried away, leaving a bemused and disappointed Filmore behind.

Once away from the crowds, Hermione soon forgot about the incident and thought only of finding Severus. She hurried along the corridors to the dungeons. There was no one around and once again she proceeded undetected, but after a quick search of his rooms soon found he was not there. She hurried back to the area near the staff Common Room. If he was in there, she was unsure how she could alert him to her presence, but as she approached it her heart leapt.

Severus was standing talking to the current Dark Arts professor, a twinkly-eyed elderly wizard called Magnus Piercy. Seized with a sudden impulse and smiling broadly, Hermione approached them.

"Good morning, Professor Piercy, Professor Snape."

Professor Piercy's eyes lit up at the sight of the bright young witch before him. So did Professor Snape's.

"Aah! Miss Granger! How pleasant to see you on this beautiful autumn day." Piercy smiled broadly. Snape inclined his head to her slightly, looking momentarily into her eyes before lowering his swiftly. "What can we do for you?"

"I was just wondering, Professor, if you could lend me a particular book. Now the trouble is, I know what it's about, and I think I know the name of the author, but I can't quite seem to remember the title." Hermione spoke with wide-eyed innocence, exaggerating her mock ignorance.

She was standing close to Snape and could feel his rich black robes brushing against her. There was no one else around, and his voluminous clothes were shielding their arms from Piercy's sight. She stealthily moved her hand over and let it graze over his fingers. They were warm and tactile. Her belly somersaulted.

"Well, my dear, perhaps if you explain the content to me, I may be able to bring it to mind."

"Thank you, Professor. Well, it's about Dark Magic in medieval times, and how Witches and Wizards were employed by Muggle despots to create a smokescreen for the various atrocities they frequently perpetrated." Their hands still touched. Hermione's insides clenched unbearably as she felt his fingers enclose suddenly and tightly around hers, entwining and ensnaring them.

"Aah yes!" Piercy furrowed his brow in concentration. "I do believe I know what you're talking about. Now let me think."

Snape relaxed his hold on her hand slightly but continued to caress and stroke her fingers. His thumb ran idly over hers and the tip of his forefinger gently rubbed her palm. She drew in an involuntary little gasp and tried to turn it into an expression of extreme joy that the ancient professor before her had been able to assist her noble academic endeavours.

"Oh! I'm so glad. Do you know the author? It's Hurltwist ... or someone ... I think ..." She sounded ridiculously happy. Piercy was amazed once again at the Granger girl's thirst for knowledge.

"I haven't seen that volume for a while, but ... yes! I have it now!" His eyes widened in excitement. Snape's palm was pressed firmly into the flesh of Hermione's hand as his little finger rubbed exquisitely over the sensitive inner part of her wrist. She mimicked Piercy's expression of delight with genuine fervour as the gnarled professor continued. "It's 'Masking Muggles How the Dark Arts shaped the Middle Ages' by Erasmus Hirstwhistle!"

"Oh, Professor Piercy you are a star! May I borrow it?" Piercy flushed slightly at her compliment and lowered his head with a smile. Hermione wondered if she would come simply from her Potions Master's sensual caress of her hand.

"But of course, my dear. I shall have it ready for you at our next lesson. Now I must be off. Severus?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "Oh! Actually, there was another matter I needed to discuss with Professor Snape. What a coincidence coming across both of you here. I find I'm in need of him too." She turned and beamed deliciously at the black-haired wizard still discreetly stroking her palm.

Piercy chuckled slightly and leant up to Snape, whispering, "Now there's an offer you can't refuse, eh, Severus?"

Snape shot him a look of such disdain that Piercy cleared his throat in sudden embarrassment before shuffling off as fast as a wizened old professor can shuffle off.

They had not let go of their hold on each other. Once Piercy had turned a corner, Hermione glanced about her. There was no one around, but they were standing in a wide, bright corridor. Although it was rare for there to be teachers or staff around here on a Saturday, it was possible that someone could come upon them at any moment.

Neither spoke. Their fingers were still entwined. Hermione turned to look up at him, and silently and sensuously, she drew her fingers out of his and brought both her hands up around his neck. In broad daylight, and in the middle of one of the most public corridors of Hogwarts's School, she pulled Severus Snape's head down to hers and kissed him long and deep.

They stood together, their tongues dancing, lips tasting each other for an age. If he felt any concern about their situation, he did not show it. He drew his hands around her waist and pulled her in tight to him. Her fingers twirled in his hair, ruffling it as she held his head hard onto hers. The only sound was the occasional deep drawing in of breath through their noses. They did not wish to part their mouths for one moment.

Hermione pressed herself increasingly desperately against him and felt him hard and insistent. She groaned into his mouth, drawing another surge against her hips.

After an age they pulled apart, gasping for breath. Hermione looked at him, her focus bleary with lust, a satisfied smile on her red mouth. Her lips were swollen and bruised from the intensity of their kiss and he could not take his eyes from them. This time she grabbed his hands and pulled him back with her into a deserted classroom. As soon as they were inside their mouths met again.

He travelled down her neck, his hot, wet mouth igniting a trail of fire as it went. She still held his head tight, pressing him into her flesh and breathed out heavily, "What do you want, Severus? Tell me what you want."

He glanced up at her, moving ever down towards her breast. She lifted her shirt quickly over her head. Before she could reach for her bra clasp, he had reached into a cup and lifted her breast out to sit on top of it, the nipple already taut and expectant in the cool air. His thumb flitted over it, sending a shot of pleasure to her dripping pussy. She groaned, arching her breast up to his mouth, so close.

He continued to run his thumb lightly over the tight pink bud, breathing over it, "You know what I want ... I want ..." But he did not finish his sentence. His mouth descended hard and he fed on the nipple as if his life depended on it. Hermione's hand tightened in his hair, and she pressed him ever harder onto her, her question forgotten. She gasped with delight as delicious jolts of rapture coursed from her breast to her clit, the blood rushing in to swell it to a ripe kernel of desperate anticipation.

Snape stayed at her breast for some time. She knew how much he loved and needed it. She wasn't complaining. His tongue laved and swirled, his lips pulled and tugged, and his teeth, only when she was drawn out to the sharpest point, bit down tenderly at first, then with increasing need. A guttural cry started deep down in her, rising up to a scream of delight. She knew when at last he touched her clit she would come almost instantly.

At last he released the nipple from his mouth and glanced down to undo his trousers. He stepped out of them and his underwear and placed her quickly on a table before him. She wriggled swiftly out of her knickers and spread her legs wide. He could see her juices shining on her and groaned deep in longing. Then bringing his hands around her backside he pulled her forward, impaling her on him immediately. She gasped with the sudden emplacement inside her, but soon her features changed into a broad grin.

He reached under her rump and gripped firmly, then with a grunt of effort, lifted her up, standing with her resting fully on him, supported only by his hands and iron cock.

Her head fell back in an ecstatic laugh, and her legs curled tight around his waist. Her delight in him could not be contained and she started pushing herself up as much as she could, feeling him filling her so profoundly. "Oh god, oh god, Severus ... *that's so good* ... do you know how good that feels ... *so fucking good*." Her words were delirious, but they touched him so deeply he knew it would only take a little movement for him to finish.

Gazing into her lust-crazed eyes, he signalled to her. She started to move as much as possible. Not much was possible but little was needed. He easily caught her clit and she squeezed around him, raising herself up enough to give him the friction that he needed. It was enough for them both. She was so ready that the next touch of her clit, combined with the feel of him so hard inside her, was the end. She came violently, clasping her arms and legs tight around him, allowing her pleased spasms to transmit directly to him. Her uninhibited groans reverberated around the silent room. As she pulsated around his cock, he opened his mouth, his pleasure ripping its way out of him. He cried out louder than she had ever heard him as he burst into her. His fingers clenched, digging into the flesh of her behind.

It wasn't until the last convulsions had left their bodies that Severus staggered quickly over, lowering her onto a desk. Hermione noticed that he was breathing heavily with exhaustion, and only then realised what an effort it must have been for him to hold her for so long on his cock.

Still, she smirked, it seemed to have been worth it.

After their breathing had settled and they were adjusting their clothing, Hermione spoke across to him. "We could do something this morning."

"Our options are limited." His response was instant and clinical.

She sighed quietly at his unimaginative reaction. "You know what I'd really love to do?"

He glanced up at her in query.

"Go to Hogsmeade with you. Just a normal couple: shopping, strolling, lunch. Wouldn't it be wonderful?"

Severus' face tensed and he looked almost lost, clearly unable to entertain such a notion. Not responding, he concentrated on doing up his buttons. She wasn't surprised by his reaction but still it caused her deep disappointment. He had after all not been worried about kissing her in an open corridor moments before.

Thinking about it, however, it was hard to imagine him ever doing those things, whatever the circumstances, let alone illicitly with one of his students. She wondered about suggesting a disguise, maybe even using Polyjuice Potion, but thought that would rather defeat the purpose; she wanted to be out with *him*, physically and emotionally. She knew it was impossible but still wanted to press him.

"What do you think?"

He shot her a glare. "Why are you being so foolish?" His voice was terse and spiteful.

Hermione was taken aback by his sudden coldness and felt herself blushing at his rebuke. She did not respond immediately, but once her confidence had returned she raised herself up and spoke firmly.

"I am not being foolish, Severus. I want to exist with you beyond this place. Clearly, it would be impossible to go into Hogsmeade as a couple now. I only mentioned it to allow myself a little moment of fantasy, silly little romantic fool that I am." She spoke bitterly, mimicking his tones and thoughts. "But one day, there will come a time, I hope, when the possibility of doing something like that may be a reality."

She watched him carefully. He could not raise his head to look at her. She sighed deeply, and making sure her clothing was neat, turned to go. "Well ... thank you for that, Severus ... bloody good fuck as ever ..."

She walked swiftly past him, but before she could get very far he had grabbed her arm sharply and held her back, staring hard into her eyes.

"Don't be so coarse." His words were forceful, dogmatic.

Hermione held her nerve and his gaze. "Why not, Severus? That's all there is between us. That's all we do. Fuck."

"You know that's not true."

"Do I?"

He looked at her, a fiery fury burning in his eyes. She stared back unabashed. Then suddenly he reached up, pulling off his robes and letting them drop to the ground. Grabbing her swift and hard round the waist, he twirled his wand, mumbling some words. Hermione felt her mind swirl; her feet were pulled out from under her and the room around her vanished.

A moment later, although it might have been longer (she had lost all sense of time and space), she became aware of standing on firm ground once again with the same strong hands still holding her. She looked up at Snape. His eyes were still trained on her but now glowed with a vibrant excitement.

Hermione realised suddenly that they were outside. Still holding him tight, she looked around. They were on a small, stone bridge, a gentle stream flowing under it. More stone buildings stretched off along a street with shops and restaurants fanning off it. It was a beautiful place, hardly touched by modern life, but still vibrant and bustling.

Hermione asked in hushed awe, "Where are we?"

"Grasmere. It's in the Lake District."

She glanced at him reproachfully. "I know where it is," she teased. "William Wordsworth was from here." But she could not chide him for long; she was ecstatically happy, but confused. "I thought it was impossible to Disapparate from inside the castle."

"It is for most, but you seem to be forgetting who I am." She smirked at his arrogant superiority but allowed him to continue. "Besides, that was technically not Apparition."

She raised her eyebrows in query. He continued. "It is a form of transport I have devised myself, similar to Apparition, but able to transcend any limiting charms and wards while also diffusing the rather more ... unpleasant side-effects."

Hermione looked up at him in stark admiration. She often forgot what an extraordinary master of magic he was. Her heart swelled and he allowed himself a slight smile of satisfaction as she gazed up. Then, with a deep breath, Hermione turned and started to walk with him through the town.

He drew several glances; his lengthy black hair and many-buttoned dark frock coat were hardly the norm in Middle England, but Hermione could not care less. She did not know these people and would never see any of them again. Their anonymity was liberating and exhilarating.

Hermione could not remember a more relaxed and enjoyable Saturday morning. Severus seemed completely content away from the oppressive school atmosphere and more at ease with Muggles than she thought possible. She was humbly reminded that he had grown up among them. They strolled through the quaint shops. It was a tourist hotspot but still retained the easy charm of deep-rooted English country beauty. On passing some tearooms, Hermione grabbed his hand and pulled him through the door.

She ordered for them: tea and cakes, anticipating them not getting back in time for lunch, although she knew at the back of her mind that he needed to be back to take detention.

As their food and drink arrived she leaned over to him and smiled cheekily. "I retract my previous statement ... and my coarse language. You are right. I shouldn't use it."

Severus glanced up while pouring his tea. "It was not the word I objected to but the sentiment surrounding it."

"I'm sorry. I suppose I did it deliberately. I wanted to see how you'd react. It was as if I was challenging you."

He remained looking coolly at her. "And have I risen to your challenge?"

She smiled across at him. "Admirably. But then ... you always do rise to it, Severus." She smirked, lowering her gaze teasingly.

His eyes danced but his features remained impassive and he spoke with a hint of his familiar disparaging coldness, "I bring you to a beautiful part of the country, the town of one of our greatest poets, surrounded by refined decorum and propriety ... and still I cannot drag your mind out of the gutter." He paused until she'd raised her eyes to his again before continuing, his low drawl more delicious than ever, "Thank Merlin for that."

She smiled broadly and took a bite out of her carrot cake.

After tea, they went and sat by the lake, watching the people passing by and the boats and birds on the shimmering ripples of the water stretching away towards the rising hills beyond. Hermione rested her head on his shoulder. "We'll have to get back soon." She did not refer to the reason why.

They sat a while longer in the thin October sunshine.

"Thank you." He was not used to hearing that word addressed to him, and at first did not realise what she was referring to. She sensed his query. "For bringing me here. Have you enjoyed yourself?"

He raised himself to look down at her, his eyes flitting over her face, but did not answer. A pang of concern nudged Hermione. Then slowly, Severus lowered his head to kiss her warm, long and tenderly in reply.

Oh, Severus, you got there in the end ...

I so enjoy reading your thoughts. LL x

Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 34

Quite a visceral chapter to show how much these two need each other, emotionally and physically. Falling, falling, falling ...

They returned to Hogwarts just after half past one having missed lunch, not that they needed it.

Hermione and Severus arrived back in the same classroom they had left earlier. He simply bent down to retrieve his robes and replaced them about his person.

"I am busy this afternoon ... unfortunately." He had reassumed the chill tones of intolerant schoolmaster.

"Yes."

"I know that Filch is cleaning my rooms this evening. I do not see how you can come tonight."

Hermione's heart sank. "Cleaning your rooms on a Saturday night?"

"I believe he prefers to work ... unencumbered by adolescents. I have a certain empathy."

"Surely magic is used to clean the castle?"

"Generally, but Filch likes to feel useful."

"You are kind to indulge him."

He did not respond.

A feeling somewhat like grief was sweeping through Hermione. Her gut ached with the thought of not being with him. "Can't you Apparate ... or whatever it is you do ... we could meet somewhere safe?"

"It would be a risk. It is harder to do so within the castle than beyond it."

"So I won't see you until tomorrow?" Her voice was desolate.

"It would seem that way." Snape's words were dismissive, but she still clearly heard regret in his tone.

He stood apart from her. It was nearly two o'clock. He would have to go to take detention. With feet of lead, Hermione turned to leave. "So ... until then, I suppose ..." She walked past him, but he caught her hand in his and stopped her firmly but gently. Slowly but deliberately he brought his head to hers.

The kiss started tenderly and languorously, but they were unable to stem the inexorable build up of passion, and soon their tongues and lips were mingling desperately as they tried to inhabit each other.

When finally they broke away, Hermione laid her head on his chest and Severus held her tight to him.

"I don't think I can stand being away from you." Her words were spoken from a place deep within.

He did not reply, but his hand moved in a circle on the small of her back, and she took his silence as concurrence.

At last she pulled back and with a final kiss whispered, "Goodbye," against his lips before leaving the room.

Hermione spent the afternoon in the library, trying desperately to fill the hollowness inside. At about half-past-three she heard footsteps approaching.

"Found you! 'Mione, it's Saturday! We're all outside. Don't waste away in here."

It was Ginny. Hermione smiled wearily up at her. "Hi, Gin. Sorry. I'm just trying to catch up on things."

"We missed you this morning too. Couldn't find you anywhere."

"I went for a walk." Hermione started to pack away her things, thinking it wise to show willing, but kept her head down.

"On your own?"

"Yep." She was happy to go with Ginny now, but did not want to be pressed.

"Shame. A certain Quidditch hottie was looking for you."

Hermione's eyes darted to Ginny's and she could not help but groan. "Oh god."

"Hermione! He's gorgeous! Everyone's so jealous of you ... they all know he fancies you. Why don't you just have a bit of fun ... let your hair down?"

Hermione could not stand it. "I just ... I'm just not interested in him," she said firmly.

Ginny paused momentarily. "Well ... is there anyone you are interested in?" She was looking at her curiously.

Hermione knew her face was reddening. She kept her eyes lowered and mumbled a barely audible, "No."

"Well, you've missed your chance with Lawrence for the day. He's in detention all afternoon."

"Is he?" She tried to appear nonchalant.

"You know he is," Ginny's voice had hardened somewhat. "I heard you were sitting right next to him when Snape laid into him."

"Oh yeah ... it slipped my mind." She still could not bring herself to look at her friend but could feel Ginny's steady gaze on her.

"Sounds like Snape was in typically sadistic form that day. What did you think?"

"I think Lawrence said something insulting to him," she mumbled.

"Really? I find it hard to believe it was that bad. You're normally the first to defend someone in front of Snape."

Why was Ginny persisting in discussing this matter? A sense of unease crept over Hermione and she heard her voice becoming defensive and tetchy. "I don't know. I can't remember. I wasn't really paying attention." She looked at Ginny abruptly. "Shall we go?"

Ginny held her gaze quietly and seriously for a while, as if waiting for something. She eventually lowered her head with a slight regretful smile. "Come on, 'Mione. Let's get you out of here."

The tension soon dispersed and the two young women walked out of the library together.

Being with her friends was good and eased the emptiness inside. Ginny seemed to have relaxed with her again and they spent an afternoon catching up and laughing. Still, their earlier conversation niggled Hermione. Had Ginny noticed? Part of her almost wanted to blurt it all out to her. She was a true friend, and Hermione trusted her completely but did not want to betray Severus. And Ginny certainly bore no affection for her Potions Master. She would find the whole situation incomprehensible, surely?

But as the afternoon wore on the two friends' easy and familiar good humour at last pushed the matter to the back of Hermione's mind.

She and Snape only overlapped briefly at supper, and Hermione was careful to keep her head down although the need for connection with him burned stronger than ever. She was also relieved to find Lawrence Filmore sitting a long way down the table from her. He looked utterly fed up after his wasted afternoon, and she was able to avoid any more awkward encounters with him.

After supper, she returned to the Gryffindor Common Room and sat reading quietly. Lawrence wasn't there again ... he had an equipment maintenance session. The Common Room had a relaxed, weekend atmosphere and her friends occasionally wandered over for a chat. Hermione would break away from her book and turn to them, conversing freely, lolling back languidly on the sofa. She felt increasingly relaxed.

At around nine o'clock the door opened and a scruffy-haired boy in a Gryffindor jumper came in. He must have been a fourth or fifth year. Hermione noticed him glance at her as he walked over to an armchair in the corner. He had an intense, brooding countenance which held something vaguely familiar in it. Hermione was sure she knew him but could not quite place him. She returned to her book.

The Common Room gradually thinned out. Hermione enjoyed the descending peace and stayed reading for a while. Eventually, she thought she should head for bed and lowered her book. Her eyes fell on the boy with the messy hair in the corner. He was looking at her intently. She quickly dropped her gaze. *Shit*. It was bad enough coping with Filmore. She really didn't want some hormonal teenager mooning around her too. She swiftly rose and went to her room.

She washed and undressed, grateful for the peace and solitude. Putting on her silk nightwear, she was about to get into bed when there was a knock on the door. It sounded like the sort of knock Ginny normally gave. Hermione rolled her eyes. She wasn't in the mood to be sociable anymore but went to open the door to her friend.

Standing outside was the scruffy-haired boy. Hermione stiffened and instinctively pushed the door shut a little. "What do you want?" she asked firmly.

"May I come in?" His voice was surprisingly measured for a young boy. She could not quite believe his audacity.

"Err ... No!"

But before she could stop him, he had pushed the door open strongly and moved into the room, shutting it smoothly behind him.

Hermione backed off, grabbing her wand quickly and pointing it straight at him.

"Right. You need to go ... now. This is completely unacceptable. If McGonagall hears about this you will be expelled."

The boy continued to walk silently towards her. He was remarkably tall for a fourth year, taller than she had noticed before. Hermione backed off further but held her nerve. "Stop! I'm warning you. I am not afraid to use this."

"I am sure you are not." His voice was deeper than she had anticipated.

His eyes stared into hers with a burn Hermione found almost painful, but as she looked back, she saw them darkening from a deep brown into black itself. The boy seemed to be growing taller with each step. His scruffy brown hair straightened and became a rich black, and his features shifted gradually, maturing, lengthening. When he at last stopped a mere step away from her Hermione found herself still clutching her wand staring up into the face of Severus Snape.

"I think perhaps you should put that down, Miss Granger."

"How did you ... but ... what ...?" Hermione could only gaze up in wondrous bewilderment at the man before her.

"Once again ... you forget who I am."

She flung her arms around him, her wand clattering noisily to the ground in the process. To have him to herself in the privacy of her room filled her with such deep joy, that all she could do was stand, clutching him as close to herself as was possible, breathing in the force of him.

"Can you stay?"

"That was the general idea." The sensual sardonic drawl had returned and throbbed through his chest to her, fuelling her desire instantly. But it was he who brought his hands up to her face and held her head up to hers, looking from one eye to the other with more searching tenderness than she had ever seen before.

"Hermione."

It was almost a prayer.

Hermione's eyes pricked and she knew he would see them growing moist. But before she could feel any embarrassment, he had closed the distance between them, his lips parting hers, warm but insistent. She melted into him and felt his tongue slip languidly into her mouth, flitting over hers to taste her sweetness as if for the first time.

At length his hands moved down to clasp her waist, and holding it firmly he spun her around, pulling her back hard into him. His mouth moved back to her head, and she turned instinctively to allow him to seek out her most tender spots. He moved over her face, planting delicious kisses as he travelled, coming to rest at her ear where he let his tongue explore the outer shell before slipping idly inside to tease and caress the sensitive place within.

He had never been so exquisitely sensual; her head fell back onto his shoulder and Hermione let her eyes close and her mouth hang open in lazy pleasure.

While his mouth continued its sensuous exploration of her ear, she felt one hand reach down to hold and squeeze her breast, his thumb rubbing lightly over the fabric encasing the nipple. She sucked in a sharp breath, but her pleasure was heightened yet further when his other hand slipped down her body, moving across it to the front. His fingers teasingly quested down into her silk pants, down, until they found her ripe and moist. Hermione gasped in a thrilled breath, pulling herself up towards his fingers. Reaching down under her, he thrust one finger hard up inside while the hand at her breast tugged the material down to roll the taut pink nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

His tongue was still circling idly within her ear, and the hand at her sodden pussy stroked and cajoled her so deliciously that she felt the familiar clenching in her belly swell to unbearable fullness. Her mind fogged and she focused only on the sensations he was drawing from the three parts of her body. At last it could wait no more, as with a final rub and twist at her clit and nipple she came completely, almost collapsing onto the hand that had brought her such exquisite pleasure. The hand at her breast moved to grip her body, pulling her close to his firm torso as she spasmed against him, a gasping cry wrenched from her.

Through her pleasure Hermione could feel him hard and insistent pressing into her back, and almost immediately the desire to reciprocate, feed on him, flooded through her. When she had recovered enough, she spun herself around and reached her hands down to his belt. But it was too frustrating, and she bent her knees, picking her wand up and muttering a spell all in the same movement. He suddenly found himself naked.

Severus raised a teasing eyebrow to her, but she frowned amidst her gasping need. "I need you ... can't wait ..."

She was still on her knees and level with his huge throbbing cock which swayed slightly towards her, seeking out its pleasure. She grinned in anticipation, a bubble of thrilled laughter sounding out of her before she opened her mouth fully and plunged her head down onto him.

He threw his head back and groaned long and loud. The pleasure this woman brought to him was indescribable.

Never had Hermione been so desperate to engulf him, swallow him as deep as she could. Her head moved rapidly, sucking hard. She did not tease this time as she would normally do; she wanted him as far down as she could take him. Bringing her head forward inch by inch, she drew more and more of him down her. She surprised herself at her ability to take him so fully. The man above her groaned, his mine beyond rational thought.

Then suddenly, she had to pull back, and dragged her lips hard over him as she went before releasing him with an urgent gasp, gulping in much-needed air. She glanced up to him ... there was an expression of awed wonder on both their faces ... before lowering her head swiftly again and repeating the process. As he descended towards her throat she felt him swell and she adjusted her ministrations, now twirling her tongue hard around his engorged head. Her hands came up to grasp his sac, and she sensed his readiness. With a final hard pull of her lips and tongue, she felt him tense within her mouth before hot bursts shot to the back of her throat. They hit her with such force that she struggled to catch it all. Moving off him a little, she captured the last spurts on her tongue, tasting it thick and salty in her mouth.

At last she leant back from him, releasing him tenderly from her swollen lips. Neither spoke. At that moment, words were so inadequate as to be obscene.

Severus stood above her, almost paralysed. She turned her head to look up at him. Holding his gaze, she swallowed hard, feeling his essence drip down into her. For the first time ever his eyes were filled with something she had never before seen in them ... admiration.

It struck her with wry amusement that after all her academic brilliance and strength in helping to defeat Voldemort it should be this act that would draw it out of him. He may be a supreme wizard and academic, but he was still a man after all.

For a while neither could move. Hermione remained kneeling before him, her eyes gazing blearily up into his. Then suddenly he bent to her, grabbed her arms firmly in his hands and raised her up. It took her by surprise, but his display of force stirred the constant ache in her belly once again. She reached her arms out to him, running them along the sinewy muscles of his body, trying to lower her head to him, but she was prevented. He held her back and instead manoeuvred her powerfully to a chair at the side of the room. He pushed her slightly and she fell into it with a jolting gasp.

Immediately he knelt before her, pushing her legs far apart and lowering his mouth to the soft flesh behind her knee on which he planted a hot open-mouthed kiss, before dragging his lips and tongue up her inner thigh, gathering in the dampness which was already glistening off her from the pleasure he had given her earlier. Hermione kept her head raised to gaze down at him, but found her features creasing in expectation of what was to come. His tongue ran hard up her legs before finally reaching the place it sought. Once there, he quickly plunged straight into her, seeking into her eager pussy and plundering what he found. He groaned deliriously against her, the vibrations throbbing through her being.

Hermione brought her hand down hard to clasp his hair and could not prevent her head from falling back; it was impossible to focus. Severus licked and sucked desperately at her juices, drinking down every drop of her he could. His tongue came out and stroked hard from top to bottom, tantalising her needy clit as it went but more intent on absorbing all her pleasure on his tongue. His ardour overwhelmed her, and the sublime feelings he wrought brought more and more pleasure flooding to him. He lapped it up eagerly, his thirst unquenchable.

She was so close; she willed him nearer to her throbbing clit, but just when she thought she would come he pulled up and brought his head up to hers, kissing her hard, forcing his tongue deep into her mouth. She tasted herself strongly on him; it was a strange sensation, but one she welcomed if only for the passion he had displayed in taking it. He pulled her lower lip out with his teeth, his eyes burning into hers. Holding her head hard between his hands, he hissed low and desperate, "I am addicted to the taste of you, witch. I am addicted to the exquisite taste of your pleasure."

Her clit groaned in need. She moaned almost incoherently, trying to push him down again, "Please ... please *.go back...* I need you there ... oh god *...please.*" She was almost sobbing. He merely clasped her head in his hands, forcing her eyes to focus on him.

"Do you know what you taste of? Do you know what I taste when I suck your pleasure out of you?"

She shook her head blearily, taking in his passion but desperate for the feel of his tongue and mouth on her again.

"You taste of promise ... you taste of reawakening. You taste of life, witch."

At last Hermione listened to his words. But just as the depth of his sentiment started to sink in, he swiftly lowered himself again to her, and reapplied himself to lavishing her

burning core with his tongue. She was now so primed that both her hands came down to push his head hard into her.

His brief absence had caused her clit to swell and ripen beyond containment, and with his words still ringing in her ear, his tongue swept hard up, at last encircling it fully. Her hands, along with her other muscles, tightened in expectation. Severus groaned with the sudden tug on his hair but did not pull back. She tensed, her eyes widening. Then the wave broke and Hermione convulsed hard over and over against his head, a deep gasping cry ripping from her. He drank in her ecstasy in long drafts, ensuring he caught every drop.

Only when he was fully sated, long after the last twitch of pleasure had left her body, did he at last raise himself up. He stood, looking down at her recumbent in the chair. She smiled blearily, brushing her hair out of her eyes.

Initially Severus seemed as incapable as her of moving, and it was Hermione who at length pulled herself up. She moved to stand against him, pressing her lithe body hard upon his tight frame, feeling him still hard and needy against her abdomen, despite all that had already passed between them.

Taking his hand, she pulled him gently towards her bed and there they made love, their bodies finding mutual release in each other.

As they lay afterwards, her head resting on his taut chest, she inquired tenderly, "How did you do that ... turn into that boy?"

"I shall tell you another time."

His words were gentle but she did not doubt his seriousness. "Was it Polyjuice Potion?"

"Not exactly. Again, I adapted it to suit my own needs."

"What would you call it?"

"Like many of the new forms of magic I have invented, I do not name them all. As I will be the only person using them, there is no need to do so."

"Don't you think that's rather selfish," she asked teasingly, "keeping it all for yourself?"

"Probably." He spoke without a hint of concern.

They lay still for a while longer, just looking at each other. She reached up a hand to stroke his face.

"You said something earlier."

He waited for her to continue.

"You said I tasted of life."

He did not respond.

At length Hermione spoke again, voicing words that had hitherto not been spoken.

"I was there, you know."

"When?" He was merely prompting her.

"When you were bitten. I saw it happen." Again there was silence for a time. "I saw your body lying there on the floor of the shack. I thought you were dead."

"Perhaps I was."

His words startled her. She stared intently at him. "But ... how is that possible ...?"

"It depends what you consider death to be."

"And what do you consider death to be, Severus?"

He was silent for a long while.

"The absence of meaning."

"I don't understand." She was pressing him for an explanation.

"When one no longer has a reason to be alive then one must die."

"That is ridiculous."

"Is it?"

"Are you telling me you no longer had a reason to be alive?"

"Yes."

"But you're not dead, Severus. You lived. How do you then explain that?"

"Something dragged me back."

"Dragged you?"

"I don't think I wanted to come. But then ..."

"Then?"

"I don't know. I cannot recall it." He spoke openly enough, but she wondered if he was holding something back.

In her heart she knew she was too.

"And what about now, Severus? Now that you have been dragged back?"

He looked at her for a while, his eyes once more searching her face. "I am content."

Hermione held his gaze.

She wanted to tell him more: more about when she had come to see his body in the mortuary, about why she had come, but the moment had gone. Enough had been said for one night.

Hermione lay her head on her pillow, feeling him pressed tight against her, and fell asleep with Severus in her room in Gryffindor Tower.

I am so enjoying your reviews and perceptive comments. Thank you all so much! x

Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 34

As in all relationships, things are never easy, particularly if you are called Severus and Hermione. A chapter of complexity.

When Hermione awoke the next day in her room, she turned to find Severus sleeping peacefully beside her. In the foggy moments of slow awareness after a deep sleep she had briefly forgotten she was not alone in her bed, and the sight of him before her concentrated the heavy sensation of relaxed happiness that throbbed through her limbs as she lay in the early morning light.

With a deep sigh he awoke and initially appeared equally surprised to find himself in a bedroom in Gryffindor Tower. Hermione said nothing but reached over to kiss him deeply. Despite the fact that she had slept little during the night, she felt more rested than she usually did on awakening. Their kiss deepened, and instinctively, almost subconsciously, she rolled over onto him and slowly slipped her moist warm body down onto his already erect member. He groaned into her mouth. She continued to lie flat on him, not breaking the kiss, and moved her hips with fluid, languid tightness along him. It was not long before they both came quietly and perfectly.

Hermione lay her head on his chest, tracing over one of his many raised scars.

"How exactly did you change into that boy last night?"

"I used a potion I derived many years ago. It is similar to Polyjuice Potion but allows one more control over the changes."

"Thinking about it now, I could see a little of you in that boy from the start."

"You would have done. The fundamental nature of the true person can never be completely eradicated."

"Is he a real boy the one you impersonated?"

There was a slight pause before he answered.

"Was."

He spoke with little discernible emotion; Hermione found herself oddly unnerved.

"What do you mean?"

"He died." His words were stark.

A sudden chill ran through Hermione despite all the horror she had confronted in her short life, but she tensed against it, not wishing to show him. "Oh ... I see ... when?" The tension in her voice was apparent. He answered fluidly and freely, but his voice was still strangely clinical.

"Many years ago, shortly after I first started teaching here. The potion only works properly, giving me full control over the transformation, if I use the essence of a dead person."

Hermione was silent.

"Why don't you ask what it is you want to ask?" His low voice broke the air between them.

She tensed somewhat. "What do you mean?"

"You want to know how he died."

Hermione did not at first respond, but curiosity eventually got the better of her. "Go on then."

Severus started talking, his voice still flat, but with a tinge of poignancy Hermione had never previously detected in it. "The boy was talented bright ... and curious. He became very interested in potions, and I rewarded his inquisitiveness by giving him extra tuition. Foolishly, I had not realised that he was also developing an even greater interest in the Dark Arts. I also had little idea that his mother, to whom he was devoted, was terminally ill. He combined his knowledge of the two realms of deepest magic to produce a potion which would cure her disease.

"The price for his foray into the Dark Side was that he had to give of his own life force to save her. This was achieved this amalgam of his life into the potion with the deepest and darkest magic. It was an extraordinary achievement for one so young. If successful, he would be weakened for a while, his mother would be cured, and he would then gradually recover. At the time, I, of course, had no idea he was doing this."

Hermione listened with rapt attention. She had never heard Severus speaking so freely about his past, let alone with regard to concern for another human being. She feared what he would say next, but was intensely curious and in thrall to his deep throbbing discourse. "What happened?" she pressed him.

"He underestimated the toll the experience would take on his own body and soul. His mother did indeed recover, but he was left broken and beaten by the process, and instead of growing stronger in the following days after returning to school, he grew weaker. It was then that he divulged to me what had transpired. I cursed myself for not being more aware. I should have seen all too well the signs of a brilliant young wizard being swayed by the Dark Arts." She heard clear bitter regret in his tone and knew he was speaking about himself. "I myself tried to restore him to health, but it was too late. The darkness had invaded his body to such an extent that there was nothing that

could be done. He died here in school a few weeks after administering the potion. His mother, whom he had saved with his own life, then faded away into despair and grief and succumbed to the same fate as her son a few short months later."

Hermione listened in stunned silence. She could not fully process all he had said. The tragedy of the boy's tale was in itself deeply moving, but what affected her yet more was how Severus had clearly felt responsible for his death, and how he now had felt ready to impart the tale to her with integrity and honesty. If he had recently been showing signs of emotional regrowth, she herself had still not considered it of him in his younger days, so wrapped up had she been in the here and now. The thought that he may have been an emotionally sentient person, with hope and affection and regret, before she had found him, even with reason telling her that it must have been the case, had not occurred to her.

She was at once profoundly humbled but oddly dispossessed by his words.

"What was his name?" She could not hide the emotion in her voice.

"Laszlo Treworgan."

Hermione paused. "You said you needed to take the essence of a dead person to make your potion."

"Yes." His voice was strangely empty again.

"What do you mean by ... essence?"

"I had to take his blood." He was chillingly candid. Hermione felt that cold prickle course through her again.

"I see ... when?"

"Within an hour of his death."

An image of her lover bending over the dead boy's body, piercing his side with his wand, draining blood from the now lifeless wound flashed before Hermione's eyes. Her stomach lurched. The sentiments of care and regret he had stirred were suddenly and starkly tempered by the reminder of how dispassionate and clinical he could be. Severus felt her tense.

"Remember I am a Master of Potions. As such, I have to take as and when I can. The deepest magic requires profound solutions. The blood of a person recently deceased is one of the most potent ingredients known to the wizarding world. I could not ignore the opportunity."

Hermione remained silent. The complexity and contradictions of the man struck home with disturbing force. The thought, so vivid in her mind's eye, of what he had done after having described the tragedy of the boy with such sincerity troubled her. This unease was compounded by the memory of the boy's intense face staring at her in the Common Room the previous night, made ever more intense by Severus' soul locked within.

For the first time since they had come to each other, she wished she was on her own.

Hermione deliberately emitted a little sigh, exaggerating its normality and knowing she had failed. It sounded flippant and false.

"I think I'll go to breakfast."

She kissed him noticeably quickly and lightly on the chest and rose up, not looking back. Severus watched her after she had returned from the bathroom. Awkward tension was clearly written on her lowered face. He broke the silence with measured tones.

"You have been exposed to darker things."

"Yes." Still, she did not look up. "It doesn't matter. It's just ... I can clearly see his face before me now ... sitting in the corner ... Remembering it now ... it is as if he was back from the dead."

"You know that was me sitting there. I could not have come here otherwise. There is always a price to pay for pleasure."

At last she looked up at him. He was staring at her with calm curiosity. His words did nothing to soothe her unease; they simply added guilt to the troubled feelings she was already experiencing.

"How will you get back?" She knew the answer but asked it nonetheless.

"The same way I was able to get in."

Hermione sighed, genuine and deep this time. She did not want to see Laszlo in him again. But it was not simply the death of the boy and the approach Severus had taken to it which had unsettled her; it was the thought that there had been people other than her who had influenced him, who had tapped into his soul. She closed her eyes briefly, turning away from him. The face of Lily Potter floated into her mind: beautiful, smiling, adored ... Amidst all the feelings evoked that morning: despair, regret, disgust, there was yet another jealousy: faint, irrational, Hermione knew, but there nonetheless, and adding to the torment already besetting her.

And as ever when Hermione was confronted by a whirl of conflicting emotions, she wanted time to think, even if it meant being away from him. Adopting a formal, perfunctory tone, she turned back to him. "Right. I'm off to breakfast. Do you want to go for a walk later?" She was not sure why she had suggested it and knew she did not sound particularly enthusiastic.

She glanced up at him. His stare was piercing. She swallowed hard.

"I would like that."

His easy acquiescence to an entirely ordinary suggestion comforted her somewhat. She smiled as warmly as she could. "I'll be in touch later."

Hermione then left the room, allowing him to do whatever he had to do to maintain their deceit.

She rushed to breakfast and was aware that she felt relief to be with her garrulous, ebullient friends.

"Hi, 'Mione," Ginny greeted warmly. "You're a bit late ... you OK?"

"Yeah ... fine." Hermione lowered her flushed face.

"I know that look," grinned Rose, one of their more brash friends. "You look completely ... shagged out!" She laughed loudly.

Hermione darted her head up, glaring at her friend's coarse humour. She may have been correct in some ways, but it was far from the reason for her tinged cheekbones now.

"The thing is," Rose continued with a smirk, "Lawrence Filmore has been sitting over there for over an hour, so ... who's the lucky boy?" She looked at her with teasing

expectation.

Hermione did not humour her with a response but glanced instead at Ginny who was staring at her intently. Hermione now blushed crimson with true shame. Ginny sensed her discomfort and changed the subject with some news.

"I had an owl from Harry this morning. He and Ron are coming for a visit at the end of the week."

Hermione's face broke into a broad genuine smile. "Really? That's brilliant. Oh god, I can't wait."

She was so delighted that her feelings suddenly transported her back to their time together at Hogwarts before the war. For the merest moment she forgot that she was in a relationship with Severus Snape. When the reality of her situation forced its way back into her mind, a feeling of dread filled the pit of her stomach and her happiness faded. There was no reason for Harry and Ron to find out about it, but the thought of having to deceive them as well merely added to the malaise which had already taken such a firm grip that morning.

After breakfast she took herself quietly outside and walked around the castle ramparts. She knew she wanted this man, was prepared to venture into her future with him, but the reality of who he was, as a wizard and a man, and of who she and her friends were, suddenly hit home. It was not going to be easy. She had no doubt that Harry in particular would be politely tolerant of their relationship, although she could not doubt that he would secretly be shocked to the point of horror. Ron would be another matter entirely. Although they were no longer together, she still felt a part of her beholden to him. She should not, of course, but her nature dictated it.

Breathing in the crisp morning air deeply, she remembered that she had told Severus they would go for a walk. The feelings she had experienced that morning were foolish, she knew it, but a little space to clear her head seemed necessary. With time to herself, she would settle again, take stock of her situation.

Hermione felt that the conversation of the morning had in fact deepened their relationship, that the myriad of disparate complexities were beginning to be aligned in their lives. She felt closer to him than ever in many ways certainly felt he had made a huge step towards her which she found humbling and stirring. But the alignment, the shifting towards understanding and compatibility, needed space to settle. She did not want him to think she was at all less ardent than before, but she knew equally that her body and mind needed time to adjust.

Hermione walked steadily to the dungeons and soon found herself outside his classroom. Immediately she could see him within. She knocked and entered. Severus looked up, surprised to see her so soon, but rose swiftly and came over to her, shutting the door with a wave of his hand. He grasped her hard on the arms and without a word, pulled her into him and pressed his lips forcibly to hers.

His passion took her by surprise. Her insides jolted and she felt the familiar spread of damp anticipation between her thighs, but today her mind was determined to resist. She had not come here for this. His tongue was exploring her mouth urgently and his hand had reached down, undoing her jeans and slipping two long fingers into her warm, wet folds. She groaned and instinctively pressed against him. It would take all her self-control to resist him. His mouth had now moved from hers and was travelling down her neck. Hermione's pleasure and need were mounting and she knew she would have to act now if she was to stop him or herself.

"Severus ... Severus ... stop ... not now."

His fingers stroked around her aching clit, and she moaned before reaching her hand down to try to pull his out of her underwear. "Stop ... I mean it *stop*."

He broke away and looked at her with annoyed confusion. "What!?" he hissed. "I want you now."

He was like a little boy being denied candy.

She brought her hands up to his face and stroked him. He tried once again to reach for her mouth, but she pulled back. "No. Listen ... I just ... have some things to do this afternoon ... I don't think I can go for a walk after all."

A look of shock and desolation immediately took hold of his face. She lowered her head in shame. "I've got work to do for my exams."

"No, you don't. You could do them in your sleep," he spat angrily.

Hermione looked up at him boldly. She had to be honest. "Severus. I just want some time to myself. To clear my head. We all do sometimes. You know that, surely."

She had never seen him look so wounded. He stared into her, his eyes narrowing, his jaw clenching under the tight skin. Then he turned away sharply, wrapping his robes tight about his person, his hunched shoulders drawing his body into itself. "I should not have been so honest with you this morning. I should know the folly of speaking openly, fool that I am!" The cold recrimination of his words pierced her through.

She tried to pull his head back round to look at him. "No, no. That's not it at all. What you said me this morning was extraordinary. I am honoured that you felt you could tell me. That's why I want just to take time to process it to take on board your ... your ... candour."

Severus met her eyes, agony still evident in his. "I want to be with you." He spoke low and urgently, his need overwhelming her.

"And I want to be with you, but this is important to me. I need to sort my head out properly, for want of better words. You must not feel threatened by that. It's completely normal."

"Don't patronise me!" he hissed at her suddenly. "*Poor Snape* never having had a proper relationship whereas you with all nineteen of your years of knowledge and expertise can teach me how to lead my life with sensitivity and tolerance!"

"Severus ..." She stood shocked at his sudden outburst. "I didn't mean it like that."

"If that is your attitude, you can go ... go to your solitude ... at least you have the privilege of being able to choose when to be alone."

Her shock deepened, the extent of his emotional desolation becoming increasingly obvious. She stepped up to him. "Alright. I won't go. We'll be together."

He glared at her. "I don't want your pity. Leave now." She stood firm. His face was bristling with anger, but she held his stare. He repeated himself. "I ~~saige~~ *get out!*"

Hermione shook her head slightly, that feeling of nausea threatening to upend her. But there was no point pursuing things like this. Her heart ached, called for him, but still she turned to leave and walked towards the door. On reaching it, she glanced back. She wanted to tell him how much she wanted him, how much she needed him in all his paradoxical complexity, but he stood so barricaded by bitterness in the middle of the room that she could only afford him the time she had requested of him to think through the multitude of new emotions coursing through his mind and soul.

She knew him to be a brilliant man; a man who could solve the most complex conundrums of the deepest magic, but hoped now he had the raw ability to deal with this most profound subtlety of the human condition.

A difficult chapter both for Hermione and Severus. We all need time to process emotions and changing relationships. Like all human complexity, things are not always able to be fully understood, but I hope this chapter helped to illustrate the emotional depth and, equally, the fragility of both these characters.

Thank you for the eloquent and thoughtful reviews. I do so enjoy and appreciate them. LL x

Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 34

Erotic complications, complicated eroticism ...

Hermione spent the rest of Sunday doing what she had initially only lied about to Severus working. She did not need to, but found her insides aching with all that had passed between them. She was desperate to blot out the pain: books and words were normally the only way she could.

Her mind replayed their conversation endlessly. Had she been unfair, denying him her presence after he had been so open with her? He had revealed so much in such a short time; she had simply needed some space. Surely that was not too much for him to understand? His tender concern for Laszlo was deeply moving, but struck hard with the paradox that he could so suddenly and clinically take from the dead boy for purely personal reasons. This was not a shock to Hermione, and she was not judging him for his actions, but he presented himself as such a complex man and she was suddenly aware of what her unease was.

She felt young. She felt inadequate.

If logic had won over emotion, it would have told her that it was Severus' reaction which had been immature, that he was the one behaving with inexperienced stubbornness, but still her insecurities dominated.

At that moment, in her mind, she was the one who had run out, left him, due to her own shortcomings.

Shame swept through her, and she pictured him standing alone and desolate in his room as she had left.

Hermione stood suddenly, grabbed her books, and practically ran to the dungeons, not caring who she saw on the way. She reached his classroom and burst through the door. The room was empty. She rushed into his living area, only just remembering to knock first. He was not there.

Her heart sank. He could be anywhere. It would be hopeless to try to find him now. He may have left the castle for the day. Hermione was slightly heartened by the fact that he wasn't moping in his rooms, but desolate that she could not apologise.

Severus was not at lunch. She found herself wondering around the castle hoping to bump into him. She didn't.

The afternoon dragged on. Again, he was not at dinner. But just as she was about to leave, not able to tolerate sitting there without his presence, he came in, not looking up, and sat dejectedly at high-table. A surge of delight swept through her but was soon tempered by his expression. It did nothing to give her much hope. He looked thoroughly morose and miserable, not once looking in her direction.

At last his petulance struck her and reason forced its way back into her thoughts; they should have both handled the situation better.

She stayed a little longer, waiting until he left. When he got up, she too rose and rushed out of the hall, round to the corridor where she hoped he would emerge. She turned a corner and saw him. He was talking to Professor Armitage. Severus glanced over his colleague's shoulders and saw her. His features froze, but she could detect in his eyes the merest glimmer. She was emboldened and could not stop herself from going up to him immediately.

"Excuse me, Professor Armitage ... Professor Snape."

"Ahh, Miss Granger. What may we do for you?" Armitage inquired politely.

"I just ... it's just that, um, Professor Snape requested me to do ... an ... uhh ... essay for him, and I could not finish it when he had wanted me to, and I know that he was most displeased about this, as I had promised him I would do it and ... I just wanted to say, Professor Snape ..." She fixed him with her eyes. "I am sorry."

He held her gaze, and she saw the glow in his eyes intensifying. An equal glow flamed in her belly. His voice then came, deeper and more silky than ever.

"The matter is done with now, Miss Granger. Let us speak no more about it."

They stared at each other. The throb inside Hermione threatened to overwhelm her. Had he accepted her apology? It was not clear, but she found herself hardly caring. He had hardly apologised himself, as she was perhaps expecting, but faced with him now, his robes swaying slightly in the breeze of the corridor, his low tones still vibrating in her ear, all she wanted was him.

Professor Armitage was looking with bewilderment from one to the other. He spoke suddenly and squeakily. "Jolly good! Jolly good! Well, that seems to be resolved. Was there anything else, Miss Granger?"

Apart from locking you in the nearest cupboard and shagging your colleague senseless against the wall behind you?

She turned to him and smiled sweetly. "No, Professor Armitage. That was all."

"Well, there we have it then. Now we must both be off as we have a staff night training session tonight. Happens occasionally, Miss Granger. Staff training can sometimes only be done at night; particular magical circumstances and all that, you know. So Professor Snape and I must dash now; the Headmistress is waiting near the Forest. I think the session tonight is on how to act if a werewolf or vampire infiltrates the school. Am I correct, Severus?"

"Regrettably," drawled the taller man. He looked utterly disgruntled by the whole thing.

The bubble which had been swelling in Hermione since seeing him suddenly burst with a sharp sting. Her face drained of colour. "Oh ... I see ... right, so ... there we are ..." She had been sure she could go to him and spend a night compensating for the tension of the day.

Severus looked at her. She thought she could detect regret in his face, but he was clearly bound by his duties as a teacher.

Armitage giggled slightly. "Goodness, Miss Granger, I'm the last for putting ideas in your head, but just think ... no staff around school ... no sneaking off to boys' bedrooms now!" He fixed her with a beady eye and winked.

Snape looked aghast. Armitage cleared his throat and leaned into Hermione slightly. "Oh dear, I think I've offended Professor Snape here. I'm sure he could never countenance such a thing amongst the students. Come come, Severus, you know what young people are like these days. Not that I could ever imagine Miss Granger here so blatantly flouting the rules."

Hermione had flushed puce. Severus' apparent indignation was a handy distraction as far as Professor Armitage was concerned. Little did he know the true thoughts of his colleague at that time.

There was an awkward silence for a while before Armitage gave Hermione a curious look, clearly unsure why she was still standing there. It jolted her to life. "Right ...I'd better let you go then. Good evening, Professor Armitage ... Professor Snape I'll see you in class tomorrow, I suppose." She smiled at the one and stared deep into the eyes of the other. She was immediately met by deep black orbs searing her soul. The ache which had been agonising her belly while standing there surged and she knew her knickers had dampened.

Please, oh please, why did it have to be tonight?

Armitage turned and waited for Snape to follow. With one last look at Hermione, her lover turned and walked swiftly ahead of his colleague until they disappeared from view. Hermione staggered against the wall and let her head fall back against it. It would be a long, lonely night.

It was. Hermione tossed and turned. She had grown used to his presence beside her, inside her. She could not remember the last time she had felt so alone, despite normally enjoying solitude.

At last the morning came and, after the early lessons, it was time for Potions. Hermione tried not to hurry to the dungeons too hastily.

He was there, writing fluidly on the board. Her mouth immediately dried up. She longed for his touch and wondered how she would be able to survive the lesson just looking at him. He spun smoothly around when all the students were gathered and launched silkily into his lecture. Hermione pressed her legs together. *Fuck, it was too much.* His voice travelled straight to her clit. She thought she may come just from listening to him. She hardly took a word in.

"I cannot stress enough the importance of adding the precise amount of the correct ingredient at the right time. Failure to do so could have dire consequences. Assemble your ingredients, you may begin."

