

# In Charm's Way

by Annie Talbot

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## Embarkation

Chapter 1 of 4

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~oOo~

"Welcome to the Wizarding Waves," blared the loudspeaker as Severus and Hermione boarded the ship. Please have your wand cases, tickets, and passports ready for collection and examination."

Severus grumbled as he turned over his wand case, but Hermione believed it was *apro forma* protest, as he'd already been informed that wands were forbidden on board.

She was wrong.

A loud screech stopped them as they walked through the security arch.

"Severus, you *promised!*"

Severus scowled as a security elf confiscated his Weasley Undetectable Wand.

"I refuse to go anywhere that I am rendered incapable of defending myself, Hermione."

"You knew when you agreed to come that we'd have to surrender our wands. The money has been spent, the tax advantages clarified, and *you will board the ship.*" She shoved him forward, as a line was forming behind them.

"Too much money," he snarled.

"At your insistence, we have economised in every way possible. Now, hush. We need to talk to the cruise people."

They accepted the keys to their stateroom and listened carefully as a tanned, athletically-built young wizard explained that the keys were Portkeys to the hallway outside their stateroom and would work from anywhere on the ship. The young man...Brad...cheerfully informed them that the ship was imbued with all the most modern spells and would adapt to fit their needs and desires.

All the most modern spells? I wonder if any of ours...

"We at Wizarding Waves are dedicated to giving you the most pleasurable holiday imaginable! We want you to join us again and again and recommend us to all of your friends! If you need anything additional, just inform one of the staff, and they'll do their utmost to give you the perfect cruise experience!"

He ended his speech with a glowing white smile, which faltered somewhat as it met Severus's stony glare but returned as Hermione smiled back happily. He shook their hands, giving Hermione's an extra squeeze, before moving on to the next couple.

"I loathe the people who speak in exclamation marks. You shouldn't encourage him," Severus muttered.

"I thought he was perfectly nice," Hermione replied cheerfully. "Do you think they're using any of our charms?"

He was prevented from responding by a female version of Brad...Brianna...who identified herself as the Cruise Director and informed them of mealtimes and communal activities. "Everyone must return to their staterooms at midnight, though. If you're not there when the clock strikes twelve, the ship will send you there! Unless it's an emergency, you won't be able to leave your quarters until six a.m. Proper rest is essential to a good holiday!"

This time, Severus was treated to the extra-megawatt smile and the lingering handsqueeze. Hermione's glare wasn't reserved for the tall, tanned, and fit young woman, either. She turned it full-force on Severus when Brianna moved away.

"You will *not* hook up with that bimbo while we're on a working cruise," she hissed. "It'd be too embarrassing."

Her business partner snorted derisively. "I have no intention of *hooking up*...as you so charmingly put it...with anyone," he muttered back. "We're here to relax, recover, and learn, remember?"

It was true that the purpose of the cruise was only partially to bring themselves up to date on magical flora and fauna of the Caribbean. The programming would provide a tax write-off as a business expense. But the real reason for the mid-winter Caribbean cruise was to get them out of the lab and into the sun for four days, recovering from the bouts of influenza that had felled them in quick succession the prior month. They'd been testing their own broad-spectrum antiviral potions on themselves at the time; clearly, they needed to reconsider their approach.

Weeks later, they were still dragging themselves around the house they shared. When the Wizarding Waves brochure had appeared with their daily post, Hermione had lost no time in consulting their accountant (Ron's distant cousin was a very useful contact to have), cancelling their appointments for the last week in February, and registering them for the cruise.

Only then had she informed her business partner of the decision. His initial reaction...fury at her high-handedness...had evaporated as she showed him the programming schedule. Perhaps they could learn something and make new business contacts. And, he allowed, she was still rather pale. Actually, he'd said that she looked like the underside of a fish. He was one to talk.

He had, however, insisted that she cancel the second stateroom, pointing at the floor plan of the double stateroom, which cost only half again as much as a single. She'd rolled her eyes. He was *always* preaching economy, unless it was something *he* wanted to do. But, because he was giving in rather easily, she went along. Sleeping in a twin bed wasn't much of a sacrifice, and she was accustomed to hearing his snoring as it echoed through the house. It shouldn't be too bad.

When the day arrived, they'd shrunk their bags, warded the Charms and Potions workrooms, locked the house, and travelled to Miami via International Portkey. Hermione was looking forward to the holiday...their first on their own in a very long time...and she suspected that, beneath his grumbling, Severus was, as well.

~oOo~

Their stateroom was gorgeous. They had a balcony, which provided an unobstructed view to the horizon. The bath had a ridiculously large Jacuzzi, along with a separate shower. The wet bar was fully stocked, and the note on the counter said that the drinks were complimentary. A home entertainment system featured a wall-mounted television, DVD player, and stereo, flanked by shelves containing a selection of their favourite books, CDs, and DVDs. A sitting area boasted a couch and two comfortable chairs. The room was perfect, except for one thing.

The bed.

Singular.

To be honest, Hermione told herself, it was a gorgeous bed. Queen-sized, four posts, with a light comforter and a plethora of firm and fluffy pillows encased in high-quality cotton. She checked the couch. Not a pull-out. She checked the chairs; neither were they.

They summoned the Purser, a free house-elf named Izzy who also appeared freakishly tall, tanned, and gorgeous (for an elf). Izzy had quite a smile. Izzy expressed her deep desire to help and had done her best. The bed resisted all her efforts to transform it into twins.

Finally, Izzy had called Brad and Brianna for assistance. They'd arrived, checked the charms governing the room customisation locally, and declared everything to be in working order.

"Well," Brad said, taking Hermione's hands between his own and smiling down into her eyes, "we'll check the main room customisation programme when we get back to the control room. But I have to say, we've never had quite this problem before... usually, people start off with two beds and want them combined."

"You don't need to worry about a thing, Mr Snape," Brianna added, taking Severus's arm as he walked her to the door. Hermione noted with mild irritation that she'd walked somewhat closer to Severus than was customary and was brushing her full breast against his bicep. "We'll have everything just as it should be by the time you return from Orientation and dinner. But you mustn't be late!"

She reached up and kissed both his cheeks in the French fashion, then turned and did the same to Hermione. With a last, special smile for Severus, she spun and Disapparated. Brad followed an instant later.

"Hmmm," said Hermione, crinkling her brow. "You didn't get a chance to snag her wand, then, when she was rubbing up against you?"

"I didn't even think of it," Severus said, eyes still fixed on the spot where Brianna had been. "What do you suppose they're up to?"

"No good," was Hermione's gloomy response, turning back to the house-elf, who was unpacking their suitcases. "No good at all."

Agreeing silently to hope for the best against all historical evidence to the contrary, they left Izzy to her task and headed off towards Orientation, dinner, and their much-anticipated Herbology lecture.

~oOo~

"Well, that was... interesting." Hermione was grateful that Severus was being restrained in his criticism as he pushed open their stateroom door and followed her into the room. They looked at the bed with disfavour. It had not divided itself into two beds while they were away.

