

Witchy Woman

by linlawless

Hermione is reluctantly attracted, Severus is unwillingly bewitched, and Dumbledore is happily meddling. The path to true love is fraught with challenges ...

AU and somewhat fluffy, beginning at the end of Seventh Year.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 28

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A/N: This was the first fic I wrote for this fandom, and it was conceived as a belated birthday present for my very dear friend, dajem (aka Atuliel or DericaAtuliel or just DA or Jem). In addition to providing the inspiration, she also provided invaluable encouragement, advice, and assistance along the way. Of course, any errors are mine alone. The title was inspired by the Eagles' classic song of the same name.

In terms of story background, this story begins toward the end of Seventh Year, so obviously, certain deaths that happened in canon didn't happen in my world. Other departures from canon should become clear in due course.

Although I'll probably be tweaking it as I post here, if you're really impatient, this story is complete and posted in its entirety at my website and at other places I archive -- check my profile for links.

Constructive feedback is always greatly appreciated. Enjoy!

The usual disclaimers apply.

Chapter 1

She must have cast a spell, Severus mused gloomily, trying not to stare at his nemesis across a roomful of students. *Anything this disturbing must be magic. There's no other rational explanation for why I'm suddenly so obsessed.*

Of course, he acknowledged (even more gloomily), the idea of Hermione Granger casting a spell to make him obsessed with her didn't exactly ring with logic and reason. What possible purpose could she have?

Perhaps she just wanted him to suffer. After all, she was close friends with that arrogant young fool, Potter, so perhaps she was trying to distract him from his dislike of her friend.

But what would be the point? He had always disliked Potter, but that had never prevented his tendency to rescue or at least protect the young fool whenever the Dark Lord

launched a salvo against him. *And making me obsessed with Hermione Granger would only make me less alert to whatever form the latest danger might take* he mused. So perhaps that wasn't it.

But maybe, he thought suddenly, it wasn't Miss Granger who had cast the spell on him at all. Maybe it was Potter himself, or his sidekick, Weasley. Or it could be any of the students, really. Perhaps they thought if they distracted him enough, he would forget to deduct points for the many infractions they committed all day, every day.

But when had he ever failed to deduct points for infractions? He considered the question as he idly watched Hermione, who appeared to be thoroughly engrossed in the Mandrake Draught the class was making today. Or at least, he tried to *look* like he was idly watching her, when in fact, his entire attention was focused on her every move. And since when had he been thinking of her as Hermione, rather than as 'Potter's insufferable know-it-all friend', or 'that silly girl', or even 'Miss Granger'?

She absently pushed back her mass of unrestrained curls, holding them off her face as she bit her lip and focused on adding the next item to her cauldron. The action made him itch to feel her hair curling around his fingers and to kiss the frown off her lips.

He forced himself to look away, realizing that this train of thought would inevitably lead to a physical response that would be difficult to hide and impossible to explain. Glancing around the room briefly, he was pleased to see that none of the students were in imminent danger of blowing anything up.

Inexorably, after fewer seconds than he cared to admit, his gaze returned to Hermione. He resumed his consideration of why he was so obsessed with her lately. He had known her since she was a child, and until recently, it had been out of sight, out of mind and even when she was *in* sight, she still wasn't really on his radar. Not unless she was irritating him with questions that he didn't consider relevant to what they were doing, or bothering him by getting herself into trouble with her annoying friends.

And then, two weeks ago, everything had changed. He could pinpoint the exact moment, in fact. It was in the dining room, as dinner was wrapping up, and she had been leaving the room with her friends. The Weasley girl had whispered something in her ear, and she had thrown her head back and laughed aloud in an uncharacteristically exuberant way, for several seconds. He had paused in the middle of pushing back his chair, arrested by the way she suddenly seemed like an attractive, sexy woman, rather than an annoying child. After a moment, she had seemed to feel his attention on her, and her laughter had died as her gaze locked with his. Another long moment had gone by, in which they had simply stared at each other across the room. Then Miss Weasley had said something else, and the moment was gone. Hermione had blushed lightly, then turned and hurried after her friends.

Now, she seemed oblivious to his attention. He wished he could ask her what she was doing to him, and why, but it wouldn't be seemly. And considering that he wasn't entirely sure she was doing anything, or even that anything had really been done, it might also prove extremely embarrassing.

So he continued to alternately watch her and force himself to look away, until finally class was over. He pulled out a book to distract himself, so that he wouldn't find himself watching her leave. Having caught himself doing that last week, he knew that even her walk suddenly seemed far too mature for a just-barely eighteen-year-old. And it was definitely too sexy for his peace of mind.