Hermione was jerked back to reality by the scraping of chairs around her as her fellow students got up. She blearily roused herself and tried to think back to what he had said. She realised with slight shame that she had taken little on board. For once, it was a potion she knew little about, one which she had never attempted before. She copied Ginny and hoped for the best.

Instinctively, Hermione mixed her potion. She followed her gut reactions to produce something she thought looked and felt vaguely correct. She hardly knew what she was making. Her eyes followed him everywhere he went, and when he approached or swept past her, her insides curled despairingly and she could barely prevent herself reaching out and grabbing his robes. He did not look at her once and it niggled. She thought they had made their peace the day before, and had been confident that the events of that morning were in the past. She was no longer certain.

The potions were finished. Snape moved smoothly to the front of the class and swept around.

"It is time to test your miserable efforts. As I said, attention to detail was of paramount importance in this instance in particular. I trust, in all likelihood with no means of justification, that you have acted upon my advice. If this potion works, the person who imbibes it should acquire the ability to see through solid objects such as wood or metal. As I'm sure you realise ... the advantages of this are manifold. If the potion goes awry ... the effects can be ... disadvantageous. And, despite the Ministry's - in my opinion foolish - decision to allow it to be taught to final year students, I stress that beyond these walls this potion can only be brewed with a licence and under strict supervision." His eyes and voice were hard and cold. It did nothing to stir Hermione out of her lustful reverie. But what he said next did.

"Miss Weasley. You will test Miss Granger's potion. Please take a spoonful and swallow it."

Hermione darted her eyes up. She had hardly been paying attention. She was sure she had not produced the potion correctly. "Uhh ... Professor Snape ... perhaps it would be advisable to try someone else's potion."

He spun round to look at her intensely. He was clearly confused. "And why is that, Miss Granger?"

"I ... I'm not sure I have done my best work today, sir."

He stared at her a while, and she saw his face curl up into the slightest sneer. Her insides twisted, and this time she was not sure if it was with desire or anger. He had made her feel like a second year again.

Snape turned away to write something on the board and drew to them with his back turned.

"Miss Granger, kindly give your potion to Miss Weasley to test."

Hermione swallowed hard and turned to Ginny. Her friend did not seem remotely worried. As far as Ginny was concerned, if she had to test a potion, she was thrilled it was Hermione's. Hermione frowned slightly, but before she could stop her, Ginny had reached a spoon over and dipped it in her cauldron.

Hermione watched in fearful trepidation as Ginny brought the spoon up to her mouth and drank the potion down without a moment's concern.

The whole class had turned to watch Ginny. Snape was standing at the front, arms folded. He looked briefly at Hermione, who knew she had an expression of clear anxiety on her face. He did not flinch, but merely moved his eyes to Ginny.

Her friend smiled happily and turned to stare into the desk, wondering if she could see through it.

"Oh yes ... look ... the wood seems to be ... thinning out ... it's as if ..." Relief swept through Hermione. But then her friend stopped talking.

Ginny had suddenly gone deathly quiet and deathly pale. Her face turned from white to blue in the next instant. Her hands came up and she clutched her throat, clearly unable to breathe. Ginny was gasping, one hand still clenched to her throat, the other grabbing the air, desperate for relief. Hermione screamed, "Professor! Quick! Do something."

Snape was already there. His strong hands swiftly laid Ginny down on the floor, and he loosened her tie and top button. Without a word he waved his wand and a vial of liquid materialised in his hand. In one fluid motion, he had uncorked it and, raising Ginny's head remarkably gently, poured a little of the concoction into her mouth. He raised her further up to allow it to trickle down her throat and supported her against him.

Hermione stood back, tears running desperately down her cheeks. But almost instantly, Ginny took a deep, gasping breath and her colour quickly returned to normal. She breathed in deeply, the welcome air flowing back to her lungs.

The whole class also breathed in a collective gasp of relief.

Waiting until he was sure she had recovered, Snape stayed holding Ginny for a while, then beckoned to a girl to come over. "You take Miss Weasley up to the hospital wing now. Explain to Madam Pomfrey what has happened. She is fully recovered, but would benefit from some restorative care. The rest of you dismissed. Miss Granger, you will stay."

He helped Ginny to her feet. She stood remarkably easily and managed a smile at Hermione, who was looking at her in abject apology. "It's alright. You weren't to know. I'm fine now. Honestly. It's OK. Thank you, Professor Snape."

With that she turned and was led out. The classroom emptied. Hermione stood waiting for Snape to berate her.

He did not look at her, merely turned and sat down at his desk. Then slowly his eyes rose to hers. He did not speak. Despite what had just happened, somewhere at the back of her mind Hermione knew that Ginny was well, and could feel only that familiar tingle deep inside her once again.

But still Snape made not a sound, merely sat appraising her. Her breathing deepened. Her belly twisted, but she could detect nothing in his visage to suggest he was assessing her in any way other than as a disappointing student. At last his low words broke the silence between them.

"I expect better from you, Miss Granger. How can we ensure that such errors do not occur again?"

"I will leave that up to you, Professor Snape." She spoke respectfully, but was aware of the meaning behind her words. Sensing a lessening of the tension between them, she could not stop herself from taking a step forward, but before she could put her foot down, his voice stopped her.

"Don't move. I have not finished addressing you."

Hermione stared at him in surprise, confused. His hand waved and the door shut and locked behind her.

She found herself doing exactly as he had asked. She did not move. Her skin started to prickle in familiar anticipation and the dull throb in her belly intensified. She waited, standing looking straight ahead. He remained sitting at his desk.

"For the first time that I can ever remember, you made a serious error in your preparation which, if I had not been on hand to remedy the situation, would have had very serious consequences. What explanation do you have for this?"

He spoke clinically and coldly. She could detect nothing beyond the literal meaning of the words in his voice. Hermione was startled.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said the words instinctively and meant them, almost forgetting what the two of them had shared for the last few weeks. "I have been distracted recently. I must have got things muddled. Perhaps I confused one ingredient for another. I may have misread the labels."

"Are you implying the ingredients in my storeroom are not clearly labelled?"

"No ... no, far from it, sir." Again, she had called him sir without even realising it.

"You are to write an essay on the differences between the ingredients due next Wednesday. That should dispel any lingering confusion on the issue."

Hermione could not believe what she was hearing. She should feel indignation, but despite the absence of any obvious sexual insinuations, the burning within her was stronger than ever. Her breathing grew more rapid. It became abundantly clear what he was doing, despite her apology of earlier. He was punishing her for her behaviour of yesterday. And despite knowing that she should turn and go, equally, she knew she would not, could not.

There was silence between them. Snape continued to sit dead still in his chair, staring coolly at the woman standing in front of his desk. Hermione waited. Then after what seemed like several minutes, his voice was poured low and slow towards her.

"Lift up your skirt."

Her breathing hitched. Then she focused on what he had told her. She had not been expecting it, but had longed for it, and now did not hesitate in complying. She looked down and fumbled to draw her skirt up over her knees, pausing before revealing herself to him.

"Higher," he dictated.

She did so, tucking the skirt in over itself a little, while gathering the rest of the material in her hand.

His eyes flickered down to the junction of her legs.

"Remove your underwear."

Hermione's breathing became increasingly laboured, but she reached down with her free hand to push at her knickers, wriggling them further down to her ankles before stepping out of them. Snape watched their progress as they descended to the ground.

"Open your legs more." His deep voice drawled his demands unstintingly.

She did as he asked, seeing his eyes flick to her sex once again, before darting back up to her eyes.

Silence.

Hermione stood tensely poised, exposed to him. She felt no shame, merely a desperate need for the unceasing clenching of her belly to find some respite. She tried not to make a sound, knowing it would merely delay her fulfilment yet further. At last he spoke again, so deep and slow it was barely human.

"Touch yourself. One finger."

She managed to focus enough to look at him. He met her eyes, but she could read nothing in them. She did not move initially, but then his eyes darted back to the apex of her thighs, reminding her of his demand.

She brought her right hand over using her middle finger and tentatively quested into her sodden folds. She herself was surprised at how wet she was. Her finger moved slowly along her sex, dragging its way up to the inflamed nub at the top. When it made contact she jerked towards it, still looking at the man before her. Hermione continued to move it idly up and down, slowly, trying to stem the relentless build of pleased tension within. Her lust was so tightly poised she knew she could not last long.

"Do you feel yourself? Do you feel yourself soaking for me?"

She could not form words; he tormented her so.

"Speak!" It was shot through the air to her.

She inhaled to draw strength. "Yes." The word was barely audible.

"Reach inside you. Take out your desire, your pleasure. Do it."

She did so, pushing two fingers deep up into her soaking pussy, stroking along her burning walls as she went.

Her head fell back in a moan of delirium.

"Look — at — me." Again, there was only an icy demand in his voice.

Hermione pulled her head back over to meet Snape's eyes once more. At last she could see the flame deep within them. She maintained the strokes along her folds,

coated ever more in her juices. Her breathing became increasingly ragged and her knees sagged as she felt her muscles preparing.

"You are not to come yet."

She groaned out with disappointment, pausing the movement of her hand. She was so close. The sudden cessation of her strokes made her clit throb agonisingly in protestation, an instant rush of blood flowing into it again.

"Wait." His voice was coldly insistent.

Her mouth opened in her effort to concentrate. Her hand no longer moved over her. She dared not allow it to.

"Do not stop touching yourself." Another low hiss.

"I ... can't ..." She ran her finger as lightly as she dared over her swollen sex. It was so ripe, so expectant, the merest touch would send her over the edge! *Please.*"

"*What!?*" he spat to her.

"Please ... *please ... let me come.*" It was a desperate sob.

"Miss Granger. You will address me correctly when standing before me in my room." A low, smooth verbal caress.

She cursed him silently but her clit throbbed painfully as it heard his words. She was so finely poised, and she knew her response would merely add to the pleasure about to engulf her. She breathed the words out as forcefully as she could.

"Please ... let me come ... *sir.*"

She forced her eyes open to once again lock with his. His were dancing, and a smirk now flitted across his mouth. She waited yet again, trying desperately to hold the flood at bay.

His words were fired like an arrow between them. "Come —*now.*"

Eyes wide with relief, Hermione immediately swept her fingers up firmly and smoothly to rub around her desperately expectant clit. Her focus went and she opened her mouth, her features forming into an expression of bewildered surprise. Her body tensed then dissolved. Radiating out from her core, the pleasure ripped its way through her body. She pulled in a gasping breath, twitching and jerking around her fingers, her eyes fused into his, despite her head being flung back in rapture.

He watched her every movement unblinkingly.

It took some time for her body to recover. She only just managed to remain upright and found her fingers still embedded in her dripping centre.

Snape stood and slowly walked round towards her. He came and stood in front of her and looked her up and down. Her mind was too bleary to wonder about his actions. Then not breaking eye-contact, he reached down to the wrist of the hand buried between her thighs and brought it up. He drew her hand, the fingers glistening with her pleasure, over towards his mouth. Hermione's brows furrowed in expectant astonishment. Parting his lips, he pulled the two fingers which had been thrust into her pussy over to him, and slowly closed his mouth around them. It was the most unexpected and erotic thing Hermione had ever seen.

He did not remove his eyes from hers. She felt his tongue swirling around her fingers, cleaning them, tasting them, possessing them. Then sucking hard, he pulled them slowly out of his mouth.

They stood staring at each other for a while longer, no longer touching or moving. Then she heard his voice, and knew she would obey him.

"Go now."

Well, a few issues there, albeit rather enticing ones. They could both do with pulling themselves together a bit. Still, where would be the fun in that?!

Any thoughts very welcome. x

Nineteen

Chapter 19 of 34

Thinking, togetherness and a girly chat.

Hermione left the dungeons immediately.

What exactly had that been all about? He had clearly needed to possess and control her, remind her of who he was, who she was. Had she angered him so greatly by walking out on him on Sunday? Surely not. She had apologised; he had seemed to accept.

But as she walked, Hermione could not deny that what had happened between them had excited her. She could not recall ever before bringing herself to such a powerful orgasm. And what of his actions afterwards? He had dismissed her with clinical detachment and she had allowed him. His complete acceptance of her body was sublime, but to show it in such a visceral way revealed further complexities in the man she was not sure she yet understood. Did she need to?

No.

She found his gesture intriguing and bizarrely touching. His intricacies were one of the main things that attracted her to him, and by the time she reached her room, she realised that what had passed between them, despite its apparently humiliating purpose, merely strengthened her connection with him.

They had not spent the night together since Saturday, and Hermione found herself longing to be in his bed again, to feel his arms around her properly, to be held and stroked and caressed. As she sat down to supper, desperate for a glimpse of him, she debated how he would react if she turned up at his rooms.

He was not in the Great Hall, and she left feeling dejected and morose, unable to decide on her course of action. She went outside for a breath of fresh air, hoping the chill of night would fire her decisiveness. It did not, but as she stood, leaning on the cold stone wall, an owl suddenly alighted with a flutter next to her. Hermione jumped, causing the owl to move back from her with an indignant ruffle of its feathers. But it waited until she had taken the small parchment gripped in its talons, before flying back up into a high tower.

Hermione unrolled the scroll as fast as her numb fingers could manage and read in the dim light: *"Come to me tonight. Ten o'clock. Filch busy elsewhere at that time. SS"*

Her heart jumped as her body had earlier. The decision on whether to go to him or not had been taken out of her hands. But she allowed herself a moment of concern. Did he intend to let her stay or were there to be more power games? Hermione realised unashamedly that she did not mind either way. She simply wanted to be with him again, completely privately. They were never happier than when in his modest little rooms tucked away behind his classroom.

She read the scroll again, noting with wry amusement that he had signed it 'SS'; one 'S' would have done. No kisses either. But then, that really would have been expecting too much. She smirked and returned inside.

The evening passed slowly. Hermione sat chatting to Ginny for a while, but her friend soon took herself off to bed, complaining of feeling unwell. Hermione retired to her own room while the minutes until ten ticked slowly away.

At quarter to, she finally thought she could venture out, and, appearing as nonchalant as possible, she left the Common Room, mumbling about a lost book. Nobody seemed to notice.

Hermione hurried silently and swiftly through the dark corridors. They were deserted, and as Severus had said, there was no sign of Filch or his cat. She reached his classroom rapidly and entered it, shutting the door tight behind her. Looking up, she was surprised to find him at his desk, seemingly intent on writing. She approached him slowly. Hermione half wondered if there was to be a repeat of the previous day. She was not sure she would have minded if there was.

He did not look up. She came and stood before him, waiting. There was silence between them. Hermione studied him carefully. His brow was furrowed; she wondered momentarily if he had even noticed her presence. His hand moved elegantly and fluidly over the parchment. He really did have beautiful fingers. Piano hands, her mother would say.

Still she waited.

Then at last, without looking up, he placed the quill down. She could not read his face.

Severus at last pushed his chair back and moved smoothly out from behind his desk, coming to stand a foot or so from her. She searched out his eyes, but he did not meet her gaze. His head was lowered and he appeared awkward.

"I am sorry."

The words were quiet but clear. At last he raised his eyes through hooded lids and looked at her. She could see clear shame on his face now. It surprised her.

"It's alright." She spoke gently. "I found that I ... liked it."

He lowered his head again. Neither moved nor spoke for a while. Then the black gaze rose again to hers.

"You were sublime."

Hermione felt that now familiar swell within her and rushed to clasp him suddenly to her. His hands engulfed her into him and moved urgently up to turn her head to his, insistent lips crashing down onto hers. She opened for him, his tongue slipping in instantly, ravishing what he found inside. He gripped her arms, denying her the opportunity to reach for his buttons, and pulled her backwards towards his private rooms.

Once inside, they moved swiftly to the bedroom and found themselves naked almost immediately. Hermione was vaguely aware that they must have used magic to divest themselves of their clothes so rapidly but had no recollection of it. He lowered her onto the bed, and entered her immediately, thrusting in with a grunt of urgency. Hermione arched up, drawing him yet further into her. He hissed out as she tightened around his desperate rigidity.

"Oh god, more, Severus, more. Please, oh god, I missed you ... I missed you inside me."

He did not speak, but continued to stroke along her urgently, his breathing heavy and rapid as he drew them both towards the deepest pleasure.

Hermione felt her muscles girding themselves and moaned incoherently, focusing on the hardness within her. As he moved, he rubbed her inflamed clit, and it took only a moment more for her to come around him. A cry was torn from her as her body heaved under him. She gripped his back, her nails digging into his pale flesh. As he felt her, his own release could no longer be restrained and he came violently, his hot seed exploding deep into her warmth.

Severus collapsed onto her with a groan of fulfilment and they lay there silently while the night encroached around them, pressing them further into the other until they fell asleep.

Hermione awoke the next morning to find him still holding her tight. They were lying in their familiar pose with him pressed firmly against her back, their legs drawn up together. His arm was resting languorously around her belly and she could not resist reaching up a finger and running it over the sinewy muscles. He stirred and pulled her ever closer into him. Smiling, she brought his hand up to kiss it tenderly.

At length, when she suspected he had woken properly, she rolled over and indeed found him gazing over at her, his eyes dancing in the early morning light. He greeted her with a gentle kiss, and they soon found themselves joined once again.

After their bodies had come down, she turned to him, stroking his face. "Are you busy today? I don't see you on a Tuesday."

"Unfortunately."

"Unfortunately, you're busy, or unfortunately, I don't see you?"

"Both."

"Can I come back tonight?"

"Need you ask?"

"Yes. I would never simply presume."

"You did once."

"Yes. That isn't an experience either of us want to repeat." They were remembering the first time she had ventured to his rooms and nearly been caught by Filch.

He smiled down at her a little. "Certainly not."

"You have to admit," she smirked, "it was just a teensy weensy little bit exciting though."

"Perhaps," he drawled before leaning down to kiss her again. "Now you had better go or you will be late for breakfast."

"You do have a bit of a thing about punctuality," she teased.

"Of course. One should always come at the appropriate time."

Hermione gasped in mock horror. "Why, Professor Snape, I do believe you just made a joke based on crude sexual innuendo!"

He stopped smiling but his eyes danced again. She beamed up at him, then rose rapidly and got out of bed. He watched entranced as she ran giggling from the room.

Hermione arrived at breakfast in ebullient mood. Ginny looked up at her and chatted amicably. "I've got a study period first thing this morning, 'Mione. Have you?"

"Yeah, I guess I do." Hermione hadn't really thought about it.

"I'm going to the library. Do you want to come?"

"Yeah, OK." Hermione smiled at her friend; she could detect a sense of insistence in Ginny's voice.

After breakfast they got their books and headed for a private, secluded part of the library.

They started to revise for Transfiguration, but Hermione noticed Ginny being more attentive towards her than usual, closer almost. At moments of quiet, Hermione would look up and find Ginny staring at her intensely.

She broke the silence by asking about her friend's health. "Are you feeling better? You were a bit poorly last night."

"Yes, thanks. Time of the month. I felt dreadful last night."

"I'm sorry." She smiled apologetically at her friend.

Ginny continued staring at her. Hermione was a little unnerved.

"Yeah. In fact, the cramps got so bad that I really needed to take something. But I'd run out of the relieving potion."

"Really? Did you manage to get some?"

"No ... I came to see you actually, to see if you had any or could make me some. I was quite desperate."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't hear. I must have been asleep."

"It was only just after ten. You don't normally go to bed that early."

Hermione could no longer look at her friend. "Yeah, well ... I was really tired last night."

"Because, you see," continued Ginny, "I didn't think you were in, so I thought I might try to find you."

"Oh, really?" Hermione knew she sounded nervous.

"And, you see ... Harry leant me something for times like this. I mean ... it's not as if he needs it at the moment. I'd never thought about using it, but I really wanted your help."

Hermione's blood ran cold as Ginny reached into her bag and brought out an object all too familiar to her. It was the Marauder's Map.

She swallowed hard, but said nothing, almost imparted with a morbid curiosity to see what Ginny would say next.

"At first, I couldn't find you anywhere. There I was, looking for the little solitary name of Hermione Granger, maybe in the library, maybe even going for a late night walk somewhere."

There was silence. Hermione found herself breaking it.

"And did you find me, Ginny?"

"Oh yes. And what a fool I was. I should have looked there first. I found you in a place that I suspect you have spent quite a lot of time recently, right next to someone else's name. And there you stayed, all night. You were still there when I woke up this morning to check again."

Hermione was almost daring her to voice it. "And what was the other name?"

"Severus Snape."

The two women stared at each other. To Hermione's surprise, there was no shock, no horror in Ginny's eyes. Still, Hermione could not bear to look in them anymore and lowered her head rapidly.

"Hermione, I've suspected for a while, you know. You can't keep your eyes off each other. You've even sabotaged my potion to get close to him."

Hermione's head darted up. Ginny merely smiled. "I just wish you'd told me before."

Hermione looked at her in astonishment. "Aren't you ... shocked?"

"I was at first, but ... I know you, 'Mione, and, despite my own opinion ... I know what he did ... who he must be underneath ... it all. You two have been through things that even I cannot imagine. Extraordinary things draw people together. Who am I to question or judge?"

Hermione found herself getting up and rushing round the table to embrace her friend fervently. "Oh, god, Gin, thank you. I wondered if you'd noticed. I so wanted to tell you, but thought you'd be so horrified you wouldn't speak to me. And I didn't want to betray him. God, you mustn't say a word, do you understand?"

"Hermione! You don't need to say that."

Hermione stared at her friend in amazed disbelief for a while, before sitting down beside her. "I just ... I just can't believe you're being so tolerant."

"Hermione. You're my dearest friend. I know you wouldn't enter into something unless you thought it was meaningful and significant. But ... I do worry about you. I mean ... surely your relationship is forbidden – you're his student."

"Yes ... but ... I'm not going to be here for much longer. And I hardly feel like a student. I wasn't sure I could stand much more of being here to be honest. I was desperate to take the exams and get out. I couldn't have felt anything less like a student. Strangely enough, he was the only member of staff who treated me like one when I came back. God, it pissed me off! Especially after all we'd been through together, all we'd witnessed."

"So what changed?"

"I ... I don't know really. He infuriated me, the way he insisted on treating me so coldly and callously, as if nothing had happened to me or to him. I suppose I resented it. I resented the fact that he could be so in control of his emotional exterior when I still felt like screaming and raging at the world. And I think, in a strange sort of way, that connected me to him. And then, one day, I caught him looking at me, staring at me in the Great Hall, not with anger, but with ... curiosity, it seemed. It terrified me almost, inexplicably and then we sort of ... bumped into each other and I knew I wanted him. And from then on, I couldn't stop thinking about him, and ... it became such a physical obsession ... he was suddenly so desirable." She looked quickly at Ginny. "I suppose you think I'm mad."

Ginny smiled. "I would have done until recently, but when you realise a sensible friend of yours fancies the pants off someone, you kind of look at that person in a different way."

"And ...?"

"He's got nice legs." They both collapsed into giggles.

"God – I hadn't really focused on his legs, but ... you're right."

"And he smells pretty good come to think about it."

"Oh god, yes."

"And, of course ..." Ginny paused with a smirk.

"Of course what...?"

"His voice is as sexy as hell."

Hermione pressed her hands to her head in an attempt to stem the laughter. "You noticed."

"Well, yeah ... it's just that when it's deriding and mocking and belittling your every move, you don't tend to notice."

"It's just a defence mechanism, you know. He's afraid to give, afraid to reveal too much of himself."

"Probably," Ginny shrugged. "Doesn't make it any easier for the rest of us though."

Hermione lowered her head, slightly ashamed. She remembered how dreadfully he treated nearly all his students.

"He did save your life."

"Yes ... only after you tried your hardest to get rid of me!"

"Sorry about that."

"What did he say about it?"

"He set me an essay."

"Really!?" Ginny was incredulous. "Anything else?"

Hermione paused. "Not really." She couldn't stop a smile caressing her features.

"Go on!" Ginny sensed something more; her eyes sparked with excited curiosity.

"No ... I can't." She was firm.

Ginny stopped pressing her, but still burned with inquisitiveness. After a moment of silence, she spoke again, more secretive than ever.

"Well ... what's he like then?"

Hermione glanced at her, then the two friends dissolved into suppressed laughter again.

After they had stopped giggling, Ginny still stared at Hermione. It was clear she wanted an answer.

"He's ... rather good ... very good, actually," She couldn't stop smiling. "And improving all the time."

Ginny grinned broadly. "Attentive?"

"Yes."

"Unselfish?"

Hermione thought about it. "Most of the time."

"Varied?"

Hermione rolled her eyes but nodded with a smile.

There was a pause.

"Experimental?"

"Ginny!"

"Sorry."

Another pause. Then Ginny spoke again with a smirk. "So ... you're satisfied?"

Hermione fixed her eyes into her friend's. "Oh, yes. And then some."

"God, 'Mione! I'm bloody jealous. Harry's not nearly so ..." She stopped abruptly. There was a grimace on Hermione's face. Ginny had forgotten how she hated to think about Harry in that way.

"I have to say; I've never seen you so happy. I mean, I suppose I should feel some remorse for my brother, although I never thought you'd last. But I'm just so happy that

you're happy. Poor Ron. I don't think he'll be quite so ... understanding."

"Shit." Hermione froze. "They're coming up here in a few days. What if they find out?"

"Will it matter if they do?"

"Yes!" She turned to Ginny. "Won't it?"

"Well ... I don't know. I mean ... they'll have to find out at some point, won't they?"

"Oh god ... must they!?"

"Hermione. If this is what you want, you can't be ashamed of it. If you want to have a proper relationship, the world will have to know sooner or later."

"Later," she said emphatically.

"I can understand you keeping it quiet while you're here, you don't exactly want to get expelled, but ... what's going to happen after you leave?" Ginny's voice was suddenly filled with deep concern.

An uneasy throb had started in Hermione's gut. She realised she had no answer. "I ... I don't know."

"I mean ... you might have great, dirty, secret sex, but ... there's more to a relationship than that. How on earth are you going to conduct yourselves away from here? And he works here anyway. What about his job?"

The feeling in the pit of her stomach grew worse.

"How serious are you, Hermione?" Ginny paused. "Do you love him?"

Hermione's eyes shot to her friend's and she stared deep into them, almost as if she was hoping to find the answer there. She did not reply.

There was silence between them. After a while, Ginny rubbed her friend's arm and got up to go to the bathroom.

Hermione stared blankly out into the still library. Her mouth opened and words came out, unheard by anyone, even herself.

"I think perhaps I do."

Twenty

Chapter 20 of 34

How will Severus react to the news that someone knows their secret? A lengthy and intense chapter.

Hermione spent much of the rest of the day with Ginny. She had not realised what an immense relief it would be to confide in someone, someone whom she was almost surprised to find so accepting and understanding of her situation and who it involved. She knew Ginny was a true friend, but her acceptance of her and Severus gave the relationship a viability hitherto unforeseen.

However, as the day wore on, she had been unable to see him, and she felt that familiar ache of longing and need inside. It wasn't just a physical urgency; she simply missed him — missed his presence, his conversation, his quiet intelligence and the obvious pleasure he derived from her. Although they had been parted for only a few hours, each minute away seemed to drag on endlessly. It had never been this way with Ron. It was an unfamiliar feeling to her; but still she recognised what it was, and at last admitted it to herself.

She was in love.

In the afternoon, just before supper, she and Ginny went for a walk in the grounds. They walked quietly for a while, content with the secret they shared.

"Do you mind me asking when was the first time you ... you know ...?"

Hermione smiled. "It was all pretty weird to start with. We had sort of crept towards each other over a few days. Not long really, but it seemed ages in my mind. I could tell he felt something and I confess, I had never felt such physical longing. I thought I would die if I didn't ..." she blushed and paused.

"Go on ... it's alright ... I don't mind ..." Ginny was genuine and kind.

"One night I followed him up onto the castle ramparts. He seemed so desolate, so broken. I couldn't stand it. I just wanted to draw him into me — give him all I could, but he was so closed up, so hard and impenetrable I thought I had been deceived. I could not see how he would ever come to me. But then, as I was walking away, he pulled me back so hard and ... that was our first kiss. It was searing it burned itself onto me... but then he ran off, left me. He was so scared, so fragile... he went away for a few days after that, then when he returned I went up to him after class. I thought for a moment that was it. As ever, he gave little away, but then suddenly..." she glanced up at Ginny.

Ginny's eyebrows rose in expectation.

"He... he just... we just... did it... right there, on his desk. It was... extraordinary. He was... so desperate, so needy, but... it was over before I realised... But just to have him... god, I was ecstatic. He had taken that first step and at that point I didn't care how it had happened. I've never known such erotic need and tension. I just... I just loved it."

Ginny was clearly surprised. "Did he force himself on you?"

"God, no! I mean it was quite brutal, but believe me... I was more than willing."

Ginny didn't seem convinced. "Hermione! You can't let a man treat you like that."

Hermione glanced at her friend and suddenly felt shame. She had not questioned the incident. Should she have? There had been other moments too. But Hermione knew she had no reason to doubt the need behind them. She was willing to accept his wounds and scars, the emotional ones as manifold as the physical ones which tormented his flesh. "But that's what has to be done. He has never abused me in that way. I wouldn't call it forcing himself on me, but I cannot deny the urgency and desperation of it in both of us. We've both ... been through so much, Ginny. If I can help... heal... appease... whatever the word is... then I will."

Ginny looked at her for a while quietly. "Talk about baggage, Hermione! Boy, does that man have baggage!"

Hermione laughed a little. "Yes, but at least it doesn't come in the shape of a wife and kids that's something, I guess. And he has his rather ... romantic moments too, believe it or not. And, with regard to — you know what — the tender moments are... pretty bloody good too. I hate it when we can't spend the night together. He has this little bedroom, with a pathetic single bed, but... I love it, I love being there with him."

Ginny lowered her head and laughed a bittersweet laugh. "I still can't quite believe we're talking about Professor Snape here."

Hermione joined her in laughter. "You know, I'm not sure I can either half the time. I think if I stopped and thought about it..."

"What?"

She shook her head. "No. No, I wouldn't. This is what I want. After I leave I want us to carry on we must. You asked me earlier, Ginny do I love him." She turned to fix her friend with her eyes, tears forming in them. "Yes I think I do."

They looked at each other solemnly before Ginny took her hand and broke the silence. "And he, Hermione... Does he love you?"

She lowered her head and answered truthfully, "I don't know."

Ginny held her hand tight and squeezed it. "This isn't the most natural relationship in the world, Hermione. It won't be easy. I don't want you to get hurt. But, I respect your wishes, and I am here for you."

Hermione smiled up at her friend. "I know. I know and I thank you. It's so wonderful to have someone to talk to about this." She turned and looked out towards the distant hills. "I haven't seen him all day. I... really miss him."

"Then you should go to him."

Hermione turned to her in surprise. Ginny was smiling gently at her.

"I will... after supper."

"Will you tell him I know?"

A sudden fear took grip of Hermione. Surely he would be appalled that anyone knew? She searched Ginny's eyes for reassurance. "I don't think I can ... do you?"

Ginny shrugged. "You must do what you think best."

The answer was about to present itself to them. As the two young women walked back into the castle, they turned a corner and came face to face with Severus Snape.

He had looked morose, pacing the halls, but on seeing Hermione his face brightened considerably, as if he had found what he was looking for. However, the expression of gloom descended instantly again as he realised she was with Ginny.

Despite the awkwardness of the situation, Hermione was ecstatic to see him, and could hardly keep herself from jumping into his arms right there and then.

"Professor Snape! How lovely to see you!"

Snape looked aghast at her exclamation, but Hermione could not completely remove the smile from her face.

They stood there in silence for a moment. To the casual observer, there was no reason why the professor and his two students should feel the need not to greet each other politely and move on. But no-one moved. Hermione and Snape could not take their eyes from each other and Ginny stood, glancing from one to the other. It was clear they both desperately wanted to be alone together, but she could think of no obvious way of excusing herself and leaving them.

"Uhh... right... ooh... I said I'd meet Rose at five. I'd forgotten all about it. I'd better go. See you later then, Hermione! Bye, Professor Snape." She sounded ridiculously cheerful.

When her footsteps had faded away, Snape's face withered. "She knows."

"Yes."

His breathing became rapid and heavy and his eyes moved from hers, staring at a point on the ground.

"How?" His voice was icy. A feeling of dread overcame Hermione.

"She found out by herself. She had... the Marauder's Map. She was only using it innocently, to find me for something... and... I was with you." She glanced at him. His eyes closed in bitter defeat.

"The *map* ... Even now... after all this time... still they torment me."

His words pierced her. Again, he looked defeated, but his anger seemed to have subsided somewhat.

"Severus, it doesn't matter. I promise you she won't tell a soul. She has sworn it herself, but she didn't need to. She is a wonderful person. I trust her completely."

"She is a Weasley." He was still unsure, but had settled.

"She's not like the boys. To be honest, it's quite a relief. I think, actually, she may make things easier for us."

He stared at her. She could not read his expression, but he seemed remarkably calm. "Perhaps you are right."

His sudden words surprised and delighted her. "You can assure me of her complete discretion?" He stared intently at her.

"Of course. She's my dearest friend. And she... wasn't that surprised, you know. She understands."

"Hmm."

He seemed deep in thought. She searched him out for a while, touched by his quick acceptance of Ginny. It seemed to be a further indication of his feelings.

"What are you thinking?" she inquired gently.

His eyes at last moved up to hers. "That I want to be inside you."

Hermione's breathing immediately hitched. Ginny was forgotten, anxiety was forgotten. They would have to have each other immediately.

They were in a dim corridor leading out of the castle, but people passed by frequently. There seemed no obvious place to go, but their need was so great that they had to move or they would end up on the floor together. Hermione walked off first, but he caught her hand as she passed and let himself be pulled along. They turned a corner into a side passage leading to a store cupboard. It led round one more corner, so they were out of sight of the main corridor but little else. Immediately, he had sunk to his knees. She stared down at him, her belly twisting, crying out its need. His hands released the clasp on her skirt, letting it fall to the ground. She was wearing no underwear.

Snape glanced up, his face deathly serious. She willed him towards her aching sex, spreading her legs wide for him, but instead he drawled up in his most tormenting way, "Incomplete uniform, Miss Granger. Ten points from Gryffindor." With that his mouth pulled up in the merest hint of a smirk and he plunged his tongue deep into her pussy.

Hermione bit down hard on her lip and reached down to clasp the top of his head. She guided him, although he did not need it, pushing him hard against her. He was like a man who had not drunk for a hundred years, feeding off her. His longing to taste and drink her in was overwhelming, and the knowledge of it was almost as pleasurable as the feel of his mouth on her clit. He encircled it fully, sucking hard, his tongue flicking fast, before dipping back to her snatch to catch more of her juices.

Hermione moaned her delight to him. "Oh god, oh god, Severus. God, I can't do without you. Please don't stop... don't ever stop... *oh yes! There.. yes... that's it... yes... oh fuck... so good... it's so unbelievably good. Harder, suck me harder, lick me... there... there... yes... oh god...*" She was sobbing. Despite her nearly incoherent stream of consciousness, he did everything she wanted. Her muscles were primed, the pleasure reined in on them, ready for release. He had two, maybe three fingers deep inside her, strumming, stroking. She clamped around them and bent her knees to sink yet further onto him. He sucked. She came hard.

One hand involuntarily threw itself off his head to hit the wall high above her. She groaned long and low as her body twitched and spasmed.

Before she could fully recover, he had pulled her down and spun her round onto her knees before him. She hardly had time to register her position on all fours, when he plunged hard and full into her.

She cried out yet again with deepest pleasure. "Yes! More... harder... *harder, my darling... I need it... I need you*"

She felt his cock swell even more with her words and he moved frantically, plunging hard and fast over and over and over again.

Severus stroked along her more frantically than she could ever recall. But it did not affect the skill with which he drew her pleasure from her. Despite her orgasm of only a few minutes before, she could feel her body fast preparing for another surge of ecstasy. He was pulling out fully before clasping her hips hard and thrusting brutally in to the hilt. The emptiness she felt when he withdrew made the pleasure of his rigid cock filling her again instantly even more palpable. He seemed larger than ever before. She groaned loudly into the air around them, almost sobbing with delight. He swelled yet further, his own groans more desperate than ever.

"Again, witch... *say it again.*"

She almost did not recognise the voice as his, so rare was it to hear him speak during sex. But she could only do as he bid.

"Severus... *I need you... you know I do... I need you always... don't stop... please, my darling... don't stop.*"

He plunged ever harder. He was moaning incoherently, but she heard words formed deep in his psyche manifesting themselves in the air around them. "No... can't... I can't stop... need you... I need you too... it is you..." He groaned loudly, his head falling back. "*It was you...*" With a final guttural cry, he came frantically up into her, digging his fingers into her hips and pushing himself so hard against her, she fell forwards onto the floor. The feel of his hardness in her, and the hard, cold stone beneath her translated as pure sensation. The sound of the rapture she had brought from him pushed her over the edge and pleasure ripped its way through her body as he collapsed on top of her, the last bursts of his cum torn from his cock. She could not move, and her ecstasy had no outlet but to heave its way in concentration through her prone body over and over again. At that moment his hand came up to clasp over her mouth, stifling her scream. It was just recognisable as a scream of his name. Her next words were muffled completely against his hand. He did not hear them.

Severus lay on top of her, panting heavily. He knew he must be hurting her, but knew also that she would be revelling in it. Moving her hair slightly to the side, he whispered into her ear, his voice heavy and low with fulfilment. "Even now, I can still feel your pleasure tight around me..." Her muscles confirmed it by pulsing once more onto him. He grunted, his fingers clenching on her. "*There... do you feel that... do feel me within you still... tell me I must remain there... tell me I must remain...*" He groaned again as her walls continued to hold him tight.

"Yes... always... *always... don't leave me...*"

He had never been so vocal, during or after sex, and his sudden candour and display of emotion thrilled but unnerved her equally, but she could speak only her own truth.

Then just as unexpectedly as his declaration of need had come, he pulled out abruptly, leaving her lying limp on the cold stone beneath him. She managed to turn herself over to look up at him, bewilderment etched on her features. He was tidying himself and doing up his clothing almost clinically. Despite his extraordinary words, his face had regained its impassivity, and she thought he would leave her there, her moist legs splayed open, her skirt lying in a heap to one side. But just as he seemed about to walk off, he smoothly extended a hand down to her. She stared at it momentarily, then reached up to it. He held it tight, and pulled her to her feet. She fell against him.

Hermione stared into his eyes, her bewilderment clear. She assumed they must go, return to normal life, but as she tried to walk away she found his hand gripping her still. He pulled her back, and rested his head on her forehead.

"Don't go. You can't go."

Hermione's hand came up to stroke his face. Softly and tenderly, she brought him down to her and kissed him, gently at first, her tongue slipping in to reassure and confirm her need.

There they remained for some time, the minutes sliding away, their bodies pressed hard against each other, the affirming physicality of each other comforting and arousing equally.

And again she needed him, not the mad plundering possession of her body he had demonstrated earlier, but she needed him inside her. Her hand dragged down and cupped between his legs, finding him thankfully once again hard and urgent. "Again... *again... you must... please... come into me again... please.*" The last word was such a desperate plea she joined it with a gasping sob of need.

It took only a moment for him to release his cock, and reaching one hand under her backside, he lowered himself down a little, then pushed hard up into her, jolting her up the wall. She cried out once again in triumph. His groan mimicked her own.

At first they did not move, merely gazed into the other's eyes. The unreadable look she had seen only moments before had been replaced by a deep glow of completion.

"Better," he groaned out. It was not a question.

She felt him throb within her and knew he would have to move. His eyes burned ever more ardently and he started to raise and lower himself slowly but assuredly. One of his hands came up, forcing its way into her shirt, breaking a button off in the process. He pulled the breast out of her bra and pinched the already taut nipple hard, plying the downy flesh in his fingers.

She groaned again with agonised delight. *So good.* The pain at her nipple blended seamlessly with the pleasure his cock wrought from her pussy. He moved as fast as he could now, bringing both of them swiftly towards another mutual release. Their eyes did not move from each other. "Yes... yes... oh god... I'm coming... *I'm coming...* so good... *so good!*" She pulsed hard around him, dragging his own pleasure with her. He thrust up again and exploded into her, a guttural cry escaping him.

Hermione still did not take his eyes off him. Severus' face was twisted in an expression of extreme sensation. She had seen that look on his face once before: one night, months before, in the Shrieking Shack. But it was not with pain that his features were contorted now. It was with complete ecstasy.

Their bodies eventually came down, and she exhaled a pleased laugh, her face breaking into a broad smile. They could no longer stay in the position they were in, and he had to pull out. Hermione grimaced at the loss of him as her body slid down the wall. He looked down, adjusting his clothes and tidying himself. But his haughty position above her was not reflected in his words, which were remarkably gentle and tender.

"That was... *you are...* exquisite." He paused briefly, a look of wonder in his eyes. "Come to me immediately after supper. I cannot bear to be away from you any longer than necessary."

With that he turned and walked swiftly away, leaving her alone against the wall.

Hermione closed her eyes, her mind replaying all that had just happened. It was unlike anything that had passed between them before. Yes, there had been other times which were as desperate, as furtive, as brutal, and there had been times of tender declarations and deep emotional bonding, but never the two together. Until now. The extent of their connection overwhelmed her.

And his words *his words.* They staggered her. His declaration of need, and desire to hear a reciprocation was overwhelming. He had revealed more to her than ever before. As Hermione sat slumped against the wall, she felt her eyes moisten. She was not sure she could fully take in or understand all he had meant. But she knew her love for him had only been strengthened and justified.

It took all her energy to raise herself up and stagger to supper. Severus was not there and she ate quickly, excusing herself as soon as she had finished the main course. She caught Ginny's eye as she hurried from the hall, and the two friends exchanged a brief secret smile.

She hurried to his classroom. It was still early enough for her to have a reason to be in the academic areas should she be caught, but in any case the corridors were deserted.

Entering his classroom without knocking, she found him pacing slightly, his body tense, expectant. He rushed to her as soon as she was inside, slamming the door behind her and gathering her up in his arms swiftly. Their mouths immediately met hungrily, and he bore her silently but urgently into his bedroom.

They used magic to rid themselves of their clothes and he plunged into her hard and deep. And there he stayed for most of the night. Even after a climax, he would not leave her, merely stay pressed within, until their lust and need drove him to swell once again, and he would begin his relentless but inevitable strokes, reminding of his presence.

At one moment of quietude, as they lay firmly together, Hermione felt his long, warm fingers running tenderly up her thigh.

"Do you really not mind Ginny knowing about us?"

"Despite her provenance, I have never had a reason to doubt Miss Weasley's integrity and humility. As you say, it may actually make things a little easier."

She smiled gently. "I must say I'm surprised. I thought you'd be livid."

"Hmm." He paused before continuing. He still did not sound entirely certain himself. "And how did she... react to the discovery? Even I know my students well enough to know I am not her favourite teacher."

Hermione smirked. "You weren't exactly my favourite teacher either, you know. In any case, Ginny knows me very well, and, believe it or not, she knows you... she knows what you went through. I think our... need for each other is clear to her."

He looked at her for a while. "And is this —*need*— clear to you?"

"I think I made that abundantly clear this afternoon."

He continued looking at her. His face had never looked so gentle. "Thank you."

She wasn't sure she had heard right. "For what?"

"For letting me breathe again." He kissed her tenderly on the lips, then lay back down, continuing to stroke her leg. Her heart had never been so full.

She asked, softly but inquisitively, "You said something earlier..."

"Hmm?" His fingers were slowing in their caress.

"You said, 'It is me... it was me...' What did you mean by that?" His fingers had stopped. *What* was me?"

He took a long while to answer. His breathing was deepening. "I have answered that already." His voice was slow and barely audible. She did not understand him.

"What do you mean?" Hermione waited for a response. She received none. She turned her head slightly towards him. "Severus?"

The only reply was his deep gentle breathing. He was asleep.

Twenty-One

Chapter 21 of 34

A very sensual chapter — remarkable for two people in such a situation.

Hermione had fallen asleep shortly after Severus, and the question had sunk to the back of her mind. When she awoke the next day, she felt only a deep contentment and was simply happy to wake up beside him.

It was difficult to part, but they were encouraged by the knowledge that they had an excuse to see each other that day in a lesson.

As she kissed him goodbye, her despair caught against his lips. "I don't know how I can survive your lessons anymore. It's too painful to have to sit there staring at you and listening to you and not to have you."

"Hmm." He was nibbling her neck.

"But you're so calm and rational; you never seem to be distracted by anything."

"It is only a mask. You must know that for the last few weeks I have taught nearly every lesson with you in it with only one thought in mind."

"And that thought being ...?"

"To bury myself as deep inside you as it is possible to be."

Hermione smiled broadly as Severus continued to nuzzle her collarbone. She held him there as long as she dared before pulling him off. "I have to go. I have an important Dark Arts lesson for my NEWT extension paper. I'll see you later ..." But just as she started to move away, she could only turn swiftly back again. "Oh god, I hate saying goodbye, my darling ... my darling ... last night was just ... incredible ... my sweet darling ... stay with me ..." She showered him in kisses; he responded with added fervour. At last Hermione tore herself away and made it to the door.

"Miss Granger!" His sudden sharp tone surprised her and she spun back to look at him. He was smirking languidly. "I seem to recall setting you an essay which was due in today. I hope it will be forthcoming by the end of the day."

She could only stare for a moment. Was he serious? In his own warped way, she knew he was. But she would oblige — somehow. Her mind flicked into action.

"Oh yes, Professor, I do recall. I can assure you, I will ... produce something." She smirked in return then spun out of the door.

The morning passed slowly, the hours until Potions class dragging relentlessly. Hermione's desire seemed to be stronger than ever. The coming together of their emotional and physical intensity the day before brought out such longing for him that she wondered how on earth she could keep up the charade of decorum any longer. By the time the lesson arrived her belly was protesting its need desperately. It was as if she had a caged beast inside her, frantic for release.

She and Ginny were the first to arrive at Potions. Snape was sitting at his desk but rose as soon as they entered and walked over to them. Hermione was aware that the two people she was with both knew the situation regarding the other, and without thinking things through any further, she hurried over to her Professor and pulled him down into a deep kiss. Snape was taken aback, but his own lust was soon evident against her thighs and they both seemed to forget about the woman in the room. The Potions Master twisted his fingers in Hermione's hair, turning her head brutally to force her mouth open for him.

Ginny coughed.

After a while the sound registered on their consciousness and they slowly pulled apart.

"Don't mind me," Ginny said awkwardly, clearly more than a little disturbed by the sight. "I take it he knows I know then."

Hermione nodded. "Yes," she said sombrely. "He doesn't mind. Do you, Severus?"

Before he could answer, Ginny spoke. "Apparently not." She turned away from them.

"Sorry," muttered Hermione, "it's just ... we ... just want each other ..."

Ginny held up her hand quickly, a grimace on her face. "Enough! Thank you! You know, Mione, when you don't like me talking about Harry *like that* ... I think I understand exactly what you mean now." She turned her back on them. Hermione smiled a little before squeezing his hand and moving away at the moment before more students came into the class.

Hermione and Ginny hung back, eventually finding a spare table at the back of the class.

Snape launched into his lesson, his voice winding its deep way to Hermione at the rear of the room. Her insides coiled.

"God," she moaned softly to Ginny. "Couldn't you come just listening to him?"

Ginny nearly snorted with surprise. "I know I said he had a gorgeous voice, but ... I think maybe it would take a bit more than that."

Hermione turned to her, almost surprised to hear her dissent. Her eyebrows rose before the two girls dissolved into quiet giggles. It did not go unnoticed.

"Miss Granger! Miss Weasley! You will kindly desist from your disruptive behaviour and focus your attention on me."

"Certainly ... *sir*." Hermione smiled her sweetest smile, leaning her head on her hands and staring fixedly at him from the back of the room.

Snape's flow of speech had been interrupted and his face twitched with a combination of annoyance and desire. "Ten points from Gryffindor," he hissed towards them.

"Bastard," Ginny could not help but mumble under her breath.

Hermione turned to glare at her. "Sexy bastard," she corrected with a smirk. "That is my lover you're talking about."

Ginny smiled. "Maybe ... but he can still be a vindictive git."

Hermione had turned to stare back at him, her belly churning its need. "I really don't give a shit," she said, her eyes boring into his body.

"No ... that's what I gathered."

The lesson progressed. Hermione could not take her eyes from him. She found herself squirming along her chair in a desperate attempt to ease the throbbing ache constantly threatening to overwhelm her sanity. She had not listened to a word he had said; the only image her mind provided her with was one of him pinning her to his desk while he drove into her over and over again. It was intolerable.

And then their eyes met. She held his gaze and mouthed to him quite clearly, "*Make me come.*"

Snape's fluid discourse was halted momentarily, then he swiftly lowered his gaze and continued. No-one noticed.

At the start of the practical part of the lesson, Snape began moving around the classroom, inspecting different concoctions. Ginny had moved to a separate table in front of Hermione, leaving her alone at the back, out of sight of the other students. It was a complicated potion, but luckily Hermione had had experience of it before and could produce it easily. The other students however, including Ginny, were huddled over their cauldrons, brows furrowed in deep concentration.

While adding ingredients, Hermione kept her eyes trained on her Potions Master. He was working his way from student to student, a stream of criticism flowing from his mouth as usual, but a little more muted than usual, she noted. Hermione's skin tingled with anticipation. *God, he must come to her now.*

At last, his slow footsteps worked their way to Ginny, and for once he actually paid her a mild compliment on the care with which she added her elder sap. Ginny glowed with satisfaction and applied herself to improving her potion yet more. Then he turned and, with head lowered, made his way to Hermione's table.

"Miss Granger."

"Professor Snape."

He stepped close into her, his robes brushing against her arms. She turned her head to his, but kept her body facing the table, grateful for its support. He stared hard into her eyes. His were impassive, but his proximity signalled their mutual lust. She breathed in deep to try to capture much-needed oxygen.

His delicious aroma filled her senses, forcing her eyes closed. Her flesh screamed for his touch.

He stepped in yet further, the side of his body pressing against hers. As he breathed into her ear, his voice came so low and silky she thought she may pass out. "I trust your inattention of earlier has not resulted in a botched mixture."

"I hope you can see, Professor, that I have produced the potion exactly as you specified."

He leaned over her, his body long and lithe, pushing her further into the desk. "Hmm ... it appears satisfactory, but then ... so did the last one, which then resulted in the near-death of your friend."

She could only exhale a long, slow breath of desperate desire.

He did not move but remained at her side. She could feel his erection pushing firm against her thigh.

"Please ..." It was so soft as to be barely audible, but it was enough.

The students in front of them were fully engaged in their potions, seemingly unaware of all but their work. There was a low clatter of spoons and cauldrons and concentrated murmuring as they applied themselves to mixing their ingredients.

Then, at the back of her legs, Hermione felt a touch: long, warm fingers, questing up, higher, ever higher, pulling her skirt with them. His hand drew itself languorously up until it found the smooth naked flesh of her rump. Once again, she was wearing no underwear.

"Miss Granger ... I think I have mentioned about wearing the correct uniform before. I think a detention may be in order this time." He was caressing her backside in slow, languid circles. She could only moan in response.

Then, with a slight grunt of his own, he quickly drew his hand down and, curling his fingers, suddenly thrust two up inside her. Her eyes widened in surprise and she gasped in a breath. The fingers moved deftly, stroking deliciously along her sweetest spot.