"I'm sorry, Severus. The seminar schedule looked so interesting... I'm not quite sure how the Potions lecture of a cruise dedicated to *Magical Flora and Fauna of the Caribbean* could be limited solely to aphrodisiacs. Many, many healing potions are based on plants and animals found here. I hope the entire programme isn't that bad... I

was really looking forward to tomorrow night's talk on Marine Life."

"Given what we saw tonight, it will be limited to the mating habits of merfolk," Severus agreed. "However, the fact that there are seminars, and we're attending them, will help us with this year's taxes, so I'll forgive you for the disaster." He paused. "It's been a long, tiring day. Do you want the loo first? I'll try to get in touch with Brad and Brianna to sort out the bed."

Hermione smiled gratefully and gathered her nightclothes. When she emerged several minutes later, teeth cleaned and hair secured for the night, she found that the television was on and Severus was lying on the untransformed Queen-sized bed.

"What are you watching?"

"An old programme from the 1960's called *The Prisoner*. It's about a retired spy."

"Ah. A childhood favourite?"

"No, it just came on."

"Brad and Brianna?" she asked hopefully.

"No response. The house-elf doesn't come when called, and the doors are locked because it's after midnight."

"Bugger."

"Quite," he replied, getting up.

He took his own nightclothes out of the dresser and went into the bath. As soon as the door clicked shut, the television went dark for a moment, then switched back on. The ladies of *Sex and the City* were having a conversation about personal grooming that Hermione found inappropriate for mixed company. Picking the remote up from the bed, she tried turning the screen off, changing the channel, and reducing the volume. When that failed, she searched for the wall plug, but it was nowhere to be found.

"Don't bother... it's enchanted. They're using a variant of our Ekeltricketty Charm. I could break it, if I had my wand, but I don't have the focus to do so wandlessly. Aaah... interesting programming choice."

"As you said, it just came on," she grouched.

As if on cue, the television switched off once more. Hermione sighed with relief. However comfortable they were as housemates, she and Snape didn't share the kinds of confidences that Carrie and the girls did. She didn't believe he really needed to know about bikini waxing.

She gathered several pillows and a blanket and carried them over to the sofa. "You can sleep here tonight," she declared.

"Why me?" he responded aggressively. "You're smaller!"

"Because you insisted that we share a room in the first place, that's why you!"

"The picture had twin beds! How should I know that the actual room would be different?"

Huffing in anger, knowing he was right about the size of the couch making for a better night for her than for him, she settled in, hoping that it wouldn't be one of his snoring nights...

... and found herself, her blanket, and her pillows unceremoniously dumped on the floor.

"What happened?" Severus had sat bolt upright at her dismayed shriek.

"The couch threw me off!"

"Oh, for... If you're that reluctant, *I'll* take the couch," he growled, retrieving the pillows and blanket, but leaving her to pick herself up off the floor.

No sooner was he supine than the couch tipped him off as well.

"Severus... I think the room wants us to share the bed."

The room lights dimmed, as if in confirmation. They stood at the foot of the bed, a sudden odd awareness humming between them. The moment stretched on...

"Oh, this is ridiculous!" Hermione exploded. "I'll take this side, shall I?" She grabbed her pillows, climbed in, and turned on one side, facing away from him as he slid between the crisp, white sheets.

The lights turned off altogether. She could feel herself relaxing into sleep. *It's not that bad, really*, she thought muzzily.

The television turned back on.

*Severus and Hermione!* A plummy voice filled the room. *Welcome to Night One of your Customised Couples Programming!*

"What the hell?" Severus snarled, sitting bolt upright in bed. Hermione pushed herself up on her elbows.

*Tonight's Topic... The Kiss! We will guide you as you explore each other's mouths with delicacy, ferocity, and passion. By morning, you will be Masters of Osculation!*

Hermione gasped, as images of herself and Severus kissing filled the screen.

He stared, transfixed, at his television self devouring her mouth as she gripped his shoulders and made small, passionate sounds. Hermione waved a hand in front of his suddenly flushed face.

"Severus!"

"Right! Sorry..." He averted his eyes from the screen, then flopped back onto the mattress, pulling his pillow over his face. "Just ignore it, Hermione. It'll stop if you ignore it."

"The hell with that!" She climbed out of bed and began pounding on the screen and controls with her shoe. When that didn't work, she marched to the door, turning the knob and tugging in a vain attempt to get it to open.

The moans from the television got progressively louder.

Finally giving up, she climbed back into bed. She followed his example, pulling a pillow over her head, but couldn't quite bring herself to block out the sounds entirely. She

kept sneaking glances at the screen, surprised by the passion that Television!Severus-and-Hermione showed for each other. She knew it wasn't real... she wasn't a passionate person at all, and Severus had never shown the slightest bit of interest in her. Which was a good thing, really, because she *knew* she'd disappoint him if they...

"Did you just whimper?"

She felt him sit up again and peer down at her in the light from the screen.

"No! No... it was her." She waved wildly at the Hermione on the screen, a woman whose unbound hair was spread against a deep red satin pillowcase, whose face was flushed with desire as she arched into her lover's touch, presenting her throat to his tongue, lips and teeth. She was, indeed, whimpering.

He glanced at the screen. "I can see why," he said in a low voice, then turned back to her. "But *you* whimpered too, Hermione. I heard you."

"All right, all right. I whimpered, okay? I was watching, and it's... stimulating." She felt like whimpering again as the admission burst out. "Severus, make it stop. Please!"

"It's impossible. I've already tried."

A low, throaty sound came from Television!Hermione's throat. "Please!" Bed!Hermione begged.

He faced the television once more and took a deep breath. "End this program immediately!" It was his Professor Snape voice, one Hermione hadn't heard in years and something odd curled in her belly at the sound.

The sighing sounds ceased. Hermione looked up at the telly to see her partner's doppelganger lift his dishevelled head from Television!Hermione's neck and turn to face the room. "The programme will cease when you have mastered the skill." More Professor Snape voice. More curling. Television!Hermione gave a breathy giggle which caused Bed!Hermione to close her eyes briefly in mortification. "I suggest you get to work, if you want to sleep at all tonight." He turned back to the eager witch and lowered his head once more.

"Hermione..." Her own Severus was leaning over her. "Maybe..." He fell silent.

"Maybe what, Severus? Maybe we should follow orders and 'Master the skill'? Maybe we should spend the night snogging, so that perhaps the telly will allow us a few hours sleep?" Her voice was harsh and she felt him recoil.

"I was going to offer to sleep on the floor."

"Oh. Sorry." She tried to control herself, but it burst out, anyway. "You shouldn't *have* to sleep on the floor. And who knows what the room will do to you if you try?"

"You're right. It's ridiculous," he conceded. "But it's also ridiculous that we're considering snogging, just to get the telly to shut the hell up."

"It's probably the only way. But..." Her voice faltered, but she ploughed on, determined. "But we have to promise not to let it affect our partnership. Even if we really like it, or really hate it, we just have to *do* it to get through this. All right?"

She felt him leaning closer. "All right, Hermione."

She looked deeply into his eyes...Her friend's eyes. Her partner's eyes....She'd never seen them like this, so dark and mysterious. What had she been saying?