He used all his will to focus on the book, and still had no idea what he was reading.

He had been watching her, she was sure of it. She was growing accustomed to the curling heat that filled her whenever his eyes found her, and she was now so sensitive to it that she knew to the instant when he watched her and when he looked away. It was even starting to feel like something was missing when she *didn't* feel his eyes on her.

She had gradually, over the past two weeks, learned to function even when what she wanted to do was ... well, stare back at him. Or maybe ...

She cut off that thought without letting it complete itself. She couldn't jump him anyway *damn, the rest of the thought had snuck through after all* since they were in a roomful of students, and anyway, he was probably just staring because she had irritated him again.

Although, even for Professor Snape, two weeks seemed like an overly long time to hold a grudge for laughing too loud.

It was all Ginny's fault, anyway. She had made some ridiculous crack about how she was going to get back at Ron for teasing her by casting a spell that would make everything he said come out the opposite of what he intended. Hermione had immediately grasped the far-reaching, troublesome potential of the spell, and even just imagining relatively minor outcomes, like moving his chess pieces the opposite way from his actual strategy, made her laugh aloud.

She had been laughing one moment, and then, suddenly, she had felt someone watching her so intently that it felt like a physical touch. An *arousing* physical touch, she had later come to understand. At the time, she had merely been aware that her heart suddenly pounded in her chest, and her skin felt flushed and hot, and she felt a new kind of agitated awareness, one she had never felt before.

She was shocked to realize that the eyes she felt belonged to Professor Snape, and thought for a moment the feelings were fear but he wasn't actually glaring, just watching her with smoldering intensity. And anyway, these sensations didn't feel quite like any fear she had ever experienced before. No, this feeling was ... enticing, she decided. She had been unable to tear her eyes from his, even at that distance, and she had waited to hear him say "Ten points deducted from Gryffindor," but he hadn't. He had stared, and then Ginny had tugged on her arm and said, "Come *on*, Hermione, let's go!"

And she had. But she couldn't get that odd encounter out of her mind.

Having had no experience with sexual attraction before, she had not immediately realized what the feeling was. She had dug through old books in the library until she found one on interpreting physical sensations, and she had been shocked that sexual attraction was included. Who would think *that* would belong in a library devoted to the study of all things magic?

However, the authors had pointed out that sexual attraction could interfere with the clear-headedness required to cast non-verbal spells, and more importantly, could keep one from effectively blocking practitioners of the Dark Arts from exploring one's thoughts to discover weaknesses that could be exploited. And, the authors continued, it was indisputable that practitioners of the Dark Arts were often highly attractive to others. Moreover, they would not be above casting spells to create sexual attraction, even if such attraction did not arise naturally.

So Hermione was now fully aware that she was experiencing her first sexual attraction, and that it was aimed at the least appropriate person she could have possibly found. Keeping her composure around Professor Snape in light of this new knowledge was challenging, at best.

Especially since he seemed to be suddenly watching her almost constantly. Maybe he was aware of her attraction to him and he was trying to intimidate her into getting over it. Or maybe he wasn't aware of it maybe he had always watched her like this, but she hadn't noticed it before because she hadn't been attracted to him.

Or maybe he just hated her and was watching for opportunities to deduct points based on her mistakes.

Now, when class finally ended, she gathered her things and headed toward the door. She was both relieved and disappointed that she didn't feel his eyes on her as she left.

At last, she was gone. Severus gave up all pretense of reading, snapping the book shut and returning to his favorite activity of late brooding about Hermione Granger. It was a sad truth that she didn't even have to be in the room these days to command his full attention.

Thank heavens this hadn't happened any earlier in the year. There were only a few weeks to go until the Leaving Feast, and then she would be gone and he would break free of this spell.

He ignored the whisper in his mind that said he would be sad when she was gone that he would regret letting her leave and that he should grab the opportunity to make a move while he had it.

Things would go back to normal once she graduated. He was sure of it.

Hermione relaxed in her room, having decided to try to nap before dinner. She hadn't been getting much sleep lately even when she managed to fall asleep, she would wake up several times during the night, hot and bothered because of the increasingly explicit dreams she was having about Professor Snape.

Hopefully, this afternoon's little nap would be short enough that she wouldn't have similar issues. She really needed some rest. She decided to think about something else while she went to sleep. Something boring, like Quidditch. Smiling at the thought, she began imagining Harry and Ron at Quidditch practice. The monotony of it to her, at least soon had her drifting off to sleep.

Suddenly, the scene changed. It was like the Quidditch game their first year, when Professor Snape had tried to protect Harry from Professor Quirrell. Except, even though the game was playing out the same way, the players were all older like their current age and so was she. And then Snape defeated Quirrell, which was a little different than what had actually happened, and instead of the scene continuing the way it actually had played out, everything from that point on was different. Snape's expression changed, and he seemed to be looking for someone.