Her head fell back and she whispered to him, so low only he could hear, *That's so good ... you're so good ...*

Another digit was inserted into her; she vaguely registered it as his thumb. But almost immediately it was withdrawn from her again. She moaned softly with disappointment.

But with another grunt of concentration and a tensing of his own body, his hand twisted and she felt a pressure on the tight, tender opening of her arse. It was his thumb, slick with her own desire. Her eyes widened in shock.

"Relax," he hissed against her ear. She did so, pulling in a breath of anticipation. Slowly, he eased his thumb into her tightest passage. A gasp rose involuntarily from Hermione with the sensation. It was not pain as she had expected, but merely heightened the exquisite feelings he was still drawing from her pussy.

Then one finger came out and swept up to her clit, touching with the lightest touches, but still causing her to buck against his hand with a moan.

"Shhh," he breathed hard again into her ear. Hermione bleakly looked out at the students before her; they were still concentrating intently on their potions.

Now he moved more urgently, circling her clit firmly and moving his thumb deliciously inside her arse. He still managed to keep one finger deep inside her pussy, and the pleasure which had been poised to break for so long quickly came to a point of release.

"Oh fuck ... oh fuck ... now ... now..." With a barely audible groan as his fingers and thumb strummed one final time, she came rapturously. As was quickly becoming a habit with him, he brought his free hand up to clamp hard upon her mouth to stifle her cries as her body shook around him. Her spasms were nearly uncontrollable, and he could not contain a small grunt of satisfaction at the sight and feel of this woman coming apart on his fingers. He pulled her in even tighter, holding her steady as her pleasure engulfed her.

When at last her body had relaxed, Snape withdrew his hand and moved away, before glancing one final time into her cauldron. "Yes, Miss Granger, I would declare myself happy with your efforts today."

Then, without another look, he turned and walked away, casting a cleansing charm over himself before continuing to peruse the other students' potions.

At the end of the lesson, Ginny turned to find a glowing but slightly dishevelled Hermione behind her.

"What happened to you?" she asked in confusion.

Hermione merely smiled.

"You are joking! I thought he was spending a long time looking at your work. Bloody hell, Hermione!" Ginny rolled her eyes but turned away with a smirk.

Hermione lingered in the classroom while Ginny waited at the doorway. It was the end of the day, but the two witches had a meeting to sort out Gryffindor's decorations for the ball. Hermione approached Snape. "I have to go now, but I'll come to you later. Are you free?"

He nodded insistently. "Don't be late."

Glancing back at Ginny, who was discreetly trying to ignore them, she leant up to kiss him, breathing against his lips, "Thank you for ... earlier. Weren't you worried that we might be seen?"

"We were safe enough. To the casual observer, it would have seemed that I was merely assisting you with your potion. In any case ..."

She waited for him to continue. He had lowered his eyes.

"What?"

"I find ... I am not so concerned about it any longer." His eyes moved up to hers again.

Her heart swelled. She reached up to kiss him deeply once again. "Still," she breathed, resting her forehead against his, "I don't want to jeopardise your job. We must be careful."

"We will be." He gave her one more kiss.

"Hermione. We have to go." Ginny called apologetically from the doorway.

"I'm coming," she replied before turning back to Severus. "Goodbye, my sweet darling. I'll be here soon."

He allowed himself a warm smile at her words. She had called him that earlier, and it had filled him with such satisfying joy that he could hardly identify the feeling. Never had anyone called him anything remotely approaching that before. It healed another of the countless wounds to his soul.

As they walked away, Hermione fell quiet, not wanting to be parted from him for a moment.

"You must be careful, you know, 'Mione," Ginny said somberly. "You don't want to risk bugging up your NEWTs at this stage."

"We are being careful," she replied defensively. "I don't want to get him sacked, more to the point. I'll get my NEWTs somehow."

Ginny stopped abruptly. "I can't believe you're saying that. Your academic work is paramount to you. Have you lost all sense of perspective?" She sounded shocked and angry.

Hermione looked at her, a frown on her face. "The preparation for my NEWTs is hardly taxing me, Ginny. If I hadn't had ... him ... I think I would have died of boredom this term. I'll be twenty next birthday! I mean, for god's sake, after all I've been through! Academic life doesn't exactly do it for me anymore!" She turned and stormed off, leaving Ginny open-mouthed in the corridor.

They both went to the meeting, but barely spoke a word to each other.

At supper that night, Hermione hardly looked up at Ginny, but realised in her heart that she must have sounded like a selfish arrogant cow. When Ginny got up to leave she hurried after her. "Gin!" Her friend turned slowly round to her, but set her face straight.

"I'm sorry. I just ... I don't know what's going to happen. I don't want to be 'institutionalised' any more, but equally, I don't want to leave him ... it just ... scares me a bit, that's all."

Ginny relaxed somewhat. "Why don't you talk to him about it?"

"We will ... we will ..."

"But you haven't yet?"

"No ... there hasn't been a right time, I guess. We have touched on it, but ... then it's kind of been brushed under the carpet."

"Well, you have to, 'Mione, simple as that." Ginny looked at her friend with sincere concern. "Come on you coming up to the Common Room for a bit?"

"Only a little. I ..." Hermione's voice trailed off. They both knew what she meant.

"Yeah yeah ... well, he can wait a little he's not the only one who wants a piece of you." Ginny linked her arm into Hermione's and together they walked up to Gryffindor Tower. "Don't forget Harry and Ron are coming tomorrow."

"God, I hadn't realised it was so soon. Shit I don't know how to deal with them regarding ... this."

"I've been thinking. It might be an idea to keep it to yourself for a bit. Harry may be OK, but my brother is very protective of you in a different way. I know you split up mutually and happily, but I think he still feels you kind of belong to him in that way ... romantically. He'd be wary of anyone — but Severus Snape!?! Bloody hell!"

"But I heard he's been seeing other people. It's not going to be one rule for him and something different for me!" Ron's approach to life irked her again.

"I know. But you know what he's like."

"All too well." She rolled her eyes.

"There's another matter to discuss as well."

"What's that?"

"The ball."

"Hm." Hermione had tried to avoid thinking about that particular matter, but the meeting had reminded her with abundant force.

"It won't be much fun without a partner, you know. Loads of people are going just as friends. Why don't you go with someone like that?"

"Oh god, Gin, I really don't know. I mean, Severus is kind of ... the jealous type. You should have seen the way he reacted when I just sat next to Lawrence the other day. I don't think he could stand seeing me with anyone else, even if it was only platonic."

"Well, that's his problem, not yours."

"Yes, but ..."

"But what?"

"I don't want to mess up what's been happening between us recently. It's been so good, Ginny ... so good."

"Well you know *you* want to go to the ball — *we* all want you to go to the ball. Just find a partner and be honest with Snape tell him you want to go and need a partner and it doesn't mean anything etcetera etcetera etcetera."

"Easier said than done."

Ginny shrugged. "Whatever ... but you need to get your skates on ... the ball's in a couple of weeks."

This also meant her time at the school was drawing to a close. Hermione's heart suddenly sank through her body. As much as she wanted to move on, out of Hogwarts with him, their time here was predictable, reliable, they knew where they stood, enjoyed the odd dynamics of their institutional relationship.

Ginny muttered the password to the Fat Lady, who complained about the poor diction of students these days, and entered the Common Room. Hermione's eyes

immediately fell on Lawrence Filmore. She had managed more or less to avoid him, but as if on cue after their discussion about the ball, here he was, his bright eyes smiling up at her. She sighed deeply but managed a watery smile back at him.

As she was heading for her room, she heard footsteps behind her, and turned around. It was him. "Hi, Hermione! Haven't seen you to talk to for ages. How you been?"

"Good, thanks, Lawrence ... yourself?"

"Yeah ... y'know ... lots of practice and matches."

God, could the boy talk of nothing except Quidditch? She smiled vacantly.

He shuffled nervously. "Hermione, could I have a word?"

Here we go.

"Sure, Lawrence." He motioned her over to a corner of the corridor leading to the staircase.

"Uhh ... I've been meaning to ask ... you know this ball ... I was just wondering if you'd ... y'know ... if you'd like to go with me?"

Shit. Predictable, but shit nonetheless. Couldn't some ugly spotty nerd have asked her?

"Oh, Lawrence. Goodness. I hadn't really thought about going at all. I'm not sure if I'll be free."

"Sure you will." He was suddenly bolder and more insistent. "Everyone will be free that night. It's going to be one of the biggest celebrations this place has ever seen. Loads of important people are coming from the Ministry and everything."

"Are they?" She tried to delay answering the question.

"Yeah ... so ... what do you think?"

Hermione just stared at him and smiled awkwardly. She should have been better prepared for this. She had just been discussing it, but now found her brain unable to come up with the best response. She knew there was no way she could go with Snape, as she would so love, but acknowledged that she did desperately want to go, and really needed to go with someone. It was always miserable and impractical to go on your own. You were expected to have a partner. What was she supposed to do? If she said yes, she knew Severus would be desolate, even if she made it clear that it was simply platonic.

She looked at Lawrence, his blue eyes smiling as flirtatiously as they ever had. It would certainly not be platonic from his point of view.

"Lawrence ... I ... I don't know ..."

"Is there someone else?"

Say yes. Say yes.

"No ... no ... it's just ... Ron ... you know ... he still gets jealous."

"But you've finished with him. You don't have to worry about that."

"Well ... yeah ... but ..." The blue eyes now took on the expression of a pleading puppy. She was lost for a sensible and sensitive response. "Can I think about it?"

He looked disappointed not to get an immediate answer but took her non-refusal as encouragement.

"Yeah ... no problem ... fine I'll ...err ... I'll catch you later ... bye, 'Mione." With a final dazzling smile, he left, walking backwards with his hands in his pockets.

Hermione turned away and stomped up to her room.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

Why couldn't she have just said no straight out?

Hermione sat on her bed, dejected and pathetic. The ball issue would not go away, but she knew there was only one thing that for now would block it out of her mind.

She stood quickly and left her room. Ginny saw her leave, and Hermione caught her look of disappointment as she hurried out of the common room so soon after arriving, but she still managed a resigned smile to her friend.

Hermione almost ran to the Dungeons. On entering his room, she found him once again at his desk and rushed over to him. He stood suddenly, almost surprised to find her so quickly upon him. She tore at his clothes, pulling at her own in the process. "Please ... please ... *hurry* ... come inside me ... have to have you inside me now ...*oh god, please* ... hurry, Severus."

She lay swiftly on his desk, crumpling the parchment he had been writing on, groaning at the wait, although in reality it was no time at all. He had risen as soon she had rushed over to him, and it took him only a few seconds to release his cock, position himself and plunge into her.

"Oh god, yes!" The cry rose from her as he filled her deep and hard instantly. She sat up, gripping his arm hard. "Don't move ... just stay still *.fuck, don't move!* I just want to feel you ... know you're there." Her eyes widened as she focused on his hardness inside her, stretching her. She held his gaze. He was looking down at her in sheer wonder. She could not help but smile up at him in equal awe. "Do you know how good you feel inside me? Do you know what it feels like to have you filling me so hard and so completely?"

He did not reply, but his black eyes continued to sear her soul. She lay back down and bucked, causing him to groan with the sudden pleasure.

"Now fuck me."

He obliged.

One hand came up to her breast, squeezing, pinching the nipple, the other dug into her hip, holding her still on the desk as best he could. She was groaning incessantly, urging him on, an unending stream of filth emerging from her beautiful red mouth. The paradox of this perfect witch speaking such crude words was too much for him, and he knew he would come soon. His balls tightened and he shut his eyes, trying to stem the tide of rising pleasure until he knew she was satisfied.

He thrust harder and harder, twisting the nipple brutally in his fingertips. "Fuck, witch, come for me, come for me, can't hold on *..I can't hold on...*"

She came. Hermione convulsed around him, her pleasure washing through her, reaching the tips of her toes. As she screamed his name out he exploded, his cock releasing shot upon shot of his seed up into her.

"*Hermione ... Hermione ... Hermione...*" Her name was chanted on his lips, almost inaudible, but causing her post-orgasmic bliss to be further deepened.

After they had come down from their pleasure, she sat up, still joined to him. He encircled his arms about her and held her tight. Then, after he had softened and slipped out, they walked to the bedroom and immediately fell into bed.

They lay quietly for a while, her head resting on his chest, his long fingers stroking her hair.

"Miss Granger." That familiar ominous drawl. "Where is my essay?"

She sat up with a smirk. "Professor Snape you know I never disappoint."

He raised a cynical eyebrow. Hermione merely grinned provocatively at him. She got out of bed and went back to his classroom. A moment later she returned with a quill and ink pot.

"Just give me a moment. Now — I have the ink and the quill — I just need something to write on ..."

With a teasing bite of her lip, she stood over him before throwing the covers off him, revealing his long, taut, naked body beneath her, the pale flesh glowing in the candlelight.

She smirked deliciously at him. He stared up at her but said not a word. His breathing deepened and she could see his cock twitching into life again already. Hermione reached down with the quill and tapped the ever-swelling head reproachfully with the feather. "Oh no. You'll have to wait. I mustn't miss a deadline, must I, Professor?"

With that she knelt and opened the ink pot. Dipping the quill in, she held it teasingly to her lips for a moment. "Now let me see ..."

Then turning to him, she slowly, so slowly, brought the tip of the quill down to the smooth arch of his chest. It hovered tantalisingly over his luminous skin before she touched it to the flesh. He inhaled sharply but did not stop her. The quill started to move over his chest, scratching as it went, but the ink from the broad nib flowed smoothly enough. She knew it would be tickling him at best, a teasing graze at worst. Her hand moved fluidly and more and more words appeared.

"*The Properties of the Various Ingredients to be Found in a Potion Master's Cupboard*" She paused briefly, as if thinking hard. Then her hand lowered again and she started to write. He groaned loudly this time. "Number one: Dragon's Blood — a rare and precious ingredient, characterised by its viscosity and deep red hue. The blood of the Ruritanian Red is the most potent variety but can only be obtained ..." She continued writing fluently.

Soon, her words had covered most of his torso, and she found herself writing frantically over his smooth, firm belly. Her scribing was accompanied by an almost ceaseless moaning from the man beneath her hands. His flesh quivered as she scraped the nib over it, but she knew how much delicious pleasure it was giving him. She tried to move further down, but found her elbow bumping against his engorged cock.

"Tut!" she exhaled with mock annoyance. "How is one supposed to produce one's best work with all these impediments!?" Again, she lightly tapped the tip with her hand, causing him to grunt loudly with need and jerk towards her. An enticing drop of pre-cum formed on the top and she could not prevent herself from reaching her tongue up and running it deep into the slit to lick it up. He cried out with torment.

"Fuck, witch! *You are too much.* You torture me!"

She merely smirked. "Professor Snape you set me an essay which is due in by the end of the day. Surely you would not wish me to let you down, would you?"

He threw his head back. The pleasure of the little scratches of the workings of this woman's mind etching themselves into his body was so deliciously erotic and sublime, that he closed his eyes tight and tried to focus only on what she was doing with the quill. Hermione had now moved to his right leg and was quickly filling it with her vast knowledge of potions ingredients.

"Number thirty two: Unicorn horn — a highly precious and rare ingredient which should only be used sparingly. It is renowned for its restorative properties, and when ground properly gives off a faint blue glow, said to be the spirit of the unicorn itself infusing it with healing ..." More groans from the man above her.

She continued, filling his right leg then moving onto his left. Soon, the whole front of his body was filled with her fluid handwriting. She paused to blow over him, ensuring the ink was dry, and allowed herself a satisfied smile at her work so far.

"Turn over, please." Hermione spoke emphatically. With a loud moan, he complied immediately, although struggled to know what to do with his rigid cock.

"Number fifty: Baobab bark — best stored in darkness as it can lose its magical properties quickly when exposed to light after having been stripped ..." She was now filling up his taut, muscular back. He tensed and flexed as the sharp point of the quill moved over his skin. "Lie still! I cannot be expected to concentrate with so much distracting movement to contend with." She revelled in her teasing, her voice chiding and berating him as he had so often done to her.

He settled under her. She continued. Her hand was soon at his firm buttocks and she delighted in pressing that little bit harder as she wrote over them. He stifled his groans into the pillow and ground his squashed erection into the mattress beneath him.

She moved down one leg then back to the other, finally ending at his ankle. "... if used incorrectly will most certainly result in instant death." She pushed the quill in hard for the final full-stop. "There, finished."

She sat back up. "I should think that's about two thousand words. I trust that is sufficient, Professor Snape?"

He rolled over, his engorged cock immediately bouncing up to her. He was breathing rapidly, his eyes burning up at her in the dim light.

"You little ..." He did not finish his words. She raised a querying eyebrow but then turned to look down at his tattooed body and smiled in satisfaction. The tip of his cock was purple with lust and dripping with pre-cum.

She knew immediately what they both wanted. She brought her head up to his and whispered near him, "Now for some unfinished business." He tried to kiss her, but she moved swiftly away. He was not disappointed for long, however, as she moved once more down his body, glancing over the words adorning his torso, before coming to rest over his achingly hard cock. He bucked up to her.

She would tease him no longer. In any case, she could not stem her own hunger. With a final look at it, she plunged her head fully onto him, taking him all the way down to her throat.

He groaned loudly, his hand coming to hold her there. She revelled in it. Pulling tightly back up, she dragged her sweet lips hard over him. Her tongue licked desperately around the head, questing into his slit, before she sank down onto him once more, then back up to drag over his skin as she went. She brought up her hand, cupping his sac gently at first, then with a light squeeze as her head moved regularly up and down over him.

He was groaning as incessantly as she had earlier on his desk. She responded with increased desperation; her hand squeezed his balls and she plunged tightly down onto him. As she rose off again, her tongue caught his head, and he came frantically, his fingers clenching in her hair. She caught all his seed in her mouth as he spurted time and again into her, each burst accompanied by a grunt of deepest pleasure. When at last he had stopped jolting into her mouth, she relaxed, but held him for a moment longer, before gently releasing him.

Then bringing herself up to him once again, she held his bleary gaze and swallowed.

His eyes took it in, then closed slowly.

She lay down along his adorned torso, and his hands encircled her to him.

"So ... what grade did I get?"

He paused before answering, planting a tender kiss on the top of her head.

"Outstanding."

Sorry for the long wait on this one. Hope it was worth it. Surely their peace cannot last? Let me know your thoughts. LL x

Twenty-Two

Chapter 22 of 34

Soap suds, sensuality, sense ... and sex. A full and detailed chapter.

They had fallen asleep soon afterwards and had hardly stirred during the night, although awoke closely entwined the next day. Hermione glanced over and immediately noticed the ink tattooing his body from the night before. She exhaled a laugh against his chest, suddenly ashamed of her actions.

"What?" drawled Severus, not even opening his eyes.

"Nothing. It's just ... I think you're ready for publication." She snickered again.

He caught her in his arms and rolled her over, gazing down in longing. "In future, Miss Granger, I shall expect all your essays to be produced with similar flair." And inclining his head, he kissed her long and deep.

When they at last broke apart, the familiar languid drawl sounded. "Now, I cannot possibly be expected to go about my day with adornments such as these. Please remove them from my person forthwith."

Hermione grinned and glanced along his body one more time before reaching for her wand, ready to remove the writing with one easy spell. But before she could say a word, he had grabbed her wrist and twisted it out of her grip. "Oh no. You do not get away with it as easily as that."

Severus sat up smoothly but firmly, quickly getting out of bed and pulling her with him. He went into the bathroom, where he turned on the taps on the bath. The room was soon filled hot, dense steam.

It was a large, free-standing roll-top bath, and after the water had filled half of it, Severus stepped in, pulling his lover after him. They did not sit, instead stood, letting the steam rise around them. Then, not taking her eyes from his, Hermione reached over and took hold of a sponge and some bath wash. Squeezing some of the perfumed lotion onto the sponge, she bent to dip it in the water, then straightened herself again.

With a lazy smile, Hermione gripped the sponge so the soap turned to a froth, and brought it slowly to his shoulder. She squeezed, and a thick foam of perfumed soap ran languorously down his chest, trickling into the centre, where it continued its idle progress down to the dark triangle below his belly button. Hermione started to rub the sponge in slow circles over his torso. She had to be firm to remove the ink, but it did eventually start to disappear. Still, neither of them would have minded if it took all day.

Hermione gazed at his body as the bubbling lather coated the pale, scarred flesh, as if soothing and caressing it. The steam continued to swirl around them, and as she stroked the sponge ever more sensuously over his skin, she could feel his chest rising and falling increasingly rapidly under her. She could not stop from reaching up and running her fingers over the smooth soapy skin, letting the white foam coat her hands, then drawing them down and over his silky body in time with the movements of the sponge.

Glancing down, she saw his cock jutting straight out towards her, rock-hard and magnificent.

Then suddenly, Severus grabbed her wrist and, with his other hand, snatched the sponge out of it. Reapplying the bath wash, he started to mimic Hermione's actions on her own body. She let her head fall back as the hot foam slid down her skin, running over her breasts, encircling her nipples and dripping off them into the water beneath. Soon his hand came up to cup one gently, and he could not stop a groan escaping him at the sight.

His hands came round her back, and he pulled her, wet, slick and dripping, into him. Severus grunted loudly as she jolted against his swollen cock, and she could only moan her own need out to him in return. Their mouths met hungrily but, not parting, they continued to soap and cleanse the other until all the writing had disappeared from his body. Still, they could not stop their sensual exploration. The feel of the silky wetness of their flesh was so delicious that they did not wish it to end.

But after a while, Hermione felt herself inexorably drawn to his erection. It rose from his body, as if seeking her out, coated in the same soapy froth. She reached down and encircled her hand around it. With another groan, he brought his hand to her wrist. But instead of pulling it away, Severus held it there, and relaxed his grip as Hermione started to move it up and down.

The feel of the slick hard flesh under her fingers was too good, causing a soft moan to rise from her into the humid air. She was amply used to the feel of him in her mouth or pussy, but it was not often that she simply held him tight in her hands. And now, coated as he was in the soap, she glided her fingers over him ever more sensuously, enjoying the silky skin stretched over the turgid core. She looked down in wonder, studying his cock carefully. It was long and smooth, broader than it appeared due to the length, and with a slight bend towards the head, which now was large and engorged. To her eyes, at that moment, it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, and she continued her task with undeniable fervour.

She felt his hand questing down between her thighs, but she quickly stopped him and pulled back.

"No. I just want to feel you feel your vitality your life under my fingers ... so good so hard ..." She stated the obvious, but the vibrant rigidity of his cock in her hand staggered her, and she could only speak the truth. She brought her other hand down and, together, her two hands stroked, pulled, caressed and pumped his cock. Hermione was enjoying the sensations nearly as much as Severus, whose eyes had glazed with sheer pleasure. Still, she raised her head and held his gaze. His mouth dropped open uselessly and his face took on an expression of pain, but which was in fact reflecting only the deepest pleasure. She drew one palm over the head while the other continued to rub hard up and down the considerable length of the shaft. He pulled in a sharp juddering breath and his eyes flashed to her. His breathing now was

ragged and fast; he was close. She found herself desperate to see as well as feel him coming for her.

"You ... you are ... perfection ... gods ... *Hermione, Hermione* ..."

He was there. She drew her hands over him a final time.

He came spectacularly.

He erupted from the tip of his cock with such force that it hit her hard on the chest. The next shot landed on her breast, finding a home on her nipple. Each burst was accompanied by a primeval grunt of satisfaction. The sight of the woman before him coated in his seed enhanced Severus' post-orgasmic euphoria yet more.

When the last drops of his pleasure had finally left him, Hermione lifted her head slowly and stood, breathing hard. He held her eyes with a glow of fierce intensity, before slowly dropping his gaze again to look at the result of her actions.

And then, his eyes steely and dark, his hand came up and he caught the viscose liquid on his finger. She turned her eyes to it and her breath was halted as she watched its deliberate progress up to her mouth. His finger paused. Their eyes met, then he reached forward and touched briefly along her lips, leaving the merest drop on her swollen mouth, before pushing deeper in and waiting for her to close her lips around it. She duly did so, not taking her eyes from his, twirling her tongue around the finger as she sucked off the salty liquid clinging to it.

Eventually, he withdrew it from her mouth, feeling her lips sucking his flesh. There was silence and stillness for the longest while before they sank into the water and cleansed each other tenderly but thoroughly.

Time had passed more rapidly than either had realised and when they finally got out of the bath they had to hurry to get dressed. Neither mentioned again the potent sensuality which had so overcome them. Words were grossly inadequate.

"Are you busy today?" he asked instead, finding an almost welcome institutional relief in his question, which Hermione too was happy to reciprocate.

"Not too bad. I've got DADA then Herbology. I think I'll go to the library this afternoon." She had forgotten to tell him about Harry and Ron's visit. Indeed, she had simply forgotten that they were coming at all. Fear suddenly swept over her at how he would react. Still, she must tell him; she had no wish to deceive him and in any case, he would inevitably find out.

"I almost forgot ... Harry and Ron are coming for a visit this afternoon." She spoke as casually as she could, but did not look up at him. She could tell, however, that he had tensed.

"I see." His voice was immediately cold.

"I haven't seen them for ages. It will be really nice. I think they're only staying for the evening. There's a portkey they can take which will bring them out close to the castle."

"And why have you not mentioned this before?" His voice had reacquired its familiar chilling terseness.

"To be perfectly honest, Severus, I had forgotten. You've been, somewhat distracting, recently. I guess our times together have meant more to me than friends coming up for a brief visit." She hoped her words would reassure him somewhat, and they seemed to have done the trick. His face visibly relaxed and his posture slackened.

"I suppose Weasley in particular will be keen to see you." He spoke relatively calmly, although Ron's name was said with a predictable chill.

"Not especially. We've both moved on. I think he's got a new girlfriend. Ron and I broke up months ago. We should never have got together like that in the first place."

"So why did you?"

He was clearly curious. Now was not really the time to discuss it, but she somehow felt obliged to.

"I don't know really. I suppose it was sort of ... expected. Our being together was sort of a habit, and the next step just kind of seemed to be what should happen."

"But it was not."

"No. That became clear quite soon."

"Why?"

"We were ... not compatible."

"How?"

"You know how."

"I do not."

She rolled her eyes. *Must she spell it out?*

"Well ... actually, we were incompatible in many ways. Although he will always be a dear friend; but he's more like a brother really. We were always bickering, and after a while it grew tedious, and also ..."

"Yes?"

"Well, you know ... I never really fancied him. He didn't ... do it for me." Hermione spoke bluntly but was flushed with embarrassment. She didn't notice the tiny satisfied twitch at the corner of his mouth.

"And do I ... *do it for you?*" The words sounded odd on his tongue.

She looked at him. *Did he really need to ask?* Holding his gaze, she stared at the man with the black eyes, his hair still damp from earlier, his broad shoulders accentuated by his black frock coat which tapered in an elegant V down his slender torso.

Walking slowly over, Hermione fixed him with her eyes and took his hand in hers. She brought it under her skirt and up between her legs. She knew she was wet for him; she always was. She pushed his fingers up towards the opening of her pussy and felt two of them instinctively slip inside her, tight but slick.

She raised an eyebrow. "Does that answer your question?"

She had not expected him to keep his hand there, but he soon started moving his fingers inside her while his thumb teased her clit to rapid fullness. There was little time, and not breaking eye contact, he strummed and stroked exquisitely, bringing her swiftly to a palpitating climax. She opened her mouth with a gasp at the rapidity with which he had achieved it.

It was his turn to raise an eyebrow. "Yes," he said smoothly, before finally withdrawing his hand and reapplying himself to getting dressed.

Hermione took a moment to recover but, smirking with pleasure at the man before her, she also continued getting ready.

"So does this *visit* mean I shall not see you tonight?" His voice was calm again, but he needed to know.

"You know I will come to you as soon as I can. They'll probably leave about ten. Can I come then?"

"Yes. Be careful along the corridors at that time."

"I always am."

"I know."

They were silent for a time.

"You know, Harry would love to see you while he's here."

Severus did not immediately reply.

"The last time I saw Potter, I imparted him with something I would never have done had I not thought I was *dying*." He spat the last word out.

"Well, your actions, and what they revealed, changed Harry's opinion of you fundamentally."

"Potter's good opinion of me is not something I trouble myself with."

She changed tack. "Fair enough, but ... if it hadn't been for that, I doubt very much I would be here now."

He looked up sharply at her, a shadow crossing his face.

She continued. "I thought you were evil, Severus. Simple as that. Never have I been so completely wrong about someone."

He paused before replying languidly. "Obviously."

She couldn't help but laugh a little. He smirked at her reaction. She crossed to him and reached up, doing up the last two buttons on his coat. "I must go. You won't worry about this visit, will you?"

Severus exhaled slightly. "I would rather they weren't coming, but it would be foolish to concern myself with it." He paused. "You will come to me afterwards, won't you?" She could detect the lingering insecurity in his voice. It was strange.

"Of course." She leaned up to kiss him. "Of course, my darling."

"Go now." He stroked her face, then Hermione turned and left him with a warm smile and a warmer memory.

Hermione was finally able to relax and look forward to Harry and Ron's visit, although she had to admit, it was Harry that she was mainly looking forward to seeing. Her lessons passed quickly and after lunch she headed for the library.

She found her usual quiet spot: a small table tucked out of sight at the end of an aisle, in front of a narrow gabled window. The light was good and the position secluded. People could occasionally be heard perusing the books on the other side of the shelves, but it was rare that she ever even saw anyone.

Hermione opened her books. Her exams were now only a few weeks away. It was early November, and although she felt confident in her abilities, she wanted to ensure she did not miss anything. Still, the words blurred on the page before her, and her mind found itself wandering to other matters, namely soaping her Potions Master down in a bath that morning.

She rubbed her eyes distractedly and tried to refocus. It was almost impossible. She was now replaying their conversation in her mind. He had seemed so genuinely insecure about Harry and Ron's visit, but she was reassured by his acceptance of it by the time they had parted. Severus' jealousy was comforting in a way, but she did not wish it to cause tension between them. He had no reason to doubt her feelings, although she realised suddenly that she had not actually declared them to him. Should she? Was she waiting for him to do the same? That may be a long time in coming.

She sighed and held her head in her hands. The image behind her eyes was one of an enormous soapy cock.

There was a gentle noise before her. She looked up.

Severus was standing directly in front of her. Her surprise silenced any response.

For a moment he looked awkward, almost embarrassed to have disturbed her, but then his eyes rose to hers and she could see immediate desire in them.

"I need to be inside you." The words were spoken quietly but with firm intensity: the simple truth.

He moved beside her, and her mind did not question her next action for a moment, despite their exposed position.

"Yes."

She said no more, but reached to his trousers to release his already hard cock. They had now both given up wearing underwear; it was an unnecessary encumbrance. She stood and moved back, half pushed by him to the window. It was recessed with a sloping ledge at hip height which Hermione raised herself onto, helped by him. He placed himself in front of her, and she brought her feet up around him to rest on the desk. They were perfectly positioned. She braced herself by placing her hands on either side of the window recess and, locking eyes with her, Severus thrust hard and deep. It had only been a few seconds before that she had been attempting to read her Arithmancy textbook.

Hermione's eyes widened with the sudden fullness. *God, it was so good*; she never wanted him to come out of her.

One hand came down sharply to clasp him to her, while the other continued to push hard onto the stone for support.

"Stay," she breathed out.

Severus acknowledged her need for tranquillity; it was the same for him. Never had he felt so secure.

They stayed completely still for minutes, silent, just gazing into each other's eyes and feeling. He had not imagined two people could fit together so perfectly. He could feel every pulse and twinge of her around him; she sensed every swell and rise of his cock.

This was what they were made for.

They realised that, with a bizarre paradox, to achieve release, it would necessitate coming apart afterwards. For the time they both just wanted to stay joined forever, with

him rigid and needy inside her. Severus seared her eyes, not wanting to break the spell, but feeling the tingle in his groin grow ever more insistent.

"Shall I move now?" It was a tender request.

Hermione smiled down at him, still focusing only on his cock inside her. She nodded her acquiescence.

Severus started to withdraw, causing Hermione's face to twist with the loss, but almost immediately he plunged as deep into her as before, drawing a smiling gasp from her and a hiss of pleasure from him.

Footsteps sounded walking down the aisle on the other side from them. Hermione's eyes widened, but he only pulled out before thrusting ever harder. He caught her clit smoothly and she bit down on her lip to stifle a groan.

A book was being taken down from the shelf.

She held his gaze, whispering low and urgent to him, "Harder, harder, harder ..."

His thrusts were fast and insistent now. All her being was focused on his relentless hardness as it pounded into her time and time again, pulling her pleasure out sharply.

Her muscles were tightening, the knot in her belly almost ready to unravel. A slight moan sounded, and his hand came up, two fingers thrust deep into her mouth to stifle it. She closed her lips around them tight and sucked. He buried his head in her neck to muffle his own groan.

With that, Severus convulsed into her, his cock swelling and releasing explosively deep within. She felt his pleasure, and her own cascaded around him, prompting her to grip his back for support. His fingers were thrust yet further into her mouth, almost to the point of discomfort, but she did not care; she delighted in the taste and feel of them, mimicking his cock buried in her still-spasming pussy.

Even when he had softened, he could not pull out of her. They stayed for an age, with her sitting on the window ledge, stroking and gazing.

At long last, with a last stroke of her face, and a light kiss to her lips, Severus pulled back and slipped gently out of her. Hermione drew in a breath of emptiness; her eyes closed. They had not been caught, through luck more than anything, but neither their minds nor bodies allowed them any regret or relief.

He tidied himself quickly and, with a subtle smile at her, whispered, "Until later," before turning and leaving.

Hermione found herself concentrating much more efficiently as the afternoon progressed and time soon passed her by.

At four o'clock, she packed away her things and left. She had arranged to meet Ginny outside the castle gates at quarter past, where Harry and Ron were to walk up from the portkey point. Ginny was already there when she arrived.

"Good day?" her friend queried happily.

"Oh yes," Hermione smirked.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "God, you're insatiable. Maybe I'm with the wrong guy. Harry hasn't managed to turn me into a complete nympho!"

"There's still time," Hermione grinned as she saw two familiar figures working their way up the hill.

"So ... not a word?" Ginny turned to her, suddenly serious.

"Not a word," Hermione confirmed.

Harry and Ron walked up the hill towards them. They both looked happy and relaxed, with broad smiles on their faces.

Harry immediately enclosed Ginny in a tight hug and Ron greeted Hermione with a quick one. They had moved on, but initial greetings were still always a little awkward.

"How are you?" he asked genuinely.

"Really well." It was the truth. "Yourself?"

"Yeah ... yeah ... good ... good, thanks." He sounded honest. She wondered if he had found someone who would last. She hoped sincerely that he had.

Harry crossed to her and held her tight. "Hi, Mione. God, I missed you."

"Me too." She held Harry close for a while, their shared experiences of a few months ago suddenly gripping her.

"Come on then. It's bloody cold out here. I miss good old Hogwarts hospitality." Ron led the way up the steps.

They chatted happily on the way up to the Common Room, the girls learning quickly all about Auror training and significant Quidditch matches. Hermione was quickly reminded of why she had split up with Ron. She listened happily to him as a friend, but was glad it was no more.

They settled down in the Common Room beside a roaring fire, drinking tea and enjoying the convivial familiarity.

"So ... has Ron told you about his new girlfriend?" Harry said loudly with a cheeky grin.

Ron rolled his eyes and glanced briefly at Hermione. She looked far too excited about it in his opinion.

"No ... go on," Ginny urged.

"You tell them, Ron."

He sighed deeply before speaking. "She's called Becky. She's the seeker for the Tintagel Tempests and we've been seeing each other for over a month now."

"And for Ron ... that's a long time," remarked Harry slyly.

"Shut it, Harry," Ron moaned.

Hermione was more relieved than she could have imagined. If Ron was happy, it seemed to give her a clear ride to pursue her own pleasure more freely.

"Ron, she sounds perfect. What does she look like?" she asked inquisitively.

"She's blonde, short hair ... fit ..."

"Fit, as in exercises a lot, or fit as in *fiiiiit!*?" They all giggled, apart from Ron.

"Both," he acknowledged with a certain amount of pride.

"Well, that's brilliant. When do we get to meet her?"

"I guess we'll see you at Christmas if ... y'know - we're still together. What you gonna do? Get your own place, I guess?"

Hermione lowered her head. She needed to start thinking about that, and about getting a job. Various positions had already been offered to her, both at the Ministry and elsewhere, but she had not wanted to give it much thought. She would have to very soon. An ache developed in her stomach.

Harry turned to her, his arm draped around Ginny. "What about you, Mione? Is there anyone good enough for you up here?" He smiled doubtfully at her.

She lowered her head. "That's not quite how I would put it."

"I see there's a ball on. I should be able to make it, Gin. If you still want me, that is?"

She gave him a shove. "Course I do."

"I'm away training in Norway at that time. Not my thing really anyway," Ron grunted. He didn't seem to realise he hadn't been invited.

Harry looked back at Hermione. "So who are you going to go with, Mione? Suppose you need a partner of some description."

Ron shifted a little.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. We'll see."

"You must have had offers. Most of the boys round here can't keep their eyes off you."

"Yeah, well ... perhaps." She inhaled deeply.

"Oh, come on who?" Harry sounded curious. Ron's arms were crossed.

Against her better judgement, Hermione eventually mumbled out, "Lawrence Filmore."

Ron's face suddenly lit up. "The seeker? Oh, he's a good bloke. Yeah ... you should go with him." The fact that it was a Quidditch player clearly negated any concerns he may have had.

Hermione sighed to herself. "I'm not interested in him."

"Doesn't matter does it?" questioned Harry. "Just go as friends."

"He might not see it that way."

"Ah," Harry realised.

"I still don't see the problem though. Just tell him where he stands. He'll still get to cop a feel on the dancefloor. I'd be happy." Ron blokish abruptness turned Hermione's stomach.

"Ron! You've changed your tune. You used to be so possessive of Hermione," Ginny declared.

"Wha'? I remember Filmore. Bloody good player. You know where you stand with a guy like that." His eyes turned to the door and lit up. "And here's your chance to accept. Filmore! How you doing, mate?"

Ron had stood up. Hermione turned with a sudden deep feeling of dread. Lawrence Filmore had just walked into the Common Room.

Ron strode over and shook his hand hard, clapping him on the back. "How's the team this year? Hear they're pretty good with you out there. Come and join us. We were just chatting about you, weren't we, Mione?"

Hermione glared at him and blushed bright red. *How dare he put her in this position?*

Lawrence stood awkwardly for a moment, running his fingers through his dishevelled hair, his blue eyes sparkling at Hermione. *He really was wasted on her,* she realised. He would be able to keep so many girls happy not this one. But she felt obliged to let him sit down and held her hand out, indicating the space next to Harry.

"So we were just talking about the ball. Got a partner yet, Lawrence?" Ron continued unabashed. Hermione could have killed him.

"Uhh ... no ... actually." He couldn't look at her.

"Oh, that's funny, cos ... 'Mione here hasn't got one either. You two would make a good couple, I reckon."

Ginny elbowed Ron hard in the ribs.

"Well ... if ... err ... Hermione would like to ... she knows I'd be more than happy to ... err ... take her." The fingers were running incessantly through the hair now.

Hermione sat with her arms crossed, staring straight ahead. If she was holding her wand, Ron would have sprouted green pustules all over his face by now. *What a complete and utter twat.*

There was silence between them. She glanced at Harry. He shrugged discreetly and mouthed to her, "Just as friends."

"Well, there you go, Mione. Can't do better than that. Who the hell else are you gonna go with?" Ron kept up the drivel.

Hermione turned to Ginny who was looking at her anxiously. She wanted her friend to go to the ball with *someone*. The pressure was overwhelming. *Why was she the only person in the room who thought this was a bad idea?*

Standing suddenly, she caught the puppy dog eyes of Filmore again. She simply could not find it in her heart to say no.

"Lawrence, could I have a quiet word, please?"

"Sure." He stood awkwardly then moved to the doorway with her.

He spoke first. "I'm sorry you were put in that position."

"Oh, it's alright. I wouldn't expect anything better from Ron."

"But, y'know my offer still stands."

She looked up at him. He would make a good partner. She breathed deeply then fixed him with her eyes.

"Lawrence." Another sigh, but she carried on. "I'll go with you, as long as you know that it is just as friends. I mean that. I don't want anything else. OK?"

He hadn't really listened to a word she had said after, "I'll go with you." Grinning like the cat who had got the cream, his face was tinged with a faint flush.

"Sure, sure, Hermione. That's ... that's great ... fine. Yeah ... brilliant. Thanks ..." He bent to kiss her on the cheek. She pulled quickly back.

"No, Lawrence. *No.*" She was firm.

He held his hands up. "Sorry gut instinct." Placing his hand on his heart, he backed away from her. "Just as friends. Promise." With another gorgeous smile he disappeared up to his room.

Hermione leaned back against the wall and sighed long and hard.

The deed was done. Now how the hell would she tell Severus? She almost feared for Lawrence Filmore's safety.

After a while footsteps approached. It was Ginny.

"Are you OK?"

Hermione nodded. "I just want to kill Ron, that's all."

"I know. He should never have done that. I'm sorry. He just hasn't got a clue."

"That's why we split up. He never did have a clue."

"Has Lawrence gone?"

She nodded again.

"What happened?"

Hermione raised her head to look desolately at Ginny. "I said yes."

Ginny smiled broadly. "Well, despite the circumstances, I still think that's great. It's just to have someone to dance with occasionally, and now we can all be on a table together. You don't have to snog him."

Hermione brought her hands to her head. "Oh, please ... it doesn't even bear thinking about."

"Are you going to tell ... him?"

"Well, I'll have to, won't I? He's going to ... oh god, he's going to be devastated, I just know it."

"Oh, for god's sake! Why should he be? He's a highly intelligent, mature man. Surely he can see that you need to appear to be just like a normal student. It would be weird if you didn't go with anyone."

"Severus is ... very emotionally fragile. He's only just started to build on things in that way. I don't want it to all come crashing down now."

"Oh, come on, Hermione. If he's that bad, you shouldn't be with him."

Hermione glared at Ginny, rounding on her in fury. "Don't presume to tell me who I should be with or to pass judgement on him! All his life he's been judged and misunderstood. You haven't got a clue what he's like. How dare you speak to me like that!?" Her voice had risen to an incensed tirade. Spinning away from Ginny, she stormed out of the Common Room. She did not notice Harry following fast behind.

Hermione ran down the step and along the corridors, not sure where she was going. There were quick footsteps behind her.

"Hermione. Hermione! Hang on! What's the matter?"

She stopped, waiting for Harry to catch up.

"Hey. It's alright. You don't have to go with the guy if you don't want to. Ron was being a prat. He shouldn't have put either of you in that position."

"Well, he got what he wanted - I'm going with him."

"Oh ... right," Harry was surprised. "That's good then ... is it?"

Hermione burst into tears.

Harry stood awkwardly for a moment, confused by his friend's sudden emotional fragility, then enclosed her in his arms.

"Hey. It's OK, it's OK." He soothed her gently. "There's more to this than it appears, isn't there?"

Hermione shrugged. He tried to catch her eyes. "Is there someone else?"

She could not speak.

"If there is, why don't you go with whomever it is?" He was confused.

She shook her head. "I ... I can't."

"Is it someone from outside Hogwarts?"

Hermione did not respond.

Harry moved gently apart. "Come on ... let's go for a walk outside." They started to head for the doors, but before they could get far an all too familiar voice drawled slowly behind them.

"Potter."

They turned to the voice. For the first time ever, Harry was actually pleased to see the person in question. "Professor Snape! It is so good to see you again. You look incredibly well."

He stepped forward. Snape actually extended his hand first. Harry took it, smiling warmly and shaking it firmly.

"I trust you are enjoying your visit to Hogwarts. I see Miss Granger is looking after you." Severus turned to Hermione and his eyes immediately narrowed on seeing her tear-stained face. "Miss Granger. Are you not well?" There was clear surprise and concern in his voice.

The Potions Master took an instinctive step towards her. Harry looked somewhat surprised.

"No ... no ... I'm fine, thank you ... sir." She looked up at him. Their eyes met for longer than was necessary. There was silence. Hermione wanted nothing more than to rush into his arms and have him carry her to his rooms and away from everyone else.

"Umm ... yes ..." Harry tried to continue the conversation, but found it hard to catch his ex-teacher's attention. The black-haired man was still staring at Hermione with a look of genuine apprehension. "Yeah ... it's a bit weird being back, but nothing much seems to have changed. And how have you been, Professor?"

Snape at last turned to him. "I am well, Potter, thank you."

"And Hermione's still taking Potions? Exams soon, isn't it? I'm sure you're training her up well."

Snape shot him a sharp look.

Had he said something wrong? Harry's sense of awkwardness grew and he cleared his throat.

"How is Auror training going? Is Shacklebolt efficient?" Snape's voice suddenly seemed to be focused.

"Yeah he's good. There are quite a few of us training. He's even given me a bit of instruction to do myself."

"Hmm." Snape didn't sound convinced. Harry laughed a little and glanced up at him. Snape had turned to look at Hermione again. Harry moved to her. She was staring straight back at the professor with a clear intensity which surprised Harry.

"Professor Snape?" Hermione started.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

Harry thought his voice sounded remarkably accommodating.

"I find I am having some difficulties with wolfsbane again, and my practical is coming up soon. Do you have a spare moment today to go over it with me?"

"Are you sure you can spare the time today, Miss Granger? Your friends are visiting."

"Please, Professor Snape. It is troubling me."

"In that case, of course, Miss Granger. You may come down to the dungeons at any point between now and supper."

"Thank you."

There was another silence. Harry realised why things were so awkward; he felt like a spare part. "Right ... well ... Hermione and I were going for a walk. It's really good to see you, Professor. I suppose we'd better get going, Hermione ... if you still want to, that is?"

"Yes ... yes, I'm coming." She could hardly tear herself away from Snape. "I'll be down in a moment, Professor." She held his gaze and he returned it. There remained a lingering query in his eyes, trying to ascertain what the problem was.

Harry had walked off. Hermione was not following. He turned to see her standing closer than was surely necessary to her teacher.

And then it all fell into place. A moment later Harry's suspicions were confirmed when he saw Hermione reach out and brush Snape's hand with the lightest of touches before moving off. His former teacher stared long after her then turned with billowing robes and headed away from them.

Harry stared down at Hermione as she approached. She did not look up, but moved past him to go outside.

They walked silently along the castle walls.

Harry stopped abruptly and sighed deeply. "I asked you earlier if there was someone else."

She looked up at him, clear alarm in her eyes. She shook her head. "Don't ask me ... don't ask me ..."

He held her arms. "Hermione ... you can trust me. I understand you. I understand ... him."

Again, her head darted up. She continued to shake it, her brows furrowed, desperately trying to deny what she knew he knew.

"Hermione ... it's Snape, isn't it?"

Again, the tears came suddenly and she spun away from him.

He stood apart from her for a moment, then moved in and rubbed her arms soothingly. "It's alright, Hermione. It's alright. I understand ... I really do. Now that I know him ... it makes sense to me."

"Did Ginny tell you?" She sounded cross.

"No ... no, not at all ... it was just then ... in the corridor. Neither of you did a good job of hiding it. He was clearly concerned about you, and you obviously just wanted to be with him."

"Oh god, Harry ... I ... I want him ... need him ... so much ... I'm so sick of being cooped up here ... trying to stay secret ... avoiding each other ... it's horrific."

"It must be ..."

"Yes, but ... when I leave ... what then?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Well, that's up to you and him ..." There was further silence. "How did it start?" he eventually asked gently.

"I don't know." She was almost sick of analysing it. "We just ... came together ... there was a need ... and we were able to address it through each other."

"Are you happy?"

She thought carefully, but answered truthfully. "Yes. I am when I'm with him."

"I must admit. I've never seen him looking so ... human. He looked ... really well."

"He's amazing."

Harry sighed deeply. "So Ginny knows too?"

She nodded. "You can probably guess how she found out. Something to do with you."

At first he frowned in confusion, but then his face opened up with dawning realisation. "The map."

"Yup."

"Hmm ... sorry about that."

She smiled. "It's OK. It's been good to have her to talk to, except, she just ..." Her voice trailed off.

"I heard you shouting."

"I shouldn't have done. She didn't deserve it. She just doesn't understand us ... that's fair enough, I suppose."

"Well it's hardly the most conventional relationship. I haven't had time to fully process it myself yet. I seem to be ... ridiculously accepting of it." He frowned a little then turned to Hermione with a bemused smile. "But, you know ... it would be very disappointing if you were ever ... conventional."

She smiled back at him. "I used to be."

"A long time ago. And, you know, Snape ... Severus ... he looks as if you are ... a very good influence. He certainly deserves some happiness. And I sincerely want you to be happy. I trust you, Hermione. I know you wouldn't enter into anything unless you were sure of it. And neither would he even more so, in a way. I just hope you are in the right environment to make the most of it, that's all. I mean ... relationships between students and teachers are not allowed."

She laughed aloud. "You don't need to tell me that! We've been ... careful ..." She hung her head at the last word, knowing how very careless they had in fact been in recent days.

"What if you're caught? Surely you'd be expelled he'd be sacked. Neither of you are the sort of person who could countenance that, are you?"

"Well, all the more reason why you must know how serious we are about each other."

"Serious?"

"Yes. Serious."

"You mean love?"

"Yes."

"Has he told you this?"

"No. And neither have I told him."

He paused. "And you want to carry on after you leave?"

"Yes."

"And how is that going to happen?"

She shrugged. "We'll see ..."

"Love will find a way, huh?" Harry crossed his arms cynically.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "God, it didn't take you long to get old and jaded, did it?"

He laughed. They had walked back inside and Hermione found them heading towards the dungeons.

"I'll ... err ... let you go now." Harry bent to kiss her on the cheek.

"I'll have to tell him about the ball. I don't imagine he's going to be very happy."

"No, probably not. But, if you explain things properly keeping up normal appearances, all that he should at least be able to put up with it for one night."

"Let's hope so." She sounded far from certain. "I won't be long, Harry. I just wanted to see him after being upset earlier. I'll be at supper."

"OK. Good. See you then." He held her arms once again, before moving back.

Hermione smiled warmly at him, squeezed his hand, then turned and walked towards the Potions classroom.

Busy chapter. They do so need and adore each other. Any thoughts? x

Twenty-Three

Chapter 23 of 34

Time to get things out in the open. Once again, Hermione and Severus exist in a world of deep sensuality and

dependency, which they need to express physically and verbally. This chapter reflects that.

Instead of the feelings of excitement and high anticipation that Hermione usually experienced when entering her Potions Master's classroom, she was this time filled with dread. Her heart was a lump of lead within her, and she hesitated before turning the door handle and walking inside.

Severus was standing diffidently off to one side of the room. He had clearly been waiting for her. When she entered he immediately rushed over and pulled her into him in a tight embrace, holding her head up to his for a deep kiss. She could not ignore it and found herself responding as she usually did.

His mouth travelled down her neck. Hermione frowned in a concerted attempt to focus on what she must do. She needed to get it over with. She couldn't have it hanging over her.

"So good ... *so good to have you now*... I thought I would have to wait. Why were you upset earlier? Has someone hurt you? Tell me *You must tell me*. Was it Weasley?" His voice was hard and insistent, almost threatening.

She reached her hands down and pulled his head up to look him in the eyes.

"I'm alright. I'm alright now. It was just a silly argument. It's nothing."

"Who? Who did you argue with? Potter? What was it about?"