"And..." Her gaze dropped from his, found his lips, caught his tongue sneaking out to moisten them. She felt her own tongue following suit. "And we won't judge each other, if one isn't very good at it. No competition here, okay?"

"Okay." He breathed the word against her jawline, moving gently along until he reached a spot just below her ear which he teased with his tongue. She gasped.

"You like that?" His chuckle echoed in the darkness.

"Yes," she choked. She'd never felt such a delicious tingling before. It was shocking. It was wonderful. It was terrifying.

He moved his lips slowly across her cheek until he found her mouth, dipping his tongue delicately within and teasing her lips until her tongue came out to play. The next few moments were filled with their gasps and moans as they explored each others' mouths, licking, nipping, caressing. Hermione realised that the television, although still lit, was silent. She hoped they weren't watching, but she suspected that they were.

She arched against him, pressing her body tightly to his, feeling his full erection pushing back at her. For the first time in her life, she didn't want to pull away. Why was this different? Why was *he* different?

His hands moved from her hair, stroked down over her throat, gripped her shoulders lightly, pulling her even closer. She heard a humming sound of approval and knew it was her own. His right hand left her shoulder, sliding down to cover her left breast.

"Oi! Severus!" His television self shouted from the wall. "Hands off! No copping a feel tonight!"

"He's right," Television!Hermione called. "You're out of bounds! Free zones for hands are shoulders and above, backs, hips, and thighs. Hands off the breasts and genitals tonight! What's covered now stays covered! You'll get a chance at her titties tomorrow!"

Severus groaned against her mouth, but he moved his hand down to her hip, securing her more tightly against himself, pushing his erection into her stomach. Without thinking, she wrapped her legs around his, creating a cradle for him. He slid downwards, never freeing her mouth, fitting himself to her and pushing rhythmically.

Hermione heard her own voice calling encouragement to him from the screen. "That's it, Severus! A little harder! More to the left! She's close!" She was vaguely grateful, as her own ability to communicate was limited to moans, gasps, urgently clutching fingers, and frantically moving hips.

She was entirely out of control, now... a creature at the mercy of its own desires. Nothing existed for her but her own body and Severus...his lips, tongue, hands, and cock. Even the television voices faded away, her ears filling with the incoherent sounds wrenched from their throats.

The odd curling sensation had long since become an urgent twist. She felt empty... parched... in need of something only Severus could provide. And provide it he did, pushing himself against her in a controlled rhythm, holding her steady with strong fingers, and...when the wave of sensation finally swept her away...swallowing her jagged cries with loving lips.

He stopped thrusting then, giving her a chance to recover and holding her gently against him. Finally she stirred, pushing at his shoulders until he rolled onto his back. She followed, straddling him, smiling down at him through the half-darkness as she began to move steadily against his straining cock.

Now it was her turn to listen to her partner's other self on the television as he instructed her as to the best angle, rhythm, and pressure. Now it was her turn to watch her beloved friend bite his lip as he tried to control his response, to draw it out, and to stifle the groans that wanted to burst forth. It was her turn to bring him to an explosion of feeling and to hold him safe as he convulsed helplessly. Her turn to stroke his hair and murmur words of love as his breathing slowed and his eyes drifted shut.

The room went completely dark as the charmed video ended. Apparently, they'd mastered the skill. Hermione knew, with a sinking feeling, that their relationship would never be the same again.

# Almost, But Not Quite

Chapter 2 of 4

Cruise Day... and Night... Two

Hermione blinked into awareness, realising that she was alone in the bed. She heard the shower running. *Good, I have a moment, then.*

Stretching, she was puzzled by tugs and pulls in her arms and legs. *What? He didn't... we didn't...*, but then she remembered the glorious spasms that had gripped every muscle in her body, sending waves rippling outwards to her fingertips and toes, only to recede, gather, and surge outward again.

*Fascinating.*

She'd never been one for sex...or for fooling around, for that matter. Her first kisses had come from Viktor Krum. Three years older than she, highly experienced (by his own admission), he'd placed her on a pedestal. For all Ginny's boasting that she, Hermione, had snogged Viktor, the truth was that his kisses had been frustratingly chaste. She had no doubt that, had they continued with their relationship, she'd have been completely untouched until her wedding night.

Ron had been an entirely different kettle of fish. For all his experience snogging Lavender, he seemed content to substitute enthusiasm for technique. His kisses had been wet and aggressive and bruising, just as everything else had been as their relationship had progressed. When they'd finally had sex, on the night she left Hogwarts, she'd been left shaken and unstirred.

Ron had had a lovely time, though; during the next six months, he'd contrived to repeat the experience as often as humanly possible. Hermione had developed a habit of casting cushioning charms whenever she sat; she needed them because of the regular affectionate battering she took from Ron. As her Muggle friend Jessica had said one night over drinks, "It's insert tab A into slot B, wiggle it around a bit, and get to listen to strange noises, look at really odd facial contortions, and deal with a wet spot. My only question is, what's in it for me, really?"

Hermione had realised that she couldn't agree more and had moved out of the flat she shared with Ron the very next day.

~oOo~

While Hermione was finishing her Hogwarts education, Severus Snape had been recovering at St Mungo's. He'd been discharged six months after the Battle of Hogwarts with an Order of Merlin and a Ministry stipend to his credit. Rather than retire to Spinner's End to drink himself to death as a decent wizard would do (his words, not hers), he'd stripped the house and sold it to a company planning the regentrification of the area, using the funds to purchase a small flat from which he launched his business.

Charming Brews was an instant success. Of course, his status as Tragic Hero accounted for much of that (and made him quite a hit with the ladies, as well, but Hermione wasn't supposed to know about that). Kingsley Shacklebolt had made the Ministry his first customer, signing a contract for him to do charms development for the Aurory. St Mungo's had followed, asking whether he'd be interested in adapting existing potions for more targeted use. He'd hired Hermione right out of school, and she'd done well in speaking to prospective clients and identifying new opportunities. It had been Hermione who'd suggested that the Muggle-born market would buy electronics if they could be charmed to work in the wizarding world. The two resulting patents...for the Ekeltricketty and Ekeltronicks Charms...had been registered in her name and were the currency she used to buy into the business. They'd expanded into the house in wizarding London right before she'd broken up with Ron. It had only made sense for both of them to live where they worked, as they spent so much time there and money, while flowing steadily, was not yet plentiful.

Their working relationship was curious. Never once had he been "Professor Snape" with her, instead always treating her as an equal. He challenged her, of course, and could be enormously critical, but he'd never crossed the line into the personal. When she and Ron had split up, he'd been sympathetic but hadn't pried.

As inventors and developers, they'd tapped into their competitive natures. Each step in a process became a race to create the best, the fastest. They developed their innovations in common workshops, working back-to-back, casting wordless charms, stirring silently, then meeting every night to discuss their successes and failures. Every charm devised, every potion developed in the years since she'd become his partner was a joint effort, and each lucrative patent reflected that fact.

The truth was, each could afford to live separately, in very comfortable accommodations, but it didn't occur to either of them to move. They were partners and they were friends.