Somehow, she knew he was trying to find her, so she decided to move into his line of sight. Just making the decision made it happen like magic, she thought, amused.

When his eyes finally found her, his whole demeanor changed. His lids fell to lazily cover his eyes, making his gaze seem sensual and alluring. His lips quirked at the corner in a near-smile, and she felt the pull of his magnetism, calling to her. She wished they were alone.

And again, just the thought made it happen. They were alone in a room she didn't recognize, until he said, "Welcome. Make yourself comfortable." She realized this must be his quarters. She shrugged off her jacket and looked around to see where she should hang it. He took it from her and tossed it toward the coat rack, which reached out and grabbed it when the jacket would have landed short. She laughed, utterly charmed.

*He turned to her, gave her an unexpectedly boyish smile, and then, as their eyes met, all childish thoughts disappeared. "I want you **now**," he whispered.*

"I want you, too," she whispered back. And then he was kissing her, and she wished she could feel his skin against hers, and suddenly they were both naked.

Delighted with this newfound ability to wish for something and have it happen, she kissed him and said aloud, "I wish we were in your bed."

He grinned at her from his new position, bent over her supine form. "I like the way you think," he growled, and kissed her again. She pulled him closer, kissing him back with abandon.

*"**Now**, Severus," she whispered when they parted briefly, "I need you**now**."*

"Patience, darling, patience." Still, he positioned himself, and she knew he was as eager as she was...

She woke up, panting with unslaked desire. She glanced around, and spied Crookshanks watching her knowingly from the other side of the room. She groaned and buried her face in her pillow, hiding from his clear-eyed gaze as she tried to will her body to cool down. This was the furthest the dream had ever gone. If this kept up, she didn't know what she would do.

Thank goodness the Leaving Feast was only a few weeks away. Once she was away from here, and away from him, she would get over this infatuation.

Things would go back to normal. She was sure of it.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 28

Severus discovers that the object of his obsession won't be leaving, after all ...

Chapter 2

Severus sat in the faculty meeting, thinking about Hermione, counting the days until she would leave, when Minerva McGonagall said something that grabbed his attention. "... and I'm pleased to report that Miss Granger has agreed to stay on with that understanding."

"What do you mean, Miss Granger is staying on?" Severus asked, so shocked that he didn't even think to keep the horror from sounding in his voice. The entire faculty turned to look at him questioningly, and he couldn't help wishing that someone had warned him about this ahead of time.

"Well, what do you think I mean?" Minerva snapped. "As anyone who was actually paying attention to what I just said can tell you, Miss Granger has agreed to my offer to apprentice her, with an eye toward having her become the new professor of Transfigurations when I retire."

"But that's years away," Severus protested, perhaps a touch too vehemently. "There's no need to take on a new apprentice yet." His obsession with Hermione Granger seemed to have displaced his good sense and his tendency to keep his own counsel.

Minerva rolled her eyes. "Of course there is. Miss Granger is the best student we've had in years, and I'll be retiring long before we see another of anywhere near her caliber. I cannot imagine a better choice to succeed me. And since she *will* succeed me, it can only be a benefit to all of us if I take the time to prepare her thoroughly for the challenges of the position."

He couldn't resist one more try, with an argument targeted more toward something Minerva might accept. "But is it fair to keep her here, when she could do so much good elsewhere?"

"Where could be better than here to 'do good'? Here, she will have the opportunity to shape young minds and influence an entire generation of witches and wizards. What

could be more important than that?"

Severus forced himself to stop arguing. Some of the other faculty members were shifting in their chairs, and Minerva was looking at him through narrowed eyes. "Well, what's done is done," he said, and then fell silent. The discussion moved on to other items on the agenda, and he tuned it out in favor of trying to figure out exactly how he was going to deal with his obsession now that she wasn't actually leaving.

Much to his chagrin, his obsession with her hadn't abated even a little bit. If anything, he had grown more attracted to her than ever, because as he had watched her so closely in the last several weeks, he had realized that she was smart, sexy, loyal, kind, strong, and even funny. In short, with the obvious exception of her dubious taste in friends, she was the perfect woman. The more he knew, the more he wanted to know. The more he *wanted*.

He had been counting on time and distance to relieve him of these intense feelings *this weakness*. He had finally stopped kidding himself. No spell could be as strong as his will to break it, and he had certainly tried every counterspell he could think of.