"No. It wasn't Harry. He's been fine. Please, Severus, stop asking all these questions ... I have to tell you something."

His face drained immediately of colour and he seemed to her suddenly like a terrified little boy. He could not speak.

"Let's sit down."

She did so, hoping he would follow. He did not. He did not even look at her. He was rooted to the spot.

"You may as well sit down, Severus."

At last his eyes shot to hers. "Whatever it is you have to tell me, I will hear it now from here." His voice was utterly flat and empty.

It dawned on Hermione that he thought she may be about to leave him. She reached her hand out to his and took it gently. "Severus *Severus* ... look at me." Still, he did not. "It's not that bad." She spoke as reassuringly as she could.

At last he moved his eyes to hers. Hermione had never seen such open terror in them, despite all he had endured in his lifetime. She almost cried. In one way, she was glad she could reassure him, but equally she dreaded his reaction to what she had to say.

"Please sit down."

Slowly and hesitatingly, he did.

Hermione sighed but continued holding his hand. "You know this ball?"

He did not respond.

"Well ... this ball. I am essentially a student here, and I am expected to go to the ball. I do actually *want* to go to the ball. But also, there is no reason in people's minds why I should not go with a partner. It is generally accepted that since Ron and I split up, I haven't had a boyfriend, and basically, you need a partner for a ball. So people have assumed I'll go with someone from here." She paused slightly before blurting the rest out. "So anyway, this boy asked me and I didn't know what to do, but then Harry and Ron were there, and they all thought it was the most obvious thing to do, and there was a lot of pressure and I was confused, and anyway, I said yes."

Her words spewed out in a mad rush.

Severus did not speak for an age and had averted his gaze again.

The silence became oppressive. "Severus?" she asked tentatively.

"Who is it?"

"Well ... this boy is someone all my friends know and they hang out with him so they want him to come. I said yes because of them really because they want me to go with someone that they can all get on with." She had never sounded so hopelessly immature.

"*Who is it?*" The words were icy.

She hesitated, knowing how this particular name would stab him through.

"It's Lawrence Filmore."

His face twitched, but he said nothing more and moved hardly at all.

"I've told him it is strictly as friends. He's only nominally my partner. It makes things much easier that way."

After an age he at last spoke, but his words did little to reassure her.

"He wants you." He sounded menacing.

She grimaced. "I wouldn't put it like that."

"Of course he does. Stupid little prick wants you, wants to have you. Naturally he does. I know exactly how he feels. I've seen the way he looks at you. I've watched him looking at you, even when you have not. I know what he's feeling. I know that feeling; that deep burn that won't go away until it is addressed, until it is satisfied."

He was scaring her. "Severus, don't be silly. He's just a kid. But he's a nice boy, too. I'm sure he would never try to take advantage of me. And even if he did, I could handle him easily. I'm not going to let him do anything remotely inappropriate."

"He will dance with you."

"Occasionally."

"He will hold you, touch you, pull you into him. I do not want him to touch you." He was still not looking at her. His eyes were fixed in front of him, and his voice had a dark,

oppressive quality Hermione had not heard recently. It was deeply unnerving.

"Severus, this is ridiculous. He is a partner for a ball and we are going as friends. I have made that abundantly clear. In any case, what does it matter if he wants me or not? I don't want him. Severus, *I don't want him* I want you. I always want you. Yes, I know that feeling too. I know that feeling because I feel it all the time when I'm with you and when I'm apart from you to the exclusion of everyone else. I am going with this boy because it is expected of me, and it will actually help us maintain this charade, this odd little dance of deceit that we've been spinning so dizzily. Can't you see that? It's a smokescreen it will help to distract people from what is really going on. *That Hermione she's going with that seeker Filmore he likes her if she's going with him she can't have anyone else can she she can't have ...*"

"Some slimy, old, sadistic git of a Potions Master." He finished her sentence with particular self-loathing.

She gaped at him, shaking her head in disbelief. Hermione took his head in her hands and forced it towards her. Still he did not look at her.

"Don't say that ... *don't say that* ... after all we've been through. After all the things you know that you mean to me ... how can you say that? You are *incredible*. You are so far beyond anything I could have hoped to find with anyone else. I want you and only you. How can you doubt that? How can you possibly ...?"

He stepped away from her.

"You should go to supper now." His voice was calm again, but still cold. His eyes remained lowered.

Hermione's breathing was deep; she felt panic sweeping over her, but tried hard not to show it. She could not get through to him with the mood he was in. Slowly, she moved away, walking with heavy steps to the door.

On reaching it, she turned back. "Severus, please see this for what it really is. It's one night. We are all expected to be there. He means nothing *Nothing*. You mean everything."

She walked from the room, leaving the solitary barren figure within it.

Hermione hardly spoke a word during supper. Ginny had come up to her just before and apologised. Hermione had too. They were too close to stay angry with each other for long. It was a pale relief amidst the trauma of what had just happened. Hermione remained quiet and withdrawn. Harry and Ron tried to draw her into the conversation but gave up after a while; she may as well not have been there.

Before they returned to the Common Room, Harry caught her and pulled her back to a quiet corner.

"Hermione, what happened? You're clearly upset."

She could not look at him but shrugged a little. "I told him and he didn't like it. I wasn't expecting much more, I suppose."

Harry sighed. "What an idiot!"

She frowned at him. "No, Harry. You mustn't say that. He hasn't felt like this about anyone since ... your mother. And now, just when things seemed to be working out for him, and he was allowing himself to trust, I've gone and pulled the rug out from under his feet. It must feel like he's back with James and Sirius again taunting, mocking, taking what he feels is his."

"Don't be ridiculous it's only a bloody date for a ball!"

"Yes, but, those emotions are so raw, so fragile. Shit, why did I ever have to say yes to the guy?"

"Hermione, Snape should know how much he means to you. I could tell just seeing you together in the corridor that you had a special bond. It was ... obvious ... humbling even. Now he just needs to sort his head out and realise what a good thing god, an incredible thing he's onto with you. How can he not? But really, anyone would think you were the one twenty years older. If he can't see this situation for what it really is, then he's bloody inadequate."

His words stung. "Don't say that. No one has ever loved him before. It must be strange."

"How did you leave it?"

She shrugged again. "I don't know really. He didn't say much. I just told him what he meant to me."

"Sounds like you've done all the hard work. I'd leave it for a bit. Let him calm down."

"I was going to go to him tonight."

"You won't now, surely?"

"I suppose not." She lowered her head. She still wanted to.

"You mustn't."

"No. I know."

Harry held her hand. "Come on. I haven't come all the way up here to have you moping around. Come and sit with us and have a chat, or a listen at least." He smiled down at her. She managed a weak smile back and allowed him to lead her back to the Common Room.

She sat with her friends for an hour or so, listening to their gossip and laughter, even occasionally managing to join in. Ginny glanced at her anxiously at times but was so engrossed in Harry that she was not able to pay much attention. At nine o'clock, Hermione stood and excused herself. She gave Harry a huge hug goodbye and he whispered to her to owl as soon as she could. She promised she would. She bid as polite a farewell as possible to Ron, although after his behaviour of earlier and the subsequent repercussions, she found it hard to do so. He didn't seem to realise why she was so terse with him.

And then Hermione retreated to her room, trying to read, trying not to think about going to him. She knew she mustn't. He was the one behaving immaturely, but still, she could not help wondering if he was alright, thinking about him, missing him.

Just after ten o'clock there was a knock at her door. She supposed it must be Ginny, and was grateful to have the opportunity to talk to her friend about all that had happened. She went to the door and opened it.

Outside stood the scruffy, gaunt figure of Laszlo Treworgan.

Hermione clasped her hand to her mouth in shock.

She was immediately engulfed with such a riot of emotions that she could not fully identify any of them. Amidst the blissful relief and delight at knowing who the boy really was, she was also filled with a deep unease at the sight of him as this strange dead youth who had suffered so much for so little. She backed into the room to let him in, but quickly spun around, unable to face him until he had transformed.

When she had heard the door close and a soft rustle of clothing, she turned slowly around again. She breathed out audibly with relief as the tall figure of Severus Snape stood across from her. Immediately forgetting the bizarre circumstances of his arrival, she became aware only of his very real presence in the room. He had come to her. He had needed her. He was mending what had been torn.

Severus stood awkwardly, unable to look up. She granted him time and did not move or speak.

After a long while, with his head still lowered and his gaze averted, he spoke to her, his words low and genuine.

"I am sorry."

Hermione walked across to him and slowly placed a hand on his chest, bringing it up until it rested in the very centre.

At last he looked at her. "I behaved petulantly and ignorantly. I understand your actions, and as much as I will despise every moment of the wretched thing, I will tolerate the evening."

Hermione stepped in closer and leaned her head against his chest, simply breathing him in. "Thank you," she exhaled. He enclosed his arms around her and pulled her in tight.

"I am sorry," he repeated, as much to himself as her.

Drawing her hands up his smooth firm back, she rocked against him.

After an age, Hermione eventually drew her head up to look at him. He cupped it in his hands and gazed hard into her eyes.

"Make love to me," she whispered up to him.

He frowned slightly in confusion, staring into her eyes, almost unable to bear her forgiveness.

But at last he lowered his head and brought his lips tenderly to hers. She felt him as if for the first time. His lips were full and warm, and the sweet taste of honey lingered on his breath. She sighed out as he parted her lips with his and breathed softly into her mouth. His hands were still cupping her head and he tilted it a little and slid his tongue delicately inside her. It fluttered so deliciously that she quickly felt her passion rising within her. She remembered their early days of longing and how she had wondered if the ache inside her would ever be assuaged. And now she was here with him. The ache, the fire, burned ever stronger, but to have him quench her need filled her with immeasurable satisfaction.

She brought her hands up and quickly set about the task of unbuttoning his coat. As ever, it took too long and he helped her, occasionally breaking away to remove an item of her clothing, their lips somehow managing never to part.

When he was finally naked, she stepped back briefly to gaze on him. He seemed momentarily embarrassed, but her desire was so clear that he drew himself up. She moved swiftly into him again, her hands running sensuously over his skin, her mouth planting hot needy kisses over the pale flesh of his torso. He inclined his head to look down at her, and raised his arms slightly to the sides and out, partially in a concerted effort to allow her complete freedom in her task, partially in wonder at the sight of this beautiful young woman igniting his body.

She was working her way up his torso, her tongue flitting over the abrasions, the scars, the signs of his suffering. One hand was around his neck, the fingertips lightly catching the silky hairs at the nape. Severus could not help but groan. He could feel himself so hard and ready, he had to concentrate not to throw her forcibly on the bed and bury himself in her immediately.

She had kissed up his face until her sweet breath tickled his ear. Tightening the grip on his neck, she pushed her mouth against the opening of his ear, whispering low and desperate into it.

"Do you know how much I want you? How much I always want you? *Do you know how much I love your body?* How it haunts my every moment? How I am not complete if you are not with me, beside me, inside me? I want you inside me all the time *I want you filling me, fulfilling me, fucking me every minute of every day.*"

Severus' mind blurred. Her words were exquisite; never had he heard the like. In the fog of self-doubt, his mind questioned momentarily if she was actually addressing him.

"Don't stop ... *don't stop saying those things.* Please ... *please* ..." He had never sounded so needy.

Her hand was down cupping him now. He moaned incessantly.

"How can I stop? I cannot deny it. Severus, you know what you must do now. Take me now *.fuck me so hard I scream your name...* claim me ... *claim me as your own* ... you know I am yours, *you know I am only yours...*"

Hermione's voice was almost disembodied, low and guttural, but still could only be hers.

Severus could no longer stop himself. He pulled back and grabbed her arms hard, pushing her over to the bed and practically throwing her down on it. She writhed amongst the covers, bucking towards him and continuing her delirious pleading, becoming ever more lewd and forceful with each utterance.

"Yes, yes, that's it. Fuck! Your cock is so beautiful; it dictates all I do. I want it. I need it now *Oh fuck, hurry, please hurry.* Come into me now, deeper than you've ever been before."

She spread her legs, still jolting up to him. He held her hips, positioned himself quickly and did as she commanded.

The force with which he entered her sent her body up the bed and bent her head forcibly back, a cry of fulfilment torn from her.

He was in all the way, and she momentarily paused in her stream of consciousness as her mind and body adjusted to the feel of him within her. But not giving her time, he pushed again, hard and sharp. She groaned.

"*Keep talking, witch.* I want to hear it. *I want to hear every filthy obscene word of your lust for me.*"

Amidst the delirious blur around her, Hermione knew her words were comforting him, reassuring him of her devotion and need, physical and emotional.

"Don't stop moving. *Don't stop moving your cock.* I want to feel it all the time. I want it to pound me, I want it to break me down, remind me of why I am alive. Fuck me, fuck me, *fuck me so hard.*" He duly obliged. He pulled out, then plunged fully back in, each time jolting her up the bed with a grunt of possession. "Yes, yes, yes ... god, that's so good, *that's so fucking good.* Harder, *even harder.* Make me come screaming, please, *oh fuck, please* I beg you. I want you to rip my pleasure out of me. Do it, do it, do it now."

His face furrowed at the woman's total abandon. Was she aware of how crude her language had become? It was as if her pleasure was manifesting itself in her most base and primal needs, disconnected from her mind. But it served only to drive them both to heady release and to confirm to him their bond. His cock surged again and he thrust ever harder into her.

"Oh god, I can feel it, I can feel only you. Your cock is mine's *all mine*." He rubbed hard against her clit. "Oh, fucking hell ... that's too good. *Don't stop that*. Do you know what you do to me? How you make me feel? I'm so close, *I'm so fucking close ...*"

So was Severus. The sight, sound and feel of her was perfect. He thrust into her one more time.

Hermione's eyes jolted open and her mouth gaped in astonishment. If he did not know otherwise, he would have described it as a look of terror. She raised herself to grip onto his arms, her nails digging hard into his taut flesh. Her wide eyes locked with his and for a moment she fell completely silent. Then a deep rasping breath was pulled into her and she came apart around him.

He felt it all. She shook uncontrollably as pleasure tore its way through her body. When the first wave passed, he quickly pulled out then in, rubbing her clit once more, sending the pleasure raging through her again. He could feel his cock milked by her as she clenched around him. And to accompany her pleasure, she was screaming. She was screaming his name, so loud and so long, he knew he was hers.

Severus had never seen such perfect surrender to pleasure. And he had done it; he had achieved it for her.

Now he could experience his own.

He pulled back; his balls tightened, his muscles clenched. He thrust with a primeval grunt into her a final time. She clenched down on him again and he came.

His came so hard and so deep that he imagined breaking through into her very soul. He lost track of how often the surge of ecstasy left him. His mind was a brilliant white, at once making things crystal clear, but blinding in its intensity.

And then at last he collapsed heavily onto her, feeling her arms thrown over him, pulling him against her.

They lay still and silent for an age. He breathed deeply into her neck; she stroked his hair.

At length he moved his head to the side and Hermione turned to look at him. Then she spoke the only words she could possibly say.

"I love you."

She saw a brief flash behind his eyes before his features became strangely indistinct. His heavy breathing stopped for a moment and he turned his head away from her.

Hermione did not fear his reaction and continued to stroke him.

She could not see him, but she could tell by the way his breathing had changed what was happening. He was crying.

Time passed.

After a while Severus moved his head back around. His eyes were red and his face damp. Hermione smiled tenderly.

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but she had reached in for a kiss before he could form words.

They lay silently for what may have been hours. Eventually he spoke, calmly and honestly.

"I cannot recall anyone ever saying that to me before."

She looked at him with a mixture of wonder and sadness, and after more kisses and strokes, said tenderly and reassuringly, "Do you want me to say it again?"

He stared at her with such innocent delight that her heart swelled almost to breaking point.

"Yes."

She kissed him deep, then gazed long into his eyes. "I love you, Severus Snape."

He let his mind process the words, then smiled, "And again."

She returned his smile. "I love you."

"Again."

"I love you."

He raised his eyebrows teasingly to demand another.

"I love you."

She was giggling sweetly now. She had hardly noticed him slip his mouth to her breast and his hand between her legs. It was a familiar position with him and brought them both deep comfort and satisfaction. She stroked his head while he suckled her nipple, sometimes gently, sometimes hard, biting down on it as his fingers coaxed her clit. All the while she whispered her devotion in a quiet soothing chant. "*I love you ... love you ... love you ...*"

He was slow and languorous in his elicitation of pleasure. They both simply wanted to enjoy the deep quiet contentment that passed between them. And when she finally did come, the feeling was overwhelming, but not as shattering as before. This time it washed over her in tender ripples, and she released it to him with a soft gasp of awe.

As they lay in each other's arms before drifting off to sleep, Hermione felt only happiness and satisfaction at her declaration. Somewhere in the back of her mind she was aware that her words had not been reciprocated, but it did not trouble her. Not tonight. After all that had happened, she was perfectly happy, and as she sank her head onto his chest and breathed in his reassuring aroma, she knew that he was too.

And that was all she needed.

sigh

I'd be happy too ... how about you? LL x

Twenty-Four

Chapter 24 of 34

Some proper living (after a morning greeting) and at last, That Chat.

They slept more peacefully than either could recall. Hermione and Severus had turned to each other in the night and made love tenderly, but although it brought them deep satisfaction and pleasure, it barely disturbed the rest that they both found in each other's arms. It was simply a part of their living and breathing, entirely natural.

She woke the next day with her head on his chest, his aroma rousing her. She breathed in deeply and slowly moved her head up. His eyes were wide open and he was gazing at her with a slight wondrous smile on his face. She smiled back.

"Yes," she said.

He frowned in confusion.

"I still love you."

Hermione moved up to kiss him. It was the sweetest, most healing kiss there had been.

She lay back down. "What are you doing today?" he said, stroking her arm slowly.

"Arithmancy, Transfiguration and then some other lesson in the afternoon ... what is it again... oh yeah, Potions or something."

He tapped her admonishingly on the arm. She giggled against him then settled. "What about you?"

"I'll be back in the afternoon, but I need to make a foray into a Muggle city to get some supplies for the Headmistress. Believe it or not, she considers me to be the member of staff best-equipped to understand Muggles, their cities and environs." He rolled his eyes.

"Environs?" Hermione sniggered.

"Yes," he replied tersely at her teasing. "What is wrong with that?"

"Nothing ... it's very you. It's just a bit archaic."

"Are you calling me archaic?" He was the one teasing now, but she detected the lingering insecurity.

She smiled at him. "Do you really need constant reassurance?"

His smile faded and he looked at her seriously. "Yes."

"Well then, I'd better give it to you." She reached up and kissed him deeply again. When they broke apart, she asked, "Where do you need to go?"

"Edinburgh. It is easily within transporting distance and it is a tolerably pleasant city."

Hermione snorted. "*Tolerably pleasant?! It's a great city! Don't be such a snob!*"

He was grinning.

"By transporting, I presume you mean that Apparition thing you do?"

"It is far superior to Apparition."

"Naturally." He couldn't see her smirk. "When are you leaving?"

"Soon ... under an hour."

She suddenly leapt out of bed. "We'd better get to breakfast then."

Severus raised his eyebrows quizzically at her sudden haste. She looked across at him as if it was obvious: "I'm coming with you."

"Surely you must attend your lessons?" She shot him a withering look. He smirked before drawing, "Miss Granger, truancy is strictly against the school rules. I shall have to put you in a very long and demanding detention."

Hermione stopped, moved across slowly to the bed and crawled up it until she was straddling him on all fours. Leaning down until she was a mere breath away, she whispered in her most sensual purr, "Promise?"

His eyes burned and quickly his head darted up and captured her mouth desperately. She responded equally and soon their tongues were darting together, almost as if trying to fuse. Moving over him, she came against his cock, vibrant and rigid, crying out for her.

Still not moving her mouth from him, she moved over the tip and slowly lowered herself onto it. He pulled away, clearly so carried away in the kiss that he had not expected it. As a groan rose from her she let out a delighted laugh and grinned down at him. He hissed, gripping her hips and guiding her steadily up and down, not taking his eyes from the sight of her revealing then sheathing his cock time and again.

After a while, as they steadied into a rhythm of building pleasure, he turned his eyes up to gaze on her, her breasts swaying above him, her face flushed with concentration and satisfaction. "What have I done to deserve you?"

Hermione glanced down and smiled warmly. Then, not slowing her strokes, her face changed to an expression of thought, as if she was summing something up.

"Well... you have helped and protected my friends and me time and time again, you've got great legs, you've taught me brilliantly for years, you smell really good, you were incredibly loyal to the man who most depended on your loyalty, you have the sexiest voice in the history of mankind, you saved my life and the lives of my friends several times, you have extraordinary eyes, you are highly intelligent and articulate, you go down on me a lot, you have really nice handwriting, you placed yourself in grave danger to a point where you were as good as dead, and did this for entirely selfless and noble reasons, you make me come incredibly hard and often, you are supremely knowledgeable in all aspects of magical history and practice, you have a huge cock... and I like all the nice buttons on your frock coat."

She smiled down in mock innocence as if to say, *will that do?*

He tried to smile, but all the while she had been moving languidly up and down him, raising herself so the tip of this cock was nearly fully out before sinking slowly but deliciously down again. He could only manage a guttural groan.

Severus held her gaze with such wondrous awe that it heightened her pleasure yet further. Her muscles were poised, but just at the crucial moment he brought his fingers to her clit and rubbed. The tight swollen flesh delighted in the sudden attention it was so expertly receiving.

Hermione gasped, her body rigid in anticipation, and she shot her eyes to his.

"Come for me... *come for me, Hermione...*" He breathed out his truth.

He pushed hard up into her and she dissolved. Pleasure heaved its way through her body accompanied by a seemingly ceaseless moan.

With that he was undone. His cock swelled and burst, sending his own pleasure high up into her. He gripped her hips hard and focused on the sensations tearing their way through his body as this woman came apart around him.

After long minutes of silence and heavy stillness, Hermione leaned down for a final kiss, then spun elegantly off him. Severus groaned with agony as her warmth was pulled off him and the cool air surrounded his softening cock.

"Come on, then. We really should get to breakfast soon."

Due to her haste, she cleaned herself entirely with magic, something she normally refused to do, and started to dress. She was putting on her uniform to go to breakfast, but set out some Muggle clothes for later.

He looked at her. "On a serious note, I don't want you missing lessons if you need to attend them."

Again she stared at him in disbelief. "For heaven's sake! I've surpassed Vector in Arithmancy, and as for Transfiguration ..." She merely rolled her eyes.

He smirked, delighting in her academic confidence, and got out of bed himself, also cleansing with magic. "Very well." His eyes were lowered, but he was smiling.

"What do you need to get?"

"I need to verify an order of some alcoholic refreshments for this...*ball*."

She tried quickly to focus on the alcohol aspect of his response, rather than the reason for its need. "You're going to a wine merchants?" He nodded. "I would have thought Hogwarts had a vast cellar already."

"Hmm ... clearly not vast enough."

"How are you intending to transport it?"

"I'll leave that to the Muggles. They can deliver it to a point beyond the castle and it can be collected from there."

She was ready. "I'll go to breakfast. Where shall I meet you?"

"You'll need to change your clothes. I'll come to you. Half an hour?"

She could not resist rushing back and kissing him deeply. Then she turned and spun out, leaving him breathless with happiness.

Hermione chatted freely and happily at breakfast. When an opportunity arose, Ginny leaned in and whispered to her, "What's happened? The last I heard he had over-reacted and you were desperate."

Hermione smiled at her. "He apologised and we... made up."

Ginny exhaled deeply. "God, Mione. I'm very glad he came to his senses, but ... how do you have the stamina?" She smirked at her friend.

Hermione merely laughed back, eating her breakfast quickly. Snape came in shortly afterwards and sat and ate equally rapidly. He was smiling a lot, such an unusual sight on high-table, and chatting openly to the staff beside him. They looked almost in shock at his verbosity and good humour. Hermione smiled to herself.

On her way out, she whispered to Ginny. "I won't be in lessons this morning. I'm going out for a bit."

Ginny looked up, surprised. "Going ... *out*?"

"Yup!" Hermione grinned, stealing a piece of toast from her friend's plate and practically flying out of the hall.

She went back to her room and dressed in jeans and a red top, wrapping a light scarf around her neck and putting on a tight casual jacket. She pulled her hair up into a high, but loose ponytail, leaving many curls floating out down her face. Pulling on some leather boots with significant heels, she looked at herself in the mirror. It was nice to wear a bit of a heel it was strictly forbidden in school, although she could probably have got away with it.

She finished by applying a little make-up. She certainly did not look nor feel like a schoolgirl now.

There was a knock at her door. With a final deep breath and look in the mirror, she turned and opened it. She moved in, still unable to look at him in his transformed state, but could feel his eyes on her already. She waited until she was sure he had changed then raised her head. Severus was staring at her as if for the first time, clearly enthralled by what he saw.

She flushed under his intense scrutiny. "Do I look alright?"

At first he could only nod, but then spoke in hushed awe. "You look ... exquisite."

She smiled, blushing even more. "Shall we go then?" She almost wanted to escape from the intensity of his gaze.

With a deep breath, he at last seemed to awaken from his reverie and stepped into her, nodding. "Ready?"

She nodded and he held his arms out to her. As she stepped into them, he quickly enclosed them around her and, withdrawing his wand, muttered some words. Hermione felt the room pulled from around her, but only a moment later discovered she was standing on firm paving stones in a quiet side street, tall granite buildings surrounding her. Unlike Apparition, she felt little if any dizziness. Severus was looking down at her warmly. "Alright?" he questioned.

She nodded. "Remarkably so. You're right. It is much better than Apparition."

Severus merely smirked and turned to head out into the wider street ahead of them. She followed. He was striding ahead and she had to hurry to keep up with him. When she did, she slipped her fingers through his and held his hand tenderly. He stopped abruptly and turned his head to look at their entwined fingers in clear astonishment. Eventually, his eyes rose to hers and she thought she could detect a faint misting in them. She reached up and kissed him, then moving back slowly, turned and this time led him, hands still clasped, up the street.

It was a relatively calm November day in Edinburgh. They walked up Prince's Street, drawing frequent but discreet glances. Severus was still dressed in his black frock coat and trousers. Hermione smiled to herself, unable to suppress a giggle. He turned to her and raised an eyebrow. "What?" he muttered.

"Nothing. It's just ... to Muggles, we must look like quite an interesting couple."

He sneered a little. She continued.

"I mean, they must be thinking, *'Hasn't that guy grown out of the goth thing yet? And what the hell is he doing with a girl who seems to be about half his age?'*"

"Goth?" He clearly had no idea.

She smiled. "Never mind. Let's just say, your appearance is ... distinctive. But you know, this is Edinburgh; they can tolerate it."

"Yes," he sneered cynically. "I'm used to being *tolerated*."

She squeezed his fingers. "Hey. I forbid sarcastic self-deprecation today."

He glanced at her, then allowed himself a small smile. They continued up the street, looking in the shop windows, eventually arriving at a large department store.

"God, I haven't been shopping for ages. I'd love to pop in and just have a look around."

"Come on then."

She looked up at him in delight. "Really?"

"We have time."

Grinning broadly, Hermione pulled him in after her. They wandered around, looking in various departments. Snape was dismissive of the electrical equipment, despite the latest Muggle technology on display. "Their ineptitude and lack of vision never cease to amaze me."

She huffed derisively. "TV and the like can be quite fun, you know, and educational. I'm sure I could find some programmes even you'd like."

He raised a cynical eyebrow but could not completely conceal his faint smile.

Eventually they found themselves in the jewellery section. Hermione looked at some of the pieces silently then moved on. She stopped in front of a necklace. It was not terribly expensive as necklaces go, but not insignificantly cheap either. It was hung with a myriad of different coloured glass beads on many strings, and fell in a seemingly endless cascade of shimmering light. It had been designed by a renowned designer which had pushed up the price tag.

"Do you like it?"

She jumped. She had not realised he was still beside her.

"It's beautiful. I know this designer's work. I've admired it for years." With a final smile, she turned to go. He did not follow. She looked back. He was reaching into his pocket and producing Muggle money. She could not speak, but before she realised fully what was happening, he had called over the assistant and was motioning to the necklace.

"What are you doing?"

He turned to her, quite matter-of-factly. "You said you liked it."

"Yes, but... I didn't mean... It's over £200, Severus."

He ignored her and continued the transaction.

"Severus... you don't have to..."

He did not speak until he had handed over the money, then he fixed her with his eyes. "No... but I want to."

She could only look on in humble silence.

The shop assistant wrapped it beautifully and handed it over. Hermione noticed the woman's eyes sweeping over Severus' long, elegant torso. She smiled broadly at him. It amused Hermione. *So it wasn't just her, then?* Severus hadn't noticed a thing. He took the package with a polite nod and turned to Hermione. "Come. I want you to wear it."

They moved to a quiet part of the store. Severus reached into the packaging and drew out the necklace. Hermione turned and slowly, meticulously, he brought it around her neck. She felt him exhale a long breath of pleasure as he placed it on her. It fell sensuously down from her collarbone. She could scarcely draw breath. She had been lucky if Ron had managed a bunch of flowers on her birthday.

Severus attached the clasp then moved around to look at her. He stared quietly for the longest while. Hermione felt her eyes pricking, but stopped the tears from falling.

She somehow managed to breathe out, "Thank you."

"I have not bought anything for anybody for..." He did not finish his sentence.

Hermione moved into him. "I love it... I love you."

He withdrew his gaze, but his expression deepened immeasurably.

This time he took her hand and they left the store.

As they walked, they chatted warmly, their hands never separating. They were completely relaxed and at ease with each other in an environment as far from Hogwarts as possible. Hermione suddenly had a flashing vision of what could be. And it worked. It felt good. It felt right. His face was more relaxed than she had ever seen it. He appeared younger. She squeezed his hand and he looked down and smiled.

They realised they would soon have to wend their way to the wine merchants. They found it in a quiet side street off the Royal Mile. It was such a dark, singular place that Hermione instinctively felt it was a magical shop, and had to remind herself that they were in Muggle Edinburgh.

Severus walked in and strode up to the counter, speaking with remarkable poise and confidence. He could certainly command things when he needed to. "Good morning. I have come to confirm an order for Professor M McGonagall. If necessary, should the order be deemed inadequate, I am to supplement it with additional cases."

"Certainly, sir."

The man led them down to a large cellar, where he indicated a large section which had been set aside for the Hogwarts' ball. It consisted mainly of champagne. Hermione could not suppress a gasp of astonishment; it must have cost a small fortune.

Severus walked along the cases, inspecting them. "This looks sufficient." He spun around. "The order will not need to be increased. I believe you have the delivery instructions."

The wine merchant's eyes narrowed. He sensed there was something unusual. The man standing before him was unusual enough.

"Yes. We have received all the information. My assistant has ascertained that the delivery address is a small shack in a remote location in the Highlands. The only other building near there is a ruined castle."

"Yes?" Snape's voice was hissing abruptly. He stared intently at the man serving him.

The merchant fell silent and lowered his head. "Nothing. It shall be delivered early next week."

"Good. I trust payment is in order?"

"Yes. It has all gone through successfully."

"In that case, we shall expect to receive the goods on Monday of next week. There will be someone at the designated location at that time."

The merchant was clearly unnerved by the dark man with the smooth voice before him. He glanced at Hermione, partially out of curiosity as to what she was doing with him, partially for reassurance.

Hermione smiled at him gently, never enjoying someone's discomfort, but as Severus crossed near her and she inhaled his aroma, her belly twisted with longing. His ability to intimidate this man somehow fired her desire, and in a move which surprised even her, she caught his hand, pulling him towards her, and reached up to kiss him hard. She felt him tense in question momentarily, but then he softened and returned the kiss with ardour. She was vaguely aware of the merchant standing awkwardly apart from them.

At length, Hermione broke away and smiled up at her lover. She turned to the merchant, who was standing with a clear look of unease on his face. Flashing her sweetest smile, she beamed, "Thank you." Then taking Severus' hand, she led him out and up to the street above.

She pulled him along, starting almost to run once they were out. Laughing aloud, she spun back to him, reaching again for a kiss.

"You are a cruel woman," he said against her lips with a silky drawl. "You should not torment men so."

"Can't I torment you?"

"Only when I give you permission." He kissed her so deep she thought she may come right there.

Then it was his turn to pull her along. He took her hand and led her a few doors down, stopping outside a little cafe. They went inside.

They sat and ordered coffee and cake. It reminded Hermione of their trip to Grasmere. She smiled at him. He could not take his eyes from her. She looked down and put her hand round her neck. "Thank you for my necklace."

"You have already said that."

"I like to repeat myself."

He smiled.

"You said you had not bought anything for anyone for a long time."

"No."

She did not think he would continue and feared she had gone too far, but then he spoke again. "I bought several things for her while we were children. Never expensive ... I had no money. I gave up after a while."

"I'm sure she appreciated them."

"Perhaps. She would write me these little thank you notes." His eyes glazed. "I still have them."

Hermione felt odd. It was touching to hear of his kindness and depth of feeling, but it unnerved her a little when she thought of the intensity of his emotion for Lily. It was not something that had really entered into their relationship before. It had been mentioned in their conversation on the ramparts, but he was so aggrieved, so closed and bitter about her then, that she had not seemed a threat. Now, Hermione almost felt jealous. She lowered her head.

He sensed her unease and reached over for her hand. "She did not love me."

"But you loved her."

"You know that."

There was silence.

"But it was not reciprocated. It is not enough. It is not complete. I was never complete."

Hermione could not look at him, but continued to speak. "You don't have to belittle your feelings, Severus. You still loved her. People are all too quick to dismiss unreciprocated love as infatuation, obsession, a silly crush, but why should the emotion be any less significant, just because it is not returned? People laugh about adolescent crushes, but they are some of the most powerful and raw emotions we will ever experience. Parents dismiss them because they are afraid to face up to their child growing up, the pain of their feelings. But those crushes are so real, so vivid, so consuming. It is an insult to a person to say, "Oh, it's only a crush" ... that is the starkest emotion there is ... all the more intensified if it is unreciprocated, as there is no outlet for it. That does not mean it is no less real. I've had them. Although none of mine were as deep as some people's, and in no way as intense as your feelings for Lily. But your emotions for her shaped all you did in life ... shaped who you are."

His head darted up to her on hearing the name on her lips. Hermione feared she had said too much. There was a momentary pause, but his face suddenly relaxed. "And who were your crushes then, Miss Granger?"

She giggled a little. "Having said all that, mine really were nothing. I was always far too sensible."

"Humour me."

She smiled. "Well, way back... we all had a crush on Lockhart to start with."

Snape snorted derisively. Hermione blushed scarlet. "Well, clearly, that one was very short-lived. And ... I guess Cedric Diggory was quite nice. I remember spending a lot of time looking at his poster during the Tri-wizard Tournament preparations." Her voice stopped. "Poor boy."

"But I thought your attentions were focused on Mr Krum at that point?"

She darted her head up to him. "Did you know about that?"

He smirked. "Oh yes."

She laughed and dropped her head in embarrassment. "To be honest, he was not my type at all. He pursued me. It was all a bit weird really, and then things started to get complicated with Ron, which made things even more confusing. God, that was a tough time."

"Anyone else?"

There was someone else, but she realised with sudden alarm that she really did not want to tell Severus about that particular person.

"No... no... that's all."

"I don't believe you."

"Well, you should."

He persisted. "Who?"

Hermione sighed but could not entirely conceal the truth. "It was a long time ago. I was very young. I only knew him for two or three years."

Snape's eyes narrowed and hardened. Hermione had already given too much away. She started to breathe heavily. She dared not say it, even though this person had been the toughest to forget, the one who had imprinted himself the most on her.

"Who?"

"No really, it was nothing... anyway, it's irrelevant now..."

"Why?" He was coldly insistent.

Hermione heard herself answering instinctively. "Because he's dead." There was silence between them. "I was very young," she mumbled under her breath again.

"Was he interested in you?"

She laughed aloud. "God, no! I was only fourteen ... sixteen when he died. And he was a lot older than me ..." She glanced up, suddenly realising she had given too much information. It was obvious who she was talking about.

"Black." His appraisal was correct. He spoke coldly, but not without predictability she noticed.

She smiled a little to try to hide the significance of the revelation. "I was very young and it really was a silly crush. I never felt it too deeply." She could tell it had stung him. "Severus ... it was just silly..."

"You said these feelings were the most raw and powerful." Despite his clear discomfort, he managed to remain remarkably calm.

"Yes, but not in all cases. I also said I had a crush on Gilderoy Lockhart! That's hardly going to stay with me, is it? I hardly ever saw Sirius; it really didn't amount to much. But, it was predictable for a young teenager to feel something for him. He was exciting, heroic... dangerous..."

There was silence for a long time, but then his voice came, a low drawl, still cool. "And you are attracted to danger?"

She raised her head to his. He was almost appraising her. She laughed under her breath and lowered her gaze again. "I don't know. I suppose it adds a spark to an attraction. Our relationship is hardly without danger, is it?"

"And if there was no danger?"

"What do you mean?"

He paused before answering with controlled effort. "Would the attraction remain?"

Again, he had revealed his insecurities. She held his gaze and reached across to take his hand. "There's no danger now ... here ... is there?"

"No."

She paused, ensuring he was looking fully at her. "And this is the happiest I have ever been with you."

He simply looked at her, his eyes dancing. "Say it again."

She couldn't help her smile broadening. "I love you."

They continued eating and drinking in silence, any tension which had arisen was now dispersed. Hermione found herself feeling the time was right to raise the question of the future.

"Severus?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm leaving Hogwarts in a few weeks."

He did not respond. She said it out loud. "What will happen to us then?"

Silence. He lowered his fork and stared hard at his plate. Then with a deep sigh he wiped his mouth with his napkin and spoke.

"It is not something that I have been able to think too much about."

"Why not?"

Another pause.

"Because it hurts."

His words warmed her heart, but did nothing to provide any answers. "I want to stay with you." Again, she spoke boldly. She had no reason not to speak the truth. Once again, he did not reply. She pressed him. "What do you want, Severus?"

He looked sharply up at her. "You know what I want."

"Do I?"

"Yes."

"Say it." It was her time to demand words.

He paused before declaring, "I want you."

They stared at each other.

"I have been offered positions at the Ministry. They are waiting for a response. I suppose I should give them one very soon. I would start after Christmas. There's one in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement which sounds just right for me. I think I'm going to accept it."

"London is a long way from the school."

"Yes. But I have to earn a living."

"You could teach."

"I don't want to teach."

More silence. He picked up his fork again and started to pick at his food. Then suddenly he let it drop to the plate with a clatter.

"I cannot imagine Hogwarts without you."

She looked across at him. His face was fraught with tension. She could think of nothing to say at that moment.

In all honesty, it was hard for her to imagine him ever leaving Hogwarts. He may not enjoy his job, but it had been his life for so long; it provided him with a strange comfort and security. She knew he would find a change to the outside world deeply difficult. And then his voice spoke again. "I only came back because of you."

Her eyes widened with shock. "What?" she whispered disbelievingly.

"After the war, I did not want to return. But when I heard you were coming back for your NEWTs, I accepted the offer of the reinstatement of my position. I did not admit to myself at the time that that was the reason ... but I can do so now."

She stared in amazement, her mind too dazed to make much sense of what he had said. Instead, she focused on the here and now.

"But... then surely... if you considered leaving before... you can do so again."

He sighed. "That is true." She could not stop a smile appearing. He looked up at her. "But unlike you... I do not have another job to walk into."

She almost laughed aloud. "That doesn't matter at the moment! This job I've been promised is well-paid. We don't need much anyway. I'll support you until you find something. Severus, you're a brilliant wizard, people will be falling over backwards to employ you!"

He sneered. "I do not share your optimism. Remember, I do have a certain ... reputation. And anyhow ..."

"What?"

"I will not be beholden to you."

"Needs do as needs must, Severus."

His eyes darted to her. "I will not be supported by a nineteen-year-old girl!" There was clear anger in his voice.

His words stung sharply and she dropped her head. "So, what then? Are we back to square one?"

He sighed audibly. "There are other complications. I have not given my notice. I need to give half a term's notice."

"Severus. These are all trivialities. I can survive without you for a while. You can stay at Hogwarts until you need to, look for another job in the meantime and then move down when the time is right."

"And while we are waiting for the time to be right, you will be off, out, enjoying yourself with others ... young ... handsome ..."

She stared at him incredulously. She chose to negate his searingly revealing concerns with dismissive astonishment. "Severus! You do talk complete and utter bollocks at times! Have you already forgotten what I have repeated to you time and again in the last twenty-four hours?!"

He turned his head up suddenly, his pale features flushing with sudden embarrassment. His eyes dropped slowly and he sniffed in sharply. "I suppose... it would be possible to transport to you quite often."

"Yes, it bloody would. Every night if you wanted./would want. God! At last you're thinking positively." She spoke flatly.

There was further silence.

He looked awkward and uncomfortable. "I have been there for a long time."

She guessed how he was feeling.

"What are you scared of, Severus?"

He did not reply, but eventually turned the jet of his eyes up to her.

She reached across and took his hand, touched by his vulnerability.

"Severus. There's nothing to be afraid of. If I can imagine us outside Hogwarts, than so can you. Today has been good, hasn't it? Wonderful. This is away from that place. It has shown me what can be. And I like it. I like it so much, I don't want it to end."

"It has to. You have a class with me this afternoon, Miss Granger." He smirked in his usual way, but for once it annoyed her more than teased her. It was all too easy for him to retreat into academic familiarity.

"It's Friday. Wouldn't it be wonderful to stay here and go to a hotel? I have some money from interviews and articles I wrote after the war. We could go to a really nice place and spend the weekend there."

He tensed. "I have a full timetable this afternoon."

She sighed and lowered her head. "Very well," she said tersely.

They finished their coffee and left the café in silence, walking up the street. Hermione was confused. She desperately didn't want to spoil the beautiful time they had had in Edinburgh, but equally couldn't help but be disappointed by his inability to let go of his familiar past. At least they had voiced it; the possibility of a future together beyond Hogwarts. And, she reminded herself, he had initially taken it well.

But his insecurity worried her. It was almost a burden; as if she was shouldering the emotional weight, not only of herself, but of a man twenty years her senior. She glanced up at him. Was he worried he would leave her? She guessed that was one of his biggest fears about being outside school. He knew where he stood with her at Hogwarts. Knew that within the school community, in her eyes, he was exciting, intelligent, charismatic... dangerous. But outside? Did he have so little confidence to think that he would seem so different? It seemed he did.

Despite their inability to have come to any sensible decision about their future, she adored him so much that she wanted only to reassure him. His fragility was so moving, touching; it brought out a feeling in her she could not quite identify. She slipped her hand in his, reaching up with the other one to feel the necklace which hung around her, and smiled up at him.

He stopped and looked down at her, his face still uncertain.

They stopped in the middle of the street. Hermione reached up and held his face. It was understandable that he needed time. She would grant it to him.

"Don't worry about a thing, Severus. You've got me. You've got me."

She brought his head down and kissed him long and tenderly while the people of Edinburgh passed by around them.

Sometimes you just want to shake him, don't you?! Luckily for him, he has Hermione. Still, at least he is being open now. Not bad for a man.

I so love your thoughts and reviews. Thank you! Any more avidly lapped up! LL x

Twenty-Five

Chapter 25 of 34

A short but hopefully sweet chapter. Each step is so important.

For logistical reasons which I won't bore you with, I had to keep this chapter quite short. But have no fear, there are about ten more to come of this story, all longer than this!

I wrote this chapter based around some ancient words which to me seemed so appropriate to the sensuality of the relationship between these two.

They returned to Hogwarts in time for lunch, Severus immediately retreating into his comfortable persona of snide schoolmaster.

Hermione attended Potions as usual in the afternoon, and they both smoothly kept their secret morning to themselves. To anyone observing, there was nothing unusual about the dynamics between the knowledgeable teacher and his most brilliant student. Ginny glanced at her occasionally, but Hermione merely smiled mutely.

After the lesson, Snape called for her to stay behind. Ginny rolled her eyes; she had clearly been wanting to catch up with her friend.

When the classroom had emptied, Hermione sauntered slowly over to him and immediately reached up to his buttons. She was surprised when he stopped her, removing her hands.

"Go and change and come back here immediately. What you wore this morning will do."

Hermione was startled, but excitement swept through her and she immediately did as he requested. Despite the distance between her room and the dungeons, she was back in different clothes within ten minutes.

When she walked in, she visibly jumped with surprise. He too had changed clothes.

Hermione's jaw fell open. He was wearing a dark Muggle suit, with a crisp white shirt underneath. He wore no tie with it, but the cut was sharp and the material black and finely woven. It accentuated his broad shoulders and slender torso. On his feet were black leather shoes which gleamed with a dazzling shine. He looked stunning.

She exhaled a laugh in wondrous delight but could not speak.

He approached her. "You are right. You must be sick of trying to justify yourself to me. There is no need. It is I who must gain your trust and respect. Come."

With that he gripped her round the waist and she immediately felt the ground slipping from under her. When the feeling stopped, they were once again in a side street surrounded by tall granite buildings. He led her along it. Hermione was back in Edinburgh, and soon found herself standing outside a luxury hotel on Prince's Street.

Severus started to pull her up the steps but she held him back. He turned with a slight frown, clearly wanting to get her inside as soon as possible.

"Thank you," she breathed up to him.

He smiled back. "You are welcome. Come along."

He pulled her up the steps and together they walked into the lobby. It was an opulent but tasteful hotel, with marble floors and gilded mirrors. Hermione immediately saw that they were drawing glances, although she noticed this time they were more admiring than curious. Women stared at him with approval, men with jealousy when they saw the beautiful young woman on his arm.

Severus approached the reception desk. "Good afternoon. I have a room booked for two nights. Professor S. Snape."

She was surprised but encouraged that he had used his real name.

"Certainly, sir." The receptionist busied herself with processing his booking.

Hermione glanced up at Severus. For someone who had exhibited such insecurities earlier, he now seemed completely at ease. He was clearly someone who needed the reassurance of a firm decision to ease his mind.

The receptionist eventually handed over the key with a smile and directed them to the room.

They made their way up silently, not speaking. Hermione felt a touch on her hand. She looked down; he had encircled her fingers in his. It was a bizarre feeling; to be walking freely and openly without rousing suspicion or reproach.

They reached the room. It was spacious and elegant with a large four-poster bed. Hermione could not contain her excitement and ran over, jumping onto it.

"Oh god this is brilliant! Severus, it must have cost a fortune; you must let me pay for some."

"That is clearly ludicrous." He spoke with dry certainty.

She leapt off the bed again and crossed to the window, looking out as dusk settled over the city. The room looked out over the Prince's Street gardens up to the castle.

Hermione sighed with happiness. Here she could breathe. Here she was away from the oppressive atmosphere, the constant need for deception and secrecy. She didn't quite know what to do with herself.

Hearing footsteps behind, she turned a little to see Severus approaching her. "Thank you for bringing me here."

He reached down to kiss her, sweet and tender. Hermione sighed into his open mouth. His hands came down her arms, stroking smoothly as they went. She brought hers up and cupped his head, questing into his mouth with her tongue. Then she moved away and simply stood looking at the man before her. He frowned in momentary confusion but indulged her whim. She stood smiling enigmatically at him.

Slowly, gently, they undressed each other, planting soft, warm kisses on the flesh that was revealed to them little by little. Eventually they stood naked, the warm light of the room imparting an other-worldly glow to their bodies. They could not take their eyes off each other.

Then Hermione spoke, words that she had studied in her own time, at home in holidays; words that had captured her imagination in their vivid, sensual detail, and the paradox of their origin.

"My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand."

She started to walk around him, slowly and deliberately, as if appraising him. Her hands came up and she kissed him momentarily again, caressing his high cheekbones.

"His head is as the most fine gold, his locks are bushy, and black as a raven." Bringing her fingertips lightly over his hair, she then rested them again on his cheekbones, capturing his gaze.

"His eyes are as the eyes of doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly set."

"His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers: his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh." Her finger ran lightly over his mouth. Again, despite the temptation to draw it into him, he resisted, enjoying her sensual words as much as her touch. Her voice continued to caress him in tune with her hands. She moved behind and drew her hands down his arms to entwine his fingers in hers.

"His hands are as gold rings set with the beryl: his belly is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires."

As she listed the parts of his body, her hand drew itself languidly over each one, hovering, lightly caressing, but never lingering too long.

"His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold: his countenance is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars."

"His mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely." She finished with a tender smile, and leant up again to kiss him warmly.

When she drew away, the smile still on her lips, he asked softly, "I take it those are not your words."

"They are not."

"They sound old."

"Indeed. Where do you think they are from?"

"An ancient text from India? A Medieval love poem?" He huffed with frustration, clearly not enjoying her possessing knowledge he did not. "I do not know. Tell me."

She was still smiling. "It may surprise you. It's from the Bible, the scriptures. The Song of Solomon the Song of Songs. It is beautiful, isn't it?"

"Hmm ..." This time, he leaned in for a kiss, then pulled back to fix her with his eyes, staring at her with a gaze so intense she nearly had to look away. "I will be worthy of you."

She shook her head in confusion. "What makes you think you are not already worthy of me? You are so far beyond being merely worthy of me, Severus."

"You must accept the job at the Ministry. I will look for work elsewhere and resign from my position."

She was startled by his sudden declaration. "There is no rush, not as far as you are concerned."

"Yes, there is. I wish you to know the strength of my feelings."

"I ..." But before she could answer he had lifted her in his arms and placed her on the bed where he immediately thrust deep into her. He moved smoothly but urgently, never slowing his strokes. Their eyes remained locked and it wasn't long before they both came, powerfully but tenderly, drawing out the other's pleasure in rapt concord.

The next chapter will be along soon. Any thoughts so far? LL x

Twenty-Six

Chapter 26 of 34

There are some things that just need to be said ...

Just a little note: in the UK a prep school is a private elementary school.

Thank you all for your lovely comments. I hope you continue to enjoy this tale of emotional and erotic need. Not much longer to go now.

It was not until relatively late in the evening that they roused themselves from the bed to go out for supper. Fortunately, the night life of Edinburgh provided many opportunities for dining late, and they found a quiet and intimate restaurant which was still serving post-theatre meals.

It was something of a relief to Hermione to find that their time together far from Hogwarts was as relaxed and easy as it had been earlier in the day. Equally, it was further confirmed to her that Severus had banished the insecurities which had beset him. His decision to take her away seemed to have cleared his mind, and she admired him for his strength and resolve. His mindset had switched remarkably quickly, but she knew him to be nothing if not forthright. If he had decided on something, there was no need to harbour lingering doubts. They seemed to have taken a huge stride forward.

As they ate, both chatted freely and easily about all manner of things: the use of magic, how McGonagall was fairing as Headmistress (very well, Hermione was surprised to hear Severus conclude) and how Hermione would settle into life at the Ministry. During a momentary lull, Hermione felt herself speaking more freely.

"What you said earlier ..."

"Yes?"

"About resigning from your position."

Silence as he awaited her resumption.

"You don't have to, you know. There are ways around it. You could perhaps resign as Head of House, then at least you would be released at the evenings and the weekends. That way, you could travel to London every night if you wanted."

He remained silent, head down, his knife slicing through the rare sirloin. At length his words reached her across the table. "You were adamant I should leave before."

"I know. It was foolish of me. I suppose in a way I ... wanted to test you."

His head darted up, a flash of anger in his eyes.

"I don't mean in a teasing way. I just ... needed to know how you felt about things ... about us."