They spent alternating holidays with each other's families... Christmas at the Malfoys could only be equalled...in Hermione's mind, at least...by Severus spending the following Yule with the Weasleys. Somehow, Australia became neutral ground, and their trips to visit her parents were greeted with relief by both parties.

Yes, they'd holidayed together. They'd lived together and worked together and become close friends. But they'd never touched one another in any way other than casually. They'd never looked sideways, wondering, *What would it be like?*

Until now.

She suddenly felt as if blinkers had been taken away from her eyes. After last night, she had a pretty good idea what it would be like, and she wanted to know it... feel it... and, even if she didn't quite like all of it, own it.

This was her chance, and she wasn't about to let go.

~oOo~

Severus pushed the control to turn the shower off, standing beneath a magical jet of air which whisked the water from his body and dried his hair in the style he'd worn when he had first entered the stateroom yesterday. *Another one of our charms*, he thought with satisfied irritation. *We're going to have to check to make sure everything is licensed appropriately. I'd hate to be missing out on the income.*

As he dressed, he heard Hermione moving around in the stateroom and the issue he'd been forcing from his thoughts rushed immediately to the fore. What was he going to do about Hermione?

He hadn't thought of her as anything other than his friend and partner before yesterday, he was certain of it. He was equally certain that he wouldn't be able to think of her just in that way ever again.

She'd been beautiful last night; open and honest in her passion. She hadn't been pretending. She knew him: Severus Snape. She spent almost every waking moment with

him, and she had wanted him.

And now... now, he wanted more than just last night. Now, he wanted every night. He wanted to possess her fully, know every secret.

Whose secret desire had the room read, when it had configured itself for them? It didn't matter, really. Not at all. Because, after last night, it was no longer a secret desire.

No, there was no going back at all.

~oOo~

Hermione looked up and smiled as Severus exited the steamy bathroom. "The door's open... we can leave any time we like."

"Are you in a hurry?" His deep voice shivered through her.

"No, not at all! I'd like to wash up a bit, then head down to breakfast soon, though. I'm famished!"

"At some point, we'll need to talk. Privately. Because I'd like to know what you'd like to do about tonight." He gestured with his head towards the dark and quiet television set. "I believe they mentioned that there was a plan for this evening, too."

"Yes," she said, and grinned roguishly. "Titties. I can't wait!"

With that, she whisked into the loo, closing the door firmly behind herself.

As she heard the click, she fist-punched the air.

~oOo~

They avoided Brad and Brianna all day, instead spending time lounging by the pool in the bright sunlight, covered with a strong sunblock potion of their own devising. Hermione looked healthier today, he decided.

Mid-afternoon, Hermione excused herself for several hours. She'd made an appointment in the ship's salon and said she'd meet him back in the room to get ready for dinner. As she left, she'd bent and kissed him on the cheek. Severus had smiled at her, advised her not to spend too much money, and returned to his book.

He knew she'd had nothing scheduled when they boarded, which meant that she'd called the salon this morning. After last night. Before tonight. His inner self fist-punched the air in triumph.

~oOo~

Izzy was nowhere in sight when he returned to their stateroom to change for dinner and the evening's lecture. The bed remained singular. Hermione had not yet arrived, but when she did, her eyes had flicked immediately to the bed. From the corner of his eye, Severus saw Hermione note its unchanged nature and smile. He had difficulty hiding his own satisfaction.

Dinner was spectacular. The Oceanic Life film which followed dinner was less so. As they had joked, it was all about the sex lives of sentient magical sea creatures: merpeople and selkies, yes, but there were some truly pornographic segments about Neptune, as well. Severus noted a number of people shifting in their seats, Hermione among them. Severus began to look forward to a very pleasurable night.

They just made it back to their stateroom when midnight struck. Severus heard the door lock behind them. "Now, *that's* an aspect of this entire thing I don't like, and I believe I'll have a word with Management about it."

"Fine," agreed Hermione, heading for the bed, across which was stretched a lovely, ivory lace gown. Gathering it up, she made for the loo, turning in the doorway. "But not tonight."

"No," he said. "Not tonight." He began to unbutton his shirt, eyes fixed on her. "I have other plans for tonight."

"Good," she smiled. Then, motioning with her hand, she asked, "Up or down?"

"What?" he sputtered.

"My hair. Up? Or Down?"

"Oh." He looked at her for a moment, considering. Then he looked at the screen, remembering the way she had looked with her hair spread across the pillows. He strode to the bed, yanking back the coverlet to expose the sheet. Crimson.

"Down."

~oOo~

She was outrageously nervous while she waited for him to emerge from the bathroom.

*Come on, Hermione, she chided herself. It's not like you're a virgin. And this is Severus. He's already proven he's a better lover than Ron. And you're far more attracted to him than you ever were to Ron. And anyway, we'll have help. She eyed the dark screen. Maybe.*

The television had been stubbornly silent as she'd waited. Although, looking at herself in the mirror as she'd changed, she'd regretted taking the advice of Carrie and friends. It had been expensive, it had been embarrassing, it had hurt, and it looked odd. She sighed.

Maybe he wouldn't notice. Maybe he wouldn't get *there* at all tonight.

The bathroom door opened and the room's lights dimmed. Saxophone music began to purr from the stereo system.

As Severus slid between the sheets and turned to her, the television switched on.

*Severus and Hermione! Welcome to Night Two of your Customised Couples Programming! Tonight's programme is called The Sky's the Limit, because you're allowed to do anything your hearts' desire. Touch each other wherever you like. Except for one or two Forbidden Acts, that is... Your trainers will explain! Before I go, I wish you as happy and fulfilling a night as last night, courtesy of Wizarding Waves!*

Television!Hermione-and-Severus appeared on the screen. She was wearing a nightdress identical to Hermione's, while Television!Severus appeared to be wearing nothing at all. Hermione's jaw dropped when she saw what she'd been coveting all day.

"Is... is that..." she whispered.

"True to life? Yes." He murmured in her ear. "We'll take it slowly. It'll be fine."

"Are you sure? Ron was... less. And it was very uncomfortable. And... they don't seem to want to go slowly at all."

Television!Hermione had gotten straight to business while they were whispering to one another, crouching before her partner and taking him fully into her mouth.

"Oh, fuck," Bed!Severus snarled. "You two, back off a bit. We're going for slow and romantic, here. Not Bang!Bang!Barbie!"

~oOo~

Television!Severus glared at his other self as his lover had sat back on her heels, releasing him from her mouth with an audible pop. Finally, with a brief nod, he pulled her between his spread legs, back to his chest, and began running his fingers lightly over the smooth flesh that rose above the swell of her breasts. "Is this better?" he asked sarcastically.

"Much," snarled Severus, shifting behind *his* Hermione and following suit, using his chin to shift aside a mass of curls so he could run his lips along the sensitive cord of her neck while murmuring to her how beautiful she was, how much he desired her, and how perfect everything would be.

"Before you get too wrapped up in each other," Television!Hermione said resentfully, "I want to share tonight's rules with you. As our Announcer said, you may do anything, touch anywhere, with two exceptions: no penetration tonight...front or back. Oral is fine, though, as you saw."

Severus ignored her. They'd follow the rules... there was no telling what the room would do to them if they didn't. But Severus would be damned if he'd spend another evening listening to her, obeying her instructions. He'd pay attention to *his* Hermione, instead.