No, this wasn't a spell anyone had cast. This was lust, pure and simple. If she weren't a student, if she were some random witch he had met anywhere else, he would consider just giving in to it, in hopes that it would go away once satisfied. In his experience, lust never lasted long. Of course in his experience, it was never this intense, either, so he had never been forced to resort to 'just giving in' to make it go away.

It couldn't be that other 'L' word. He wouldn't allow it. He didn't believe in love had only thought himself 'in love' once, and that had not ended well. He simply would not go there again, not even had he believed love did exist which he absolutely didn't.

He forced himself to return his attention to the meeting. It finally ended ten long minutes later, and he stood to leave. Unfortunately, Minerva's voice rang out with the authority her position as Deputy Headmistress gave her. "Severus? A word, if you please."

He didn't please, but he didn't see that he had much choice in the matter. "Yes, certainly, Minerva."

She waited until the rest of the faculty had left the room before speaking again. She got right to the point. "What is your problem with Miss Granger?"

He had anticipated this as soon as she had asked him to wait; the delay had given him time to come up with an acceptable answer. "The same problem I have with all the dunderheads I am forced to put up with," he replied smoothly. "She's arrogant, thinks she knows everything, and is constantly getting into trouble with her friends trouble that / wind up having to get them out of."

"She's not a dunderhead she's very intelligent and she will be an outstanding addition to the faculty. As for the rest of it, I expect that, like most teenagers, she's discovering that some trouble is worth avoiding, and as she matures, I'm sure you'll find that she won't need rescuing anymore."

"She has horrid friends," he replied, sounding lame even to his own ears.

Minerva replied smoothly, "Well, her friends *are* leaving, so they won't be your concern anymore." She narrowed her eyes again. "You seem awfully familiar with Miss Granger's activities, Severus."

"She's an annoying know-it-all, who can't be ignored even when one would prefer it," Severus insisted.

"If you say so," Minerva said, sounding doubtful.

"I do," he replied firmly, then raised an eyebrow. "If that's all?"

"Yes, yes, go," she said testily. Still, he could feel her questioning gaze on him as he left.

It was never good when Minerva McGonagall got curious.

"Miss Granger, would you mind staying a moment after class?" Professor McGonagall asked, in a tone that said quite clearly that it didn't really matter if she minded or not.

"Certainly, Professor," Hermione replied politely. She half-hoped that the faculty had decided to deny her the apprenticeship that Professor McGonagall had dropped in her lap last week. She had been so counting on getting away from Professor Snape it seemed like that was her only hope for ever getting a good night's sleep again. But the opportunity to apprentice in Transfigurations to eventually replace Professor McGonagall as Professor of Transfigurations was simply too good to pass up.

She was seriously considering seeking out a spell to help her get over this ridiculous infatuation with Professor Snape.

When class ended, Professor McGonagall said in a kinder-than-usual tone, "Hermione, dear, why don't we go have some tea in my office?"

"Of course, Professor," she replied, suddenly certain that the offer of apprenticeship was about to be withdrawn and contrarily disappointed that she would have to leave Hogwarts, after all.

When they reached the Professor's office, she waited while the Professor made tea. She took a sip, and then, unable to contain herself another minute, she asked, "Did the faculty not approve me to be your apprentice?"

"What?" Professor McGonagall looked startled. "No, no, it's nothing like that. The faculty, as a whole, is delighted that you will be staying with us. We feel that you'll make a fine addition to Hogwarts. That's not why I asked you here."

"Oh?" Hermione asked, relieved and curious. "Why did you, then?"

Professor McGonagall sighed. "It's just well, Professor Snape seemed rather well Hermione, is there something I don't know about going on between you and Professor Snape?"

"Wh what?" Hermione stammered. "G - going on? L-like what?" She could feel herself blushing deeply and hoped fervently that the dim light didn't reveal that to the Professor.

"Is there some reason why he might dislike you?"

Relieved, Hermione said, "Well, I think he doesn't like my choice of friends he positively hates Harry and Ron and Neville, as far as I can tell, so he probably just dislikes me by association. I don't think there's anything new or different that I've done to anger him lately." She paused, then added, "At least, he hasn't taken any points away from Gryffindor because of me in the last few weeks." Come to think of it, that seemed a little odd, didn't it?

She would have to think about that later.

She sipped her tea, trying to appear unconcerned. Professor McGonagall said, "Well, it's no matter, anyway. The rest of the faculty is thrilled, and you'll have limited contact with Professor Snape, at least at first." Hermione tried to suppress the sinking feeling that comment elicited. Professor McGonagall continued, "Perhaps, once he gets to know you as a colleague, rather than a student, he'll see you as the rest of us do."