The spark in his eyes softened to a glow and he lowered his gaze again. "You were right, though," he continued. "I have become too settled there. It has helped me forget, ignore things that should be confronted."

"But surely you have confronted all those things?"

"Most. Perhaps not all."

Silence fell between them again.

"And besides," he said at length, "as I have said before, I can only tolerate my job when you are there. I associate the place entirely with you now. I cannot imagine it without you. There shall be no point to me remaining with you gone."

She stopped eating and put her cutlery down. He did not look up, but she could not remove her gaze from him.

"Severus."

Eventually, he raised his head to meet her eyes and she was rewarded with a slight smile before he dropped it again.

It took a while before either spoke, although the silence between them was anything but awkward, simply peaceful.

"Do you live at Hogwarts during the holidays?"

"No."

It did not seem he would be more forthcoming. She pressed him. "So, where do you live?"

"In my childhood home."

Again, he offered no further information.

"Do you not wish to tell me about it?"

Severus paused, sighing deeply. "It is a small, dismal terraced house in a vile industrial town in the north of England. It contains nothing of any merit or value whatsoever."

"Apart from you."

He could only sneer.

"So why do you still live there?"

This time he looked up at her quite suddenly, as if realising something for the first time. "I don't know." Hermione raised her eyebrows in enquiry. "But I know why I used to live there."

"Go on."

"Because that is where she was from. Living there reminded me of her, of some of the happiest times we spent together."

Hermione lowered her head, trying not to let his bluntness affect her. What he said next ensured it did not. "I now realise I can move away quite freely and happily. It no longer has a hold over me."

She could not speak. Her mouth hung slack.

"Because of you, of course. You do realise that, don't you?" He sounded as if he was chiding her for not grasping something obvious in class.

She could only smile, staggered by what seemed to her a sudden shift in allegiance. His own determination fired hers and gave her further confidence in their relationship. She felt completely secure in her emotions for him.

They returned to their food.

"And you, Miss Granger." He smirked as he called her by her title. "You have never told me about your childhood home."

"It's terribly dull and predictable, I'm afraid. I grew up with nice middle-class parents in a nice middle-class Cotswolds town and went to a nice middle-class prep school. All very comfortable and cosy."

"When did you realise you had magical abilities?"

"Well, with little things really. I ignored them at first. I remember struggling to dress my dolls one day when I was very little and then, after I had thrown one on the floor in a temper, they were all suddenly immaculately attired! And one day at school, I had been so frustrated by my teacher's inability to write up what I thought was a simple calculation on the board, I was sitting there glaring at her back, and she turned away, about to admit defeat, and when she looked again, the board was full of the correct solution. I'll never forget her look of astonishment. Of course, I had no idea it was me who had done it."

"Tormenting your teachers even then?"

She smirked. "But of course. Did I ...*torment* you?"

"Yes."

"Was I that bad?"

He exhaled deeply. "I suppose it was your clear affection for Potter that riled me the most. I resented the fact that the most brilliant and talented witch I had come across for as long as I could remember was so attached to him. It reminded me ..."

His voice trailed off, but she knew he was referring to another Potter's influence: to James' hold on Lily.

"But you took it out on me rather a lot."

"I suppose I did."

"You were very cruel at times."

He did not flinch. "See it as building up your resilience."

She looked at him. It was clear he was not going to apologise for his behaviour towards her over the years. She decided not to push for it.

"I will see it as you trying to come to terms with feeling threatened by my intelligence and talent," she said with a smirk.

She did not see his momentary glare before his expression changed slowly into a slight admiring smile.

"This feels right, doesn't it?"

"Yes," he said clearly after a pause. "That is why I am content with my decision. Our trip this morning confirmed it to me."

"Not initially."

"No. Strangely enough, it was only when we returned to Hogwarts that I realised how clear it was. Despite the reassurance of the surroundings, and the knowledge that you were to arrive for a lesson, I realised that ..."

"Go on."

"It was no longer enough. However confusing, different rather, that our time away from school had been, it felt, as you have just said, right. Although I admit that I ... resisted seeing it at first. You must remember, I did not have a nice middle-class upbringing. I was not taught to tolerate, to adapt and develop. I have had to work all those things out for myself; some I have grasped better than others."

"You are far more self-aware than I admit to giving you credit for previously."

"And you are just as patronising as I always gave you credit for previously." He smirked across at her; she responded with a mock affronted glare.

"I know I can be an annoying pain in the arse. You're probably one of the few people who could tolerate me."

He humphed slightly. "Mr Filmore seems to be more than happy to 'tolerate' you."

"Oh, don't talk about that. But that's a point actually, if it makes you feel any better. A few hours in my company and I'll have probably bored him rigid."

"Hmm ... it's the rigid part I'm worried about."

She giggled at his humour, glad he could joke about something she knew he was deeply troubled by. "Severus, not only do I love sitting here, fully clothed, chatting to you, but that particular aspect of our relationship is remarkable. I never believed I'd find someone to be able to make me feel the way you do. I didn't know such pleasure was possible."

"Neither did I."

"Well, that's a further sign of our compatibility. God, it's almost ..."

"Fate?"

She looked up at him, surprised he was happy to admit it so readily. "Yes."

They stared at each other. Her cheeks had quickly flushed, and the colour had spread to her lips which were full and swollen; he could not take his eyes from them. His chest rose and fell rapidly under the crisp white shirt, contrasting with the deep black of his jacket. "We need to go back to the hotel." He spoke with urgent insistence.

"Yes."

The waiter immediately appeared at their side. Snape had not even looked across at him. "We require the bill, thank you."

The man did not hesitate in returning with the bill immediately. When he thought about it later, he could not explain why he had served the black haired man and the young woman so swiftly.

Severus paid for it all and they were soon walking rapidly back towards the hotel. It was a cold night and Hermione huddled against him to keep warm. His arm came around her and pulled her in tight. She laid her head on his shoulder and smiled into his coat. At one point they could go no further but stopped and drew the other in tightly for a long, deep kiss. It did not seem to bother the Friday night revellers of Edinburgh. When they had reached the steps of the hotel, they paused briefly for another embrace. On breaking away, she looked up into his eyes and said once again, "You really were horrible to me, you know. You reduced me to tears on several occasions."

Again, no apology was forthcoming, and she thought she could detect instead the merest hint of a smirk. For now, she smirked back and pulled him up the steps into the hotel.

Once inside the lift they could barely keep their hands off each other, and if it had not been for another person getting in on the second floor, they may well have ended up naked before they reached their level.

They somehow managed to unlock the door to the room and Hermione moved him back into it. He was tearing at her clothes almost desperately.

But a thought had been forming in Hermione's mind for some time. It would require tremendous willpower on her part, at least initially, but she was determined to see it through. She pushed him back, removing his jacket and undoing the buttons of his shirt in the process, until he came to rest against a pillar of the four-poster bed.

She kissed him hard and he reached up to hold her head, angling it to assault her mouth with increasing desperation. Her hands came up and pulled his down and she slowly lowered herself so that she was kneeling before him. After a slight smirk of anticipation, his head fell back and his eyes closed in expectation. Hermione undid his trousers and let them fall. He kicked off his shoes and socks and stepped out of them swiftly so that he was standing before her in nothing but his shirt tails.

He rose out towards her, needy and rock hard. Her mouth was so close, her tongue flitting out as if to capture that first drop which had already appeared on his swollen tip. But the anticipated touch did not come. Instead she took his hands and pulled them behind him, and then yet further behind the pillar of the bed. Before he had even realised what was happening, Severus Snape found himself immobile, bound by some unknown material to the post.

He struggled as it finally dawned on him what had happened and started to mutter a wandless spell to release himself. But before he could complete it, he felt the tip of her wand under his chin.

"Uh uh uh. I wouldn't recommend that if I were you. Do not underestimate my magic, Professor Snape. You know me too well for that. Besides, this won't be nearly as much fun if you don't cooperate." She smiled languidly up at him, and tapped the tip of her wand reproachfully on his chest before drawing it down the length of his torso. He could not deny that his cock was even more engorged than before and stopped struggling, burning with curiosity to see what she would do next.

She merely stepped back and crossed her arms, watching him with teasing amusement.

"What is this about?" he hissed, frustration coursing through his limbs. How he longed for her touch; his flesh was burning for her.

"Penance." She spoke plainly and clearly.

"What!?" His eyes burned into hers. She looked away.

"I told you; you have been beastly to me over the years. It is time for you to make amends."

The ache in his groin was so intense he feared he would injure himself. "Don't tease me, witch," he groaned through gritted teeth.

"Oh ... that is exactly what I am going to do."

She continued to stand staring at him for some time, watching as his breathing became increasingly ragged. It became harder and harder for him to maintain the silence he normally exhibited at times of arousal, and the occasional tormented moan could not stop itself rising from his throat. Hermione could not deny the effect this had on her. She knew her own knickers were soaking.

Hermione glanced down at his member, more swollen than ever. The head was purple with need and dripped mercilessly onto the floor. She took a step towards him and caught a drop of the clear liquid as it fell. Examining it with a frown, she brought it up for him to see. "Tut tut. What are you always telling me about creating a mess and not letting things go to waste? Seems you are in need of a little reminder of your own rules and regulations ... *sir*." She smirked, running one finger along the line of his jaw and pushing his head up with it. He returned her stare with a glare but did not speak. His breath came in short deep gasps and he struggled momentarily against his bonds.

"Oh no, you don't." She instantly stepped away from him, denying him the promise of her touch. A deeper groan emerged from him.

Hermione moved further back. His eyes followed her everywhere. She stood before him and slowly started to remove her clothing: first her shirt, each button undone with deliberate indolence. Her breasts were revealed: pale, milky mounds encased in the red silk of her bra. She saw the flash in his eyes but ignored it.

Moving to a chair, she pulled it out to just a few feet in front of him and sat, slowly unzipping each boot in turn and pulling them off. At last she stood and removed her jeans, slipping them down her long legs until she was able to kick them, redundant, away from her. She stood before him in her bra and knickers, hands on hips, appraising him and the situation. There was now a decent sized puddle on the floor beneath the tip of his cock and she smirked on seeing it.

"Do you know how it feels to be humiliated in front of your classmates for no reason other than spite?"

He inhaled sharply through his nose. "You know I do." The words were spoken with anger.

She maintained her calm. "Ah, but you could argue that there is a great difference between adolescent schoolboys stupidly unable to control their emotions, taking it out on someone they did not understand, and a grown man in a supposed position of authority and respect taking it out on innocent hard-working pupils."

"Innocent?!" He spat it towards her.

"Oh yes. For a while at least."

"You lost your innocence a long time ago, Miss Granger."

A wistful mask fell over her face and she stared beyond him momentarily. "Yes. I suppose I did." Then her eyes darted back to his. "But never my work ethic. You cannot deny me that."

"I did not say that I did."

She approached him again and knelt, gazing quizzically at the rigid shaft of flesh before her as if it was a specimen to be studied. He arched his groin towards her open mouth, but again she pulled back, drawing a cry of desperation from him. Slowly she stood, always maintaining a few tantalising inches of distance between them.

"What did it feel like, Professor Snape?" He did not reply but his eyes hardened, burning into hers. "The spite, the malice, the disparagement, the caustic put-downs? When you saw people reduced to tears before you - did you enjoy it?"

He took a long time before replying, but eventually spoke with surprising clarity. "I knew no other way. I had never been treated any better myself."

"That's not entirely true though, is it?" She was referring to Lily. "I ask you again; did you enjoy it?"

He refused to answer for a while, then, turning his head, gave his response, reluctantly but clearly. "It provided me with a sense of justice. And I could not risk any pupil or teacher becoming too attached to me; that would have made it hard to maintain the web of deceit I had to weave in order for me to succeed in my ... *work*." He was not referring to his teaching.

"Oh, I don't buy that excuse, I'm afraid. What an effort. What a charade. Why not simply use your powers for good from the word go?"

"You know full well it was not as simple as that. Stop this effrontery now!"

Hermione stepped in and brought her mouth tantalisingly close to his ear. She whispered low, "I like to hear what goes on inside your head." With that her tongue flicked out and briefly flitted into his ear, sensual and warm. He almost sobbed.

She stepped back again and reached behind her, undoing the bra clasp before slipping the straps down from her shoulders and letting the garment fall to the floor. A deep breath was drawn into him at the sight. Her nipples quickly rose hard and dark pink as the air hit them, and she brought a hand up to cup a breast lightly, before stroking over the pliant flesh, taking the nipple between thumb and forefinger and squeezing lightly. The throb in his groin was so severe he was sure he would come just from watching her. It was the most agonised torment he could recall with no actual bodily pain being inflicted.

Her eyes closed and her head fell back. She continued to pull at her nipple. Her own lust was so heightened that it did not register as pain at all, merely causing the fire in her belly to flame ever more. Her other hand reached down and quested inside her knickers. She found herself sodden with desire and pushed one finger along, circling her swollen clit as she went. There was a hiss from the man opposite. She touched the lightest of touches on the hard nub of flesh and a jolt of pleasure shot through her. With a gasp, her eyes opened instinctively, meeting his. He looked as if he would burst out of his bonds any moment, but she knew she had him where she wanted, knew she had him where he wanted to be.

She pulled down the knickers and stepped out of them, revealing herself fully naked before him.

"And now, Severus Snape, I stand before you: this body, this woman, whom you derided and tormented all those years." She moved into him. "These lips which uttered so much, only for the words then to be criticised and denigrated." He could feel her sweet breath on his face. Her lips were red and swollen; he thought he would die without their touch. "You want them now, don't you?" He did not reply. He was not sure if he still had the power to form words; his mind was a complete fog of lust. "*Say it.*" It was her turn to hiss.

"I want them. I want you." It was a whispered breath all he could manage.

She smirked and moved to his ear again. "*Not yet.*" She emphasised the words with deliberate precision.

Hermione once again stepped away from him. His face crumpled at the deprivation of her body, but he quickly recovered his composure on the surface; beneath he knew he could not last.

She sat in the chair she had placed opposite him, placing one leg over the arm, revealing herself fully and tauntingly to him. Fixing him with her eyes, she let her hand quest once more between her thighs. She could not prevent her own groan rising loudly as she felt her swollen wet flesh once more. He too let the sound of desire escape him. Her other hand again found her nipple and started tugging at it relentlessly, coaxing sensation and pleasure through her body. One finger sought deep inside and drew out her wetness. He caught a glimpse of the glistening moisture and his mouth fell open involuntarily as more pre-cum fell in audible splatters onto the floor.

Hermione drew the finger up and rubbed around her clit, causing her to jerk up to meet it. She knew she could not keep herself waiting much longer. Why should she? Her fingers worked faster now, tantalising her clit then dipping back into her sodden passage, only to draw more liquid out to further coat and stimulate her sex. She rubbed harder over and around the bud of tight flesh at the top. He could see it engorged and red, desperate for its own release. The hand at her nipple was still pinching and tugging, the tight redness of her clit mirrored in it. She had tried to maintain his gaze, but as her insides somersaulted with near completion she could not. Her eyes closed and her head fell back, and with a final hard rub over her engorged flesh she came in vast groaning spasms. Pleasure coursed through her, magnified by the knowledge of his eyes boring into her, soaking up her rapture.

Her limbs twitched for some time afterwards and she kept her eyes shut tight to concentrate on the feelings that continued to billow. Only when she felt every last ounce of pleasure leave her body did she at last open her eyes and look across at him.

Severus's face held the most extraordinary expression: a mixture of desire, wonder, pain and admiration. After her breathing had settled she stood and walked across to him, holding his gaze firmly, her eyes fixed surprisingly cold.

They stayed like that for some time. Then at last she heard it. His mouth opened and he spoke: softly, tenderly and completely honestly.

"For all the pain and humiliation I caused you over the years ... I am sorry."

The expression on her face changed instantly to warm acceptance and forgiveness and she smiled tenderly at him. Then at last, Hermione Granger reached in and kissed him. It was a remarkably chaste kiss, but to him, it was the most beautiful thing she had ever bestowed.

They remained like that for some time, their lips touching, blending, never too hard or insistent, but eventually, she became aware of the constant dripping against her thighs and she pulled back, raising an eyebrow to him.

"You are forgiven," she breathed to him, then immediately knelt.

She only had time to open her mouth and drag her lips once, maybe twice over the purple engorged head of his cock, before he exploded into her, all his need and frustration finally able to be relieved. She captured every burst of his seed in her mouth. Each was accompanied by the most soul-wrenching groan from him, as if all his failings and faults were finally being atoned for.

When she was sure he had given her all he could, she stood and swallowed his seed deep within her, bringing another moan from him.

Then, still looking at him with complete tenderness, she reached behind him and untied the bindings. He exhaled as his arms were finally freed and he felt the blood flowing back into them swiftly. He had not realised the discomfort until now.

Some of his cum had escaped onto her face. He gazed at it in awe; never had he known such an erotically satisfying sight. Bringing his finger up, he captured the stray

drops on it. She saw what had happened and eagerly caught his finger in her mouth, sucking off all she could from it.

With that, she removed the shirt he had been wearing the whole time and, taking his hand, led him into the bed.

They lay for a while, simply looking at each other, then he spoke, not angrily, merely inquiring.

"What was all that about?"

"I needed to hear you say it. You needed to say it. You had been reluctant earlier."

"You were very forthright: in your actions and your words."

"Yes. Did it surprise you?"

"What?"

"What I did to you?"

"Initially."

"But you did not mind?"

"It was strange to relinquish control. Unfamiliar."

"I asked if you minded."

He paused momentarily. "I did not."

"And my words?"

"What about them?"

"Did you mind them?"

Another pause. "Do you really think those things?"

"Yes." She waited a little. "Does it matter?"

"No."

"You seemed angry at times."

"Am I not allowed to be?"

"I suppose you are." She thought for a moment. "So I haven't gone down in your estimation?"

"Quite the opposite."

With sheer delight and love, Hermione leaned over to kiss him, more passionately this time. But before she could assume control once again, he had swept her onto her back, and moved over her. She could feel him hard and insistent already between her thighs and quickly parted them. "Please. Please come inside me." He pushed firmly but tenderly into her before her voice had died away.

Severus moved smoothly and powerfully within her, not taking his eyes from hers, and it was not long before they both came again.

It was only then that the events of the day overtook them both, and they fell into a deep sleep, still holding each other tight.

There might be something else you need to say at some point, Severus.

I still love your reviews. xxx

Twenty-Seven

Chapter 27 of 34

A long chapter: lots of sex and lots of spoken words, all very, very meaningful.

Sorry for the long wait for an update. I have edited this chapter a lot from what it originally was and like it a lot more now. Hope you do too. It's a long, very intense read, but well worth it in the end.

They slept late the next day. Hermione was thrilled to see that Severus had had the foresight to order a room-service breakfast which arrived when he was in the bathroom. Hermione quickly slipped the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the outside of the door after the steward had left.

Severus emerged from the bathroom to see her, legs crossed under her on the bed, tucking into a slice of buttered toast. He smiled softly at the sight.

"Thank you for sorting this," she grinned. "I don't think I have the energy to go downstairs."

"I doubted somehow that you would." His eyebrow cocked. "Don't make crumbs."

She smiled to herself. Domesticity was setting in in all its complexity. Even his little foibles, of which she was sure he had many, delighted her. She wondered momentarily if she would feel the same about them after five years.

As she ate, careful not to make any mess at all, she beamed over at him. "Severus, this is perfect. I get the impression you have done this sort of thing before."

He looked confused. "What sort of thing?"

"Taking a woman to a hotel for the weekend."

A trace of the old sneer passed across his face. "I can assure you that has never been the case. This is the first time."

She smiled tenderly. "Well, you're very good at it."

"Well, it's hardly like making the Wolfsbane potion for the first time is it? All it requires is a simple reservation. And I have stayed in hotels alone before, on numerous occasions, both wizarding and Muggle."

"One of the perks of working for the Dark Lord?" she inquired, trying to lighten the gravity of the question with a teasing lilt.

He shot her a cold look. She held his stare and raised her eyebrows, not afraid to get him to talk about that time of his life.

"I would hardly call them perks."

"And all those women?" she persisted. Another cold look. "However you see that time, I suppose I at least owe them something. You're bloody good, Severus."

His tense features softened a little and he dropped his eyes. Hermione smiled ruefully; she knew that men, even the most hardened, could not resist their sexual egos being stroked.

Severus continued more calmly. "I told you; that was all a long time ago. And there was never any emotional attachment."

"Not with any?"

"Not one." He looked up at her again with a searing intensity. "What I feel with you, what you do to me, the way you respond to me ... is a revelation ... an epiphany. It transcends anything I have ever felt before."

A tender smile graced Hermione's lips. Severus reached across smoothly but suddenly and brought his lips crashing onto hers, forcing her mouth apart. She allowed his tongue to search desperately within her. The crockery on the bed clattered loudly and they broke apart necessarily. "Oops," teased Hermione. "Crumbs."

Severus grinned, and with a wave of his wand had cleared the bed of all sign of the breakfast. He drew her into him and she lay on his chest, running her fingers up his torso.

"But you, Miss Granger ... you are quite skilled yourself, especially for someone so young. I suppose a brilliant and famous young witch can take her pick of the most eligible — and ineligible, for that matter — young wizards out there."

She laughed out loud. "Hardly! Believe me, I'm not sure where this supposed skill came from. I told you — it's just you ... you inspire me."

"Don't become sentimental, now." He was teasing, but his tone changed quickly. "But ... have there been many?" The question came boldly, but Hermione could detect an anxious edge to his voice.

"No ... no, of course not. I don't need to tell you that, do I? I was still a virgin until after the war, although I admit, I'd done other things: everything but, I suppose you could say. But, you know, I was really just too busy to think about it, and I wasn't ready. I wanted to be certain I was doing the right thing. I thought I was with Ron, and I don't regret it, but obviously that didn't work out. We only had a fully physical relationship for a couple of months.

"Then when we split up, I saw someone else for a month or so, but it was so wrong ... that became clear quite soon. He was a reporter for the Daily Prophet. He's moved to America now. And, alright, I've had a couple of one-night stands after functions and events. Not my finest hour, but, you know ... we all make mistakes. I've never seen them again and never will, I hope. So there we are ... four."

Severus had been listening quietly. She glanced up cautiously. He was staring straight ahead, then he spoke, quite calmly, but with a tinge of surprise lacing his voice, "That's relatively adventurous for someone who was still a virgin a few months ago."

She giggled into his chest, before fixing her eyes into his seriously. "But not one ... *not one* ... was a patch on you ... god no! I mean, what we have transcends anything I thought possible. Like you said: you have been a revelation."

Severus at last allowed himself to smile. He had clearly needed that conversation, and it seemed to her a turning point in his own self-belief that he had asked and listened so freely.

They settled quietly again. She continued to run her fingers up and down his chest, lightly touching the many scars and abrasions she had become so familiar with.

"You have suffered greatly, haven't you?"

He inhaled. "At times, there was considerable ... *discomfort*."

"Were most of these at Voldemort's hand?"

"Most."

"Why?"

"That is how he exercised control."

"But he wasn't controlling you."

"No, but I had to let him think he was."

"What warranted these?"

He laughed derisively. "Anything. The slightest hint of criticism, a failed undertaking, normally through no fault of one's own ... boredom, a whim ..."

"And did you ..."

"What?"

"Did you have to inflict pain on others?"

He paused momentarily before answering flatly, "Many times."

She fell silent. She wanted to ask how he felt about that, but feared the answer.

"Does that trouble you?" he queried at length.

"I understand the need to do it. I suppose what matters is how you reacted to it."

"I tried not to react."

"But you must have regretted."

"No. That would have led to weakness. I could not afford to be weak. Regret leads to doubt and doubt leads to failure."

"But ... you did not enjoy inflicting pain, did you?"

"You are asking a lot of questions."

She simply inquired again. "Did you enjoy inflicting pain?"

"Not in the way that many of my colleagues did."

Hermione sat up, looking from one dark eye to the other, unsure whether she wanted to continue.

"If you question me, I will answer you honestly." He spoke plainly.

"How do you mean then?"

Severus responded, low and smooth as ever, as if detailing the ingredients for an OWL test potion. "Some of the people I was sent to *deal with* ... were people who had treated me very badly in the past. I admit, before doing what I had been ordered to do, there was with these people, a certain anticipation, a certain expectation of satisfaction, vengeful justice if you like. But ..."

"But what?"

"The reality of reducing a man to a brittle shell of paralysing agony, of seeing terror dragging any hope from their eyes, of seeing their skin tighten and wax with pallor, all at your hand ... it was as if the pain was reflected straight back onto me, the perpetrator. I always left as wretched as the quivering wreck of a human being I had left behind."

He was not looking at her. As he had spoken his voice had become thin and fragile. His features were as tense as she had ever seen them. She continued to stare at him, trying to alleviate some of the pain the memories had clearly dredged up.

"There is another question you wish to ask me." Still he did not look at her.

"Is there?"

"Ask it."

Hermione paused only briefly. "How many people have you killed?"

His head turned suddenly and fixed her with a look so intense it brought a flash of pain across her forehead. "How many people have ~~you~~ you killed, Hermione?"

"I ..." She shook her head, not understanding.

"In battle, in war, in the heat of the struggle for survival, with your wand outstretched before you, desperate to cling on when all around you seems lost. How many people fell at your hand? Enemies, yes, but still human beings, still with souls and mothers and brothers and memories."

Hermione stared at him. She had tried to avoid killing, tried to use disabling curses, but she knew that even a mild curse when inflicted with enough force and despair and need, could result in death. Her mind replayed the moments in the battle. Death Eaters and Voldemort's lackeys fell around her. Due to her? *Surely not*. But ... she could not be certain.

She could not be certain.

Severus lifted a hand to her face and cast his eyes over it. "You see, Hermione Granger, you and I ... we are more alike than even you realised."

"Severus. When I said I forgive you, I meant everything. All your sins, all your transgressions. I accept and forgive them all."

"Enough questions. The answers are sometimes ... surplus to requirement." He drew his eyes back to hers. "Lie down."

She turned to him, her face still creased with confused desolation.

"Let me taste you."

His request surprised her. She opened her mouth to speak but no words emerged. The silence was instead filled with his own voice. "The taste of you helps me forget. And it will help you forget too."

And as Severus leant down to kiss her tenderly, the memory indeed began to blur, seeping back into the fog of past deeds. He pulled the bedclothes back and kissed down over her breasts, slowly, nipping, sucking as he went, down over her smooth flat belly. Her need for him took hold quickly and as his hand parted her thighs they fell open easily for him. A long finger swept up, finding her wet and pliant. Hermione closed her eyes and arched off the bed towards him, desire consuming her quickly and helplessly, banishing the turmoil of emotions which had beset her.

Severus kissed over the neat hairs at the apex of her thighs and she felt him breathe onto her, evaporating some of the wetness he found there. Then another sensation: warm, firm and moist, flitting in to take in her juices, then stroking languidly up towards her swollen clitoris. She jerked and his hand pressed on her belly to hold her down. Glancing down, she saw his black head buried between her legs, sucking her in leisurely but determinedly. She breathed in sharply, trying to focus on prolonging her pleasure for as long as possible.

His tongue was joined by a finger which quested in, stroking her walls. The knot in her belly twisted and that familiar prickling tingle started to spread over her flesh. For his sake, she wanted to last as long as possible, but his tongue, sucking, laving and probing was almost too much. Her clitoris throbbed under his touch, and she knew her passivity would not last much longer. Then just when she thought she could stand no more, she felt something else, something she had felt only once before, at the back of his classroom with the whole class working away before them. He had put a finger up her arse.

Her eyes shot open. *God, that felt good.* It was not something that she had ever been curious about before, but now that it was happening, as that first time, she wondered why she hadn't. His finger was not large enough to hurt, but stroked in and out of that deliciously tight and sensitive passage so sublimely she could not stop herself groaning loudly with delight and pushing onto it again.

She was suddenly so focused on the feeling there that she had ignored the sensation to her clit for a while. And then, more; another finger had joined the first. This time it was accompanied by slight discomfort, as her muscles stretched to accommodate it, but still she registered it only as the fullest sensation. She continued to moan and press against his fingers which he moved rhythmically but tenderly in and out of her arse, each push and release bringing her untold delight.

Then his tongue reapplied itself to its task.

"Oh god ... *oh god ... too good ... too good ... don't stop ... please ... don't stop ...*"

He didn't.

His tongue was swirling hard around her clit now, in time with his fingers inside her. He encircled the tight nub fully once again and sucked hard, his tongue sweeping over it at the same time.

Hermione gasped in with sudden revelation. Her eyes flew open and her body froze. Then she shattered around him, pleasure heaving through her over and over. She let out a groan of deepest rapture reflected in her body which refused to remain stationary, despite his attempts to press it into the bed. She jerked uncontrollably for some time, until the last droplet of pleasure had escaped her, and he had drunk it all in, in long soul-saving gulps.

Eventually she managed to regain the power of speech, albeit only in the crudest terms. "Fucking ... fucking hell. How did you do that? How did you fucking do that?"

"Eloquent as ever, Miss Granger," he drawled.

"I don't care ... I can't ... I can't think ..." She managed to sit up and pull his head up towards her, the faint memory of their earlier conversation lending a further intensity. She kissed him deeply in grateful appreciation, tasting herself strongly on his mouth. She fell back into the bed again. "Oh god, oh my god, I love you ... I love you so fucking much."

Severus smiled and moved to lie beside her, pulling her in close once again.

"You know, I was dreading the end of term, when I would have to leave you. But now, I can't wait for it, to get away together. If every day is half as good as this ..."

"I may struggle to find work, you know."

"You said that before. I don't know why. You're brilliant, efficient, organised; what more does an employer want?"

"Someone who wasn't one of Voldemort's Death Eaters. The questions you asked earlier are ones I will be asked again, many times."

"But everybody knows now what an amazing thing you did. All those years, Severus: the danger you put yourself in. I think you've fully vindicated your reputation by now. You could do any number of things. And ... you'll be with me ... I may be able to help."

"I told you before - I will not be beholden to you."

"I don't mean financially. I mean in terms of reputation, reference, that sort of thing."

He huffed softly.

"Anyway, you could sell your house. That would support you until you find work."

He glanced down at her. "It is almost obscene for a woman of your youth to be so ridiculously *sensible*."

She giggled a little and buried her head in his chest again, continuing to let her hands run over his body. Eventually they came to rest on the largest scar on his left forearm. He flinched slightly as her fingertips ran over it.

"Sorry," she murmured with concern.

"No. I'm sorry. I like your touch it was an instinctive reaction."

"Is that where ...?"

"Yes."

"How did you get rid of it?"

"I do not know really. It had gone before I regained consciousness. I believe it simply disappeared after he was finally defeated, although I unfortunately still have the visible memory."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not the body."

She moved over and planted tender kisses around the area where the Dark Mark had been, finally allowing her lips to play lightly over the scar itself. No detail of the skull and snake were discernible, but the outline of the shape could still be made out.

Her lips soothed and caressed it, her tongue occasionally flitting over the rough flesh. He initially drew in a sharp breath, but his breathing steadied as she continued. Hermione continued her gentle healing long after he had fallen asleep.

At last she lay her head on his chest and let sleep take her as well.

Hermione awoke with a start a while later, and opened her eyes suddenly to see him looking across at her. She gasped in with surprise.

"Sorry. Did I startle you?"

She was bewildered and oddly distressed. "I was dreaming about you."

"Good or bad?"

"I don't know. It was bit upsetting ... disturbing. You were in the Forbidden Forest. You were lost, trying to find your way out. I was trying to get to you, to help you, guide you, but you kept turning a corner and I lost sight of you. I kept calling your name but my voice just didn't travel to you. It was so frustrating."

"I do not get lost in the Forest," he replied snidely.

"I know; it was just a dream. Anyway, it didn't end there. I kept walking, always trying to catch up with you. It shifted to Diagon Alley, but still you kept walking, always just out of reach, out of earshot. And again, I was suddenly in a maze, you know, like in the garden of an old house, and you were turning corners ahead of me. And then it opened out in the middle into a large garden, just a normal nice garden with a lawn, like my garden at home as a child, but still with the tall hedges around. And you were there and you ... were all of a sudden naked. You stopped at last there was nowhere else for you to go and you turned to me. You looked surprised to see me ... and then I woke up."

He stroked her arm reassuringly. "It was just a dream. You're beginning to sound like Trelawney."

She smiled, nestling into him. "I know. Anyway, at least I found you in the end."

"Naked?" he asked sardonically.

"Of course. I wouldn't have it any other way," she smirked, hoping humour would dispel the unease wrought by the dream. But she could not dismiss it completely and looked up at him for reassurance.

He kissed her. Her mind at last cleared. His tongue was soothing her, caressing away her anxieties. The kiss deepened. They did not think they would ever stop, but her hand quested down and she felt him hard again. Her core ached. Through all the pleasure they had given and received that morning, he had not been inside her all day.

She sat up, drawing her leg over him and placing herself over his tip. He held her hips and guided her down, unable to take his eyes off the sight of him disappearing into her. Once the feeling of conjoining had been absorbed by them both, they began a long slow rise and fall, deep and luxuriant.

Her breasts swayed gently as she moved and he removed his hands from his hips to cup them tenderly, enjoying the heaviness in his palms. One of her hands came to his and moved his fingers to her nipple. He knew what she wanted and rubbed lightly over them both, delighting in seeing the dark pink buds of flesh rise to firm points before him.

Hermione continued to rise and fall on him and he grunted as she sank down, encasing and squeezing his rigid shaft tightly. He focused on that, and his fingers stopped their ministrations for a moment. Instantly, her hands were back guiding them.

"More. Harder." Her voice came low and desperate.

He complied, taking the nipples between thumb and forefinger and pinching hard, not releasing them. He watched in awe as her eyes closed in bliss, a gasp as pain coursed through her body, translating only as sensation and heightening the pleasure. For a moment, she stopped moving. Her breathing shallowed as she focused on the feelings emanating from her agonised breasts.

And then she threw her head over to look at him, her face breaking into a delirious smile. The circle of feeling was complete: his member inside her and his hands gripping her breasts. Pain and pleasure became indistinct and she knew it only as ecstatic feeling. She bit her lip, focusing on what he was drawing from her. "So good ... *so good.*"

When at last she started moving again, he finally relinquished his grip.

"How can you let me do that to you?" Despite his actions, the concern was evident in his voice.

"What?" she muttered, barely understanding.

"Pinch you like that. It hurts deeply."

"Yes." She looked down and spoke plainly. "But sometimes pain is good. As you said, Severus Snape - we are more alike than either of us realised."

She rose and fell more desperately now, bringing them both closer to the final release. When he knew she was nearly there, his hands once more came up to twist and squeeze her nipples. She exhaled through a smile, and with that came hard around him, her body shuddering as it struggled to remain upright. She leaned back to support herself and let the pleasure wash through her. With that he felt himself explode, crying out louder than she had ever heard him before.

Hermione collapsed on top of him and he threw an arm over, pinning her to him. Again, speech was impossible.

Later, as she lay propped up in bed, Severus rested his head in her lap. He glanced up at her nipples, still red and angry from their treatment of earlier.

"Are they sore?"

"Yes. I like it. It is a reminder of you."

"I don't like hurting you."

She looked down and spoke firmly. "As we have established: there is no black and white. I love you for your complexity, Severus. I want all you are, all you can give me. So be it. Nothing is straightforward."

Severus simply looked up at her quietly before gently taking one of the tormented nipples in his mouth, licking and soothing it with his tongue. She ran her fingers through his hair and stroked him. He stayed there for an age, sucking, tasting, nuzzling. She knew it was his weakness. She was only too happy to indulge him.

"I could stay at your breast forever."

"I noticed."

"Do you mind?" he asked as his hand quested down between her thighs.

"No. Especially not if you do that as well."

He continued to suckle while his fingers worked their way inside and along her, finding her clit once again eager for him. It was a familiar position for them and brought great comfort and delight to both. It was not long before she came again in long slow waves.

They were silent for a while, lying in the thin November light, listening to the other breathe. His heart beat steadily into her head and their breathing steadied into synchronicity.

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"You know once we talked about when you were bitten, and what happened after that."

"Yes."

"You said some things. So much has happened since then, I had almost forgotten. You said you were essentially dead because you no longer had any meaning, any

purpose. Do you remember?"

"Yes."

"But you said something else: that something pulled you back. What did you mean by that?"

He was silent for a long while, seemingly deep in thought. "I am not sure."

She glanced at him. "You must remember something to have said it."

"I have tried, but ... it is too indistinct. However, I know it involved another person."

She looked away, almost fearful. Placing his hand delicately under her chin, he lifted her head up. "I think that person was you."

Hermione lowered her gaze. Severus was galvanised by her desire to talk. He sat up, his body suddenly taut.

"Hermione. I do not know how or why, but here, inside" He took her hand and brought it to rest on his chest, directly over his heart. "I came back. What, Hermione? What was it?"

Her brows creased slightly. So much had happened between them that the time before they had come together had started to seem irrelevant to her. She had never before thought it significant, but now, as they lay together, so as one, she realised she had been foolish: that she may have denied him something he clearly thought important.

"I know I have never really spoken to you about that time. It has always been very private to me. I never thought you would want to know. In any case, what happened did not seem significant."

For a time he was completely still and silent, and Hermione thought he would not persist. But his chest was rising and falling rapidly beneath her and she detected a distinct quickening of his heartbeat.

Then at last he spoke, so low as to be almost inaudible. "What happened?" His voice had taken on an otherworldly quality, but his insistence was still present. She looked up and saw anxious determination on his face.

Hermione spoke. "I came to see you, when they brought your body back to Hogwarts and after Harry had told me about your ... memories. I came to see you. It was a long time after you had been bitten, a long time after you had been examined. No-one detected any life in you, Severus. And ... I came to see you, that's all." She shrugged slightly, as if trying to dismiss the relevance of her statement.

"Why?"

And with that she was struck with a realisation for the first time. Her eyes instantly filled with tears, and she gasped her truth out. "To apologise."

He studied her face intently. "Tell me."

She looked at him blankly for a moment. He reiterated it firmly. "Tell me what you did."

"I ... I ... just told you: I was wrong. I was wrong about you ... and I said sorry."

He was still staring at her fixedly. "Go on."

"What do you mean? That's all."

"No. What else?"

"I don't understand. That is why I was there ... to say sorry."

"You did something. *What did you do?*" His voice was so insistent it almost scared her.

She thought back, her mind struggling at first to recall the detail. But she did. She shut her eyes tight and saw it; saw herself standing over his prone, lifeless body, so cold and pale in the harsh light of the white room they had set up as a morgue. She saw herself, close to him, looking down with such remorse and shame and sorrow. She was standing, and then she remembered she remembered the surprise of her next actions. It surprised her still, but she saw herself clearly moving down towards him ...

"I ... I kissed you. I brushed your hair back with my hand, leant down to you ... and ... I kissed your forehead."

All tension and anxiety suddenly vanished from Severus' face as the epiphany struck.

"Yes," he breathed out in awed revelation.

Hermione was utterly bewildered. He looked intently at her as before, but his face was now open and giving.

"It was you," he looked at her in wonder. "You gave me meaning."

Now it was her turn to be silent as the nature of their mutual realisation sank in. She lay back onto him and breathed in. He felt his chest grow wet with her tears. Silence wrapped around them both, pushing all else away.

Then she heard herself speaking, recalling something he had said during a prior moment of what she thought was pleased delirium. "You have said that before! *It was you.* Is that what you meant? I gave you meaning?"

He continued in hushed reverence. "I knew it. I knew it somehow, although I did not understand how, and did not want to admit it. I felt your presence even in the darkness, even in the depths, but I needed something to cling onto, to pull me out. *De profundis.* Your apology, your faith in me, manifesting itself through physical contact ... through a kiss ... I grabbed onto that."

All she could do was stare at him, tears brimming from her eyes. "Promise me you won't let go."

He stared back, his brows furrowed in wonder, a mist washing over his eyes too. "How can I? How can I ever?"

He spun her over and kissed her desperately, possessing her, encompassing her. He kissed away her tears almost painfully then returned to her mouth, tearing it open, plundering it with his tongue. She felt him between her legs, harder than ever, seeking his release. Immediately he thrust fully with a deep grunt of urgency. She was jolted up the bed with her own cry of satisfaction. Never had she felt so full. He moved rapidly, as if time was limited, as if he would somehow lose her if he did not hurry. He held her gaze, his black eyes burning into hers.

Her body and her soul felt complete as never before and she relinquished her pleasure faster than ever, crying out with wonder as it heaved its way through her. He paused in his movements.

He had not taken his eyes from hers and they sought within her like never before. His mouth moved and words came to her. But they were transmitted, not from his lips alone, but through his eyes, through his body, his very soul.

"I love you."

She absorbed them, let them sink through her, deep inside. But it was almost too much for her own fragile body and soul to comprehend. She swallowed hard. More tears fell, and it was only when he started moving again that she remembered to breathe. He came only a few moments later with a heaving groan of complete fulfilment, his pleasure coming in long bursts, his eyes still fixed into hers.

They lay afterwards, not speaking, just being.

When the time was right, he murmured, "I have never said that to anyone in my entire life."

Hermione planted a tender kiss on his chest. "In that case, you had better practise."

He chuckled softly. She was doing to him as he had done to her, although he sensed it was just as much for reassurance on her part as it had been on his.

"I love you." He enjoyed the sound of it as much as she and could not help a broad smile breaking out over his face. "Your turn."

She grinned. "I love you too."

"So be it," he said, reaching down for another kiss, before drawling deep, "How very convenient, Miss Granger."

At last.

More soon. x

Twenty-Eight

Chapter 28 of 34

Just enjoying the rest of their weekend together ... away from institutional life.

When they finally glanced at the time they saw that it was past three o'clock in the afternoon; they had completely missed lunch. Hermione felt a twinge in her stomach and rolled over to pick up the phone. She requested some sandwiches to be brought to the room.

Turning back, she was met by the black of his eyes.

"Sorry. Do you mind me doing that? We could go out if you want."

"Ah, but that would mean you would have to put some clothes on, and that would be most disappointing."

She laughed and curled herself into him. "I can't tell you how wonderful it is to be away from that place. I mean, I have loved and adored my time there, but I can't keep up the charade much longer. I am so sick of lessons and homework and studying and dorms and set meals and alphabetical order and house points and ... bloody teachers!" She glared at him in mock defiance. A look of fleeting indignation passed across his face, then he reached over suddenly and tickled her mercilessly. Hermione laughed so hard and desperately in an attempt to escape his fingers that she fell off the bed and landed with an ungainly thud on the floor, which caused her laughter to continue unabated.

Severus leaned over and looked down at her still giggling hopelessly; it was the most beautiful sound in the world.

She eventually managed to stem the hilarity and reached up a hand towards him. "Well, don't just lie there gawping at me! Aren't you going to come to my rescue, oh knight in shining armour?"

He raised a cynical eyebrow. More giggles. Then slowly she felt the hard floor disappear from beneath her. It was as if the room was falling away. Severus was levitating her over onto the bed. Her mouth opened in wonder, but before she knew it, she had come to rest gently next to him on the bed.

She pouted. "That's not fair. You were supposed to lift me up in your strong, manly arms and carry me boldly to safety. You cheated."

He rolled his eyes. "There is no pleasing some people. I thought you'd like it."

"Only kidding," she responded with a peck on his lips. "I loved it. I like it when you use your powers skilfully but subtly."

"Skilfully but subtly?" He did not sound convinced.

"Yes. I think that describes you very well. Skilful and subtle."

The black eyes rolled again. "I should imagine your fellow students have a few other adjectives at their disposal when describing me."

She smiled ruefully. "I don't care less about my fellow students' opinions of you."

"They are still a part of your life."

"Yes. And those who I want to stay a part of my life will accept you as they accept me."

He looked away. "You have tremendous faith in your friends."

"I choose them carefully. We've all been through it, you know. They understand far more than you give them credit for."

"Perhaps."

They lay still for a moment. She stroked his face, thinking over his declaration of earlier, and his expression softened into a deeper smile than she had ever seen on him.

Then with another sudden giggle, Hermione sat up, declaring, "Now this won't do at all. At least half an hour has gone by without us engaging in any sexual activity whatsoever. We'll forget how to do it. Come on!"

With that, they set about remedying the situation.

It was gone eight o'clock when they at last managed to shower and stagger downstairs to the hotel restaurant for supper.

They had a drink in the bar afterwards. A few other couples sat around, all intimately engrossed in each other. Hermione and Severus were no different. It was so liberating for them to be able to kiss and touch and laugh in public with no fear of recrimination. They were more exhibitionist than they would ever normally dream of being simply because they could. At one point she felt his hand quest under her dress. Her need for his touch banished any awareness of public decency, and she placed her own hand on top of his, pressing his fingers hard into her. Severus kissed down her neck, nibbling and sucking the sensitive flesh he found there.

"Did you really not mind what I did to you on Friday night?" she breathed hoarsely against him.

"At the time, hardly at all, and with hindsight, most certainly not. In fact ..." He moved up to her ear and whispered sensuously, "Perhaps you could do it again sometime?"

Hermione laughed, pulling back to look him in the eyes. "Would you like that?"

"I believe I would like that very much indeed." He kissed her deeply, causing her to groan aloud.

The barman glanced across at them in disapproval, especially when he noticed where the man with the long black hair had his hand. His authoritative Glaswegian tones broke them out of their mutual reverie. "Excuse me, sir. The hotel provides rooms for that sort of activity."

Snape turned to glare at him.

A sudden cold chill ran through the tall Scotsman, who looked nervous to the point of fear. Hermione merely laughed and stood up quickly, pulling Severus with her. "Come on, you."

They got into the lift. Severus still looked disgruntled. "I'm not used to being told off," he muttered.

Hermione couldn't stop giggling. "God, if looks could kill! Acts of public indecency are not permitted, you know. The poor man was only doing his job. He looked pretty worried when you turned to him. You have the ability to reduce even the most hardened Scotsman to a drivelling wreck with one look. I love it!"

He looked at her sharply, but a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "It may have been slightly more than a look."

Hermione frowned. "Be careful. You know as well as anyone what would happen if you used magic on a Muggle."

"It wasn't deliberate not entirely, anyway." He smirked. "Don't worry; it could not have been detected or identified."

Once inside the room it took less than a minute for their clothes to come off and their bodies to join once again.

Later, with tiredness finally creeping over them both, a sense of despair began to inch through Hermione; they had to return to Hogwarts the next day.

"What time will we have to be back tomorrow?"

"We must be out of here by noon, but there is no immediate rush to get back to the castle. Early afternoon, I suppose. I have duties in the evening."

"It's less than a month until the exams. There are a few others taking them with me: people doing resits from the summer. I suppose I should focus on them properly at some point."

"You are more than well-prepared, even without the extra work I am sure you will put in. You will find them very straightforward. Besides, they are entirely unnecessary. You already have job offers which, may I remind you, you must accept on Monday. But do you really think the Ministry, or any other employer for that matter, will care less whether you have NEWTs or not at this stage? You are Hermione Granger, for Merlin's sake!"

She was taken aback by the force of his compliments, so unusual was it to hear him praising anyone. Still, she felt obliged to explain her actions to him.

"I'm not taking these exams for anyone but myself. Academic excellence has, or rather had, been the defining characteristic of my life for as long as I can remember. I know the delights of it have paled recently, but still, I would not forgive myself if I didn't get my NEWTs. I don't want my grandchildren to ask me in the future, "What NEWTs did you get, Grandma?" and for me to have to answer, "Well, actually, I copped out and didn't get any.""

"You could reply, 'As a matter of fact, at the time of the exams I was off solving the deepest, darkest of mysteries which threatened our very existence on this planet and means more in itself than about a million pathetic little exam marks which aren't worth the paper they are printed on.'"

She opened her mouth to feign indignation, but could only close it immediately and smile up at him, kissing him lightly on the chest. "I think we've both had enough of academic life, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I'll work hard for a few weeks and then that's it ... done."

"Done. And of course, there are the delights of the ball in two weeks."

Hermione slapped him lightly on the torso. "Stop talking about the bloody ball! You never know, I may even be able to wangle a dance of sorts with you. There are some formal group dances. Teachers dance too. We may be able to engage in some permissible physical contact in full view of everyone!"

"I do not dance."

She smirked. "We'll see about that."

He repeated firmly, "I do *not* dance." He was moving down her body until his mouth rested just above her clit, "but *to* do this." His tongue descended and swirled. And again, Hermione gave herself up to him.

That evening, Hermione was not troubled by any more dreams and awoke feeling remarkably rested the next day.

They enjoyed their last breakfast downstairs in the dining room. It was strange being able to eat next to each other. Hermione thought over all the meal times she had spent unable to concentrate on her food because her eyes were permanently trained on high-table.

Back in their room, Hermione crossed to the window and looked out. There was a light mist floating over the gardens and the flag was hanging limply from the castle ramparts. Edinburgh was slowly waking up to a lazy Sunday. Severus came and stood behind her, drawing his hands around her waist to pull her into him. She rested her head against his shoulder.

"What time is it?"

"Just gone nine," he drawled amidst kisses to her neck.

"Three more hours of heaven."

"Hmm."

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For this. I cannot describe the feeling of being able to be with you when I want, how I want, and without worrying about who's seeing us."

"Likewise."

"Still, we've had some moments at the castle, haven't we?"

"That's one way of putting it," he drawled, continuing his attention to the soft skin of her throat.

Her mind replayed their most intense times together. "God, that time after I saw you with McGonagall do you remember you pulled me into that corridor, up against the wall. You put your hand over my mouth so good, *so good* ..."

He turned her around, and his hand moved up again, mimicking those actions. Long fingers once again pushed past her lips; she sucked hungrily on them.

"You like that?"

"Uh huh."

His other hand was at her zip, undoing her jeans and pushing them down. His fingers then slipped quickly between her legs, causing him to grunt with revelation. "Always so wet for me ... *always so wet for me.*"

With a frown of concentration, he angled two fingers deep up inside her, drawing out the confirmation of his effect on her. Bringing them out and up to his face, he looked at his damp fingers curiously, before placing them in his mouth and imbibing her essence. Hermione's eyes shut softly in adoring delight.

Severus' hands had now moved to her shirt and were concertedly but leisurely undoing the buttons, studying the flesh revealed beneath as if for the first time.

"What about you?" she managed to breathe out in query.

"What about me what?" He was still staring at her pale skin as if it was a subject of utmost fascination.

"Which do you remember most of our more ... dangerous ... encounters?"

He did not speak for a while, slipping her shirt from her shoulders and reaching into her bra to place one breast on top of the cup, pushing it up into a bubbling mound of milky white beauty. An appreciative smile danced over his mouth before he lowered it to the nipple.

Between sucks, his low drawl rumbled on her flesh. "The time you came so beautifully for me while the rest of that class of dunderheads continued destroying their potions through incompetence and ignorance, entirely unaware of what was happening just behind them." She laughed aloud at the memory. "And the time you stood before me, touching, bringing yourself to pleasure ... so compliant, so trusting ... so exquisite, my love, my heart ..."

She stroked his head. One hand had returned to her soaking core, one was at her other breast, now sitting atop her bra like its twin. He occasionally brought his head back to gaze at them in quiet appreciation before descending again to suck gently at the nipples.

"We had some ... interesting ... moments early on," she mused. "There seemed to be a certain control issue."

He raised an eyebrow, his voice taking on a cynical edge, "A control issue?"

"You know what I mean: the denial of eye-contact, the insistence on student-teacher protocol, taking away house points, setting essays ..."

He did not respond.

"Did that turn you on?" she dared ask.