His fingertips trailed into the valley between her breasts, avoiding the sensitive peaks altogether as they travelled down to roam across her belly, catching and pulling the lacy fabric as they moved, dragging it taut across her nipples, then releasing, then tautening again.

A long, low moan came from the telly, echoed more softly by a shuddering moan from the woman in his arms.

"Touch me," she gasped. "Touch me, please."

He dared a glance at the screen. His counterpart already had his partner's bodice down and was fondling both breasts freely, rolling the nipples between his fingertips while his mouth sucked at her throat. Severus looked at the witch in his arms; her eyes were glued to the scene before her, her lips parted and moist.

He moved his hands to her arms, now, sliding them slowly upwards until they reached the thin straps that held her bodice then, sliding his index fingers under each, pulled them slowly downward, exposing her millimetre by millimetre to his gaze. The lacy edge caught on her hard nipples, and he paused, looking down over her shoulder, breathing heavily at the sight of the perfection of flesh against the fabric, the curve of creamy skin echoed by the smaller arc of her deep pink aureole. Then, a tiny tug downwards, and her nipple popped free. At the sight, his control broke for a moment, and he let go of the straps, trapping her tightly against him with his arms crossed in front of her, his hands roughly squeezing, kneading, his mouth ravenous on her shoulder.

She gave a cry and his grip loosened.

"I'm sorry," he panted. "I..."

"No, no, Severus," she said urgently, turning in his arms to kneel before him. "You don't understand. How can you, when *I* don't even understand? I liked it. I've liked everything you've done to me, even though I've never liked any of it before. And I want to do more." She peeled the straps down her arms, leaving the gown bunched around her hips, baring her breasts and belly to him.

Taking his right hand in her left, she pulled it to her breast while caressing his own chest with her right hand. "Tell me... does it feel as wonderful when I do this to you?" She pinched a nipple, rolling it between her fingers and repeating the action with her other hand.

"Yes," he said, feeling his loins catch fire as he used both hands to stimulate her, lifting, pinching, rolling. Finally, he leaned forward and sucked, drawing another cry from her...one he now recognised as a cry of passion and need. Both of her hands came to the back of his head and pressed him tightly to her. He licked, he sucked, he gently bit... and her breathing grew harsher, the pressure of her hands more urgent. He pulled away, running his tongue up her body and over her throat as he pulled her even closer. Her head fell back to give him full access, and he took advantage, licking and sucking at the pulse, eliciting cries and moans and passionate whispers. He lifted his head. Television!Severus-and-Hermione were staring at them open-mouthed from the screen. Checking to make certain that his lover's eyes remained closed, he reached for the remote, pointed it, and clicked the television off.

Now, the only light in the room came from the balcony door, and it was dim, indeed. Still, Severus could see her lips, parted with her quick breaths, and the sweep of her lashes lying just above her cheekbones.

"Lie back, Hermione," he whispered, pushing her sideways across the bed.

She lay quiescent, trembling, waiting for him to lead her further into passion. He kissed her deeply, passionately, coaxing her tongue into an eager duel as his hands roamed freely down her torso to her hip, bunching the lace of her nightgown in his hand, and pulling it up to expose her totally to his touch.

When he slid his hand into the soft flesh between her thighs, he was shocked and unbearably excited to find her entirely bare. Nothing shielded her from him. He ran his fingers along her moist folds and shuddered with barely-contained lust. Ripping his mouth from hers, he put it to her ear, whispering, "Did you do that today?"

"Yes," she gasped, as his knee pushed between her thighs and he pressed his pyjama-covered erection hard against her hip.

He growled. "Did you do that for me?"

"Yes," she moaned, as his finger found and probed, pushing as far into her as he could go.

"Do you like this?" he purred, as his thumb found her naked clitoris and began pressing lightly, circling.

"Yes!" she cried, lifting her hips, pressing herself against that maddening hand, that tantalising, terrifying hardness.

"Good."

His lips began their journey back downwards. He took his time, biting and suckling at her throat, her breasts, her navel, always keeping the rhythm of his thrusting finger and circling thumb regular, steady. Keeping his aching cock in contact with her hip, her thigh, her calf, until the moment when he crouched between her thighs, looking at her most intimate flesh in the dimness, watching as she strained upward against his hand, and thinking, *Perfect*.

"Perfect."

He didn't realise he was going to speak until he heard the word hanging in the air between them. And in the next second, he dove through it, bringing his mouth to her open, welcoming, forbidden places in a caress that shocked him as much as it did her.

"Perfect," he said again, his lips playing across her flesh, his breath finding and entering her alongside his finger.

And then he consumed her, feasted on her until her body was wracked with volcanic spasms and her sobbing cries split the night. And as he crouched, aching, above her panting, trembling body, he heard her gasp one word.

"Perfect."

~oOo~

Hermione felt her heartbeat ease somewhat and found that she could move again. She looked down her body to see him looking up at her, dark eyes gleaming hotly, lips parted with his quick, shallow breaths. She thought he hadn't come... she *knew* he hadn't come... and, despite her past failures, she knew she could do no less than return to him the pleasure he'd given her. Tenfold, if possible.

"Come," she croaked, beckoning him up her body, gathering him close as he moved above her. "No sex, right?"

"No sex," he confirmed, his voice a deep purr. She felt him straining at her core and lifted to rub her silken, wet flesh against the burning ridge beneath his pyjamas.

"Then..." For the second night in a row, she pushed him onto his back, rising to straddle him, look down at him. Struggled with the fabric bunched around her waist, pulling it up over her breasts, over her head, she flung it aside, then bent to kiss him. She moved lower, then, duplicating the path he had taken, licking and biting his nipples, combing her nails through the hair on his chest, lower still across his belly, pausing at his navel, then looking up into those deep, hot eyes as she peeled the pyjama pants away from his cock and down his legs, pulling them free and then tossing them to join her nightgown.

She crept back up between his legs, making a place for herself. She knew he was holding himself absolutely still, submitting to her wishes, not daring to move lest he frighten her away.

She smiled as she approached his cock.

It twitched and seemed to stretch to meet her tongue as she ran it along the underside, swirling it slightly as she reached the tip. Tasting him... scenting him... as he had tasted and scented her.

He groaned.

She slid one hand around his base, grasping him lightly, then increasing the pressure until she heard another pleasure sound escape his lips. She took the entire tip of him into her mouth, swirling her tongue and suckling as she moved her hand up and down, bringing the other to explore his already-tight balls.

His hands tunnelled into her hair, then gripped helplessly as, on the next downstroke of her hand, she followed, taking as much of him into her mouth as she could. Slowly, ever so slowly, she moved back up, hand pressed against her lips, tightening the pressure of her grip, increasing the power of her suction as she went.

He was moaning above her. Babbling endearments and obscenities. *Is that what I sounded like?* she wondered as she lifted her mouth from his cock, letting the cool night air bathe the glistening, weeping tip as her hand travelled inexorably back downward. Then upward. Then downward again. She blew gently against over the slit, then dipped her tongue in delicately, gathering his essence. His body jerked uncontrollably, and she moved the hand that had been caressing and rolling his balls to his hip, pressing to hold him still.