Hermione now tried to suppress the hope that flared to life at that statement. "That would be lovely, Professor, but I'm not counting on it. Professor Snape doesn't really seem to like anyone, does he?"

"Perhaps not," Professor McGonagall allowed. "However, he did seem unusually vocal in his opposition to your apprenticeship, especially considering it's not anything that directly affects him, one way or another."

Desperate to change the topic without giving away how desperate she was, Hermione said, "But then, who knows what Professor Snape thinks? He certainly hasn't said anything to me about well, *anything*, really. As far as I can tell, he doesn't like me, but that's nothing new. So, I guess we'll just have to avoid each other as much as possible and each go about our own business, right?"

"Right," Professor McGonagall agreed. "Now, let's talk about your apprenticeship. It would probably be good for you to plan to return about two weeks before the students do that way, we can start preparing you for your new role. Is that going to be a problem for you?"

"No, of course not. I'm eager to get started I'll even stay the summer if you like."

"No, no, that won't be necessary," Professor McGonagall assured her. "I plan to take most of the summer off myself. However, I will give you a reading list. Nothing too onerous, just a few primers on teaching theory to assist you in learning to think like a teacher rather than merely a student although the latter point of view should never be abandoned entirely. If you do, you risk boring your students."

"Like Professor Binns," Hermione murmured, then blushed again. "Sorry. I shouldn't say negative things about professors."

"Just between you and me, I was thinking of Professor Trelawney," Professor McGonagall smiled. "But Binns will work just as well. However, I would never say that to any student who was not about to become an apprentice," she added more seriously. "And I expect that you will keep this type of information confidential."

Hermione smiled. "I will, of course, Professor." She couldn't help herself, though, and grinned. "I don't think it's any secret among the students that certain classes aren't quite as exciting as certain others, and that this may be due, at least a little, to the relative skills of the teachers involved."

Fortunately, the professor laughed with her.

They discussed plans for the apprenticeship while they finished their tea.

After Hermione left, Minerva considered what could possibly be going on between Severus and Hermione. Oh, they both insisted it was Severus's general antipathy toward Harry Potter and everyone close to him, but that didn't ring true. Severus got too smooth, and Hermione too flustered, when she asked them about each other.

So there was something more than either one was admitting, but she had no idea what it was. And, despite her assurances to Hermione, Minerva wasn't entirely sure that Severus wouldn't treat Hermione badly enough to make her want to leave Hogwarts. It would be one thing if he just disliked her because of her friendships or because she was a student he would get over those once the friends were gone and Hermione was a colleague. It would also be fine if he just disliked her the way he disliked most people his general moody rudeness wouldn't get to someone as strong and determined as Hermione.

But if he held a personal grudge against her, then he could be downright nasty, and even Hermione might not be able to withstand that kind of pressure. Since it was in the school's best interest to have someone of Hermione's character and intelligence on faculty, Minerva would simply have to ensure that whatever was going on between them didn't ruin that.

Therefore, she would have to keep observing them both closely until she figured it out.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 28

Hermione comes up with a new plan to help her get over her infatuation ...

Chapter 3

The day after the Leaving Feast, Severus woke up with a feeling of relief. He had two full months before the fall term started before he would have to see Hermione again. He let the relief seep into his psyche.

At least, he told himself that's what it was. Funny how he had never noticed before that relief felt a little bit like something less pleasing than that. It was a bit of a letdown, actually. If forced to analyze it, he would have to say it felt a lot like ... disappointment?

Fortunately, there was no one to force him to analyze anything at the moment.

Pushing the thought aside, he quickly got himself together. He was going to Spinner's End for the summer, where he would have no reminders of Hermione and would find it easier to get over the whole unfortunate lust situation.

Then, come fall, he would ignore her as thoroughly as he did everyone else who had no particular relevance to his life.

Unfortunately, it didn't prove as simple as he had hoped. Even the dark, depressing atmosphere at Spinner's End didn't stop him from wondering what she was doing and, more to the point, with whom. He had realized during those last few weeks of the school year that Weasley was showing an inordinate amount of interest in Hermione. Certainly more than "just friendship" would warrant. Perhaps this had even been going on before the shift in his own attitude, but he wouldn't have noticed it before that.

Once he had seen it, though, he had become increasingly concerned that she would fall prey to that dunderhead's dubious charms. And sadly, their graduation and subsequent separation didn't guarantee anything they *were* friends, after all, and Weasley was probably visiting her constantly, hitting on her and trying to weasel his way into her life and her pants. Pun intended.

Just because Severus was determined not to want her, didn't mean that someone as unworthy as Weasley should have her.