She waited for an answer. At length she got one.

"Yes."

His response could have raised her anger, but his candour instead confirmed entirely her own feelings on his treatment of her early on. Why deny it?

"As it did me."

"I know."

He had now removed her bra and was pushing her jeans off her legs altogether. She continued her questions. "Do you like being in control?"

"You know I do."

"Not on Friday night?"

"Clearly not."

"What was different then?"

"I was completely secure in my feelings for you ... and in yours for me. I no longer needed to reassure myself of it through any exertion of power. It was utterly liberating."

He was kneeling before her, helping her out of the last of her clothes, until she stood completely naked before him. He slowly stood again. His eyes had poured over her body in exactly the same manner throughout their conversation, as though he was trying to etch every detail of her onto his mind. His expression had been completely passive, but with a burn of intense concentration in his eyes. Hermione was to him the only other human being in the world.

A thought took sudden hold of her which inexplicably gripped her stomach and twisted. She asked urgently, "Promise me you won't always relinquish control to me?"

Bringing his hand up to her chin, he tilted her head, appraising her face and eyes last of all in his examination of her body. She let out a moan of longing.

"Oh ... I think I can quite easily promise that." His eyes moved to her mouth which instinctively fell open. He spoke coldly. "Kneel on the bed."

Hermione obeyed immediately.

Severus moved behind her, took in the sight of her ripe rump swaying up to him, grabbed her hips and thrust. She cried out with the shock. He was embedded within her with violent confirmation. The force had pushed her up the bed, but she adjusted immediately and moved back to keep him as deep inside her as possible.

He stopped, pulling in deep breaths through his nose.

Her sudden impalement had taken her aback and she took the time to adjust to the feel of him.

"You are utter perfection," he said with plain sincerity. "I will live because of you, with you, within you ... there is no other way."

She found tears filling her eyes, and was relieved he was behind her and could not see. He started to move again, each thrust brought her name falling from his lips. "Hermione ... Hermione ... Hermione ..."

This time she had no words. She knelt before him, meeting him, enclosing him within her. He pushed perfectly along her g-spot over and over again. Despite the intense repetition of his movements, he seemed in no hurry to end their pleasure, and she felt her slow release building deliciously and inexorably within her.

Severus continued chanting her name, barely audibly but religiously behind her. She hardly heard it now, so focused was she on her body preparing to melt around him.

Her breathing grew ragged and her muscles tensed. The shift in her body signalled to him the imminence of her climax and brought a surge towards his own. He thrust ever harder and deeper, gripping her hips forcefully. She moaned, low and soft to start, then building in intensity, until at last she could only cry out as ecstasy tore through her, spreading through her limbs. She pulsed unremittingly around him, and as he felt it Severus burst into her, his own pleasure as intense as hers, exploding out of him enough to make his world spin. And at that moment, he fell completely silent.

But time passed, and the reality of their approaching departure started to press itself onto their consciousness. That sinking feeling she used to get on Monday mornings at junior school gripped Hermione. She nuzzled against him to try to keep it at bay. Her lover held her close, sensing her unease.

They lay in bed until the last possible moment, their bodies hardly ever separate. Hermione had never realised such a connection with another human being possible. She wondered momentarily if she could actually cope without him inside her when they returned. Little did she know it, but Severus was thinking exactly the same thing.

When the time inevitably came for them to vacate the room, they gathered their things in silence. As they opened the door, both turned back and gave the setting of their most intense happiness and pleasure a final longing look. Then, with a last smile at each other, they closed the door behind them.

The two of them stayed in Edinburgh for as long as they dared, enjoying a lunch near the castle. It was a cold day and Hermione huddled in close to him as they strolled through the city. He was completely relaxed, walking remarkably leisurely, even with his hands in his pockets at some points. Hermione smiled up at him, and when he glanced down at her quizzically, she merely broadened her grin and reached up for a kiss.

As they were walking through the gardens, the bells of the city started to strike around them. Hermione counted three chimes. She heard them only as a knell, summoning her back to the oppressive institutionalism of the castle. Severus stopped, an equally desolate expression on his face.

"You don't need to say it," she bemoaned. "I've got stuff to do as well. We'd better go."

They walked as slowly as they could back to the transporting spot in the deserted alleyway. A strange sense of detachment had overcome Hermione and she did not even look at him as he drew his wand. Then with sudden force she felt herself pulled into him. He spun her around and held her head up. His lips crashed down onto hers with an intensity that took even Hermione by surprise.

When at last he broke away, his eyes searched hers one more time. "Thank you. Thank you for the happiest two days of my life."

His words initially drew a flood of images of her past into her mind. Could she give him the answer she felt he deserved at that moment? She paused, then answered with complete sincerity, "And mine."

With one final kiss, he clasped his wand, grabbed her round the waist and murmured some words. As she felt the pull around her, the sight of his face, tender and contented, fixed itself upon her. The granite buildings were pulled away from them, and within mere seconds, Hermione found herself back in the Potions classroom, still clasping the waist of her teacher.

The contrast to their previous surroundings could not have been starker. The sights, sounds and smells around her now were relentlessly familiar and spoke of little but him. Indeed, this room had been the sight of the start of it all, of great pleasure and happiness. But at that moment, standing there next to the neat desks and the bottles and the books and parchment, all Hermione Granger wanted to do was weep.

Snape, too, stood awkwardly, and a sudden unease swept over Hermione. Would all that had happened between them, all his words and declarations, be wiped out due to their return to this place? Would it strip him of his resolve? She looked fearfully at him.

But then he crossed to her, and his face broke into a remarkably reassuring smile. His hands came up and cupped her face, tilting it to look into her eyes. "Now, as much as it pains me for this to end, we must remind ourselves that in a few short weeks we can spend the rest of our lives together, free and easy. I'm afraid I must spend the remainder of this delicious day preparing for next week. Some of those intolerable students are taking their NEWTs in a few weeks, and I suppose I had better do what I can to ensure they receive relatively decent results." He smirked. "There's one in particular ... pesters me continually, trying to impress, reasonable knowledge, I concede, but ... an insufferable know-it-all nonetheless." His grin broadened. She smacked him playfully, eliciting a mock groan of pain. But his good humour and approach to his tasks reassured her and she returned his smile.

"I'll see you at supper," he continued.

"Back to longing looks across the dining hall?"

"For now. I quite like longing looks across the dining hall."

"Me too."

After a kiss which made her swoon in its intensity, they stretched away from each other, the last thing to part their fingertips, flesh touching, reaching out for the other until the last possible moment.

And then she turned to leave the room. She had reached the door when he called across forcefully, "Hermione!"

She spun back, shocked at his insistence. He was staring hard after her, but his words carried across the room effortlessly. "I love you."

Her face broke into the warmest smile. "I love you, too."

"Now go, my darling. You can return here tonight. I will be waiting."

She turned and left before it became impossible to do so.

Hermione went straight to the library and found, remarkably, that she concentrated productively on her work. She did not see her friends until dinner and Ginny looked up with relief as she sat down next to her.

"Where the hell have you been? I know you left a note telling me not to worry, but still it would have been nice to have known where you'd gone, just in case."

"In case what?"

"Well, you know ..."

Hermione looked distinctly clueless. "The big bad wolf got me?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "I was just a little concerned, that's all. Anyway how was your ... dirty weekend?"

Hermione grinned. "Wonderful. Completely and utterly delectable and ... very dirty."

Ginny could only grin back. "Wish I could say the same. I spent it watching Quidditch in the pissing rain and studying the origins of Apparition."

"Did it rain on Saturday? I was inside all day didn't notice."

"Shut it, Granger," mumbled her friend. "Your delectable Potions Master seems pretty happy too. I've never seen him so relaxed. He looks different not bad, actually, even I'll admit."

Hermione looked up to high-table. Snape had come to sit next to McGonagall as usual. For once, he was engaging her in animated discussion. At one point, after a comment she made, Snape actually laughed so audibly that the whole first few rows of students looked up in surprise. The Headmistress had an expression of equal astonishment on her face.

Hermione smiled softly, staring up at him until he met her eyes. His were dancing.

After supper, she spent a while catching up with Ginny. She did not tell her all that had passed between Severus and herself but did impart enough to reassure her friend of her happiness.

"Any news here?" she eventually asked.

"Not really," Ginny sighed. "Harry owled. Asked how you were. And Lawrence was asking for you."

"Oh."

"He doesn't stop talking about the Ball. I reckon he thinks that's his chance. He's not going to push things till then, but expect a full on charm offensive at that point."

Hermione groaned, hanging her head in her hands. She pushed herself up quickly. "On that note, I'll see you tomorrow, Gin. Take care."

"Can't bear to be parted even for one night?"

"No. We can't."

Ginny smiled up at her, resigned, "Go on then. See you tomorrow."

Hermione made her way to the dungeons as unobtrusively as possible. When she entered his classroom there was no sign of him. Calling softly, she still got no response. As she walked through to his rooms, the door suddenly slammed and she spun round to find Severus standing tall behind her.

"God!" she exclaimed, hand on her heart. "You made me jump! I didn't think you were here."

"Why not? I told you I would be waiting for you." He was already removing her clothing. She reached up to his shirt to do the same.

"I know. It's just you normally wait in the classroom. Sorry I was so long. I was chatting to Ginny. It's good to see her again. I didn't tell her much about our trip but it was important to be able to reassure her that all is well. God, you were so happy at supper. McGonagall looked shell-shocked. I don't think she knew what had come over you. I bet everyone ..."

"Miss Granger," he said, removing her bra and letting it fall to the floor.

"Yes?" she looked down as his head descended to her breast.

"Shut up."

Anything you say, Professor. I am so enjoying your reviews and comments. Any more? LL x

Twenty-Nine

A tender and important chapter drawing one aspect of their lives to a close. (But not the end of the story.)

The ball is just around the corner, but this chapter draws to a close an era in both their lives. This chapter, particularly the ending, is very special to me. I hope you enjoy it.
X

Despite the Spartan surroundings she now found herself in, Hermione was just as happy to wake up in Severus' small single bed as she had been to wake up in the luxurious setting of the Edinburgh hotel. As long as she was with him, it did not matter where they were, and his private rooms had provided them with some of their happiest times.

They lay in the dark of the November morning, languidly caressing each other.

"So," he drawled, "two weeks 'till the end."

"Sounds about right. Apart from the fact that I would amend your final statement to 'the beginning', not 'the end'."

"Quite right." Smiling, he leant down for a kiss. "Do not forget to accept the position at the Ministry today. And I will hand in my resignation."

"I'll owl the Ministry after breakfast. But, Severus, there really is no great rush to you resigning, you know. It may be more sensible to put your house on the market first. You could market it in the Muggle world and the wizarding world; I'm sure it will appeal to both."

"You haven't seen my house," he drawled sardonically. "I do not wish to return here to teach after Christmas, but as I have not given half a term's notice I will probably have to, for at least part of next term anyway. I suppose there is no immediate need to inform Minerva of my decision."

Hermione suppressed a giggle.

"What?" he asked sharply.

"*Minerva*? I've never thought of her as *Minerva*. And I haven't heard you call her that either. You've shifted your perspective, Professor!"

"Don't tease me, Miss Granger."

"The last time I teased you, Professor Snape, I got the impression you rather enjoyed it."

She had already moved down the bed so that her head rested just above the tip of his ever-growing erection.

Her tongue flicked out, just about to touch the head, when she stopped and pulled back. "Actually, we mustn't be late for breakfast."

Immediately, his hand closed upon her hair and he plunged her down again, drawling, "On the other hand, one can always last until lunch if necessary."

With a brief smirk, she set about her task with relish, encouraged by the ever more satisfied groans of the man above her. With the expert skills of her tongue, lips and hands, he soon came hard into the back of her mouth, his hips rising up to thrust as fully into her as she would allow. Releasing him gently, she brought herself up and swallowed visibly before him. He had propped himself up on his elbows to gaze at her, but on seeing her do that, he fell back with a moan of complete satisfaction.

The taste of him, salty and pungent, was strong in her mouth for so early in the day, and Hermione derived a strange pleasure from knowing it would linger on her tongue throughout the morning, a constant reminder of him. With that knowledge in mind, she was able to get up, shower and rush off for a quick bite of breakfast. She had Potions that afternoon.

After breakfast, she wrote a formal letter on the best piece of parchment she could find, accepting the position at the Ministry. She summoned an owl and sent it straight away. Before class, she also perused the Daily Prophet for flats she could rent, most magically concealed, although she wondered whether a straightforward Muggle dwelling would be preferable. She circled a few possibilities with the intention of sending off for details.

Hermione was remarkably focused on her lessons. The looming exams suddenly made their presence felt and she applied herself in good Granger fashion to her work.

The morning passed easily and after lunch she found herself in the familiar position of walking to the dungeons. Her fellow students were, as usual, moaning about the truculent manner of the Potions Master. It was Ginny who piped up in his defence. "Well, whatever we think about him, he's a bloody good teacher. I know I'm not taking my NEWTs until the summer, but I think I'd have a pretty good chance of doing well in Potions even if I was taking them this term."

"Yeah, you're right," continued a Gryffindor boy. "No one said you had to be popular to be a good teacher. Anyway, I think he's softened up a bit recently. He must have brewed himself a happy potion. God, he even laughed out loud at supper last night. The whole hall practically choked on their stew!"

"Maybe he's got himself a woman. Even Snape must need a good shag from time to time!" laughed another.

Hermione caught Ginny's eye.

"Who'd shag him?!" guffawed another boy.

"Oh, I don't know," said a pretty Ravenclaw girl. "There's something about him, you know."

"You are kidding me!?" the boy replied in complete disbelief.

"No, I agree," chipped in another girl. "He's got such a sexy voice, and there's something about that cold, calculating dismissive arrogance which is definitely hot."

"Yeah ... I know what you mean ... God, I thought I was the only one who thought that! He's got a pretty fine body too. I can just imagine undoing all those buttons ..." More and more girls were now extolling the virtues of their Potions Master.

The boys looked horrified. There was nothing so intimidating to a male as a seemingly unattractive man who women found sexy. They fell silent. The girls continued to giggle; even Ginny joined in.

Hermione was walking ahead of them slightly, her eyes down, studying a parchment for the lesson. They called after her.

"What do you think, Mione? Professor Snape would you?"

Hermione's head remained down, but her footsteps slowed, and with a nonchalant glance back at them, she shrugged, "Not my type."

With that they had arrived at the classroom. She opened the door with a smile and walked in.

Hermione thought it wise to sit near the back and placed herself at a table in the most isolated spot she could find. She was amused but curiously disturbed by the girls' sudden declaration of their interest in her lover. It sometimes only took one person to give credence to an attraction, and the feeling spread rapidly through a group. It

certainly had not been the case that they had been lusting after him all year.

Still, she watched them carefully when he stepped out from his rooms. There was a predictable hubbub as the girls turned to each other and giggled. Snape had been looking across at Hermione, but on hearing the noise turned sharply to the rest of the class.

"My my ... we are in a good mood today. Let us hope it translates into better results than the muck I have been used to receiving from you."

Hermione smirked, keeping her head down. He delivered the introduction with his usual smooth aplomb and thereafter the class set about concocting their potions. Hermione found herself again able to concentrate much more ably than usual. She was so engrossed in her work that she soon raised her hand to ask a question. Her fervour for academic exactitude was so fierce that she forgot for a moment she was inquiring of her lover. Her head was down, peering at the list of ingredients.

"Professor Snape? Surely it would be more advisable under many circumstances to substitute beetle wings for caterpillar spines. I mean, certain species of caterpillar can produce disadvantageous side-effects, which can severely hamper the efficiency of the resulting ..." She at last looked up. He was standing right next to her, looking down with a strange mixture of annoyance and amusement.

"Oh!" She stopped, her face breaking into a smile. "Hello."

"You were saying ... *Miss Granger?*"

She could not stop smiling at him, but his face, like his voice, did not reflect her mirth.

"Nothing, sir. I just got a bit carried away, that's all. The caterpillars that you have provided for us are indeed the best we can use."

"Naturally."

"It's just, with my exams coming up ... my brain is working overtime."

He moved around her desk and rested one hand on it. Instantly, inevitably, Hermione's pulse quickened and her belly twisted. It was a delicious reminder of their earliest illicit moments together. *And still they went on.* Her skin was aflame with expectation.

Snape did not immediately move, simply leaned into her, his eyes staring at her face, which she resolutely refused to turn towards him. Then she felt it: long, agile fingers working their way under her skirt. He knew she was wearing no underwear; he had watched her intently as she dressed before him that morning.

Hermione sucked in a little gasp of anticipation. His fingers were at her pussy, dipping up into it then running leisurely around her clit. She squirmed in expectant delight, wriggling upon them.

He leaned into her further, his mouth a mere breath from her ear. "As I was saying, Miss Granger ... you really are an insufferable know-it-all."

"Yes, sir."

With that he moved his fingers and thrust two up her arse hard and fast. He anticipated her gasp, as at the same time his other hand came up to clamp down firmly on her mouth. "Shhh," he murmured low, his fingers pistoning with delicious certainty along her. "Will you be silent?" She nodded, eyes wide with pleased surprise.

He withdrew his hand from her mouth and moved it to hers, taking her fingers and guiding them over and into his robes. They were so voluminous as to hide a manifold of sins, none so much as now. Her breath hitched as she came up against his huge naked cock, released from his trousers.

His mouth was still at her ear. "My turn," came the next hiss, the fingers in her arse twisting, causing a pang of exquisite sensation. She bit down on her lip to prevent any sound escaping.

Her head instinctively darted round to look at him. His eyes flashed and he spoke low and urgent, "Miss Granger, the contents of your cauldron are most interesting, are they not? Kindly give them your full attention."

Hermione forced her head round to her pot of bubbling ingredients, while starting to move her hand up and down over the length of his rigid shaft. The skin was dry and she quickly released him to spit copiously onto her palm. She moved it swiftly back to rub immediately over the head and drew a soft moan from him which fell silently into the dense curls of her hair.

She pulled and twisted her hand over the flesh, thrilled by the hardness under her fingers. He soon gave up his own lubrication to her, as pre-cum started to ooze relentlessly from the tip. She gathered it up, then slid her hand hard down, then back up, over the head, then down again with a further firm twist.

He moaned into her hair again, his breath hot on her scalp, "Is there nothing you cannot do with utter brilliance?"

She smirked, but dared not take her eyes from the cauldron. She so wanted to be touched: her breasts, her clit were crying out for his touch. The fingers tight inside merely teased and coaxed her, sometimes pushed in so hard they sent a jolt of delicious pain through her primed body. She squirmed back onto them, so desperate for more, so desperate to come. She pulled on his cock hard. He groaned against her hair.

He knew exactly what he was doing. "Don't stop that, don't stop that, witch."

Hermione let out a sob of need. His hand returned violently to clamp hard on her mouth again.

"I said — you will be *silent*. I know what you want, witch, I know what you want. You will wait."

Hermione bit down on his palm, but rubbed with ever more skill over his turgid cock. He buried his head once more in the fragrance of her hair and came hard, moving his robes apart.

As his breathing settled, his fingers were withdrawn from her arse, and he stepped away, tucking himself in quickly. He glanced down at her dismissively. "You appear to have something on your skirt, Miss Granger. Please ensure you come to my lessons with clean uniform in future. Clean yourself at once. Five points from Gryffindor." With that, he turned and moved to the others.

Should she have been affronted? He had, after all, denied her an orgasm. But remembering all that had been said over the weekend, about control, about need, about love, she could only stare at his retreating form with adoration.

In due course, they tested their potions. Hermione's was, naturally, the most successful.

"Bravo, Miss Granger. Once again, you have denied anyone else the opportunity to exhibit their own skills. And all this despite not having beetle wings. Perhaps I am not such a fool as you think."

She merely grinned. He held her gaze a moment longer than needed, a smile playing around his mouth.

The bell rang. With a moment to spare, Hermione remembered to clean her skirt with a charm.

Ginny approached her. "God, he had it in for you today, didn't he? What was all that about? Lovers' tiff?"

"Far from it." She grinned at her friend. "See you later."

Ginny left her alone with her teacher. She knew better than to try to keep them apart.

Hermione picked up her books and crossed to his desk. Severus was sitting writing on a parchment, his hand moving fluidly over it, producing a sensual flowing script.

He glanced around the room, but avoided eye-contact with her, ensuring everyone had left. "And you were worried I would relinquish control to you?"

She did not comment on that.

"That was interesting."

"There are few opportunities like that left to us. I thought we should take advantage while we could."

She could not disagree. She watched him filling the parchment with exquisite cursive movements.

"You know I could come just watching you write?"

He continued to move his hand over the parchment, not looking up. "Would you like to put it to the test?"

"I'd rather you put me over your desk and fucked me."

With that he at last looked up, then almost immediately lowered his head again. She waited. He did not speak again and carried on writing.

She waited.

At last he finished and slowly and deliberately rolled up the parchment and replaced the quill in its holder. Then, carefully moving a few objects off his desk, as if merely tidying after a busy day, he at last stood.

With measured footsteps he walked to her and brought a hand up to push her hair off her shoulders, watching as it fell behind her. She was breathing so heavily she feared she would hyperventilate. His actions of before had ignited her need so much, her body now felt electrified, desperate for him to touch her, fill her, fuck her.

He did not look her in the eye, but his head descended to the part of her neck that he had just cleared of hair and he set about assaulting the tender flesh he found there with his mouth and teeth. Her insides writhed with the need which had been so cruelly teased and goaded.

At last, his hands came up to grab her waist. He moved her forcibly over towards his desk, backing her against it. She fell across it, knocking objects to the floor in the process. It was almost identical to their first coupling. The memory of that ignited her even more, and she started to grab frantically at his clothing. But he pushed her hands away with a grunt of displeasure and responded by ripping at her shirt instead, destroying it by tearing both sides down from the shoulders. Then he pulled her bra off, breaking the clasp at the back.

Hermione let out a loud triumphant laugh as her desire was at last addressed, as her body at last sensed the inevitability of its craving.

"Fuck yes, yes ... this is it ... what I want ... you bastard ... keeping me waiting like that ..*fuck me now* ... fuck me so hard I scream this place down."

Strong fingers pulled her skirt down and pushed her legs apart brutally.

With agile fingers he released himself quickly and burst out, swaying up to her. Hermione raised her head to gaze at it in rapt appreciation yet again. "I love it. I love your cock. I want it so much. Constantly. Come into me now. *Now!* I can't wait any longer. Don't make me wait." She was almost crying.

He pulled her forward towards him, drawing a surprised gasp of pain from her, then gripping her hips tightly, he thrust, so deep and so hard that she was forced back up the desk she had just been pulled down.

"Yes!" It had only been early morning when he had last been inside her, but Hermione's need was so great it felt like days. She pushed herself up, spurring him on in her desperation. "Move! Move, damn you. I want to feel you filling me, pounding me. Fuck! Don't stop, *don't you fucking stop.*"

He could hardly believe this was the same woman who had earlier been questioning his choice of ingredients so accurately and insightfully (although he would never have admitted it). The contrast in her speech and personality merely heightened his own pleasure inexorably. He plunged into her harder than ever, over and over. At last, he too could not maintain his silence. As he felt himself about to burst into her, his own groan of affirmation reached her ears. "Hermione! My love. I love you. I love you." His voice morphed into the deepest moans as he came hard up into her.

"I love you too. I love you too, you know I do." She grimaced with pleasure as his cock continued to plough into her again and again. "Oh god, I can feel you ... I can feel you coming into me ... *ohh ... god ...*" With that, her limbs disintegrated and she shook uncontrollably on the desk, causing more objects to tumble to the floor.

By the time their bodies finally came to rest, his desk was empty.

"God," she gasped between pants, "if it's going to be like that, maybe we shouldn't leave after all."

Severus chuckled a little amidst his own rasping breaths, before pulling out and adjusting his clothing. He turned away. "I can't see you tonight. I have a meeting which will run very late. It is out of the castle and I don't know when I will be back."

"Oh." A pang of disappointment shot through her. "OK." She tried to distract her mind by mending her clothing.

"Don't worry." Severus looked at her with mild amusement. "It is only Hogwarts business. In London. I just don't want you hanging around waiting for me."

"You know I would wait for you anywhere for as long as it took."

He moved back and kissed her. "I know. But please don't trouble yourself tonight. Besides, Filch is around later. I don't want him causing trouble for you."

"As you wish. You are, after all, the one in control." She grinned at him.

"Careful," he drawled, before his face darkened. "I'll miss you."

"Me too."

"However, I think we've just created enough memories to keep us going for one night."

She smiled. "Maybe just one."

"Come to me tomorrow night."

"I will always come to you," she grinned.

Severus smiled back and leant down to kiss her deeply again. Groaning into her mouth, he could not help but let his tongue flit delectably around her wet warmth. He pulled away with a grunt of despair. "Go now. I will never be able to let you leave me otherwise. You are too exquisite to part from. Go!"

She did so, reluctantly, but swiftly.

Hermione passed a lonely night. Her mind occasionally flickered with a niggling doubt had he really gone to London on Hogwarts business? But as she lay in the dark, she shook the thought from her head; she had no reason to doubt the veracity of his words.

Severus was at breakfast the next day and gave her a warm smile as she entered the hall. It stirred her heart so much she had to force herself to sit still and not propel herself up onto high table to embrace him.

Lessons were becoming increasingly intense as the exams approached, and Hermione found herself in small groups consisting only of those students sitting their NEWTs that term. The teachers worked them hard, and she was reminded of how much she loved academic rigour. She threw herself into her studies, confident that in the evenings she could retire to Severus' bed and his body, reenergising for the next day.

That Tuesday night, she had gone to him. He had been waiting for her in his classroom and rushed to her as soon as she turned the door handle. They were joined before they even got past the first row of desks.

The days began to tick away. Hermione was now focusing more and more on her studies, something that Severus respected and admired. She would often bring her books to the dungeons at night and sit at the desk in his small sitting room. He would remain with her, resting in the armchair opposite, reading quietly.

As she studied, Hermione would become completely absorbed in her work, but when she did glance up, would usually find him studying her with a look of complete delight. She would smile and return to her book. Occasionally, he would drift to her side and plant a kiss on her head, comment on something she was studying, normally only to offer a constructive suggestion or improvement, then sit again in quiet contentment. Despite so much energy being expended on her work, they still ensured that not an evening went by without them making love, always drawing deepest pleasure from each other.

Potions class was just as focused on exam preparation as other lessons, although Hermione made sure she always took a seat at the rear of the class. Her teacher always spent an extra long time studying her cauldron, standing particularly close to his pupil. Anyone passing by may well have detected odd little grunts and moans, but luckily, no one ever did.

After a week, Hermione received an owl back from the Ministry confirming her acceptance of the position and saying how delighted they were with her decision. They would see her for work at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement on the second of January. Hermione had also sent off for details of some flats and booked viewings for after the end of term, happy that Severus had agreed to come with her.

And so, two weeks after their trip to Edinburgh, it came to Friday afternoon, and Hermione slowly made her way to the dungeons for the last Potions lesson she would ever have. Despite the knowledge that she and Severus were about to embark on their proper life together, she felt a deep sadness as she entered his classroom for a lesson for the last time.

She was early, and he was not there. She took the time to wander around, looking carefully at all the jars, tubes and instruments on display.

Her mind suddenly and forcefully took her back: back to the first time she had sat in this room; the way she had stuck her hand so far in the air she thought she may dislocate her shoulder; the way she had been blatantly ignored by her teacher at every point. She smiled ruefully, thinking over all she had learnt: all the potions she had brewed, nearly all with great success. She thought also of all the put-downs, criticism and insults she had endured under him.

Hermione shut her eyes briefly. But it was not an image of intense potion brewing which danced behind her lids now. She saw them on his desk, his body pounding into hers for the first time. *How had they come to that in only a few months? Did it matter?*

Her eyes flickered open. He was standing beside his desk staring at her. His long, solemn face was set straight, but she could tell he was struggling to rein in his own emotions.

Hermione could only rush over to him. Immediately, he enveloped her in his arms and pulled her in for a brutal embrace, gripping her head and angling it to plunge his tongue hard into her as if searing her onto him. She responded equally, not wanting the moment to end. Tears tumbled uncontrollably down her cheeks. He kissed them away with tender sincerity. "It's alright. It's alright, my love, my heart ..."

A sob broke through her. "So much, Severus, so much here ... in this room ... I'm alright, I'm sorry, it's just ... so much has happened here. I would be sad anyway, but ..."

"I know ... I know ..." He kissed her again. "I feel it too. I don't know how I can teach this lesson."

But with that they heard voices outside and broke away rapidly, moving swiftly apart. The others entered, their normally ebullient pre-lesson tones already muted.

The students all sat and looked at him. They waited.

Professor Snape usually launched into an eloquent and word-perfect lecture the moment the last student was seated, but on this occasion he stood before his class completely silent.

He was staring at a point on the ground a little ahead of him, a slight frown on his face. No one spoke, unsure what to do. Still, they waited. His head came up a little and he met Hermione's eyes. She could do nothing for a moment, and they simply shared each other's desolation. But then, drawing on her deepest resolve, she turned up the corners of her mouth and smiled tenderly at him.

At last he spoke. "You are here for your final Potions lesson. I have nothing more to teach you. I have given you all you need to know in order to be more than successful in the exam. The rest is up to you. Whether you succeed or not will depend entirely on your own ability and perspicacity. I am happy to spend this lesson answering any questions or queries you may have."

At first, no one spoke; it was so rare for him to enter into any kind of dialogue with his students. His lessons had always consisted of him lecturing and them listening. They were astounded that he was willing to help them in such an unselfish and generous way.

Slowly, a hand went up, and a Ravenclaw boy inquired, almost timidly, "Professor Snape, could you please explain the differences occurring in the blood of different species of dragons, and which potions each should be used for."

"Of course, Zachary." Snape began an explanation. No one heard the first few sentences as they were all so shocked that he had addressed one of their number by his first name. Hermione smiled softly. *Would it have been so hard for him to have been like this a little more?*

By the end of the lesson, Snape was actually sitting on the front of his desk discoursing freely over various points which may occur on the exam. Someone dared make a joke about a silly sounding name of an ingredient and he laughed along with the rest of the class. It was such a strange sound in the classroom that the students almost lost a sense of the familiarity of their surroundings.

The end of the lesson came. Snape stood and set his face straight again. "That concludes your Potions tuition for your time at Hogwarts School. I hope you will take the knowledge imparted to you here and use it wisely and for the good of all. As for the exam, you have received the best instruction as is humanly possible. I wish you all every success. You are dismissed."

The students stood up to leave. They started to head out, but the Ravenclaw boy who had asked the first question turned back to their teacher and approached him. Snape glanced at him with confusion. The boy slowly raised his hand towards his professor. Snape looked down at the open palm as if wondering what it was, then slowly lifted his own hand and shook it firmly.

"Thank you, sir. Goodbye for now."

"Goodbye, Zachary," replied his teacher.

One by one, all the students came up to their Potions Master and shook his hand, thanking him for his teaching over the years. One by one, they left the classroom for the last time. All but one.

Hermione came up to him last. He could hardly look at her, but then moved his eyes to hers quickly. She could tell they were moist.

Hermione reached into her bag and brought something out. He looked down at it. She held it over. It was an apple.

"What is this?" he asked in bewilderment.

"An apple for the teacher. To say thank you."

He smiled and took the fruit. It was a verdant green with a slight ruby tinge on one side. Severus held it gently in his palm, rubbing the smooth skin with his fingers.

"Have some," she said.

Hermione watched him intently as he lifted the apple to his mouth and let his teeth bite into the crisp flesh. As he chewed, a smile flickered on her lips.

His eyes darted to hers. She was standing several feet apart from him, but it was suddenly as if she had moved in and embraced him. He could feel her arms around him, smell her delicious aroma; her hair tickled his face, her lips kissed his neck. He felt completely at peace and loved, as he was at their most tender and intimate moments. He inhaled in wonder and stared across at her. She had not moved. There was at least three feet between them.

"Just a little reminder of me, for the hopefully rare occasions when I cannot be with you."

"How ...?"

"I have enchanted it to contain a little of me. When you bite it, it will impart my spirit and a little of my physical presence to you. It will never decay or be finished. Look."

He glanced down at the fruit in his hand. The bite he had taken from it had vanished and it had resealed into a complete apple once again. He smiled in wonder.

"Thank you. It is perfect. You really are a very *very* clever witch."

"I have been well taught."

He smiled before turning away from her. Reaching under some papers on his desk, he brought out a small rectangular passage wrapped in brown paper. "I have something for you too."

"Severus ..." she began, but he was holding the object out insistently. She took it and opened the paper.

Inside was a small, battered book; a manuscript of some kind, clearly ancient. She opened it delicately. It contained copious writing, diagrams, lists, instructions, all in a small, meticulous hand; the hand of someone with a pin-sharp mind.

"What is it?"

"It is the notebook of Nicolas Flamel. Those are some of his original writings on his earliest discoveries and potions."

She could only gape, holding the object in front of her with awed reverence. "But ... how did you ...?"

"An old acquaintance of mine knew of its existence and managed to procure it for me. That is where I went the other day when I told you I had a meeting on Hogwarts business. In reality, I went to get this. I am sorry I had to lie about where I was going. I hope under the circumstances, you will forgive me."

"Forgive you!? Severus, it is ... more than I could ever have dreamed of. Thank you, my darling, thank you so much."

She rushed over and kissed him deeply.

"There will be many more gifts, but that is to say thank you for all you have given me in your time here."

They kissed again, not wanting the moment to end. "I don't want to go," she murmured into his black robes.

"No."

"Do you think I could just stay like this?"

"What? Standing in my classroom forever?"

"Yes."

He chuckled and lifted her chin so that she was looking at him. "Filch would eventually come and sweep you away. And besides, you have to get ready for this ball tomorrow. I want you to look exquisite, as I know you will."

"Only for you."

He smirked slightly. "Only for me."

The thought of the ball, and his words of encouragement, at last gave her the motivation to leave the room. With a final kiss, she tucked his gift safely in her bag and stepped back from him. Then, like all the other students, she extended her hand towards him. "Goodbye, Professor Snape. Thank you for all the extraordinary knowledge you have imparted to me so skilfully over the years. There will never be another teacher like you."

Severus Snape reached out and shook her hand. She smiled, removed her hand from his and headed for the door. Without a look back, Hermione Granger opened it and left her last ever Potions lesson.

She did not see her teacher slump in his chair, his face crumpling and his hands coming up to bury his head in them.

You have come so far, Severus. We will allow you your little moment of private emotion.

Thirty

Chapter 30 of 34

The ball, at last ...

Many apologies for the dreadful delay in updating. Life has simply been too hectic. Enjoy this one. x

The evening before the ball, after Hermione's last Potions lesson, she had known that they would be unable to be together. Severus and Professor McGonagall were entertaining the Minister for Magic and other notable guests who were arriving at Hogwarts for the celebrations. Afterwards, select members of staff, including him, were to walk the boundaries of the castle, ensuring security was at its tightest with whatever magic was necessary. The ball was to be a great event with many luminaries of the wizarding world in attendance. For several days now there had been a palpable buzz of excitement amongst the students and teachers alike. There had not been such a big celebration at the castle for as long as anyone could remember.

It was strange spending the night alone in her room in Gryffindor Tower. It was so rare that she was parted from him now that Hermione could not sleep for what seemed hours. Luckily, she did not have to get up early the next day, and was able to catch up on sleep in the morning.

She, Ginny and some others spent the early part of the afternoon charming the castle with elaborate decorations for the evening. They were in charge of the Gryffindor contribution, and by four o'clock much of the castle was festooned with red and gold streamers, flowers and banners. It looked magnificent and put the other houses' efforts to shame. Professor McGonagall, although she had relinquished the Headship of Gryffindor to Madam Hooch, still bore allegiance to her old house, and complimented them on their efforts with a genuine smile of gratitude and admiration.

After finishing the preparations, they all departed to get ready for the ball. Various dignitaries had been shown around the castle throughout the day, and the sense of anticipation mounted with each minute that passed.

Hermione had not seen Severus all day. The Slytherin decorations were subdued to say the least. The Slytherin pupils had clearly received little mentoring. Hermione could not prevent a small smirk escaping on seeing them; interior design was not her lover's forte.

The Gryffindor girls rushed back to their dorms to prepare. They had all been allowed to send for a dress from home. There was a rush on the bathrooms, but eventually all were able to prepare adequately. The number of charms they could use to beautify themselves for the evening had been limited, and Hermione noticed a ridiculous amount of Muggle make-up and perfume being thrown around.

She had managed to avoid Lawrence for most of the day, and in fact, had seen little of him since her trip to Edinburgh. She recalled Ginny's words: that he was biding his time until the ball. She sighed as she tamed her hair into lush, rich curls with the one charm she permitted herself to use for the evening. Lawrence had caught her just as she had disappeared into her room, saying that he would pick her up at seven o'clock.

The seventh years (and eighth years, Hermione thought ruefully) were to be allowed two glasses of wine each, or one of firewhisky. It was to be consumed with the meal, under the eye of the staff, and under no circumstances was there to be any other alcohol drunk anywhere else on the premises at any point. There were rumours of copious amount of booze having been smuggled in with concealment charms by the usual suspects, mostly Slytherins, but Hermione had seen little evidence of it.

Happy with her hair at last, Hermione walked to her wardrobe and opened the door. Her dress hung inside. She had treated herself to a trip to Harvey Nicholls in London, and spent some of the money she had earned from interviews on an exquisite designer gown. She knew it was extravagant, but she hardly ever spent anything on herself, and wanted to look her best for him. It was a deep red satin, shoulder-less gown, close fitting, clinging down to the ground, but with lacing behind which blended into a gathering of material at the small of her back, flowing behind her into a slight train. It was far more mature than any of the dresses she had seen on the other girls. She knew it would create an impact, but as long as Severus liked it, she didn't care what anyone else thought.

She applied a little more make-up than normal, especially around her eyes, placed her mother's necklace around her neck, and waited. It filled her with remorse to think that the first person to see her like this would be Lawrence Filmore. She desperately wanted Severus to come to her and cast his eyes upon her first.

At five to seven, there was a low but insistent knock on the door.

With a deep sigh, Hermione rose to answer it, trying to fix her face into a forced grin before opening the door.

Lawrence Filmore looked as if he would pass out when he laid eyes on her.

"Whoa! You look ..." He could not finish his sentence, merely exhaled in delighted amazement, his eyes unable to stop running up and down her body.

"What?" she forced him to continue tersely.

"Amazing."

"Thank you," she replied, remembering to smile. She must not be rude. It wasn't his fault he was the wrong person. "You look very fine yourself, Lawrence."

He did as well, she just couldn't care less. She felt slightly guilty that she was denying some horny eighteen-year-old girl a chance with him.

Lawrence stood nervously for a moment, running his fingers through his hair. *He will go prematurely bald if he carries on like that,* Hermione thought. She raised her eyebrows expectantly, as if to say, "Well, are we going then?"

With that he came to his senses and held his arm out for her. She took it with a private sigh and left her room.

They made their way to the Great Hall. They had been joined by Ginny, Harry and their other friends, and Hermione was grateful now to be in a big group where she could surreptitiously slip away from her partner more easily. By the time they reached the hall, she was several feet away from Lawrence.

The hall was buzzing with excitement and people. It had been enchanted with an extraordinary combination of a starry night and an additional canopy of snow-laden tree branches. On looking up, despite the lack of any clouds, there was a flutter of snow which kept tumbling down, tantalisingly close to their heads, but disappearing before reaching them, just like at the Yule Ball three years before. It was utterly beguiling. In addition, there were great garlands of fir branches, pine, holly, ivy and mistletoe. Tiny lights shimmered and sparkled amongst them and robins flew overhead, although Hermione noticed they disappeared in mid-air every so often; they were merely a charm

for the evening.

Despite not wanting to be with Lawrence, Hermione equally did not want to spend the evening engaging in small talk with the gathered elite of the wizarding world, and her determination stuttered as she noticed many look up at her as she entered the hall. She scanned the crowd for Severus, but could not yet see him anywhere. Her heart sank further. Before she could descend the steps completely she had already been stopped by two Aurors, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement (who was to be her new boss) and the curator of the National Magical Library. She glanced around for Harry, or even for Lawrence, hoping either of them might rescue her from forced smiles and chit chat, but they had both vanished. As the curator of the library further bored her into a semi-catatonic state, she let her eyes wander around the room and saw him.

Severus was standing about twenty feet away from her, in a small space of his own, staring at her with a look of complete wonder on his face. She locked eyes with him and knew she must be reflecting his expression. Never had she been so delighted to see anyone before. A moment later her face broke into such a broad grin, the sides of her mouth started to ache.

She could not remove her eyes from his, and neither could he. And then he moved. He walked towards her in his inimitable way, striding through the crowds. She gasped, surprised by his boldness, but equally thrilled that he would approach her in the midst of all these people.

He was soon there, next to her, tall, real, gazing down, his eyes alight with vitality. Hermione had not heard a word the librarian had said to her for the last minute.

"Professor Snape," she managed.

"Miss Granger," he began. There was a pause. Their eyes remained fixed on each other. "May I ... compliment you on the decorations Gryffindor have used to ... adorn the castle. They are most ... entrancing." His eyes ran over her body.

"Thank you, Professor. Uhh ... Do you know ... uhh ... sorry, I didn't catch your name?" She turned to where the curator had been standing. He had gone. A flicker of guilt passed through her and she turned to Severus with a look conveying it. A small smile flitted across his face.

"Thank Merlin for that," he drawled quietly.

She laughed and looked down. When she raised her head again, he was looking at her with the same expression as before.

"You look ... utterly captivating."

She blushed, but finally managed to take in what he was wearing too. His usual attire was flattering enough, but this outfit was subtly but effectively different. The deep black material was cut broad across the shoulders, before running smoothly down his flat torso towards his waist, around which hung a heavy sash. The full-length coat was adorned with the usual buttons, but descended all the way to the floor, similar to a clerical cassock, but without any of the pious superciliousness that such a garment may convey. The collar rose high and split into a sharp V just below his chin, under which Hermione could detect a hint of light white linen. He was unencumbered by any outer robes, allowing his tall form to be accentuated.

"So do you," she just managed to breathe out. "I mean ... really ..." She laughed a little at her inability to express herself coherently. He smiled.

"Are you alone?"

She glanced around. "I seem to be at the moment."

They stood awkwardly, simply staring at each other. All the things they wanted to say could not be said in the circumstances. As it was, they realised they should move away from each other soon, or they may arouse suspicion. Hermione continued to gaze at him. She wanted so desperately to reach out to him, run her fingers up his firm body, over his shoulders, round and down his back. A slight sob came from her, and her breathing grew ragged.

"I want to touch you," she whispered with quiet desperation.

Severus' face flinched but he said nothing. He could not stop himself. He took a step in towards her. They were a mere inch or so apart. He was so close that she could feel his breath on her hair, smell his unique aroma so intensely she thought she was tasting it. His chest rose and fell rapidly right before her eyes and she swayed a little, unable to think or behave rationally.

"Hermione! Severus!"

The booming voice of the Minister for Magic shot them out of their reverie. Hermione gasped in with shock and spun to see Kingsley Shacklebolt bearing down on them with a beaming smile of delight on his face.

He immediately came up and embraced Hermione in a bear hug, something which at that point she was most grateful for, as she had thought she would collapse otherwise. Kingsley turned and shook Severus' hand forcefully. The Potions Master gave a forced smile, but his eyes flashed with displeasure.

"What's this, Severus?" continued Shacklebolt. "Hasn't anyone told you you don't have to work tonight? Still giving your brightest student some last minute tuition, hey? Exams don't start till Tuesday, so I'm told. Come, Hermione, don't let our mad professor here bore you senseless tonight. Have some fun for a change!"

Hermione managed a watery smile. "I'm sure I will, Kingsley. How's life at the Ministry? I'm afraid you'll have to put up with me pestering you from January."

The Minister for Magic let out a loud bellowing laugh and placed a firm hand on her shoulder. "Excellent, my dear! I cannot wait to have you on board. Why you insisted on staying here and taking those damn exams is beyond me. We would have employed you even if you'd failed all your OWLs!"

She caught Severus' eye. He raised his brow to her with a look that said, 'I told you so.'

Shacklebolt continued. "And who are you with tonight, Hermione, my dear? I should imagine the boys were falling over themselves to accompany you. You look stunning, I must say. No one else even comes close. Doesn't she look exquisite, Severus?" He turned to Snape.

Snape did not answer initially then said simply, "Yes."

Shacklebolt looked at the professor with mild surprise for a moment, before turning back to Hermione. "Well, there you go, Hermione. If you can impress Severus, you can impress anyone. Who is your partner anyway?"

Hermione flushed and glanced down, "Err ... Lawrence Filmore."

With that, Lawrence came over. "There you are, 'Mione. I've been looking everywhere for you." He took a startled step back when he saw who his date was talking to. "Oh ... err ... hi ... Minister ... god ... it's really good to meet you ... I'm a huge ... err ... fan ... err ... hi ..." Hermione rolled her eyes. Introducing yourself as a 'huge fan' was hardly the way to greet the foremost politician in the wizarding world.

Shacklebolt merely smiled broadly and extended his hand. "And you must be Mr Filmore. Very pleased to meet you. You've done well to secure Miss Granger. Make sure you look after her tonight, won't you?"

"I will, Minister, don't worry, I will."

Shacklebolt laughed aloud again and slapped Lawrence on the back before moving off. "I bet you will! I bet you will, my boy!"

Severus Snape looked as if he was about to vomit.

Lawrence eventually realised there was another person standing with them. "Err ... hi Professor Snape ... err ... alright?"

If looks could kill.

The expression ran through Hermione's head as it so often did when witnessing her lover in a state of disdain.

"Yes, Mr Filmore, I happen to be very much ...*alright.*"

Lawrence waited for him to speak again. He did not. The younger man turned to his partner. "Right. Great. Come on then, 'Mione. You must be sick of talking to all these old farts, let's go and find the others." He made little if any effort to lower his voice for the last sentence.

With that he had grabbed Hermione round the waist, a gesture not lost on Severus who flinched, and yanked her away from their teacher. Hermione twisted her head to look longingly and apologetically back at him as she was pulled away. Severus stood fixed to the spot, staring after her. Her heart and body ached.

They were to eat before the dancing started. The tables suddenly appeared amongst them, dressed and decorated to perfection with great heaving platters of the finest foods. Hermione sat down between Harry and Lawrence and tried to focus on her meal. She had little appetite, despite the sumptuous feast before her, and kept glancing up at Severus, seated between McGonagall and Shacklebolt. He too seemed to be eating little.

She took the opportunity to catch up with Harry, who asked her quietly how things were going and how Severus was feeling about the evening.

"Things are ... amazing, Harry. He's really come a long way. He's OK about tonight. I just want to have a bit of fun, get dressed up, dance a bit, see you lot ... he understands that now ... it's all good." She smiled warmly at him.

He returned the smile. "That's great to hear. I must say, you look amazing, and I don't just mean the dress. It's you ... you're radiant."

Hermione's smile deepened. Just then Lawrence leaned over to her. "You alright, 'Mione? Can I top up your glass?"

She turned to him just as he was draining the last of his and refilling it. "Why not? Go on then, Lawrence." She was resigned. She might as well try to enjoy herself as much as possible. Lawrence was reaching across her, pouring into her glass. "I have to say, Mione. You look fu ... sorry ... bloody incredible ... absolutely bloody beautiful." He seemed to be slurring his words more than one glass of wine warranted. She glanced at him curiously.

"Thank you, Lawrence," she said cautiously, leaning away from him a little.

After the meal, the tables magically vanished as fast as they had initially appeared. A band appeared on the stage and everyone was encouraged to take their partners for the first dance. There were to be formal set dances to begin with, a tradition in the wizarding world, which enabled people to dance with as many others as possible.

Hermione started with Lawrence, but glanced around the vast hall to see if she could spot Severus. She eventually did. He was in a far corner of the room, engrossed in a conversation with the Chief Auror, blatantly ignoring anything that went on on the dance floor.

The dances moved swiftly on. Generally, they were progressive dances which meant nobody remained with the same partner for long. Hermione found herself dancing with students and teachers alike, and after three dances had partnered nearly all her professors. All except one.

Whenever Lawrence partnered her, she noticed his hand clamped as tightly round her waist as it was possible to be. On one occasion it moved down towards her bottom, but luckily at that point, the dance moved on and she was able to spin away from him.

They reached the last set dance, after this the band would resort to normal muggle pop music. Hermione sighed. Severus had missed his chance. Not that he had ever wanted one, it seemed. She tried not to feel angry with him, but she was deeply disappointed that he had not even blended into one of the more tasteful sequences.

She wanted to sit this one out. But just as she was about to turn away from the floor, she saw Madam Hooch striding over to him. The forceful flying instructor reached out her hand and practically dragged him onto his feet. They proceeded to have what seemed to be an argument, and Snape appeared to be winning, but at the last moment he looked up and caught Hermione's eye. She smiled across at him.

With a deep sigh, and an obvious roll of the eyes, Severus allowed Madam Hooch to push him onto the dance floor, not that she would be partnering him any more than the next woman, as this dance in particular required a lot of progression and rotation. Every man had to dance with every woman. At that point, Hermione could have kissed the Quidditch referee.

The music started. Hermione's partners came and went, holding and twirling her. They nearly all blushed and smiled as entrancingly as they could when they came to her. But she just wanted them to move on, desperate to partner one person alone.

At last, he was next. She looked across at him. He was hardly the most uninhibited dancer, but he could move and had a fair sense of rhythm. With a spin to her left, she found herself opposite him. The dance required them to adopt a traditional ballroom hold. Despite all the times their bodies had been so intimately joined, on this occasion when they could touch each other with no fear of reprisal, they seemed unsure how to do it. All the other couples were moving smoothly around. Severus had still not even taken hold of her.

To prevent them from being knocked over by the others, Hermione stepped into him and took his hand, bringing her other one up to his shoulder. He at last raised his eyes to hers and placed his hand on her waist. Even through the material on her dress, she could feel his strong palm and fingers searing her flesh. His grip tightened and he started to move.

He spun her round the floor remarkably elegantly. Hermione could not take her eyes from his. His seared into hers, almost drawing tears from her. She gripped his hand hard and the fingers on his shoulder dug in, as if she was clinging onto him for survival. As they moved, he pulled her in closer and closer to him, until she felt herself pressed against his entire length. Still, they moved smoothly round the floor.

His scent filled her head again, and combined with the movement of the dance, caused her to reel. He sensed her dizziness and pulled her in yet tighter to him with a slight grunt of his own need. As far as they were concerned, at that moment, they were the only people in the world.

She pressed against him and felt the familiar hardness against her hips. He ground it into her. She could not stop a moan rising. Luckily the music was loud enough to conceal it. Their heads were practically touching. Hermione had to keep reminding herself to breathe.

His mouth was at her ear, his hot breath moving her hairs, tickling her scalp. He spoke, low and desperate.

"I can smell you ... *I can smell your lust* .. I want you now ... *I have to have you now...* to taste you ... to be inside you ...*now* ..."

Hermione looked up at him, hardly able to focus. But she was soon knocked out of her haze by Madam Pomfrey tapping on her shoulder.

"Miss Granger! Wakey wakey. Change partners, dear! Goodness me, Severus! What a good job you don't teach dance!"

With that Hermione was practically pushed out of his arms and over to her last partner, a spotty Hufflepuff seventh year. She did not make eye-contact with the boy for the entire sequence. It ruined his evening.