"There, there," she whispered, letting the words play across the swollen, needy flesh. "I'm here."

His cock twitched again in her hand. He was almost there, she could tell, and it would be cruel to deny him. Moistening her lips, she bent back to him, taking all of him in that she could, moving her head and hand in unison until he pulled wildly at her hair, trying to pull her away, losing control, spilling endlessly into her.

She drank him. Joyously, as he'd drunk her.

And she heard him say, at that final moment, "Hermione."

And it meant "perfect".

## Finish What You Began

*Chapter 3 of 4*

Cruise Day... and Night... Three

This time, it was Severus who woke alone in the bed, although he could hear Hermione moving about the room, tidying up.

*What the hell happened last night?*

For all that he'd acknowledged that he wished to continue the relationship with Hermione, deepen it, he had been entirely unprepared for the intensity of passion he'd felt last night.

Lust, he knew. He could *do* lust. He could even do lust with affection.

But passion? Passion implied something else. It implied more than the physical, more than the casual. It meant need. It meant craving. It meant... fear. Loss.

He felt his fists clench and couldn't control them. Just as, in the darkness of their room last night, he'd been unable to control himself, unable to control her.

Could he do this? Could he *do* passion? Could he give up control?

Or was it now too late to ask those questions?

He lay rigid until he heard her go into the bathroom and close the door. When he heard the water running, he opened his eyes and pushed himself upright. He looked around at the tidy room...so sterile and orderly...and then at the wrecked bedclothes.

Order. Chaos.

He'd lived most of his life balanced on the edge between the two. When the war had ended he'd craved order and had lived quite contentedly for the past fifteen years, going about his business. Order.



And now Passion stood before him. Tempting him with her siren song. If he let himself go... if he let himself embrace her, he'd be dancing on that knife again.

He heard the water shut off and the sound of her humming as the air dried her and she dressed. He imagined how she looked, hair wild until she wrestled it into a plait that hung down her back, arms and legs touched with the beginnings of sun tan, breasts ripe and heavy in the heat, and her woman flesh... her cunt, her quim, her core... Dear God.

She'd stripped herself utterly bare for him, exposing all of her secrets to his fingers and eyes in the dim light of the room.

Trust.

Chaos.

The door opened and she emerged, long legs clad in tangerine-coloured shorts, an ivory silk tank top clinging to her curves.

She saw him and smiled. "Good morning!"

He flung himself into the abyss.

~oOo~

Hermione knew the instant he woke up, of course. She could sense the altered tension of his body and made sure to make enough noise that he'd know she was there.

When he didn't open his eyes to greet her, she knew something was wrong. When she saw his hands curl into anguished knots, she'd stood, watching as he struggled with something too great, too terrifying, to share.

She knew that he wouldn't open his eyes while she was still in the room, so she'd gone into the bathroom to shower and dress. She hadn't cried until she was deep in the shower with the falling water to stifle any sound.

She was so afraid.

She'd known that he was important... he was her *partner*, for heaven's sake. And her best friend... he'd filled the gap that had opened when Harry and Ron had married and moved on. But now he was her lover. Really, the first lover she'd ever had, as she refused to count Ron in any equation that contained Severus.

And he was considering letting her go. She knew that as surely as she knew the sun would set that evening. He was considering stepping back, and she'd have to survive it if he did.

Could she do that?

Could she return to a life of research and affection? Of orderly sterility? Of mind alone, devoid of heart, body, and soul?

If she had to.

She wouldn't lose him... Whatever part of him he wished to share, she would take.

She could go back in behaviour, and she *would* if he required it. But her heart... her heart wouldn't go back. She loved him.

That wasn't going to change, regardless of his choice.

She drew a great, shuddering breath and turned off the tap, standing still for the drying jets of air to do their work. She stood naked before the foggy mirror, braiding her hair and studying the blurry outline of her body. What was it about *that* body that had the power to move him so? How was it able to contain and spill so much love so suddenly? She pulled on her clothes mechanically and slipped her feet into sandals.

She was ready to face the world; ready to face *him*.

She flung open the door and emerged, surrounded by steam. Her eyes immediately went to the naked man sitting at the centre of the bed, staring at her with such a mixture of anguish and hope, she almost couldn't bear it. For a moment, she couldn't tell what was going to happen, and her heart began to break.

She pasted a cheerful smile onto her face... *Fight for him!*...and carolled, "Good morning!"

Everything hung in the balance for a second longer.

Then, his face relaxed into a smile and he held out his hand to her.

"Good morning, Hermione."

She flung herself into his arms.

~oOo~

The day passed much as the previous one had. They spent time soaking up the sun's rays. Hermione finished her book early that afternoon and hurried to the ship's library to pick out something new to read. While she was gone, Severus went looking for Brad and Brianna. He found them, seated side by side in a glider overlooking the putting green. He pulled up a chair and faced them, effectively blocking their view of the ninth hole.

"So, here's what we're going to do," he said, leaning forward and fixing them each with an icy stare. "We're going to call George Weasley and tell him to meet us all when the ship docks tomorrow. At that point, we'll sit down and figure out how many laws you've broken and what we're going to do about it."

The two sat staring at him, gobsmacked.

"What do you know about George Weasley? And why should he care about you?" After a long pause, Brianna finally broke the silence.

"I know that he owns Wizarding Waves. And he cares about me because Hermione's practically a member of his family. And...if you've met him...I'm the man responsible for the ear."

"But..." Brad blinked. "But he said it was a war injury. That it had been severed by a Death Eater."

Severus smirked. "It was." He casually rolled up his sleeves.

Two perfect tans became beiges.

"So, I'm thinking that we have a simple case of fraud, embezzlement, and blackmail here. You two...and the elf, probably...have cut back on staff so that there are no Pursers on duty after midnight, done away with the scholarly presentations, and pocketed the salaries that were to be paid to the staff and speakers Mr Weasley believes

you've hired. In addition, you targeted the couples who stayed in our stateroom for "Couples Counselling", using Parrotjuice Potion to induce them to indulge their basest urges, documenting such indulgences and then threatening them with exposure."

He eyed their perfect faces and bodies with suspicion. "I suppose you're using Parrotjuice Potion now, as well. Good God, people, did nobody tell you the stuff was addictive if used continuously over an extended period of time?"

Four angry blue eyes glared at him. He decided to go on.

"You embedded a Psykread Charm in the door of the stateroom...which is a Class A felony, by the way, as Psykread Charms are only to be used for therapeutic purposes by licensed professionals... otherwise, they're a mind-rape for which you should be hanged, drawn, and quartered. I'm fairly certain that Mr Weasley didn't obtain access to that particular charm, so one of you must have done so. I'll be interested in learning where you got it. Shall I continue?"

The two sat, mute.

"Fine. I realised what you'd done the first night when you selected a television series about a retired spy for me to view. I could forgive that...what I can't forgive is that you deliberately played on Hermione's insecurities as you did."