Eventually, with a month to go before fall term was due to start, Severus decided he might as well try to distract himself with work. Perhaps he would write a new textbook an advanced course on the use of potions in defending against the dark arts. Such a project would surely keep him from devoting all his energy to avoiding thoughts of Hermione and Weasley or of Hermione and himself.

Hermione soaked up the love and pride her parents lavished on her freely over the summer. They were thrilled that she was training to be a professor at Hogwarts; they thought it was the perfect job for her. It should have been the perfect opportunity to recharge and get some rest in anticipation of her new position.

In some ways, it was. When the time came to return to Hogwarts, she had almost succeeded in convincing herself that she was over her ridiculous infatuation with Professor Snape. He had hardly entered her thoughts at all in the last several weeks.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said of her dreams. There, he showed up every night, like clockwork, usually multiple times. Sometimes, she woke up before things got too heated, but more often, she woke up frustrated, aroused, and desperate for release.

By the time she got back to Hogwarts, then, she was resigned to going through life in a state of sleep-deprived arousal.

It was just her luck that the very first person she ran into quite literally was Professor Snape.

Severus stared, shocked, at the woman who had rounded the corner at a trot and practically bounced off of him, landing in a heap at his feet. She didn't get up immediately. Instead, she craned her neck to look at him and stammered, "Sev that is Professor Snape! I didn't I mean, I apologize. I should have been looking where I was going. Are you all right?"

Severus tried to keep his voice even. "An odd question, Miss Granger, considering that *you* are the one sitting on the ground." What was she doing here? Classes weren't due to start for another two weeks. He had assumed he would have that time to shore up his defenses.

"Oh," she said, looking around and seeming almost surprised to find herself sitting on the ground, then glanced back up. "I guess you are, then. I'm sure I'm fine, too, so you can get back to whatever you were doing."

He sighed, and reluctantly offered her a hand up. He didn't even know why he did that; he certainly wasn't averse to being thoughtless, or even downright rude. In fact, anyone who knew him would attest that he was both thoughtless *and* rude, most of the time. After a very long moment, she took his hand and let him pull her to her feet. He carefully ignored the electric charge that seemed to pass between them.

She said, "Thanks." He nodded curtly, and she continued, "Er, I was just on my way to see Professor McGonagall, so I guess I'll see you later." She suddenly seemed to realize she was still holding his hand, but instead of releasing it immediately, she stared at their joined hands for another long moment. Then she blushed and took her hand back, saying, "Bye."

"Good-bye, Miss Granger," he replied to her retreating back.

Hermione spent the entire meeting with Professor McGonagall trying really hard to pay attention to the conversation, while her mind was busily trying to process that odd interaction with Professor Snape. He had been not *nice*, exactly, but civil. Courteous, even.

Fortunately, the meeting had been short, as Professor McGonagall had simply wanted to check in about how far Hermione had gotten with the summer reading list she had provided. Naturally, Hermione had finished the list nearly a month ago, and had, on her own initiative, sought additional materials that seemed like they might be useful. She had finished those, too, and today, Professor McGonagall had suggested a few others that she might find interesting. Fortunately, she had given Hermione the suggestions in writing, so Hermione need not worry that she would forget them due to her preoccupation.

As the meeting had ended, Professor McGonagall had said, "Oh, and Hermione? You aren't a student anymore, so please call me Minerva."

"Yes, Professor I mean, Minerva." She smiled sheepishly, realizing that this new informality would take some getting used to. Although, come to think of it, she already had trouble remembering to address Professor Snape formally (since in her dreams, she always called him "Severus," or sometimes even "Sevvy" which she just *knew* he would hate). She hoped he hadn't noticed her little near-slip earlier.

As she sat in the library an hour later, she could swear her hand still tingled with the excitement of having been enveloped in his. She flexed and stretched it a few times, but the feeling didn't go away.

Maybe she was getting sick.

Maybe she was having sudden-onset paralysis.

Maybe he had cast some sort of spell.

She sighed. What was she going to do about this? Not the hand she would probably never touch him again, if he had his way. A tingling, paralyzed, spellbound hand was the least of her worries. The real problem was the infatuation. An entire summer spent away from him, convincing herself she was over him, had been shot to hell in less than she checked her watch five hours back in his proximity.

So, distance obviously wasn't the answer and even if it was, if today was any indication, avoidance wasn't a viable solution. Drumming her fingers against the book she wasn't actually reading, she considered what else might work.

An idea finally struck her, and she sat straighter in her chair as she considered it. Since distance wasn't working, maybe she should try getting *closer* instead of further away. He was sure to treat her with the same rude disdain that he always had. She had never been a masochist, so eventually, she would get tired of him treating her like the dirt under his feet, and she would get over him.