The dance finished. Hermione could hardly stand. The room was spinning around her. She saw him standing just apart from her, his long black coat making him seem even taller and more vital than ever. She knew they had only one course of action available to them. She would go mad if they didn't follow it.

With a final look at him, she turned and practically ran from the hall. She knew he would be following her.

Hermione pushed past various people in her haste and turned into the corridors. She rushed down them, turning as many corners as possible. She heard sharp insistent footsteps behind her. The noises of the crowd faded, but she was still in the public areas of the castle, in a main corridor leading to the classrooms. It was unlikely that anyone would come this way tonight, but possible. She looked around desperately for somewhere to go. All the classrooms had been locked and charmed so no one could enter them that night.

Before she could think too much about it, black-clad arms had encircled her, and firm hot lips were assaulting the tender flesh on her neck. Her head fell back and she sobbed with need.

His hands were gripping her tightly round her waist, rubbing over the tightly encased body beneath the satin. He spun her around and pulled her as hard as he could to him. "So beautiful ... perfection ... you are exquisite perfection ..."

Hermione reached in to kiss him brutally, opening his mouth with hers. "Please ... please ... hurry ... can't wait ... please, Severus ..."

He gripped her hips and lifted her over to the ledge which ran along the edge of the corridor, placing her roughly on it. She lay back against the window frame, her lust allowing her no coherent thought whatsoever. She could only grunt and mewl in expectation. He threw her dress up over her hips and ripped her underwear from her. It only fuelled her further.

He did not hesitate in kneeling before her and plunging his tongue hard up into her immediately. She groaned into the chill air of the cold castle night, and pushed herself further into him, arching her back. He moaned his own need against her and the vibrations sent a tremor of pleasure shivering up her core. She laughed with delight.

His tongue now swirled around her clit, stroking, stoking, drawing it out to swell even more for him. She moaned loudly, her eyes closing and her head thrashing from side to side. He pushed his thumb hard up into her pussy while a finger worked its way into her arse. Hermione thrust down to meet his fingers, forcing him to rub them forcefully inside.

"Oh god," she groaned, her words echoing around the hard stone walls. Her hand was flung down instinctively to grip his hair tight and push him against her. The fingers inside her stroked and rubbed, as his mouth drew her clit into a state of ripe arousal. A moan rose from her, once again reverberating around them. He could only respond with a groan of his own, muffled against her wet depths.

"So good ... so close ... please finish it ... it's too much ... too good ..." Her body tensed, ready to fall. His tongue was so near, but not quite close enough to bring her to her end. She sobbed aloud as every muscle in her body cried out with near fulfilment. Then, just as she thought he would move to suck hard on it one final time, he brought his head up and moved back from her. A moan of despair rose from her, but she forced it to fade when he started to fumble at the buttons nearest his hips. He had so many that he resorted to a wandless spell, quickly muttering some words. All the buttons on the lower half of his coat were immediately undone, and his throbbing erection rose out of it suddenly and desperately.

The disappointment of his mouth being withdrawn immediately disappeared as she saw his cock seeking her out. She lay back again, spreading her legs wider, and laughed with abandon at what was before her. Severus positioned himself quickly, his own desire unable to be contained any longer. He rubbed the head of his cock along her soaking sex, teasing her clit again, causing her to cry out with thwarted anticipation. His hand came up round the back of her neck, digging his fingers into the tender flesh and pulling her up to stare deep into her eyes. His other hand was holding the considerable length of his cock, preparing to push inside her.

"Do you see? Do you see what you do to me, witch? You will take me. You will take all of me. Know that." And then he thrust so hard that her head was forced back against the window frame. She cried out with a combination of satisfaction, shock and pain, but her soul and body merely registered pleasure.

A deep throbbing groan was pulled from his being. Hermione brought her eyes sharply up to his, her mouth falling open in wonder. His face reflected her amazement. She pulsed around him and his features flinched. It was a reaction she often saw in him when displeased or annoyed, but on this occasion she knew it to be with sheer bliss.

He brought his hand up to her neck again, his fingers digging hard into her skin, and pulled her up towards him. She heard him exhale a slow, awed breath. His other hand gripped her hip and he lowered his gaze to their point of union, preparing to move again.

"Wait!" she exclaimed sharply, her voice insistent. "Wait. Just stay with me, stay in me ... for a moment ... just a moment, my love. I just want to feel you ... feel you ..."

His face tensed. She knew he was desperate to move, to feel friction. He continued to hold her up. Hermione looked down, pulling her dress up away from her hips as much as possible to gaze down at him buried inside her. "Yes ... there ... always there ... I want to see ..." She spoke almost reverentially and pushed against his chest, moving him back from her a little, so she could see the shaft withdrawing. Then she gripped the material and pulled him back, watching with fascination as it disappeared into her again. He groaned with the movement; he needed more.

His low voice snaked its way into her, desperate to the point of anger. "I have to move. Let me move now, witch. I have to feel you, see you. *have to make you come, give you my pleasure, all I have. Let me move!*"

Her eyes darted to his and she granted him his need. "Now! Do it!" she hissed, not taking her eyes from his. His hand still clasped her round the neck, holding her body upright. With a grunt of acceptance, he started to withdraw, then thrust hard into her again. He tried to hold her gaze, but she could tell he was finding it hard to focus. She could not remember him so hard inside her.

He moved brutally now, his own sounds of rapture unable to be contained. His groans came with the same low sonority he carried in his voice, causing Hermione even more pleasure. Her muscles, which had been so primed, so ready only minutes before, now found themselves tensed for release once again, even more coiled and expectant.

A sobbing cry rose from her as her mouth fell open helplessly again. He rubbed against her already ripe clit with each plunge in. Hermione's hands flailed, coming down to grip onto the black material of his coat desperately, trying to steady herself before tumbling from the precipice.

His face twisted in what looked like agony, and at that moment he held her head hard and turned it sharply towards him. "Speak to me! Tell me what you feel!"

Her eyes widened and she spoke, the words coming from deep inside her psyche. "*I feel you ... always you ... so hard, so real, you fill me like no other. I want no one else. I only want you, only want your cock ... filling me, pounding me, filling my cunt ... only you ... only you, my love ... come now, come for me, make me come, make me come ... I love you, I love you, I love you ...*"

With that, he pulled back. His features creased yet further, as if he would weep, and then he thrust fully back into her. Hermione's world disintegrated. Pleasure so extraordinary ripped its way through her body she thought she had been pulled away from her surroundings. A cry of pure sensation sounded in the air around her. It was only later that she realised it had been her own cry. Every fibre of her being pulsed around him.

She felt the man within her gripping her body hard in his attempt to steady himself. He was coming, coming so violently he thought his legs had melted beneath him. He gripped her yet harder so as not to collapse; he had not thought pleasure like it possible. His seed was torn from him over and over, shooting deep into her. Still the rapture coursed through him, reflected in the agony etched onto his face. However, never had he been so far from agony. He was touching perfection.

When at last their bodies came to rest, Hermione lay back along the ledge, her mind slowly reengaging with reality. Severus was leaning over her, his hands on either side of her body, gazing down. She managed a bleary smile.

Neither spoke a word. Nothing could be said. When he felt able, he slowly pulled out of her and tidied himself, allowing her to do the same. They cleansed themselves with a charm and Hermione ensured her hair and make-up were still intact.

She stood and started to walk away from him, back to the hall. As she passed, he caught her wrist. She turned. Severus pulled her into him, and spoke low, with aching sincerity. "I love you."

Hermione responded with a deep kiss before pulling away to rejoin the ball.

I don't think there's any doubt as to their feelings for each other.

The ball isn't over yet ...

Thirty-One

Chapter 31 of 34

The night is still young ... not necessarily a good thing ...

So ... an important one this ...

I have included a reference to one of Mr Rickman's other performances. You get housepoints for guessing what!

When Hermione returned to the Great Hall, Muggle pop music was filling the air and students had started to gather on the dance floor. She noticed a respectable number of teachers and guests still up dancing, but the majority of people were teenagers intent on enjoying one of the few occasions they were allowed to be exhibitionist in such a setting.

Her friends immediately came up to her, dragging her onto the floor. The girls seemed to have been abandoned by their partners for a while, not that Hermione was complaining. Wherever the boys had gone, Lawrence was with them, although Hermione noticed Harry had not joined them. He had managed to escape a conversation with a junior minister to dance with Ginny.

Glancing behind her, she saw Severus returning to the hall unobtrusively and retreating to a dark corner of the hall on his own. She gave him a secret smile which he returned, clearly relieved to discover Filmore's absence, and proceeded to sit, his arms folded before him, watching her discreetly. Hermione let the music guide her erotically charged body into an expression of ripe sexuality.

She closed her eyes and gave herself over to the sounds and rhythms which engulfed her, her mind consumed with the images and sensations she had experienced only minutes before. When she managed to drag her eyes open, she saw he had risen from his chair and was moving slowly around the room, arms still folded, unable to take his eyes off her. She was his. He knew it, as did she. She danced for him and herself. No one else mattered.

She longed for him to come over and hold her, let her move against him. But she knew it would not nor could happen. She contented herself with providing him with his own show of delicious eroticism, delighting in the secret little perversion of it.

She was dancing with a group of girls, including her more outspoken friend, Rose. The boys were nowhere to be seen. Hermione momentarily wondered where they had disappeared to, but felt great relief. She was with her friends, being watched by her lover, doing something she adored, having just had some of the best sex of her life. It didn't get much better.

After a few dances, the group went and sat in the chairs on the side, watching the others. They laughed with hot exhaustion, the small amount of alcohol they had consumed earlier helping to float them into a heightened state of euphoria. Amidst gossip and giggles, Hermione still managed to keep her eyes trained on him. As he did on her.

Snape continued to walk slowly around the room, moving towards her and her friends. Hermione felt a curious buzz of nervous elation beyond what she would expect. How they had managed to retain the sexual tension between them for so long staggered her. She supposed it was due simply to the continued illicit nature of their relationship. Would he dare approach them? Speak to them? She wasn't sure if she wanted him to or not. As her mind vied to find the more acceptable option, Rose said loudly, "Bloody hell, he is looking so damn sexy tonight!"

"Who?" Ginny turned to her, bewildered, looking around for an attractive sixth or seventh year.

"Our delicious Potions Master of course."

A shiver ran rapidly over Hermione's skin. She wasn't entirely sure whether it was with excitement or dread.

Ginny giggled a little to hide her nerves and shot Hermione a glance. Hermione kept her head down. "Do you want to go and dance again?" she asked as brightly as she could, trying to change the subject.

"God, not right now. He's heading this way. Watch this, girls!"

Severus was walking slowly and deliberately past them, his mask of arrogant disdain hiding his constant appraisal of Hermione. Rose suddenly leant back in her chair, blocking his path. He stopped and glanced down at her with clear annoyance.

"Hello, Professor! Enjoying yourself?" She sounded brightly flirtatious. Hermione started to feel nauseous. Although she knew there was no way he would respond to the girl, she still felt what she knew to be a stirring of jealousy. It was not an emotion she had thought she would ever encounter in their relationship. Now she knew how he had felt about Lawrence.

Snape's features tensed and his whole body grew rigid. A familiar sneer passed across his face before he drawled, "Some moments have been better than others."

Rose continued. "Not dancing, sir?"

"Apparently not." The words were spoken with their usual dripping sarcasm.

"Oh, I think you should give it a go. You might enjoy it." She stood up, smiling flirtatiously at him. "I can just see you doing a tango, sir. If you need a partner, I'm more than happy to oblige." Rose finished by biting her lip, lowering her eyes to his chest and running a finger down half the buttons on his torso. Then she spun around and sat down again, a broad mischievous grin on her face.

Hermione had to sit on her hands to stop herself punching her friend.

Snape visibly flinched and glanced briefly at Hermione; she could not look at him. With a sharply inhaled breath, he drew himself up and spoke once again, his voice so low as to be barely audible. "I can assure you that shall not be necessary, Miss Hughes. Good evening, ladies." With a slight bow, he moved off.

Rose leaned back in her chair one more time to watch his retreating form. She sighed, "Oh dear god above. So many buttons ... so little time ..."

Hermione turned to glare at her and stood up. "Excuse me! I'm going to the bathroom." With that she stormed off.

Just as she was heading out, a strong hand encircled her wrist and pulled her into a dark corner.

"What was all that about?!" Severus hissed to her.

"Don't bloody ask me! Half the girls in the year have all of a sudden got it into their heads they fancy the pants off you! It's nothing to do with me, I can assure you!"

He released his grip on her wrist, and even in the dim light she could detect his features softening to the extent that he may even have been smiling. It did nothing to ease her discomfort.

"I had no idea I was so in demand." His deep tones had a hint of sardonic self-satisfaction carried in them.

Hermione crossed her arms and humphed. "Yeah well ... Just assure me that if you do ever dance a tango, it will only be with me."

He was smirking, although she refused to look at him. "Miss Granger," he drawled, "I do believe there is a touch of the green-eyed monster about you."

She humphed again. He put a finger under her chin and lifted it towards him. "Hermione."

She pulled away. "Don't. Someone might see."

"*Hermione*," he continued. "Now I know how you felt about my petulant little display of emotion regarding Mr ..*Filmore*. The charms of Miss Hughes, if indeed there are any, are utterly wasted on me. I do not need to tell you that. You consume me entirely."

She at last smiled up at him. "I know. It's stupid, I'm sorry. She just annoys me. She's such a stupid idiot sometimes. It just reminds me how little I have in common with these people now." She glanced around. Nobody seemed to be able to see them in the darkness of their little corner. "Did you use a concealment charm?"

"I might have done." His low tones seeped into her, inflaming her lust once again. His head had descended to her neck and he was planting hot, sensual kisses along her tingling skin. She moaned out, holding him there.

"I sincerely hope you have, Professor." His head rose to hers and they met in an open, hungry kiss. When at last they parted, she moved her mouth to his ear and whispered as sensuously and flirtatiously as she could, "I wish I could consume you entirely - *right this - instant*."

He smiled languidly and bent to kiss her neck again. "All in good time, Miss Granger." His words may have given the impression of cool patience, but the hardness she could feel pressing against her hips told another story.

Hermione moaned again, but as his head descended to caress and kiss her supple breasts as they rose out of the red satin of her dress, her mind tuned in enough to listen to the music. She pulled her head up.

"Oh god! I love this song! I want to go and dance." She moved back from him, then glanced up. "Is that alright?"

He smiled down at her. "If you dance the way you were dancing before... it is imperative."

She laughed, reached up for a kiss, and rushed off to join her friends on the dance floor. Her good humour had returned with a vengeance, and she was even able to laugh as she recalled the way Rose had flirted with her lover earlier. In fact, it suddenly made her realise how proud she was of him and their relationship. As she danced, her hips undulating sensuously, her arms raised in idle abandon above her, aware of his eyes focused on her from a distance, she was euphoric.

The girls stayed on the dance floor for several songs. As Hermione danced to one, her eyes closed as the music washed through her, she felt firm arms reach around her waist and clasp her tight. For a moment, in her semi-delirious state, she thought it was Severus, and ran her hands over the well-toned arms that held her. They felt different. Her eyes darted open and she spun around. There standing behind her, a grin on his face, was Lawrence Filmore.

She flushed with embarrassment and immediately looked round to see if Severus had noticed. Luckily, at that moment, he seemed to be deep in conversation with a Ministry official. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. She shot Lawrence a glare, which he did not register, and turned to dance facing him, keeping a significant distance and not looking at him once.

At several points he tried to move into her, grabbing her waist and pulling her towards him. She was able to escape his clutches each time. However, every time he came close, she smelt the unmistakable stench of strong alcohol, far more than the two glasses of wine allowed at dinner. She looked up at him. He was dancing very badly, in that peculiar abandoned style drunk teenage boys have, all flailing limbs and vacant eyes. It turned her stomach.

Still, he kept moving towards her, his hands all over her body. She glared at him again, trying to shout a warning to him over the music. It made no difference. After several minutes of trying to fend him off, she stormed out. He followed, swerving unevenly after her.

Snape had been manoeuvred into a position during his conversation whereby he could not see the dance floor. He did not notice Hermione leaving.

She headed for the girls' bathroom, but Lawrence caught up with her and grabbed her arm before she could reach it. There were several couples engaged in various degrees of snogging around them.

"Hermione! Wassa matter?"

She turned to glare at him. "I think it's entirely obvious what the matter is, Lawrence. You're completely drunk! How on earth did you get like this?! Where did you get the drink from?"

"Oh - don't worry about that. A load of the Quidditch boys managed to get some in a few days ago. We've been in Radford's room. Fucking great! Just wish you'd been there."

His speech was so slurred, she could hardly distinguish his words.

"Tom Radford!? That moron?! He's in Slytherin. I didn't think you even knew him. And how did you get into his room anyway?"

"Dunno... everyone's at the ball... no one gives a shit about the Slytherin dungeons. Certainly not bloody Snape! He's been nowhere near the place!"

Hermione felt a twinge of guilt pass through her. Lawrence once again moved into her.

"Mione ... I mean ... you really ... I really ... fuckin' hell, 'Mione ... the things you do to me ... come 'ere ..."

He lunged for her. She managed to pull back again. She tried hard not to be judgmental and knew what boys could be like when drunk. She was under no illusions as to the potential for any student to overdo it at times. But the surfeit of alcohol seemed to be bringing out a side to Lawrence she had not seen before. It was repulsing her.

"Lawrence! Remember what I said about going to the ball. Just as friends. Strictly. Please keep your hands off me. I am sorry, but I am just not interested in you in that way."

His whole body sagged. "Oh bloody hell, Mione. Just a little snog. Go on. Please."

She opened her mouth in horror. "No way! Lawrence, go back to the ball and sober up a bit, if that's possible."

"What's wrong with you? What is it? Don't you fancy blokes any more, is that it? Is Ginny more your type?"

Hermione nearly punched him. But as she looked at him swaying before her, trying desperately to focus on her face, she just felt pity for him. She sighed deeply.

"Lawrence. You are saying things that, if you remember them tomorrow, you will severely regret. Listen to me. Go back and find your friends. I think you should probably go to bed."

"No no no no no ... you've got to dance with me once, babe. I haven't had a single slow dance with you yet."

She sighed again, her eyes raised to the ceiling. She was his partner after all. "Alright. Just one slow dance, and then promise me you'll go to bed. I'll check someone's there to make sure you're alright."

"Yeah, sure, babe, anything you say." He was grinning stupidly at her.

She headed for the bathroom, then stopped and turned back. "And Lawrence," she spoke sharply. "Don't call me babe."

When she returned to the hall, she rejoined her friends. Lawrence came up, but kept his distance for the next couple of dances. Her eyes immediately found Severus again. He was alone, standing slightly apart from some other teachers. Their eyes met. She obviously looked a little distressed as he raised his brows inquiringly to her. She managed a watery smile, trying not to betray too much.

The music changed; the beat slowed and couples started to form around her. She sighed, wondering if she could sneak off. But before the first bar had finished, Lawrence had caught her and pulled her into him. She noticed his muscular frame and strong arms immediately. But whereas before it might have ignited her desire, now it merely turned her off further. His shirt was damp with sweat, and the alcohol on his breath had started to turn rancid. She placed her hands on his shoulders, as platonically and formally as she could, but his strength overwhelmed her and she found herself being pulled in against him over and over. Eventually, she gave in, and moved her feet regimentally, praying for the song to end.

As they turned on the spot, she dared to glance up and met Severus' eyes. She gazed apologetically and almost shamefully at him. His face was fixed tight. His arms were folded across his chest and she could tell it was rising and falling more rapidly than normal. But he remained still and outwardly calm. It provided her with some relief. One dance. That was all.

The music continued. Lawrence's hands were around her waist, and she felt a tightening of his fingers. He moved his head down to hers and his mouth reached her ear. She grimaced as his lips brushed against it. "Fucking hell, Mione. Can you feel me? Fucking hell, I'm gonna come right here if I'm not careful." With that he ground himself into her. Hermione squirmed back, heaving with disgust, but immediately his hand was clamped firmly on her backside, pushing her into his erection even more. She struggled to escape as nausea welled up in her. But he was too strong and held her close into him, groaning loudly into her ear. It was clear her protestations were simply turning him on even more.

She reached sharply around and gripped his wrists, trying to pull them off her. She could not.

"Lawrence! Stop it! Take your hands off me."

"Come on, babe. You know it feels good. You're so far up your own fucking arse, woman. You need a bloody good, hard fuck." His hand was squeezing the flesh of her backside hard as he continued to press against her.

Hermione saw red but was unable to do anything. She looked around desperately for Severus, but she had become disoriented and could not see him. "Lawrence. You bastard. Stop it. For god's sake, let me go."

Her words were merely inflaming him more. His head had descended to her neck and she felt not only his mouth but his teeth on her flesh. She wished she had her wand. Then his other hand came up and gripped her breast, his fingers digging in so hard she cried out with pain.

Suddenly, he was pulled back from her. She reeled and took a desperate step forward to steady herself, unsure what had happened. Then she heard a voice, a voice so familiar and welcome she nearly wept.

"I suggest you step away this instant, Mr Filmore. I do not believe Miss Granger appreciates your attentions."

Lawrence spun around to see the tall form of Severus Snape looming next to him. His face twisted in disbelief and he snarled at his teacher, "I suggest you mind your own fucking business ... *sir*." He turned immediately back to Hermione.

Snape's hand was once again at his shoulder, pulling him around to him. "Mr Filmore. Using inappropriate language to a member of staff is a major disciplinary offence. But at this precise moment, it is Miss Granger's welfare that concerns me the most. Move away from her now."

Lawrence was riled. He stepped up to Snape, his features twisting with the arrogant anger of youth. "What's it to you?! Look around you .*Professor* ... half the bloody school's at it. Look at Whitmore and Lucy he's practically got his dick in her already!"

Snape did not flinch, but continued to stare at Lawrence. "Miss Granger was not enjoying your ...*efforts*."

"How the fuck do you know!? And what the hell do you care? Go and pick on someone else." He turned away one more time towards Hermione, reaching for her hips. Snape grabbed his arm forcefully and pulled him hard around to him again.

"Get your fucking hands off me, will you!?" Lawrence exclaimed, twisting his arm out of Snape's grip. He stared at his teacher with angry confusion. "What's your fucking problem!?"

Snape was breathing heavily, his body tense, eyes fixed like daggers on Filmore.

A sudden light of realisation dawned across the younger man's face. He smiled a little to himself, not taking his eyes from Snape's, and started to nod slowly. "You're jealous. You're fucking jealous. Aren't you?"

The corner of Snape's mouth twitched, but he did not move. Hermione stood stock still, unsure what to do or say.

Lawrence moved up to his teacher and whispered in his ear, deliberately taunting. "You want her, don't you, old man? You want her hot tight pussy as much as I do. Can't say I blame you. But you know what? You can't have her."

Snape eyes narrowed briefly and he leant in close to Filmore, almost intimately, and whispered softly and smoothly, for the ears of the younger man only, "Ahh, but you see, Mr Filmore, as is so often the case with you ... *that* ... is where you are ... *wrong*."

Lawrence leaned away, his face twisting in confusion. He clearly did not understand Snape's meaning and continued unabated, his voice hot and low with spite, stepping up to stand only an inch away from his teacher. "Think she'd want a slimy old tosser like you? In your fucking dreams ... *sir*. Tell you what, I'll write you an essay. 2000 words. How about it? After I've shagged her hot, sweet young body into oblivion tonight, I'll write it all down for you and put it on your desk the next day *'For the attention of Professor S Snape. Title: What it's like to be in the cunt of Miss Hermione Granger.'*"

Before Filmore had finished the last syllable, Snape's wand was out and at his throat. Every muscle in the older man's body was tense and he seemed taller than ever, even next to Filmore. His black eyes were wide and alight and a vein pulsed in his temple. Hermione had not heard what the boy had said, but could feel the venom pouring out of her lover towards him. She felt powerless to stop him. Immediately, the people around them stopped dancing and fell back, staring with curious awe at the scene before them. The song ended. None followed. There was silence. Snape was a mere breath away from cursing one of his students before the assembled students and wizards in the Great Hall.

Filmore's hands rose up above his shoulders and he swallowed hard, not taking his eyes from the wand still pressed tightly to his throat.

"Whoa ... OK ... OK ... just put that thing down will you ... I'm sorry ... I'm sorry ..." His face crumpled and he looked as if he was about to cry.

Keeping his wand pressed firmly to the throat of the whimpering boy before him, Severus stepped in close to him again and spoke, low and dangerous. "You are the worst scum I have ever had the displeasure of coming across during my time at this school, and, as your ignorance may or may not permit you to know, that is quite an accomplishment. Consider your time at Hogwarts School terminated forthwith and indeed your future career, such as it would have been, at an end before it has begun. You will never converse, approach or even look at Miss Granger again for as long as you live, and if you do, I can assure you that I will finish the job I so desire to complete tonight."

Hermione, Severus and Filmore were alone in a circle of people which had formed around them. The entire hall was watching and waiting.

Severus started slowly to lower his wand, and as it moved away from his throat, Filmore's face changed instantly from horror to malice. "Go fuck yourself, you bastard."

The wand was immediately replaced at his throat and Snape's arm tensed. His mouth opened.

But just then a hand came up and rested on his arm, gently squeezing reassuring fingers around it.

"*Severus.*"

Hermione whispered his name softly, but it was heard by the first rows of people surrounding them. Snape turned blearily to face her, almost surprised to find her there and looked at her with a mixture of bewilderment and adoration.

Still he did not lower his arm. Her other hand rose up and touched his face, smoothing her thumb gently over his cheekbone.

The hand which was still resting on his arm now gently pulled it down, and Hermione felt the muscles slacken as she did so. He turned his body to her, breathing heavily, and she remained before him, simply gazing up.

Then, with exhausted defeat, Severus Snape leaned forward and slowly brought his forehead to rest on that of Hermione Granger. She in turn lifted both her hands and cupped his face tenderly. They hardly noticed the audible gasp travel around the assembled students, staff and guests. Lawrence Filmore staggered back in horror and incredulity.

The hall fell silent again, no one moved: all were staring at the figures of the Potions Master and the school's brightest student locked together in the middle of them.

But then from across the room came sharp footsteps, cracking through the air.

Minerva McGonagall strode into the circle, a look of complete shock taking hold of her at what she found.

"What in the name of Merlin is going on here!?"

Nobody said a word. Severus and Hermione slowly moved apart and turned to face the Headmistress.

McGonagall looked from one to the other, her mouth hanging open in disbelief. Then she fixed her face into her usual expression of tight disapproval and spoke.

"Mr Filmore. You will wait in Madam Hooch's office. I will deal with you imminently. Miss Granger. Professor Snape. My office. Now."

With that she strode out of the circle. Hermione and Severus did not hesitate to follow. The crowds parted with hushed murmurings to let them pass. Hermione briefly noticed Harry and Ginny's anxious faces as they left.

McGonagall strode ahead of them through the castle, quickly reaching the foot of the staircase that led to her office.

They had not looked at each other as they had followed her through the dark silent corridors, but as McGonagall disappeared up the spiral staircase above them, they instinctively reached out their hands at the same time and entwined fingers. Then, with a final look into each other's eyes, they ascended the staircase to the Headmistress's study.

Oh dear ...

LL

x

Thirty-Two

Chapter 32 of 34

Time to face the music ... but remember, McGonagall is a woman of experience, and this is a story of humanity and love, not a story of scandal.

Again, apologies for the delay in posting and responding to reviews. Christmas etc intervened.

I find this a touching chapter, and I enjoyed writing for McGonagall. As I say in the summary, this is a love story, not a story about scandal ... these two should be allowed to begin a happy future together, don't you think ... let us see ...

Hermione and Severus sat in front of McGonagall.

The Headmistress of Hogwarts initially said nothing, and sat with her hands clasped in front of her on the desk, looking down at her fingers.

Hermione felt like a Second Year again.

Severus' face flinched imperceptibly.

They dared not even glance at each other.

For what seemed like an age, they sat in silence, save for the ticking of several clocks.

At last McGonagall looked up, her eyes moving from one to the other. Her voice broke the silence, causing a jolt to Hermione's core.

"How long has this been going on?"

She was insistent and terse, but she remained calm. It was almost as if she was inquiring about some stolen potion ingredients.

Hermione shifted uncomfortably and at last looked at Severus, unsure if she should answer or not. He stared straight ahead. She opened her mouth to speak, but just as she was about to, his words cut across hers.

"Since October."

McGonagall's face flickered a little. There was a further silence. She seemed almost unsure what to say. Then the Headmistress shook her head and looked sharply at them both.

"I hardly need to tell either of you that relationships between teachers and students are forbidden. If I was to follow the law of the school as it stands it would result in instant dismissal for the teacher and expulsion for the student."

More silence. McGonagall tensed further. She turned sharply to her Potions Master. "Severus?"

He at last met her eyes and spoke, clear and distinct. "I do not regard Miss Granger as a student."

The Headmistress sighed. "I accept that you have moved beyond the bounds of what I would regard as being a student, Miss Granger. I myself encouraged you to dress in your own clothes, invited you to sit with the staff at high table. Indeed, after all you have been through, it is impossible for me to ascribe the term 'student' to you. But you rejected my offers, Hermione. It was your decision to retain your uniform and consort entirely with the other pupils. As such, in their eyes, you are one of them. And therefore, this ... situation ... puts me in a very awkward position. They will regard this as a student-teacher relationship. How can I let that pass?"

Hermione, for once, could not think of anything to say.

McGonagall sighed again before turning to Snape.

"And you, Severus. Do you not see the ethical and moral problems here? You were in a position of responsibility over this girl."

"Excuse me, Professor McGonagall." Hermione's voice rang through the air, suddenly and forcefully. "I am no longer a girl. I stopped being a girl when I witnessed the death of my best friend's godfather, when I spent time living rough, evading capture, seeking light in constant darkness, when I was tortured to within an inch of my life by Bellatrix Lestrange at Malfoy Manor. Clearly Severus understands that, even if you do not."

They both turned to look at her with clear surprise at her sudden declamation. McGonagall at first bristled, but as Hermione's words sank in, her face relaxed and she lowered her head.

"I am sorry, Hermione. You must understand that, as Headmistress, I am concerned for the welfare of all in my charge. I have to ask you ..." she shifted uncomfortably, before looking her in the eye, "did Severus ... initiate this ... did he set out to seduce you?"

Hermione felt Snape drawing himself up in his chair next to her. "No! No, not at all. Of course not." Her mind rapidly replayed the start of their relationship. She had to admit that the first time they had had intercourse was not a moment she wished to impart to her headmistress, but she knew full well that as far as seduction was concerned, it was she who had made her feelings abundantly clear from early on. If anything, she had seduced him. "Please, Professor, Severus would not have done anything if it had not been for me. I wanted this. I ... needed this."

McGonagall looked at her attentively and with concerned respect. She lowered her head, mumbling, "Of course," then raised it to Severus, who was looking most aggrieved. "I am sorry, Severus. I was not suggesting any coercion on your part. I merely had to ask, you understand." She shook her head with a sigh. "What a fool I have been, not to have seen it. I dimly recall an incident in the corridors a while back involving you two. And you have been so ... *happy* of late, Severus ..." She looked thoughtful for a moment. Hermione and Severus glanced at each other.

Silence descended over them again. It was clear McGonagall was unsure how to proceed. It was Snape's voice that sounded next.

"You shall have my resignation in the morning."

McGonagall darted her head up to his. "Severus ..."

"I was preparing to hand it in anyway. This has necessitated me doing it earlier than expected, that is all."

She looked down, pausing before continuing solemnly, "I cannot imagine Hogwarts without you, Severus. It will be a sad day when you leave, but ..." she sighed deeply, "I think that, under the circumstances, your resignation may be the best course of action to take. I do not wish to dismiss you, Severus. If that is what you wish, then I have to say, it will make things much easier for us all. And ... far be it from me to put ideas into your head, but you may find that when you date your resignation letter, you mistakenly put the wrong date on, that of one or two days before the ball ..." She looked at him over her spectacles, a slight twinkle in her eye. If they could announce that he had resigned before his relationship became public, it would temper some of the scandal which was sure to engulf the school.

"Hermione must be allowed to sit her NEWTs and she must not be expelled. That would be ludicrous." Severus spoke abruptly and forcefully.

"Of course. I will need to examine fully all that has happened here. But, I must tell you, I have only a minor influence in the outcome. The governors will make the final decisions. Hermione, I will endeavour to portray you as something beyond a student to the governing body, as indeed you are. You have only a week left of school and the exams are public wizarding exams, anyone can take them. It is not up to the school to decide whether you can take them or not. There is no question that you shall sit them, and if I have anything to do with it, no question that you will not be expelled from Hogwarts. You have been such an extraordinary student, I want you to leave with your reputation intact."

Hermione managed a small smile at the Head. "You know as well as I that I have courted controversy throughout my time at Hogwarts. Why not end in the same way?"

McGonagall smiled slightly, then sighed and removed her spectacles, rubbing her eyes. "Unfortunately, the matter of your little ... liaison ... is only half the story of the evening. If anything, the far more serious and immediate issue is the matter of your wand raised to the throat of a student, Severus."

"You have my resignation, what more do you want?"

"Unfortunately, the governors may decide to hand out more of a punishment." She sighed, her features registering regretful displeasure. "Severus ... did you have to do it in front of the entire student body, staff and some of the most eminent wizards in our land?"

Severus remained remarkably cool. "The boy was vile. I only regret not following through with what I had in mind."

"And what did you have in mind?" McGonagall was clearly curious.

Snape raised an eyebrow to her and opened his mouth to speak. She shook her head quickly, holding up her hand. "Never mind." After another sigh, she continued. "But Severus, what warranted your anger and reaction?"

"Filmore was behaving with gross indecency, bordering on assault, to Hermione. I tried to stop him, at which point he proceeded to insult both Hermione and myself in the crudest terms. It was clear that he had consumed considerable amounts of alcohol. He has grossly violated several school rules and should be expelled immediately."

"Mr Filmore's behaviour will be the subject of careful scrutiny, I can assure you. If that is the course of action that needs to be taken, then of course it will be. I would like both of you to write and sign a statement detailing your version of what took place this evening." She sighed again and brought a hand up to rub her eyes wearily before glancing up at Dumbledore's portrait. He seemed to be sleeping peacefully, apparently oblivious to everything that was going on. "Dear oh dear. Sometimes I do wish my illustrious predecessor was here to sort these matters out."

"I was your illustrious predecessor," Snape hissed tersely.

McGonagall looked startled and dropped her head, "Yes, yes, of course, Severus ... slip of the tongue. But you know better than anyone that we never use our wands to enforce discipline in this school."

"Alastor Moody did to Draco Malfoy in Fourth Year!" Hermione suddenly piped up. "He turned him into a ferret. He wasn't punished for that. Severus didn't even say a word."

"Hermione. The incident to which you refer was in fact dealt with most seriously. You may have been a privileged recipient of much of the inside information of what goes on in this school, but may I tell you, there was, and is, an awful lot that goes on which you do not know about." Hermione hung her head shamefully. "In any case, that wasn't strictly Professor Moody - it was Barty Crouch Jr. May I reiterate our staff do not raise their wands in anger to students." Her gaze turned coldly to Severus who looked at her with a haughty lack of concern.

"The action was merited under the circumstances, I can assure you."

"It sounds as if there were mitigating circumstances, I concur, but I still have to instigate the disciplinary procedure, you know that. As you are resigning, any punishment will most likely entail a loss of earnings or in the worst case ..."

Severus face tensed. "Go on."

McGonagall breathed deeply. "If the governing body conclude that you have brought the school into disrepute, they have the power to strip you of your wand for a time."

"But that's ridiculous!" exclaimed Hermione.

McGonagall looked at her with sad resignation. "Indeed, it is regrettable, but that is how the governors are fully entitled to act, if they see fit."

Severus sneered slightly. Neither option sounded attractive.

Silence fell upon them again. At length, McGonagall rose and crossed to look out of the window. "It was such a wonderful ball as well. I haven't enjoyed myself so much for as long as I can remember." A deep sigh escaped her. "Still, I don't imagine it spoiled the enjoyment of anyone else there, apart perhaps from Mr Filmore. I should think most people, from the youngest First Year to the Minister for Magic himself, found your little incident the best entertainment of the evening. I suppose I have to be grateful to you both for that."

Hermione managed a small laugh. McGonagall turned back to face them. "It won't be easy for you both now. There will be whisperings and mutterings and giggling. You still have a week to go here, and you, Hermione, have exams to focus on. Can you do that?"

"I am used to focusing on academic work in difficult circumstances, Professor."

McGonagall smiled to herself. "Yes, I suppose you are."

Severus had turned to the young woman next to him. He reached over and took her hand suddenly. Hermione looked at him in surprise and smiled warmly.

The Headmistress continued. "What possessed you to let your guard drop tonight? You have clearly been so careful until now."

Hermione was not sure what to say, although she had not doubted the appropriateness of their disclosure. It just felt right. She looked up at the Headmistress, trying to think of how to express it.

"It was time." Severus spoke suddenly and simply next to her. She turned and looked at him with deep love and affection, and gently leaned over and planted a kiss on his lips.

McGonagall frowned a little, but not with disapproval. Her expression melted into a small smile. "And now, you two ... what happens now?" she asked with genuine concern.

Hermione answered. "We intend to move to London together. I have accepted a job at the Ministry. Severus will find employment when he can."

"Your reputation as a wizard precedes you, but you know I will always write you a glowing reference, Severus."

Hermione looked suddenly concerned. "You don't think this incident - will affect our employment chances do you?"

"Oh no. I shouldn't think so, Hermione. It is of no relevance to the Ministry of Magic. They do not see you as a schoolgirl, and certainly do not see Severus as a schoolteacher, believe me. In that, they are far more enlightened than us in our little academic bubble. If anything, I should imagine it will have done you a lot of good, Severus."

He raised an eyebrow to her. She smiled at him. "Oh yes ... it will be encouraging to many people to know you do have a heart after all."

"I think a lot of people know that already," Hermione said softly, squeezing his hand.

McGonagall sighed one more time. "Well, I suppose I had better deal with Mr Filmore now. Let us hope he has sobered up enough to be able to give me a coherent account of what happened. Please could I have your statements by first thing in the morning. I would recommend discretion, but I do not see the need for you to keep away from each other entirely. In fact, the more we can make this appear to be an acceptable and ... normal ... relationship, the better." She did not look entirely convinced by her words. "I would advise, Hermione, that you dress in your own clothes for the final week, as I had wanted all along. I would also like you to sit at high table. I shall try to pass you off as ... 'one of us', shall we say. Although, I admit, it seems that we are locking the stable door after the horse has bolted." She sighed yet again. "When I have gathered statements from everyone I need to, I will present it to the governors. I will, however, recommend that they go easy on you. I am, after all, human. That will be all for now."

Hermione and Severus rose to leave, but before they could she called them back. "Oh, and ... good luck, you two. I have to say, when the dust has settled, I hope you find true happiness. You both deserve it and, despite having to deal with the fallout, I find it strangely satisfying that you two, my most brilliant student and my most brilliant professor, should ... find each other. Far be it from me to dictate that academic convention should have prevented you from coming together. It seems strange, Severus. I had always imagined you and I, two lonely old teachers, ending our days here. It seems I was wrong." She smiled tenderly at him.

Hermione looked over at her Headmistress. "Thank you for everything, Professor. I am so sorry for the difficulties we have caused you. That was the last thing we wanted." She glanced at Severus for him to corroborate her words. He looked at her for a moment, not entirely sure what she expected, then seemed to come to his senses and turned to McGonagall.

"Indeed ... my apologies, Minerva."

The Headmistress gave him a faint smile.

"Goodbye, Professor McGonagall," Hermione said, her hand on the door.

"Good evening, Headmistress," Severus concluded.

With that, they clasped hands tightly and walked down the stairs, leaving the Headmistress of Hogwarts School all alone in her study, staring out of the window.

When they reached the bottom of the steps they stopped and turned to each other. Hermione looked up at him and burst into tears. She wasn't sure if it was with shame, relief or just nervous exhaustion. It didn't matter. He moved swiftly to her and embraced her firmly in his arms. She closed her eyes and felt herself enveloped in thick black comfort.

At length, he lifted her head and kissed the tears away from her face. "It's alright ... everything is alright."

"I don't want your wand to be taken away."

"Neither do I, but ... there are other ways of using my magic, and it would not be for long, I should imagine."

She admired his resilience. She looked up at him, searching his face. "Why do you think we let it out tonight, of all times?"

"Like I said ... it was time ... I could not pretend anymore, I did not want to."

"It was I who started it. I said your name."

"Yes. Once again ... *de profundis*."

His eyes had moved from hers, and were staring far beyond his surroundings. It was her turn to lean up and kiss him.

"Thinking back, it probably would have been better for me to have simply taken McGonagall's advice and not lived as a student from the start. That way, we probably could have been together as a proper couple from the word go."

He suddenly focused back in on her and looked down with a smirk on his face. "Yes ... but where would have been the fun in that?"

Hermione playfully slapped him a little, but could not deny the truth of his words. Their relationship had developed, initially at least, due to the dynamics between them: his authority over her, her seductive resistance. While they were in the school, they knew it was the only way either of them wanted to be. The dangerous encounters, the many times of near discovery, the looks across classroom and dining hall; she had never known anything so intoxicatingly exciting.

It was only now, now that their relationship had deepened immeasurably, that they had reached a point at which they were both so content with themselves and each other, when they knew their time at the school was coming to a close, that they were able to move on. Revealing themselves had been the most natural thing to do at that point. The incident with Lawrence had merely been the catalyst.

Hermione smiled up at him again. "So ... no regrets?"

"Certainly not ... although, I would have regretted cursing the fool. It would most likely have resulted in a spell in Azkaban and therefore away from you."

"You wouldn't have cursed him."

He looked at her, curious at her trust in him. "Oh yes ... I would have done ... had you not stopped me."

His voice had adopted a chilling edge. She spoke quickly to pull him back. "And what were you going to say? What was the curse, Severus?"

A faint smile flickered around his mouth. "Let's just say, it involved a certain part of his anatomy, the word 'Minimus' ... and a cockroach."

She giggled and rested her head against his chest. "That is evil."

"You once told me you thought I was evil."

She looked up at him again, staring deep into his eyes. "I was wrong. But anyway, like I have said ... there is no black and white."

He cocked an eyebrow at her enigmatic words, before turning and offering his arm to lead her away.

They strolled through the corridors. They could dimly hear the music in the great hall still continuing. The ball was winding down, but many people were still dancing. They did not pass any students or staff as they made their way to his rooms. Hermione was glad; she would deal with that in the morning.

But on turning into the corridor leading towards his classroom, they came across the pale, limpid eyes of Filch's cat. They looked at each other, a slight smile on their faces.

"He won't be far behind. I know from past experience," Hermione said wryly up to Severus. "Do you think he knows?"

The shuffling footsteps of Argus Filch approached louder and louder.

Severus suddenly pulled his arms tight around Hermione's waist and leant down, kissing her passionately and deeply in the middle of the corridor.

When they finally broke apart, they turned to find the Hogwarts caretaker staring at them with an expression of that of a constipated gargoyle, frozen in his agonised frustration for a thousand years. Severus smirked and muttered down to her, "He does now."

He took her hand and led her past Filch, glancing down past Hermione's backside at Mrs Norris as he went.

"Lovely pussy, Argus."

Hermione found it impossible not to dissolve into giggles before they were out of earshot.

"God, that was so mean. You are a cruel, cruel man."

"Well then, you must set about redeeming me forthwith." He pulled her into him and kissed her once again.

They broke apart and she smiled up at him. "I can't believe we were never caught ... *in flagrante*, so to speak. None more so than earlier tonight in the corridor."

"Hmm ...by then, I don't think I really cared if we were, to be honest."

"Oh god, can you imagine if McGonagall had found us like that!"

He smirked. Hermione was thinking about their earlier coupling. "It was so good, Severus - one of the best, and ... there have been quite a few."

He gazed down at her. "You looked - *look* - extraordinarily beautiful tonight."

He took her hand and led her through his classroom, which she for once felt strangely detached from, and into his private rooms. Then he stood her in the middle of the room and walked around her, gazing at her encased in the red satin of her dress. He removed his wand and continued to walk in leisurely circles, moving it up and down over her body as he went.

"What are you doing?"

"Removing all trace of *him*."

She allowed him to continue silently. His eyes bore into her body as he moved, as if he himself was cleansing her, not his wand.

At last he stopped and placed the stick of wood upon a side table. Then he crossed to her, looking over her in satisfaction, and took her waist in his hands. Severus simply held her for a while, the palms of his hands moving slowly up and down her body. Then, inclining his head, he kissed her long and slow. She thought he would never stop. She did not want him to.

After an age where they simply stood together, lips and tongues caressing and tasting each other, as if for the first time, he pulled back a little and turned her around in his arms. His head descended to the sensitive spot where her collarbone rose to her shoulder and his warm, firm lips nuzzled there. Then she felt his hands at the base of the laces on her dress. He tugged and they loosened. Her lungs filled naturally with air as the tightness of the bodice was relieved. His long fingers continued to pull at the laces and she felt them being removed from their eyes, one by one. Then when they were parted completely he spun her around again, and watched in awe as her dress tumbled to the ground, revealing her breasts full and warm before him.

Severus stood quite still and stared at them, rising and falling slowly and regularly in the dim candlelight. To him, it was an image of complete perfection. Hermione unclasped her stockings and removed them and the suspender belt. Soon she was naked before him. Then she moved forward and reached up her hands to his buttocks. It took her a while to undo even the first few, and he opened his mouth to assist her with magic, but she anticipated what he was doing and lifted a finger to his lips. She turned her head back to the long coat and continued in her task, delighting in it. She was reminded of Rose's words of earlier, now formed in her head with a slight variation ... "*So many buttons ... all the time in the world ...*" She worked her hands steadily down his torso. He was breathing rapidly now as the naked woman with her smooth pliant fingers opened him to her.

She reached the sash at his waist and undid it. It fell to the ground and she continued down, down, kneeling as she got closer to the end.

At last she had completed her task. It had taken several long minutes, not that either of them had objected. It had been an act of complete devotion. Hermione stood again, and saw the black material parting naturally. She reached up, almost reluctant to divest him of it. But her hands rose to his shoulders and she pushed the heavy garment gently off them. It tumbled in dark curtains to the floor. She now undid the white linen shirt beneath, although this took no time at all in comparison. This in turn slid off his shoulders. Apart from his shoes, which he had removed himself, he was wearing nothing else and now stood naked and erect before her.

She moved into him, feeling him pressing against her belly, but ignoring it for now. She lay her head on his chest and his arms enclosed her into him, as hers came up high on his scarred back.

Then his knees bent a little, and he moved an arm beneath her hips, while the other came round her back. Hermione felt herself being picked up and carried through into his bedroom. He placed her on the bed and lay beside her quickly. Then almost reverentially he lowered himself to her breast. With a look at the soft mound before him, he brought it into his mouth and suckled at it. Hermione drew her hand up to his hair, stroking and soothing.

Her nipple swelled in his mouth and tingles of delight flowed through her to her core. She granted him his indulgence and tried to suppress her own need. But she need not have feared, as she soon felt languid fingers, stroking, parting and probing. She knew she was slick with desire, but the pleasure he brought from her while at her breasts filled her with such sublime happiness, knowing how he loved feeding off her tight pink nipples, that when she came, it was as if her body had dissolved into a cascading flutter of rose petals.

At length he moved up to her again, kissing her tenderly and bestowing a whispered, "I love you," in her ear. She smiled, repeating it back to him, and felt him slip into her. She was so wet that he glided in in one easy, fluid movement, taking her almost by surprise.

His eyes closed and he breathed, waiting, feeling, being. Then slowly he started to move along her, his eyes opening again and holding her gaze, his face a mere breath from hers. Their pleasure grew quickly, Hermione unable to distinguish herself from him.

Then silently, in hushed wonder, they came together, the moment both elusive and overwhelming. It was as if it had been wrought through the profoundest magic, but was in fact an instant of complete humanity.

They lay still, simply looking at each other. Time passed them by. Then Severus lay down beside her, still buried deep in her being, and they fell asleep.

Peace at last ...

Only a couple more chapters to go. LL x

Thirty-Three

Chapter 33 of 34

The morning after the night before ... time to face the music. This is the penultimate chapter.

They slept late the next day, missing breakfast. Hermione was not sure if they had done this deliberately or not and could not pinpoint her feelings about facing her friends now that their relationship had been disclosed. She was so perfectly content with Severus and their love that any concerns she had were buried deep within her. And as she awoke to find him still drowsing beside her, a few strands of sleek black hair hanging over his face, she felt utterly at peace.

Hermione reached over and brushed the hair off his eyelids. He stirred and rolled onto his back. She feared she had disturbed him and withdrew her hand quickly.

"Don't stop."

His eyes remained closed, but the low tones drew her into him. With a smile, she reached over again to move the remaining strands off his face.

They lay still for a moment, but Hermione knew that there was an awareness between them that they would have to face the music with their peers and colleagues. It would be harder than facing McGonagall.

Severus held her close, stroking her arm. "What are you doing today?"

"I suppose I'd better go and revise. I'll go to the library. I can find a quiet corner in there."

"I know."

She laughed. "Yes. And I don't want any surprise visits today, thank you very much. My exams start on Tuesday. No interruptions from now on."

She glanced up at him. He was pouting.

"I'll make it up to you tonight."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

They kissed.

But there was a sense of urgency starting to press down on Hermione. She needed to go. It was not just her need to revise; she wanted to get it over and done with: 'it' being facing the music with her friends and schoolmates.

She strangely felt no dread. In fact, she just wanted to get on with it.

Kissing Severus once again, she rose from the bed.

"Where are you going first?" She could sense the concern in his voice. It touched her.

"I have to go back to the Common Room first."

She pulled on some jeans and a top she left in his rooms for the mornings, luckily not having to get back into her ball gown. She did not look up.

"Will you go to lunch?" he inquired.

"Will you?" She glanced up at him.

Hermione detected a slight flicker cross his features before he at last responded, "Yes."

She carried on dressing. "As will I."

After a trip to the bathroom, she was ready. She crossed to him, still in bed, and kissed him again, stroking his face. "Bye bye, my love. See you later."

She turned to go but Severus caught her arm and pulled her back. "I will be thinking of you."

"I know. Me too."

Hermione smiled tenderly, at that moment far more concerned for him than for herself.

Neither of them had mentioned directly the issues they were facing. After one last kiss, she pulled herself up and left.

Shutting the door of his classroom, Hermione held her head up high. Then she started walking through the halls of her school, the school which had accepted her, given her a home and a purpose for over seven years.

The first people she passed were two First Year boys. They did not even seem to recognise her, and were talking excitedly about the new Nimbus broomstick. She breathed in deeply. *That wasn't so bad.*

She turned a corner to discover some Fourth Year girls sitting on a ledge. They were chatting animatedly when one looked up and saw her. The girl immediately leaned over to her friends and they all turned to face Hermione, the group of them quickly falling silent. Hermione managed a faint smile as she walked past which they did not return, more from distraction than deliberate rudeness.

Hermione continued past them. Once she had turned the next corner, she distinctly heard their sudden giggles echoing down the hall.

She pursed her lips and continued. There were more huddles of students to come. A similar story presented itself each time. On seeing her, they seemed immediately to lose the power of speech, and once she was past, dissolved either into giggles or hushed whispers.

By the fourth time of this happening, Hermione was so used to it that she simply smiled at any students in her path.