"Well, it all turned out okay in the end, didn't it?" Brad had found his tongue at last. "You and your Hermione have hooked up, she's not so insecure anymore, and life is good! No need to bring old George into it, now, is there? We'll just fold up our tents and leave. No harm done!"

"Not so fast!" Severus ordered as the pair made as if to stand. "Not to sound too cliché, but I'm giving the orders, now. And no, you're not leaving. And yes, old George is most *definitely* coming into it."

He waited until they subsided back into their seats.

"So, the Psykread Charm. Who has the ability to interpret it?"

"Nobody," said Brianna. "We don't know what it sees, specifically, we just do what the computer tells us to do."

"And who operates the computer?" Years of interrogating second-years had prepared him for dealing with these two. He asked the question, knowing the answer, but wanted to be sure they were telling the truth.

"Izzy," answered Brad. Brianna nodded. "Izzy ran the whole show. She's one smart elf! She used to work at St Mungo's and she brought the charm and the computer program with her."

"Does she hold the memories? For the blackmail?"

"What?" Brad looked startled for a moment. "No, elves handle memories differently, so we can't use her for that. And..." Here he looked briefly embarrassed. "...she doesn't like to watch people screwing, so... well... she doesn't actually *have* any of the memories."

"So it's just you two."

"Yes," Brianna nodded. "Us and the couples. Izzy handles the charms and the money."

"Who else is in on this?"

"Nobody," Brad, this time. "Just us and Izzy."

He looked deeply into both sets of blue eyes and saw that they were telling the truth.

"It's too bad that you won't be able to cash in anymore," he said.

"I'm sure we can work something out," cooed Brianna, pouring sex into her voice.

"Oh, I doubt it," he declared and, raising the wands he'd Summoned from their pockets as he'd approached them from behind, cast two perfect Petrificus charms and waited to see whether they'd fall forward onto their faces from the glider. They didn't, to his everlasting regret.

"So here you are! I thought you were waiting at the pool." Hermione stepped up beside him, her eyes fixed upon the Petrified pair. "What's up?"

Severus explained briefly, his eyes searching her face for signs of distress that she'd been seduced and spied upon by a pair of blackmailing thieves.

Her eyes went hard as she turned to look at Brad and Brianna. "I can't believe you did this to people! You used the Psykread Charm to give people what they wanted most in the world, and then you used it to shame them. You deserve everything you're going to get!"

She looked back at Severus. "What *are* they going to get?"

His face was grim. "Well, Obliviated, for starters." He saw her flinch. "I know it's harsh, but they're carrying around other people's private memories. Those have got to be destroyed. After that... well, it's up to George."

She held his gaze for a moment, then nodded. "Right. It's necessary. They can't be allowed to victimise anyone ever again. So... wipe the charms, too."

He was shocked. "All of them? Turn them into squibs?"

"No, Severus, not all of them. But I don't want them to have memory of even one of *our* inventions. I counted twenty-three total in use on the ship, by the way."

"Really? My final count was twenty-four... They're using Parrotjuice."

"Oh? I wonder what they really look like. I guess we'll find out soon enough, won't we?"

~oOo~

Hermione waited patiently while Severus delivered two Petrified and semi-lobotomised Parrotjuice junkies into the care of the ship's captain. Security elves were dispatched to apprehend Izzy. They returned speedily and placed her, with Brad and Brianna, in a specially warded brig. Not even Izzy would be able to perform magic there.

"Twenty-five," Severus whispered to Hermione, who giggled. She'd designed the complex warding system the brig's protections were based on.

Their stateroom looked exactly the same when they reached it late that afternoon. The television remained silent.

"How much of this was them and how much was us, do you think?" Hermione asked as he began to undress her.

"It's all us, Hermione. That's why I didn't kill them. They showed us what was already there."

"You mean I've always loved you?" she asked, obediently raising her arms over her head so he could pull the tank top free.

"Well, not always. I am sure that you didn't love me when you set me on fire, or stole from me, or hexed me in that godforsaken shack and then, years later, left me to die a lonely, painful death. But I *am* sure that you loved me when we boarded this ship. And I... cared... for you, as well. The Customisation Charms wouldn't have worked as they did, otherwise."

She smiled quietly to herself at the admission and stood still, content to let him unbuckle, unsnap, and unzip the shorts and send them zooming to the floor.

"I've been wondering all day what you were wearing under that outfit." His eyes gleamed as they rested on her berry-coloured nipples poking at the peach lace covering them, then roved lower to the bikini briefs that concealed her secrets.

She stepped closer to him, raising her hands to unbutton his shirt. He was less compliant than she had been, reaching around to unhook her bra, pushing her arms down so it could join her shorts and tank on the floor. Within seconds, the matching peach panties had completed the set and she stood naked before him.

Shrugging out of the shirt, he stepped back to look at her. Suddenly, the rays of the setting sun flooded the room, turning her hair and skin as radiant as her smile. His hands went to his own belt, and soon he, too, was standing naked in the light.

He held out his hand and led her to the bed, reaching to pull down the coverlet. It came as no surprise to him whatsoever that the sheets, tonight, were the same peach colour as her bra and bikini pants had been.

Even without Brad and Brianna, the room continued to operate, only now, it was *on their* side.

He gestured for her to lie down. For a moment, he stood at the bedside, looking down at her, feeling his guards slip away. He was as open to her as she was to him, and oddly, he didn't mind.

"Hermione," he whispered.

Her smile broadened and she spread her legs.

"Please come to me, Severus. Now."

Seconds later, he was lying over her, kissing her passionately, left hand buried in her hair, right hand between her legs, finding her damp heat and stroking, circling as he'd done the previous evening. Continuing the movement with his thumb, he gently inserted two fingers, feeling her silken heat clench around him as he pushed... withdrew... pushed in again, feeling her moisture easing his way and hearing the quiet sounds she made with each intrusion escalate to moans.

Her own fingers moved downward to grip his cock, moving her hand from its base to the tip and back again, her thumb swirling across the tip in a motion similar to what he was doing, in miniature, to her clit. His voice met hers, murmuring quiet reassurances against her lips as he began to thrust into her grip, grinding against her thigh and feeling her hips rise to meet the thrusts of his fingers.

This was moving much faster than he'd intended. She was arching and twisting, making incoherent sounds and pulling him closer. Gathering all the control he could muster, he withdrew his fingers from her and allowed her to guide his penis to her, dragging it down through her folds and across the hard nub of her clit, fitting the head into the place he wished to be more than anywhere in the entire world.

He pushed forward a little, freezing at the first sound she uttered. Gazing into eyes that were glazed with desire, yet touched with a hint of unease, he smiled.

"Easy, Hermione," he rasped. "We'll take this slow and easy."

Gently he rocked forward and retreated, stretching her more with each inward movement. She imitated the rhythm, rocking upwards against him, incrementally back, then upwards again.

Reaching behind him, he pulled her knee up, opening her wider and tilting her for easier access before returning to her clit, rubbing and circling to match the rhythm of their bodies' movements.

In... back... in...

He was nudging deeper with every gentle thrust forward, feeling the tight passage give way before him.

... back... in... back...

Deeper still. She was moving more urgently, now, meeting him with increasing force, trying to pull him deeper... faster.