She hoped.

With renewed energy, she began to consider how she might get closer to Severus. Since he hated her, she would have to be sneaky, she decided. For the first time ever, she wished her personality had just a bit more Slytherin tendency in it. Especially since Severus himself was Slytherin, and therefore would be difficult to outsmart.

Well, she would just have to find a way. She wasn't going to spend the rest of her life pining away for a man just because she couldn't get close enough to let familiarity breed contempt.

That evening, Severus arrived a few minutes early for dinner. Looking around, he headed for the far end of the table, where few professors were seated. He preferred to eat his meals without a lot of foolish chatter around him, so fewer people was definitely better. He always tried to get a seat on the end, so he would at worst have one person annoying him. And, he could always hope that some professors would decide they weren't hungry and stay away altogether, thus increasing the likelihood that he would be left in peace.

Moments later, someone sat in the chair immediately to his right. Suppressing a sigh, he resigned himself to the likelihood that someone would be trying to make small talk with him. He really hoped it wasn't that fool Trelawney.

And then, his pulse increased suddenly, and he just *knew* who was next to him. He looked up and confirmed his suspicion.

"Miss Granger," he said by way of greeting. So much for avoiding her this was twice in one day and the term hadn't even started yet.

"Professor Snape," she replied, and smiled at him, as though daring him to comment on her choice of seats. Glancing around, he realized that, while there were plenty of empty chairs where the students would normally sit, the only other empty seats in the professors' area were between Trelawney and Binns (and why did Binns come to dinner anyway? It wasn't like a ghost could eat!). No wonder she had chosen to brave his bad mood for all his faults, he could at least claim that there wasn't much risk of boring her to death. She asked politely, "How was your day?"

She might very well irritate him to death, he decided. "Fine," he said tersely.

"So was mine," she babbled. "After my meeting with McGonagall, I went to the library and got a lot done in preparation for the fall term."

He took a bite of roast beef, chewed it slowly, then asked flatly, "Do you always talk so much while eating?"

She laughed, seemingly unfazed by his less-than-pleased tone. "Yes, of course," she replied. "If one doesn't talk between bites, there's a tendency to eat too fast, which isn't good for the digestion."

"Nevertheless, Miss Granger, I prefer not to talk while eating."

"Oh, okay," she agreed cheerfully. He was relieved, but only until she added, "You don't have to talk. I'll just keep the conversation going, unless you decide you want to jump in at any point."

He narrowed his eyes. "Miss Granger, are you quite all right?"

"Oh, yes, Professor, I'm fine. Thank you for asking," she replied. "Do I seem like I'm not?"

He frowned. "I don't recall you being this " he bit back the word 'confident' at the last second, substituting " loquacious in our past acquaintance."

She blushed lightly, but gamely smiled and waved a hand airily. "Well, it wouldn't have been appropriate before," she replied. "I was a student, and you were a professor before, remember?" He found himself nodding agreement as she continued. "And there aren't any other apprentices here at the moment, and I have to talk to *someone*, don't I?"

He could see her point, of course, but why did she have to pick him? She didn't even like him practically no one did and he was fine with that. But, recalling the location of the empty chairs, he supposed he could see why it had to be him, this time.

So he tried not to be too rude as she chattered away, but he kept his comments short and made them only when he had to no point in giving away his unfortunate lust by getting deep into conversation. Besides, he had noticed Minerva watching them with an eagle eye from the other side of the room, and he certainly didn't want her thinking he was deeply involved in this conversation even if he was hanging like a lovesick teenager on Hermione's every word.

That thought made him frown, and he was horrified to hear himself ask abruptly, "Did you see much of Weasley over the summer?"

For the first time since she had sat down, she appeared flustered. Indeed, she choked on the pumpkin juice she had just sipped, and coughed for several seconds before she managed to ask, "Ron? Why would you ask about Ron?"

He said, "You're friends with the idiot, aren't you?"

"Well, yes, but I didn't think you liked him, so why would you ask about him?"

"Since we're having a conversation, against my better judgment, I assumed you would want me to participate in it."

"But, then, why would you ask about Ron and not Harry?" Since he didn't have any kind of answer for that, he just shrugged. She continued in a confidential tone, "I'm actually closer friends with Harry, you know. Ron and I have never spent much time together during summers or holidays unless Harry and I went to visit Ron's family or something."

"Oh," he said, and perhaps because she was staring at him with intense curiosity, he heard himself add, "I got the impression he was interested in a deeper friendship."

"Ron?" she asked, sounding perplexed. "You mean me and Ron? Like, together?" Her voice rose to a near-squeak. "As in, *together*-together?"