It was as she was approaching the staircase to Gryffindor Common Room that she faced her toughest test: at the bottom of the stairs stood Professor Piercy and Madam Pomfrey.

A similar pattern unfolded. They went from happy chat to silence on seeing her. Hermione breathed deeply and set herself straight. Then fixing her by now well-practised smile on her face, she approached them.

"Good morning, Professor Piercy, Madam Pomfrey."

They looked at her, clearly startled that she had spoken so directly.

"Uhh ... Good morning, Miss Granger," Madam Pomfrey managed to squeak out.

"Hermione," the young woman corrected tersely.

They looked down, embarrassed, and mumbled her name in confirmation. "Yes ... yes ... of course ... Hermione."

There was silence. Hermione thought she may as well grab the bull by the horns. She smiled broadly and asked with exaggerated cheerfulness, "Did you enjoy the ball?"

The two members of staff looked as if a Hippogriff had just landed in front of them to sing Happy Birthday.

Hermione waited for an answer, her smile still on her face, her eyebrows raised expectantly, looking from one to the other.

At length, Professor Piercy mumbled out slightly incoherently, studying his shoes, "Yes ... yes ... most enjoyable. Did you?" He had obviously forgotten the significance of the follow-up question. Madam Pomfrey dug him sharply in the ribs, causing him to emit a strange guttural squawk before staring down at his feet again.

Hermione almost laughed out loud, so surreal was the situation she had deliberately put herself in.

She waited before granting them an answer. The two people before her were staring at the ground as if they might be able to conjure a hole in it to swallow them.

"Most of it."

They looked up at her, astonishment still etched on their faces.

Then suddenly they both started jabbering at once. "Right, I must go and sort out those bandages." "I've got so many essays to mark." "Off we go then, another day and all that." "Yes, goodbye then ... yes ... err ... goodbye."

With hardly a glance at Hermione, they set off in opposite directions. Again, Hermione's over-riding emotion was amusement. She did not detect any malice as such towards her, just embarrassment. Still, that was their problem, not hers and Severus'.

Her eyes rose up to the portrait of the Fat Lady at the head of the staircase above her. Hermione walked up it, aware, despite the fortitude still gripping her resolve, that with each step she took, her feet seemed to be growing heavier and heavier.

She at last reached the top and looked up at the Fat Lady. The portrait smirked down at her a little. "Just to let you know ..." she jerked her head back, "they're all talking about you."

Hermione ignored her comment, fixing her with her eyes and giving the password.

The Fat Lady bristled a little but swung open for her.

Hermione's stomach suddenly dropped from within her and her hand came out to steady herself on the wall. Then, summoning all her fortitude, which seemed to have suddenly and inexplicably vanished, she stepped through the opening.

She could hear happy, contented Sunday chatter and, for a moment, Hermione almost convinced herself that it was no different to any other lazy weekend. But as soon as she stepped into the room, she was reminded forcefully that it clearly was not.

The silence which suddenly gripped the air was all-encompassing and immediately stifling. Hermione involuntarily swallowed hard, but maintained her straight back. All eyes in the room had turned to stare at her.

She spotted Ginny and Harry in a corner and almost sobbed with relief that he was still there.

She knew she must not stand there for long. Already it felt like minutes, but in reality it had only been a few seconds. Hermione walked purposefully over to Harry and Ginny.

Harry stood immediately and kissed her on the cheek, saying clearly, "Hermione. Glad I saw you before I left."

Ginny continued, as normally as possible, "Do you want to sit down?"

Hermione wondered what to do. "No ... no ... I ... need to get some books, and then I'll go ..."

"Right." They smiled awkwardly at her, but Harry kept his hand on her arm gently.

She so wanted to sit and talk to her two best friends, but was not quite able to bring herself to stay in the room.

She was about to ask them to follow her up to her dorm when there came loud giggling chatter from the girls' staircase. As with all conversations she had intercepted today, it stopped abruptly when its originators saw her.

Hermione turned. One of the girls was Rose. Their eyes met. Rose had a small smirk on her face and walked over to Hermione.

"Hi, 'Mione."

"Hello, Rose."

There was silence for a while. But Hermione did not shrink from it. Some strange force inside wanted her friend to broach the subject, the subject everyone wanted to talk about. The bubble of tension enveloping the whole castle needed to be popped. She waited for what she knew she could depend on Rose to do.

"Kept that quiet, didn't you?"

Hermione just smiled.

Rose sighed deeply. "Well ... you've got guts, I'll give you that."

The two friends stared at each other, Rose still smirking. Then her smile became more genuine and she leaned into Hermione a little. "You know I'm just jealous, don't you?"

Hermione could only laugh.

"You also know I want all the juicy details at some point, don't you?"

Ginny started laughing too.

The rest of the Common Room turned to look at them in amazement, and then slowly returned to conversation. The tension was dispersing.

Hermione sighed. "Maybe I will sit down for a minute."

She slumped down next to Harry, a strange relief seeping through her. Rose squeezed in next to her.

"Was McGonagall really hard on you?" Ginny asked.

Hermione shook her head. "No ... no ... not at all. She was very ... understanding."

"So ... they're not going to expel you?"

"I'm not sure yet. It has to go to governors. But ... it doesn't look like it."

"And what about Snape ... Professor Snape?" It was clear Rose was not sure what to call him now.

Hermione drew in a breath. "He is resigning. It's not a new decision. He had decided to a while ago. He is moving to London with me."

Her three companions glanced at each other.

"Right," said Harry awkwardly.

There was silence for a moment before Rose broke it again. "You know, they say Lawrence Filmore is going to be expelled."

"We'll see," replied Hermione non-committally.

"He was completely rat-arsed, and I heard some of his language to Snape. It was pretty out of order."

"Yes."

"And I could tell he was coming onto you pretty badly."

"Yes."

"Deserved what he got from Snape really."

"Let's hope the governors see it that way."

"Are you going to be allowed to take the exams?"

"Yes."

"So ... basically ... you've got away with it."

Hermione felt annoyance for the first time. "Got away with it? What would 'it' be exactly?"

Rose was as blunt as ever. "Well ... you shagging a teacher."

"Is that what you think? Is that what you see this as?"

"Sorry, 'Mione. But ... yeah."

"Well, then you really don't know me ... and you certainly don't know Severus. I love this man more than I could ever imagine possible, and believe it or not, he loves me and we are starting a life together. After the war, my life seemed meaningless; I didn't know where to turn. I didn't feel right being here, I didn't feel right at home. And he ... had been to hell and back, and I mean that in no uncertain terms. And we sensed that and we came together. Who cares that I was technically his 'student' ... that term is meaningless to me. I am just so grateful, if that is the word, to whatever force brought me back here, because if I hadn't come back we might never have found each other and god knows what would have become of us."

There was silence. Rose sat, stunned and humbled, unable to speak. After a while she lowered her head and mumbled an apology. Then slowly, her eyes rose to Hermione again and she whispered, "Still ... I bet you had some great sex."

Hermione glared at her momentarily before dissolving into giggles. Harry and Ginny eventually joined in. The rest of the Common Room turned and looked with intrigued curiosity at the little group in the corner.

Hermione smirked. "Well, now you mention it ..."

More giggles.

"And there was I thinking you were just spending all your time in the library! No wonder you weren't interested in Lawrence."

"No ..." Hermione sighed.

She smiled at her friends. "Thank you." They looked at her quizzically. "For being here for me and ... letting me talk about it. I needed to. I'll be able to face other people now. And now ... I need to go and revise." She got up determinedly. Harry rose and kissed her on the cheek again.

"I'm off in a moment. Come and see me as soon as you get to London. You can stay in Grimmauld Place for a bit."

"Yes ... I will. Thanks, Harry."

"And so can ..." He smiled awkwardly.

She looked at him with gratitude. "Thanks."

"And good luck with the exams ... not that you need it."

Hermione squeezed his hand and walked off. There were a few curious glances as she passed by, but nothing like the thunderous silence which had greeted her earlier. She had crossed the first hurdle.

She took herself off to a quiet part of the library until lunch. She spent the first half hour writing up her account of the events of the ball, and went to hand it discreetly to McGonagall before returning swiftly to the library. The quiet familiar academic environment helped ease her mind further, and she found herself able to concentrate well on her work. She even recognised that tingle of intellectual excitement she got in the run-up to exams.

Some time later she heard the clock strike one, and with a startled realisation hurried out of the library to the dining room. She was late; lunch had started fifteen minutes ago. She forgot for a moment the circumstances she found herself in.

Hermione rushed into the dining hall, not noticing that every head turned to look at her as she sped past. She found a place next to Ginny and went to sit in it. Suddenly the reality of what had happened to her the night before flooded her senses. She noticed that there was a palpable silence throughout the hall. It was the first time she had been in the place since the events of the ball, and she glanced up towards the ceiling with a sigh. The memories which besieged her were a curious mixture of great happiness and resentment towards Lawrence. Her head dropped again but still she knew eyes were staring at her.

She glanced up at High Table. Starting at the far left, she scanned the staff. They were staring at her just as curiously as the Fifth Years. Her eyes moved along. They came to McGonagall. She managed a faint smile at Hermione who continued to move her eyes further along until she got to the far right end.

There he was, sitting in his usual impassive way. When their eyes met, Hermione did not realise that nearly every head in the room had swivelled from her to him. She smiled warmly at him.

There was a spare chair beside him. Hermione could not move.

Then slowly, with the eyes of all of Hogwarts looking at him, Snape raised a long finger and pointed it at her, rotating the curled palm around so that it faced up. Then, fixing her with a look that melted her insides, he beckoned her over, the single finger bending and flexing smoothly and seductively to draw her to him.

Her smile broadened. She glanced briefly at McGonagall, who gave her a look of acquiescing confirmation. Hermione mumbled, "Excuse me," to her friends and, holding herself tall, walked proudly up to High Table.

As she approached Severus, he stood, and moved behind the chair next to him, pulling it out for her. Hermione had never known the Great Hall so silent. Even the Headmistress had twisted her head to look at them.

She was breathing rapidly, but her strength was heightened by his, and with a tender smile at him, she sat in the chair he proffered.

For a moment the silence remained. Then McGonagall loudly set about clanking her cutlery and engaging Madam Hooch in discussion. Suddenly, the rest of the hall snapped out of their awed wonder, and the usual hubbub of chatter and laughter sounded again.

Hermione turned to him. He was looking at her with the faintest smile of admiration. She felt a warm firm hand placed on her leg. It squeezed and rubbed along her. "I love you," she mouthed silently. The hand rubbed ever more smoothly.

On her other side was Professor Flitwick. Hermione turned and smiled at him. "Hello, Professor. How are you today?"

At first the diminutive teacher looked startled, but then managed to stammer out a response. "Very ... err ... very well, Miss Gr ... Hermione." He took a sip from his drink before continuing more confidently. "I understand you have a job at the Ministry?"

"Yes. I'm really looking forward to it. Now I just have to sort out a flat and things like that."

With that, she fell into easy conversation with him, and forgot entirely about the extraordinary position she now found herself in. Severus' hand remained on her leg the whole time.

After a while, Flitwick turned and talked to the teacher on his right, giving Hermione a quiet chance to turn to Severus.

"Are you alright?"

"Certainly." The drawl was as self-assured as ever.

"You know what I mean."

"Very few people are judging my actions against Filmore ... and as for you ..."

"Yes?"

"The female members of staff seem to be swooning with romantic delight, and the male members of staff are green with envy. People seem to be more understanding of the complexities of human nature than I sometimes give them credit for. Apparently ... and somewhat surprisingly, I confess ... I have done well."

She spluttered a laugh out. "Really!?"

He smirked at her.

"And me, Severus? Have I ... done well?"

He turned to her. His hand crept further up her leg until his fingers rested firmly right between them. He proceeded to rub slow but hard. Even through the thick material of her jeans, she knew she was responding to him. A slight gasp was pulled into her.

"Oh ..." he drawled, "I should say so."

She smirked, trying for once to ignore the feelings building inside. "How did they respond to your resignation?"

"They were not surprised."

"Regretful?"

He was silent for a moment. "I cannot tell."

"I'm sure you can."

He changed the subject. "Did you hand in your statement?"

"Yes. You?" He nodded. "Have you heard anything with regard to Lawrence?"

Severus tensed somewhat on hearing her referring to him by his first name. "His behaviour was reprehensible. At best, for him, he will be suspended. I believe a decision is to be made this afternoon. McGonagall has it in her powers to decide that matter at least."

Hermione took in his words before turning out to look at the sea of students before them. A few were still glancing up in her direction and muttering, but most had returned to their food and their friends. How fickle children were, and how easily they moved on to the next piece of intrigue. Hermione smiled ruefully.

At last she was able to look out at the hall from his perspective. She did not feel superior as such, but did feel strangely in control, as if she could sense all the ripples of disquiet or tension that may swell through the masses of seated pupils. She wondered briefly if it would have been so bad to stay and become a teacher. The thought quickly passed.

She glanced at the Gryffindor table, at her vacant place at it. How many times had she sat there, looking up longingly at the man now seated beside her? She lowered her head and smiled.

He looked across at her. "What?"

"Nothing. Just this whole thing."

The corners of his mouth twitched up.

"What are you doing this afternoon?"

"Revising."

"You could come to my rooms if you like."

"Would you like?"

"You know I would."

"Then I shall. But I will have to work."

"Naturally." Severus looked at her with a slight amused smile. "What a conscientious girl you are, Miss Granger."

"Naturally."

They finished their lunch contentedly. For once, Hermione was able to walk out with him and not have to hurry after him secretly or wonder when they would meet again.

They walked through the corridors together. Another hurdle.

Again, they drew predictable stares and whisperings, but Hermione was used to it by now, and Severus did not seem at all perturbed.

By the time she reached his rooms, she wondered what she had been worried about.

"Oh god, I've left all my stuff in the library. I'll have to go and get it."

She turned to go. He held her back and pulled her firmly through to his sitting room, indicating his desk. There atop it sat her books and parchments.

Hermione looked at him with quizzical wonder. She had not been out of his sight since deciding to come to his rooms.

"How did you do that?"

He looked at her with wicked arrogance. "Oh ... did I not tell you? ... I'm a wizard."

Hermione thumped him playfully and he quickly drew his arms around her and encircled her hard into him, kissing her passionately. She responded with equal hunger, but then remembered her responsibilities and pulled back.

"Now now. Remember what I said; I have to work. I have the most important exams of my life next week."

He rolled his eyes a little.

She gasped exaggeratedly. "Professor Snape! It is not like you to discourage the pursuit of academic excellence!"

"Only when faced with a certain encumbrance." He took her hand and placed it at his groin. She immediately felt the throbbing strain.

"An encumbrance? Is that what you call it?"

Severus pressed her hand into him, but she pulled it off, causing him to groan with frustration. Hermione spun from him and went and sat at the desk. Clearing her throat loudly, she unrolled a parchment and opened a heavy textbook. Then with a furrow of her brow she set about deliberately ignoring him and focusing on the words before her.

He moved silkily round to her side, and leaned down to whisper in her ear, "As long as you keep your promise."

She glanced up momentarily, a smirk capturing her features.

"To make it up to me tonight."

She kissed him briefly. "I always keep my promises. You know that. Now," she returned to her work, "bugger off."

He bugged off as far as the chair opposite her, took out a book and started reading, his eyes frequently rising to stare at the beautiful, brilliant witch sitting at his desk.

The minutes ticked by in quiet concentrated silence. Hermione was able to tidy up a few confused issues in her mind about transfiguration and went over the ordering of some of the more complex potions with Severus. He assured her that they were unlikely to come up. Her level of expertise was far beyond NEWT level as it was.

Hermione had expressed her insecurities about Defence Against the Dark Arts, having only gained an E in her OWL. He smiled at her with wry amusement. "That was over two years ago. I think you have had ... sufficient experience in the subject since then."

She held her head in her hands. "Oh ... I don't know ... there's a difference between practical experience and academic understanding."

"You will surprise yourself with what you know, I am sure of it."

They were interrupted by the ringing of a bell.

"What was that?" Hermione was startled.

"The door bell. I will be back in a moment." Severus hurried out through his classroom, a slight look of concern on his face.

A few minutes later he returned, his face grim. A sudden fear gripped Hermione. "What is it?"

"Lawrence Filmore has been suspended for the remainder of this term and all of next term, starting from today."

"I see." Hermione was not sure initially how to take the news.

"He should have been expelled," Snape spat out venomously.

Hermione was silent. "Was there any explanation?"

"They said his behaviour was entirely unacceptable, but apparently the fact that he was so under the influence of alcohol tempered the harshness of their judgement somewhat. Tom Radford has been suspended as well. He was apparently pouring the stuff down Filmore's throat and encouraging his behaviour."

Hermione suddenly felt aggrieved. "That doesn't excuse what he did to me."

"Exactly."

"Or you. But, to be honest, that is a pretty tough punishment. He'll only have a term left after that, and the Quidditch season is over by then. He'll miss all of that. I think justice has probably been served."

Severus sniffed derisively. "It is the behaviour towards you which concerns me the most. How dare that boy remain in the school?! They referred back to his previously ... 'unblemished' record. And there is the little matter of the Headmistress being the ex-head of Gryffindor."

"Oh, Severus, McGonagall would never let that influence her decision."

He did not reply, merely frowned further.

Hermione got up and crossed to him. "Severus! You mustn't say things like that!"

He turned his eyes to her. "Am I offending your sense of decency?"

"Yes. A little. I forget how loyal you are to Slytherin."

He cocked an eyebrow. She smirked. "It's alright. Opposites clearly attract."

"Haven't you done enough for one day?"

She sighed and looked down at her work. Picking up a parchment, she was about to peruse it further. "I really wanted to look at ..." His hands had worked their way under her shirt and unclasped her bra. Long agile fingers were cupping her breasts and questing over her nipples.

The parchment fell from her hands and tumbled to the floor.

"On second thoughts ... I think perhaps I have."

Almost there. They've come a long way. LL x

Thirty-Four

Chapter 34 of 34

The last chapter. They (and we) have all come a long way.

Monday was a similar story.

Hermione now sat normally at high table. Her friends had accepted her absence and often gave her a cheeky smile or wave as she glanced across at them from her elevated position next to Severus. Despite all that had happened over the weekend, she was able to concentrate on her imminent exams with remarkable clarity. She studied either in the library or in his rooms, and by the time Monday night came, she felt as if she had done all she could in preparation for them. She could tell he was impressed by her focus and dedication.

At the back of her mind she knew that the governors were meeting on Wednesday to discuss the 'ball issue', as they were terming it. McGonagall had been rational and

equable since their meeting. If anything, she had given their relationship her blessing. Hermione knew she would work to lessen any punitive elements within the governing body.

Hermione was still met with curious looks and hushed tones wherever she went, but they were growing less intrusive. She and Severus made no attempt to avoid each other around the castle, and noticed that the more they were seen together, the less inquisitive the student population seemed about them. They did not engage in any public displays of affection, but walked freely around and always sat together in the Great Hall.

It made a huge difference to both of them for Hermione to get to his rooms without having to hide in the shadows and hurry silently from one corridor to the next. Sunday and Monday nights passed in blissful ease. Hermione had greeted Filch with a cheery hello at ten o'clock on Monday night, just before she flung open the door of the Potions' classroom and walked proudly in. He had scowled.

Hermione ensured she slept long and well on Sunday and Monday, but not before she had turned to the man next to her and assuaged the need within. Her body, mind and soul felt primed as never before, and the heightened intellectual state she was experiencing seemed to be reflected in her body, more alight for his touch and presence than ever.

Even Severus had noticed her increase in ardour, if that was possible. As soon as her books were shut, she would rise and walk to him, often kneeling swiftly to take him in her mouth or discarding her clothes rapidly, lying on the floor, stretching her limbs towards him, her moans of desire soon transmitting to his groin.

She was more vocal than ever, something he admitted to adoring, and her constant moans and mewls simply spurred him on.

Tuesday morning dawned bright and cold. Hermione rose early and showered, dressing in crisp, clean clothes. They were not school uniform, but bore a remarkable resemblance to it. She clearly needed to feel academic.

They spoke little. Severus allowed her her focus. She had Herbology and Arithmancy first of all; neither would tax her.

Just before she turned to go, Severus beckoned her over and guided her to turn around. Then about her neck he placed a chain with a golden pendant hanging from it.

"For luck," he said, leaning down to kiss her.

Hermione studied the object. It was a complicated pattern of interweaving loops, forming an intricate but beautiful design. It looked as if it was from an ancient culture. "Severus, I don't need you to give me anything. You are too kind, really." She frowned curiously at the pendant. "What is it?"

"It is an Ancient Egyptian symbol of intelligence and cunning. The high priests would wear a similar object at times when they required great skills of intellect. It will inspire you, I am sure."

"It's exquisite, but ... *cunning*, Professor Snape?" She eyed him with a teasingly suspicious stare. "That's a particularly Slytherin trait. This isn't enchanted is it? I intend to rely on my own brain power and nothing else to see me through these exams."

"Are you suggesting I am encouraging you to cheat?" He sounded rather defensive.

Hermione smiled warmly, keen to dispel the implication. "No, not at all. I'm only teasing you. It's beautiful; I'm overwhelmed. I just wondered if it had any extra significance. I know it will inspire me." She looked up at him. "Anything that reminds me of you will undoubtedly inspire me. Thank you, my darling." She kissed him warmly.

"Of course, you do not require luck or extra help, be it magical or otherwise. But ... I will be thinking of you a new experience for me, I confess. I normally try to distance myself as much as possible from the tedium of exams."

"Are you invigilating?"

"Yes. Tomorrow Transfiguration. And then Defence Against the Dark Arts on Thursday."

She shot him another warning look. "Now don't go distracting me, sir."

He smirked. "I will not. But ... you may distract me, if you so desire."

She kissed him again. "Thank you again for my necklace. It means everything to me."

Severus smiled with genuine pride. "Come to me later. I will be waiting. I will go over some details for tomorrow with you."

"Amongst other things?" she teased.

He simply smirked, holding the door open for her.

After breakfast, Hermione made her way to the Herbology exam. There were only ten students taking it, and she found herself remarkably relaxed yet still tingling with anticipation. Various extraordinary plants were set before them, the invigilator conjured a floating clock to hover in the air, and they began.

Time passed swiftly by as Hermione worked attentively. All the while, she was aware of the heavy golden necklace around her neck, providing a comforting reminder of his presence. She completed the paper and checked through her answers with ample time to spare. The invigilator waved his wand and the answer papers flew towards him, followed by the plants and tools they had used, which disappeared neatly into sheds and baskets.

"That concludes your Herbology NEWT. I hope it was successful for you all. You are dismissed."

Hermione left the greenhouse with a smile of satisfaction. She could not think of any errors she may have made.

It was a similar story in the afternoon with Arithmancy, a subject she had excelled in. The paper seemed ridiculously easy to her and she finished with nearly an hour to spare.

She was released from the exam room at five o'clock, and with a spring in her step Hermione ran off to the Common Room for a quick shower before supper.

She bounced into the Great Hall with a broad smile on her face and sat down next to Severus, planting a kiss on his cheek, which created an audible murmur around the hall.

"Oops!" she whispered to him. "Forgot where I was for a minute!"

He smiled. "How were they?"

"Good, I think. Yes. I'd even go so far as to say I enjoyed them."

"Miss Granger, sometimes it amazes me that you have any friends at all. You are a student. You are not supposed to *enjoy* exams."

She laughed and elbowed him in the ribs. "You forget, Professor. I am not technically a student. Well, let's hope not anyway, at least in the eyes of the governors."

They fell silent, reminded suddenly of the meeting tomorrow.

They continued eating quietly. At one point she reached under the table and squeezed his hand firmly. He quickly encircled his fingers in hers and gripped them. She looked across and smiled reassuringly.

After supper they returned to his rooms and went over some last minute revision for Transfiguration and Potions, both of which were the next day.

"You do realise I expect you to get the highest NEWT Potions mark there has ever been, don't you?"

She opened her mouth in disbelief. "That's a pretty tall order! You are kidding, I presume?"

He merely smirked.

"Who has the highest mark so far?"

He did not look at her, but his voice drawled deep, "Me."

She grinned. "Surely you don't want me to beat you?"

"We shall see."

They made love tenderly and gently that night. Hermione's mind was focused on the exams and the governors' meeting. Neither of them mentioned it again, but they both knew it was niggling.

It was an early start. Transfiguration began at 8:30. Severus was invigilating and had to leave earlier than Hermione to set things up. Hermione hardly had time to bid him a proper goodbye.

She stood alone in his room for a moment, a slight sigh escaping her, wondering how they would be feeling at the end of the day.

Luckily, Transfiguration was, for Hermione at least, straightforward. She was glad it was, as she kept finding herself glancing up at her invigilator, who was looking at her constantly with a faint smile of devotion on his face. She would smile back, then reapply herself to her task. The spells were things she had become a master of over several years, and she completed them with no faults or mistakes far before any of her fellow students.

Severus was caught by a colleague after the exam and Hermione had no time to talk to him before having to leave for a bite to eat before the Potions exam.

It was only during the exam that Hermione realised fully what a brilliant teacher Severus had in fact been. It was a difficult exam and she could tell her fellow students were finding it heavy going. Even she had to wrack her brains at times to come up with the correct ingredient or method of preparation. But whenever she thought she was stuck, she would close her eyes, grip her necklace and hear his velvety voice in her mind, imparting the correct solution. It felt at times like a type of legilimency, but she knew it simply to be her memory recalling a vivid lesson. She glanced at the others. After much frowning of brows and wringing of hands, they too seemed to alight upon the correct way forward. All of Severus Snape's students had been well taught.

The exam finally finished. Hermione breathed a deep sigh of relief. It had not been easy, but she was filled with the unique glow of a fulfilled challenge.

"God, that was tough," moaned a boy named Joseph Trimble as they were leaving. He had returned to Hogwarts for the term to refresh his knowledge and retake some of his NEWTs which he had failed in the summer.

"Yeah it's over now though. Well done, you," congratulated Hermione.

"I think I did a lot better than last year when Snape wasn't teaching. That's why I had to resit. The teaching was crap I flunked it. Couldn't get the job I wanted they told me I'd have to take it again."

"I'm glad you approve of Professor Snape's teaching, Joe," Hermione smirked at him.

"Yeah, Snape's a miserable bugger, but a bloody good teacher, I'll give him that." He suddenly remembered who he was talking to. "Oh shit sorry, Hermione. You know what I mean though ... great teacher ... I mean it."

Hermione lowered her head amidst a chuckle. "It's alright, Joe. I know what you mean. Don't worry ... I used to think he was a miserable bugger too. Still do sometimes."

She walked off with a broad smile. It soon faded as she passed McGonagall's office and saw several governors emerging.

Their faces were set in impenetrable inscrutability.

She lowered her head and tried to hurry past.

"Hermione!" McGonagall was calling her back.

Hermione turned to her and managed a weak smile.

"Come up, my dear. I shall send for Severus too."

She ushered Hermione up the stairs and told her to sit and wait while she got Professor Snape.

It seemed an age before they arrived back together, silently, although in reality it had been only a few minutes.

Severus sat rigidly next to Hermione just as he had the night of the ball.

McGonagall cleared her throat and lowered herself into the chair opposite them.

"As you know, the governors met today to discuss the events of the ball and how best to deal with them. I am pleased to say that they concurred with my decision to suspend Lawrence Filmore. After hearing all reports and statements, they declared his behaviour entirely unacceptable and did not hesitate to enforce the judgement.

"With regard to your ... relationship ... with Professor Snape, Miss Granger, the governors expressed a certain amount of surprise, not least because many of them knew full well the vehemence of your feelings towards Severus before the war. However, they also know of your remarkable intellect, maturity and experiences. And they did bear in mind the fact that you are technically no longer a normal student. In light of that, they even went so far as to say that they found your relationship ... understandable. As such, they do not intend to take any action against you.

"The same goes for you, Severus. Although there was more ... discussion, shall we say, about your part in this liaison, they did not feel that there had been any undue influence on your part. If either of you were to remain in the school after this week, I think perhaps they would have considered things differently. Rules about student-teacher relationships are there for good reason, even if the people in question are both consenting adults. There is the question of bias, unfair favouritism and advantage. You are lucky that this liaison was only discovered recently, and that you, Hermione, are who you are. They did accept your resignation, Severus, and I suppose, were glad that you had made that decision for them. But they bear neither of you any ill will. Indeed, many even went so far as to say it was a 'good match'. So, as far as your relationship goes, no further action will be taken.

"Most of the discussion centred on the fact that you raised your wand in anger to a student, Severus. However, when the nature of Mr Filmore's words became known, most

of the governors commented that you had shown remarkable control in not speaking a curse or a hex. I think many of them felt that they themselves would not have been so restrained. They do not blame you for your actions, and again, find them, in the circumstances, understandable. However, they feel they must prevent an incident like this from happening again, and do fear a little for the reputation of the school. Therefore, you are being asked to repay two months' salary as punishment. You shall be allowed to keep your wand."

McGonagall stopped speaking. Hermione and Severus looked hesitantly at each other.

"Is that it?" Hermione asked after a moment.

"Yes. That is it." The Headmistress smiled at them. "I think, all things considered, that we should be very happy with that. Let us speak no more about it."

Hermione glanced at Severus to judge his reaction. Two months less salary. They could live with that, surely. She smiled nervously at him. His face was unreadable. Then suddenly, he inhaled sharply and sat up straight.

"Good. Thank you, Headmistress. If you will excuse me." He stood up, inclined his head to McGonagall and turned to leave the room.

Hermione smiled at McGonagall with a whispered thanks and hurried after him.

"Severus! Severus! Slow down!"

She eventually caught up with him halfway down the corridor. "Well what do you think? That's good, isn't it? I think that's the least we could have got away with."

At first he did not look at her, and his tight, dour expression filled her with anxiety. Surely the outcome was as good as they could have hoped for.

"I don't like sitting like a first year in front of a desk which only last year I was sitting behind."

"I know. But you had to, and now it's done. So - move on." She spoke remarkably abruptly.

Severus turned his head to her, a faint look of surprise on his face. Then his features at last relaxed.

"You are right." He sighed. "As usual, you are right." His face flinched mildly but perceptibly. She knew he did not like being shown up by her emotional maturity. At last a small smile shadowed his face. "Yes. It is good. I'm sorry. I want the whole thing to be over with."

Holding his hand, Hermione stroked his face. "I understand. Well, it is over now. All done. And only one more day of exams and then the rest of our lives."

He smiled again and took her hand. They stood silently for a moment, letting the moment sink in. It could have been so much worse.

"The rest of our lives. Thank you."

She looked at him curiously. "For what?"

"For the rest of my life."

Hermione kissed him.

"Why do you think ..."

"What?"

"I mean ... after the final battle ... why do you think ... it was me?"

He sighed. "When two people, magical people, are so perfectly compatible, when they are connected mentally and emotionally, a great energy is created between them. When you touched me, you must have imparted much of it to me."

"But ... I admit ... I did not think of you in that way then ... far from it ... at least, I did not think I did."

"I acknowledge it was only later, when you came back to school, that I too realised the extent of my feelings about you, but ... I confess to finding myself thinking about you before - last year, when you were away with Potter. I tried to bury the feelings, thought I had, but there was something absent in the school a brightness, a light, a spark of brilliance. I missed you. I missed it. I missed you."

She held him tight into her. "But, I do not understand. For there to be a connection, the feelings must be mutual, surely. During that time, I was thinking about Harry ... about Ron. I thought I was completely in love with him. I had waited so long for him to acknowledge his feelings. When at last he did, it had simply been such a long wait that I confused the relief for love. You had always been there, present within me, associated with very strong emotion, but, as I thought, very *negative* emotion. I suppose when I saw you dead, as I believed, those emotions manifested themselves within me as what they truly were, although it took me a while longer to realise it consciously."

They stayed holding each other, then eventually, after a final kiss, Severus turned and led her to the dungeons. But before they reached them, he stopped abruptly and turned to her, suddenly remembering.

"How was Potions?"

Hermione sighed. "Bloody hard, actually. The hardest exam I've ever had to take. But, I think I did quite well. I kept remembering your words ... hearing your voice in my head ... I think I nailed it in the end."

He raised a cynical eyebrow. "*Nailed* it?"

"You know what I mean," she smirked.

On arriving in his rooms, Hermione fell on the bed exhausted. "God, I'm knackered, and I've still got Charms, History of Magic and DADA tomorrow. Last ones though. Thank god for that."

Severus came to lie next to her and slowly started a long soothing stroke over her belly. "Do you want to go over anything?"

"No. I think my brain needs a rest. It's saturated. I'm not going to think about anything else until tomorrow. I just want to relax."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" His hand was moving further down, undoing the buttons of her jeans.

"You seem to know the answer to that already."

His fingers had slipped down into her already damp folds and one had pushed up inside while his thumb circled her clit idly. Hermione closed her eyes and gave herself over to the warm feeling of relaxed pleasure he was drawing from her. She came quickly and almost immediately fell into a deep sleep.

She did not know that her lover continued to lie next to her, simply looking at her, his hands running lightly over her body, for the longest time.

Hermione slept a long, exhausted sleep. She was filled with a strange nervous anticipation about her remaining exams, which was tempered by sweeping relief at the decision of the governors.

She spoke little in the morning, focusing on the mental exertion that lay ahead. With a quick kiss, she disappeared to her first exam.

The Charms paper was not a hard one, and Hermione emerged feeling as if she had merely ticked off another box. Much the same could be said for History of Magic; her knowledge had always been exceptional in that area. At two o'clock, Hermione faced her final exam, the last test of her intellect at Hogwarts School: Defence Against the Dark Arts.

She walked in, more apprehensive than she had ever been about a test. The E she had received in her OWL still haunted her, and although she felt more confident in her knowledge now, she still had misgivings about the whole situation. She entered the hall and was immediately met by a pair of piercing black eyes staring ardently at her. It took her by surprise. She had forgotten Severus would be invigilating this one.

She held his gaze for a moment and allowed any insecurity to wash away. Then with a deep breath, she sat, and the exam began.

Hermione found it remarkably straightforward. Most of the answers she was able to write thoroughly simply through personal experience. In terms of what she had learnt in school, it seemed that it was the years she had been taught by Lupin and Severus himself that provided her with the most material. By the end of the exam she felt herself glowing with satisfaction, a sure sign that she had succeeded. She put her quill down and fell back in her chair, her eyes rising to meet Severus'. He was smiling at her tenderly.

The exam ended and she handed it in. After Severus had taken them to the exam officer, he returned to find her still in the classroom.

"The end."

"Yes."

Hermione looked around the classroom. It was McGonagall's old room. The place was full of vivid memories for her, but standing there now, she felt merely a glow of happy nostalgia. "It's strange. Now that it's over, I don't feel any remorse or sadness; just satisfaction and anticipation. I'm ready to go." She turned to him, and after a slight pause, asked, "Are you?"

Severus took his time to respond, not looking up. Then his head moved up and he met her eyes. "Yes."

"Term finishes at midday tomorrow. I'll have to sort my stuff out tonight. Harry's expecting me at Grimmauld Place tomorrow night and we've got those flat viewings on Saturday. You could ... come and stay with me tomorrow if you want." She was almost nervous asking him. "I suppose you have lots to sort out here though."

"Not really." The abruptness of his answer startled her. "It can all be dealt with by magic in a few minutes."

"So ... will you be able to come with me when I leave tomorrow?" Again, her voice was hesitant.

He took a while to answer. She almost gave up.

"Yes."

Severus spoke suddenly, his head darting up to meet her eyes. Hermione could not prevent an enormous grin breaking out across her face. He acknowledged her happiness with a kiss.

Eventually, they left the classroom and walked slowly up the corridor. Hermione stopped and turned apprehensively to him. "Severus? Do you mind if I spend the night in my room tonight? It's just ... you know ... the last ..." She was searching for the right words.

"I understand."

"Are you sure?"

"I should imagine we will be spending ... considerable time together from now on. I can always have a bite of my apple if I get too ... desperate. I think we can both survive one night apart in this place. Indeed, most of our time in this school has been separate. Perhaps it is right that that is how it should end."

She smiled and squeezed his hand. "I'll see you at supper. I'm going to go and sort out my things."

Hermione returned to the Common Room. She looked around, remembering the laughter, tears and moments of anxiety she had experienced there. It would always be a special place, somewhere she hoped to be able to return to in future. But, she had to admit, without Harry and Ron, or even Draco to torment around school, things just weren't the same. It did not have the same connotations as before. She was so excited about her life at the moment; about Severus, about her job and finding a place to live, that as she walked to her dorm to pack, she was filled with happy warmth at the memories, but a tingling excitement about leaving at last. She remembered how she had struggled to fit in when she returned, and how her relationship with her Potions Master had been the only thing that had kept her here, if truth be told. She was ready for the next day.

At six o'clock, Hermione went to her final supper at Hogwarts School. She contemplated sitting with her friends at the Gryffindor table, but as she looked at them, giggling stupidly again about some trivial matter, she realised fully how little she belonged there. She took her place beside Severus gladly.

Although there would still be breakfast in the morning, this was the last proper meal of the term, and McGonagall gave a short speech wishing everyone a happy Christmas. She bid a short farewell to Hermione, commending her intellect and efforts in the war. Hermione blushed. It was not expected or necessarily the right place to do so, but she greatly appreciated it. The students applauded one of their most famous pupils. McGonagall then turned towards Severus. He flinched.

"And we are also saying goodbye to a long-serving member of staff - someone whom we all have very strong opinions of, I am sure. But those opinions have been formed due to his remarkable ability with magic, his attention to accuracy and detail, the expectations he has of you, his overwhelming knowledge of his own subject and many others, and his sheer force of personality, all of which combine to make this man an extraordinary teacher and human being. I need not tell you the role that Professor Snape played in helping to defeat Lord Voldemort, placing himself in grave danger time and time again, the last time to the point where he nearly sacrificed his own life. It gives me immense delight to see him so well, and ... so happy now, and I wish him and Miss Granger all the best in the future. The school will not be the same without him, but I am sure his presence will live on for ages to come, and hopefully, Severus, you may come up and impart us with your knowledge on some occasions in the future."

"The staff and I have this little token of our appreciation for all you have done for the school and the wizarding world over the years."

McGonagall held out a package, wrapped in beautiful gilded paper.

Hermione glanced at Severus. He looked surprised, unsure, almost embarrassed. She nudged him. He stood and walked over to the Headmistress.

He took the gift with a small smile and a nod of his head, and was about to walk back to his seat, when a ripple of applause broke out, mainly from the older Gryffindors, strangely enough. But the clapping spread rapidly through the hall, and before long, the entire student body were on their feet, cheering loudly, their hands raised above their heads, clapping and whistling.

Severus turned to them, a look of astonishment on his face. He stood there for a while, letting the sound of their appreciation wash over him, then turned to Hermione. She too was on her feet, as were the rest of the staff, applauding loudly. She had tears in her eyes.

Then his head darted back to the students and he raised his hand. They immediately fell silent.

"Quiet, all of you, or I shall have you in detention." The familiar low coldness was back. He turned towards his seat. The students' faces fell. Then, slowly, he turned to look back out at them. "Oh. I had forgotten. It seems I am no longer in a position to administer detention." He paused, before drawing with a smirk, "You lucky, lucky lot."

Then he raised his wand, and with a flick, thousands of twinkling lights flew out from it and spread through the hall, hovering several feet above the students. Then, with another flick, the lights changed instantly into chocolate drops and tumbled like a gentle rain down onto them. They squealed with delight and grabbed for them, laughing and falling over each other. Severus allowed himself a smile of satisfaction before returning to his seat.

Hermione could not help kissing him full on the lips when he returned. His smile broadened and he looked down at the package McGonagall had given him.

"Are you going to open it?"

His hands moved to the wrapping and, carefully, he undid it. Inside was a small but beautifully ornate bottle containing a pale blue liquid which gave off an iridescent glow. Severus undid the stopper and smelt it. He did not attempt to hide his astonishment.

"What is it?"

"If my memory serves me correctly, and I have only once come across this before, it is unicorn's milk."

"What?!" Hermione almost choked. She knew how hard it was to even catch a glimpse of a unicorn, let alone approach one.

"It is one of the rarest and most powerful ingredients known to us, but almost impossible to come by, as unicorns can never be tamed and would never allow themselves to be ... manhandled, shall we say."

"So how ...?"

"Firenze helped me."

They spun around. McGonagall was standing behind them. She smiled down. "He knew of a gentle female unicorn who had just given birth. Firenze was able to communicate enough to her and she allowed the wood nymphs to extract some of her milk. Your reputation is known even amongst the forest creatures, Severus. It is not just wizarding folk whom you have helped. Use it wisely." She returned to her seat.

Hermione stared in wonder at Severus. He said nothing; she could tell he was moved beyond words. First, the response of the students, and now this remarkable gift from his colleagues.

They finished their meal in silence and afterwards remained in the hall for some time while students and staff came up to bid both of them goodbye. There was still the next morning, but the end of term was always a mad rush, and the last night in school was more relaxed.

Eventually, everyone had gone, and they found themselves alone in the Great Hall. Hermione sighed and looked up. The beamed arch of the ceiling was dull and unmoving; the enchantment had worn off. She simply stood staring up at it for a while.

"What would you like?" Severus asked.

Hermione was surprised.

"Up there."

"I thought only the Head could enchant the ceiling."

"And former Heads," he declared.

Hermione smiled. "I want ... the universe!" She giggled at her exaggerated demand.

He pulled her into him and kissed her deeply. When he broke away, he held still and looked deep into her.

"I will give you anything you desire."

His wand was raised above his head and he pointed it along the ceiling, chanting a low incantation as it moved.

Hermione laughed aloud as the ceiling was transformed into the most extraordinary starscape she had ever seen. The air above her was full of nebulae, swirling galaxies, a myriad of planets, mesmerising in their diversity and variety, supernova and clusters of tiny sparkling stars, all alight with colour and motion.

She staggered backwards, her head up, her mouth open in astonishment.

Severus followed her over to the steps leading up to the podium.

"Will that suffice?"

She laughed in disbelief before slumping down to sit on the top step. "For now," she smirked at him, pulling him down to sit beside her and kissing him hard. "I love you."

"I love you too." His eyes sparkled. "Lie down."

"Here?"

"Most definitely here."

"But ... what if someone comes in?"

"They won't. Everyone is off sorting out their things for tomorrow. And, in any case, I have locked the doors."

"What about the ghosts?"

"Do not worry. They'll be in the corridors, trying to find someone to pester while they still can."

Hermione did not initially move, but his black eyes were so alight with desire and longing that it transmitted straight to her belly, which churned as it had those first times she became aware of wanting him. Slowly, she lowered herself down so that her back was lying flat on the top step and her legs were bent onto the steps below.

Severus moved down and ran his hand slowly up her bare leg. She was wearing a dress and his fingers tickled a little as they moved sensuously up her inner thigh. She shivered at the sensation and he whispered a soothing *shh* up to her. His hand parted her thighs and he moved his body between them. Hermione's breath came heavily with anticipation and she let a soft mewl of desire escape her. There it was, as distinct and inescapable as ever: the tingle between her legs, the throb from her clit, swelling at his proximity. Her belly twisted again and she arched off the step towards him. His other hand pressed her down, warm and firm, causing even more longing to grow in

her.

Severus lifted the dress above her hips. As usual, she wore no underwear, and she heard a slight sigh of wonder at the sight of her revealed to him: open, moist, waiting, *waiting*.

Hermione raised her eyes to the ceiling and let them fall upon the moving constellations above. Lust had blurred her mind and she fell into a reverie. It was as if they too were up amongst the stars, floating, swimming, dancing.

His fingers were now at the top of her thighs and she felt one parting her, sliding languidly up the slick channel. She inhaled sharply, tensing with expectation. The finger moved inside and was joined by another; together they stroked and coaxed her pleasure.

And then out, slipping out to rub up towards that ripe bud at the top, so close, but just avoiding the perfect point of tenderness. It swelled ever more in thwarted expectation. Hermione groaned, thrusting her fist into her mouth in an attempt to control her body.

Then she felt a change in the pressure. He had lowered his mouth to her and she recognised his tongue and lips, licking, laving, taking in her essence. His tongue sought deep inside, consuming the pleasure which flowed from her.

Severus kissed reverently up her soaking snatch until he reached her clit. It jerked as his tongue made contact; she almost came immediately. But he withdrew it quickly and circled the tight flesh languidly instead, deliberately teasing, denying it its ultimate release.

Hermione felt fingers inside her again, and then more, in her other, tight passage. She arched off the step. A slight grunt was caught in her lover's throat as she moved against him.

Despite only using his hands and mouth, Hermione felt as full as she could. The fingers inside both her pussy and her arse were drawing such deep satisfaction and pleasure from her she sobbed uncontrollably. His tongue and lips continued to inflame her clit, now so engorged, so ready, she could feel its need transmitting itself to the tightening muscles in her abdomen. It spread like fire through her body, and then at last his mouth moved to encircle the flesh fully. He pulled the tight kernel deep into his mouth, his tongue stroking hard over it simultaneously.

Her body dissolved. A rippling flame of pleasure washed over and through her, radiating out from her core, but flowing right through to her toes. Hermione shook helplessly, crying his name out into the vastness of the hall.

At length, Severus raised himself to stare down at her. She managed a bleary smile, but he hardly took it in, as almost immediately he had released himself and plunged deep and hard into her.

Hermione grunted loudly with the shock of it, but her body was still so primed, her flesh so ready for him, that she thought she may come again immediately. The grunt turned into a moan of triumph. It was joined by his own guttural cry of deepest pleasure.

Severus knelt on a lower step and pulled her roughly towards him, her hips perfectly aligned with his thrusts. He furrowed his brows, trying to stem the pleasure from engulfing him too quickly, but the sight of her beneath him, lying supine on the steps of the Great Hall, made it almost impossible.

Hermione moved her eyes to his and saw his face above her, framed by the stars and galaxies he had conjured. She was apart from herself, as if she was one of the stars, looking down on the extraordinary sight of these two people so perfectly joined, body, mind and soul. Her orgasm swelled rapidly again as he stroked ever harder within her. Hermione's features creased and her body melted irrevocably into ecstasy.

"Oh god oh god, Severus. It's you, it's you. Always you, you know it. Oh god ..." Her voice morphed into a sob of complete rapture.

Severus felt the confirming pulse of her orgasm around him but did not come immediately. His mind took in her words, took in the sight of her face crumpled in abandon, her body coming apart upon him. Only after he had fixed those images, sounds and feelings on his mind, knowing they would sustain him for years to come, did he allow himself to give his own body over to rapture.

He held her eyes and stopped moving. Hermione watched as his expression distorted with wondrous shock. Then with a deep groaning cry he came, exploding into her with more force than ever before.

"Hermione! My Hermione, my Hermione!"

His eyes closed and his head fell back uselessly with the extreme pleasure tearing at his limbs. When it was over his body sagged onto hers, heaving to draw in enough breath. She drew her hands around him to hold him to her as tight as was possible.

They spoke not a word, lying at the top of the steps in the Great Hall, listening to the other breathing.

Eventually, still in silence, they rose, adjusted their clothing, and went their separate ways for the evening.

Hermione said little to anyone that night. They supposed it was with sadness that her time at school was finally drawing to a close, but in reality, her mind was consumed with thoughts of their coupling in the Great Hall. She could never have anyone else, of that she was sure. There was no one else.

As she lay for the last time in her bed, looking around the Gryffindor Tower room that final night, she did so with a remarkable sense of hope and conviction, in the knowledge that she was doing the right thing; the only thing. Hermione turned over in her four-poster bed, snuggled into the covers, and went to sleep.

The next day dawned chilly, but as she pulled back the curtains, the white winter sun poured into the room. There were no lessons that morning. The students spent their time sorting things out. Hermione dressed, left her room for the last time, and headed out to the Common Room. There was a poignantly teary farewell to some of her friends, amidst promises that she would come up to visit often. She gave Ginny a long hug.

"What am I going to do without you up here?" Ginny was clearly upset.

Hermione smiled warmly. "You'll be fine, Gin. You know you will. I'll be seeing an awful lot of you, you know."

"It won't be the same."

"Maybe not. But that doesn't mean it won't be as good, just different."

Ginny didn't look convinced.

"And just think you don't have to put up with that bloody Professor Snape anymore!"

Ginny caught her eye, and the two girls dissolved into giggles.

Hermione headed for the door. With a final look back into the Common Room, she whispered her own goodbye to it, and left.

Waiting at the foot of the steps leading to the main castle exit was Severus. She smiled.

"Hello."

"Hullo."

"Do you have everything you need?"

She nodded. "My trunk's gone on ahead. It's going to Grimmauld Place. You?"

"I have sent things to Spinner's End for the time being."

They walked towards the door. Standing beside it was Professor McGonagall.

The Headmistress hugged them both. "Well, you two. This is it. Not quite how I imagined either of you departing, but still ... I find myself strangely satisfied. Goodbye, Hermione. Goodbye, Severus. Thank you." She paused. "That is all I can say. No words are adequate at times like this."

As she smiled at them, Hermione thought she could see, for the first time, a dampness in the stern Headmistress's eyes.

"Goodbye, Headmistress. As you say, it is impossible to express oneself adequately, but ... thank you. I will be back ... often. This place lives in me."

Severus stepped forward and extended his hand. "Goodbye, Minerva. For all you and this school have done for me over the years, I thank you. Like Hermione, although I leave here with great hope for the future, I am sure I will be back just to check up on you of course. Don't let things slip." The corners of his mouth twitched up, but apart from that, he sounded deadly serious.

McGonagall rolled her eyes. "Now be off with you! You're not the only ones with better things to do than be stuck in an empty school during Christmas!"

With that she practically shooed them out. Severus stepped beyond the castle doors, but stopped and looked back over his shoulder. Hermione linked her arm through his and rested her head on his shoulder as they gazed back at it for a while. He looked down at her with a smile, then together they walked down the hill, away from Hogwarts School.

"I hadn't really thought about how to get to London. Do you want to Apparate from beyond the grounds? Or use your method. I suppose we could even take the train for a change."

He shrugged slightly. "There's no rush. You mentioned a while ago that you wanted to do something."

She glanced at him curiously. "What was that?"

"You wanted to go to Hogsmeade."

"I often go to Hogsmeade."

He rolled his eyes. "With me."

"Oh!" Realisation dawned as she remembered their conversation of several months before. "Yes! I'd love to. But ... there's not much point now, is there?"

"Why not?"

She smiled and reached up for a kiss. "Come on then."

Arm in arm they took the path that led to the village. Many students had had the same idea, and giggled excitedly as they passed the two of them. To many, their relationship was still a source of amused fascination. After half a mile or so they stopped. It was at this point that the path curled around a hillside and the castle would disappear from view.

They looked back at it a final time.

"No regrets?" Hermione asked.

"You've asked me that before."

"And what was your answer?"

He looked down at her. "How can I possibly have any regrets with you in my arms?"

She smiled. "I'll take that as a no."

And there, with Hogwarts Castle high on the hill behind them, and clusters of excited schoolchildren rushing past, Severus Snape leant down to kiss Hermione Granger. And together they stood, clasped together for an age, as the first snow of winter started to tumble idly around them.

The End.

Thank you to everyone who has supported this story from the beginning. It was always going to be a love story with a happy ending. What happens to these two wonderful people is up to them and you, but I hope I have placed them in a position where they can enjoy whatever life has to offer.

Any final thoughts would be greatly welcomed.

With love, LL x