Sweat erupted from every pore of his body as he tried to maintain control, to avoid hurting or frightening her at all costs.

... in... back...

And then she won. Digging her fingers into his buttocks, she pulled him down into her as she propelled herself upward, impaling herself on him with the same courage and passion she'd shown for her entire adult life.

As he held himself perfectly still, buried within her, trying to give her time to adjust, she pulled her other knee up, tucking it against his side, curving her calf across his buttocks and further deepening his entry.

Her gaze sharpened, focussing on his.

"Now," she said, loosening her grip so he could pull back, then tightening again so that he was forced forward. "Let it go."

"You don't understand," he whispered, flexing within her. "I could hurt you."

She pulled her mouth to his for a long, deep kiss.

When she drew back, she smiled, then looked down to where they were joined.

"I don't care. Let go... NOW!"

With that, she twisted and squeezed, and his control shattered. He began thrusting, pulling almost all the way out and then burying himself as deeply as he could with quick, sharp movements of his hips. She met him thrust for thrust, sometimes shifting to change the angle, crying out when he hit a spot... the spot...

"There!"

He grasped her hip firmly, keeping her angled just so as he moved with increasing ferocity.

He was going to lose it... he was losing it...

Still propped on one arm, he pushed himself higher, staring down at her, noting the flush that spread upwards across her torso, her breasts, her throat, her face.

His Hermione. His brilliant, beautiful Hermione was writhing beneath him. Around him. Her eyes were blank now. Her body was beginning to convulse... he could feel the tremors beginning deep within, the spasms that clutched at him, pulling him inward again and again.

She screamed and arched, then went rigid beneath him as he began slamming into her without regard for her comfort, for anything other than finding perfect release within this spectacular woman. She relaxed, accepting him even as she recovered from her own shattering climax.

Then, amazingly, she began to move again, rocking into his pounding thrusts, gazing into his eyes as his tension grew... and grew... until he finally spilled inside her in a blinding, searing convulsion that drew an agonised cry from his lips.

He collapsed on top of her, unable to roll aside to spare her his weight, gasping for breath. He thought he might have died for a moment, but he didn't care one bit.

~oOo~

Hermione lay dazed, her hand moving through his sweat-soaked hair.

What he had given her... What they had shared... There were no words.

She smiled ruefully. If she knew him, though...and herself...they'd twist themselves up in knots trying to find those words that didn't exist.

"Severus," she whispered.

"Mmmmm?" an exhalation against her throat.

"Nothing, love. Just Severus."

As she lay holding him, she had the fleeting thought that, if their lovemaking continued to be so vigorous, she should consider brushing up on those cushioning charms. She smiled and closed her eyes. She didn't care one bit.

## Epilogue

*Chapter 4 of 4*

The end of our tale

George had, of course, been furious. He'd taken charge of his three employees—who, by that time, no longer appeared freakishly tall, tanned, or gorgeous, as the Parrotjuice Potion had worn off overnight, leaving them a short, dumpy, middle-aged wizard, witch, and elf—and sent them to work as testers in the Weasley's Wizard Wheezes Potions Division.

He'd walked through the ship with Hermione and Severus, nodding as they pointed out each instance where their charms had been used or adapted without their consent.

"Well, I can't say that this isn't serious, Severus. Hermione," he'd said at the end of the tour. "It's hard to believe that three relatively low-level employees were able to put together such a scheme. I'll make sure you're compensated, of course."

He'd extended his hand, intending to leave them to disembark and return to London while he had a word with his captain.

"Not so fast," said Hermione in a hard voice. "We can't believe it either. Oh, the three of them are responsible for the criminal acts. Absolutely. But *you*, George Weasley, are responsible for adapting most of the charms installed throughout this ship and failing to pay the proper licensing fees. Nobody else could have done it. Nobody else is clever enough."

George had quailed under their combined glares. Eventually, he'd confessed all. A subsidiary of WWW had purchased licenses to most of the charms, misrepresenting the use to which they'd be put. The licensing fees paid had been far lower than they should have been, given George's income from the charms' use.

An agreement was quickly worked out. Negotiations were always speedy when Hermione began dictating terms in the insufferably bossy voice Severus remembered so well from her student days. George apparently remembered it, too, as he capitulated far too quickly. Most men foolishly tried to hold out longer.

Under the agreement, Severus and Hermione would each receive one-third shares in WWW and its subsidiaries; George would remain in charge of day-to-day operations. Severus and Hermione, in turn, granted George a one-sixth share in Charming Potions, on the condition that they all participate in Research and Development for both companies.

Hermione would be responsible for Corporate Ethics for both companies. George immediately began to call her Jiminy Cricket. She responded by calling *him* Vincent. Neither had the courage to address Severus as Cyrano, but they both thought it.

~oOo~

From that point, everyone got along fine. The new partnership settled into a busy—and lucrative—routine. Hermione revamped the academic programming for Wizarding Waves, while George created a Love Boat theme, capitalising on the adaptations Izzy had made to the Customised Couples Programming. Instead of using the Psykreader Charm, though, they asked couples to provide answers to a questionnaire, written on Veritapaper. The results were as accurate as what Brad, Brianna, and Izzy had obtained, but far less intrusive. Wizarding Waves soon obtained a second ship, and each served both markets, alternating weeks with each programme so as to avoid Charms Fatigue.

The interactive component of Customised Couples Programming had been done away with altogether, although truth be told, Severus and Hermione had rather enjoyed the voyeuristic interplay and were working together on a private project to charm a mirror to function in a similar fashion. They'd been unsuccessful, thus far, but continued with enthusiastic experimentation.

~oOo~

Several years after their adventure with Wizarding Waves, Hermione returned home loaded down with Christmas gifts she'd bought at Diagon Alley. After stowing them in

her closet, she went hunting for her lover, who the wards told her was alone somewhere in the house. Potions workroom? No. Charms workroom? Not there, either.

She moved up the steps to the attic where she'd once had her bedroom. Since she'd moved downstairs with Severus, he and George had been using that space in their attempt to reproduce the charms which had been used to create Hogwarts' Room of Requirement. If they managed it, they planned to market The Playroom to high-end resorts.

They'd been getting closer, finally making a breakthrough in the Secret Desire Charm last week. As had been the case with the illegal and dangerous cocktail of charms they'd encountered on their cruise, The Playroom would read the shared desires of a couple and would supply a setting for those desires. Unlike the cruise, the setting would come from a prefabricated list, designed to prevent harm to the participants. Each participant had to at least be aware of and not feel negatively about the desire. And, if either partner had a change of heart, the program's safeguards would set in and the scenario would end.

Cautiously, she pushed open the door and stepped through. For an instant, she saw an empty attic, her beloved standing waiting for her beside a dormer window, dressed in his customary jeans and black shirt. Seconds later, the room changed. The walls were made of stone, one covered with shelves containing jars of potion ingredients, each more grotesque than the last. Severus stood in teaching robes behind a massive desk. She could feel her own clothing changing, morphing into her old school uniform, now too small for her more mature figure.

The Potions Master spoke.

"You're late, Miss Granger."

She stepped forward into the room, closing the door behind her.

Detention.

Life was very good, indeed.