He shrugged again, feeling the heat of embarrassment rise in his face. "Perhaps I was mistaken," was all he said. He tried to keep his intense relief at her reaction to the idea off his face and out of his voice.

Suddenly, he realized that he might have planted an idea in her head that hadn't been there previously. He decided to let the matter drop before he made anything worse. But then the words came out of their own accord, anyway, "In any event, it's better that you don't get closer to that foolish brat. He and Potter are as likely as not to get you killed."

"They aren't that bad," Hermione returned, sounding annoyed now. "I know you don't like them, but they're good guys. They're my friends, so keep your comments about them to yourself, if you please."

"I suppose we'll just have to agree to disagree about this. I just hope they don't get you killed before you discover I'm right," he added darkly.

She rolled her eyes. "Let's talk about something else. Minerva said you were writing a textbook this summer. What's it about?"

He raised an eyebrow at her use of Minerva's given name, but presumed that Minerva had given permission. "It addresses the use of potions in defense against the dark arts." As he spoke, it suddenly occurred to him that earlier, when she had bumped into him, she had started to call him 'Severus' before she corrected herself. That seemed odd he would have to consider what it might mean when he was alone later.

They discussed his textbook for the rest of the meal, and he was surprised to find that he enjoyed the conversation.

Later, as Hermione got ready for bed, she thought back over the conversation she had had with Severus at dinner. He hadn't been as rude as usual except for the bit about Ron and Harry, but that was to be expected, considering he had little use for either one of them. So far, her plan to get to know and hate him wasn't working very well.

But, with the Charm she had used earlier that day, she was certain to have many more opportunities to chat with him at meals. She smiled at her reflection as she congratulated herself on such an effective spell none of the other professors had sat next to Severus, just as she had planned when she made it so that none of them would even notice the empty chair there at all.

Returning to her review of their conversation, she focused on the one part where he had seemed a little testy. Why had he brought Ron up at all? He couldn't possibly care whether she had seen her friend or not. And as she had asked him, why ask about Ron and not Harry? The only clue she had was that he seemed to think Ron wanted to date her or something. Which was just plain crazy she didn't think of Ron like that never had, never would.

If she hadn't known better, she would have thought Severus sounded almost jealous.

But that was ridiculous. Wasn't it?

In any event, she had to assume that he would revert to his normal self tomorrow, when he saw her at breakfast. Fortunately, she had made enough Confidence-Boosting Potion to get her through the next several days, at least. Only a single tablespoon had enabled her to carry on a reasonably intelligent conversation, rather than stutter and stammer like a tongue-tied schoolgirl, for almost the entire dinner.

Well, except for that Ron bit. What was that about? She pondered the question, without reaching any conclusion, until she drifted off to sleep.

Meanwhile, Severus congratulated himself on getting through dinner without giving away the fact that he was growing more intensely attracted to Hermione by the minute.

He was really displeased to discover that she was better able to carry on an intelligent conversation about his textbook than anyone else he had mentioned it to. In fact, aside from her unfortunate tendency to defend the thoroughly indefensible Weasley and Potter, her conversation was interesting and enjoyable.

He thought again about how she had nearly called him by his first name earlier in the day. Did she think of him as something other than her former professor? The very idea brought up an odd mixture of pleasure and confusion and disbelief and to his everlasting irritation arousal.

He mentally reviewed everything he could remember from first-year Arithmancy, since that was the most boring thing he could think of, until his body came back under control. It took much longer than usual, because he would just be getting back to normal, and then he would hear her voice again, saying the first syllable of his name: "Sev"

And he would be right back where he started, aroused, frustrated, and irritated.

In any event, Minerva and the other professors could do whatever they pleased. *He* was certainly not going to invite a greater level of familiarity by giving her permission to call him Severus. He was having enough trouble reigning in his suddenly-overactive libido without adding the certain knowledge of what his *whole* name would sound like coming from her lips.

He consoled himself with the thought that odds alone decreed that it would be rare indeed that he would find himself seated next to her at a meal.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 28

Severus tries to put distance between himself and Hermione, which makes Hermione more determined than ever to keep him close ...

Chapter 4

Several days later, Severus realized that he had underestimated the vagaries of fate. Either that, or some kind of spell really *was* at work. Otherwise, how could one possibly explain the fact that at every meal since that first one eleven meals and counting, thus far Hermione had come in and seated herself next to him?

He had hoped that their conversations would get less interesting, over time, but they didn't. He had desperately wished she would say something so utterly stupid that he would lose all respect for her, but she never did. The most annoying thing she did was defend her unworthy friends, and after the second day, they had tacitly put that topic aside.

Instead, she would tell him about the things she was learning in her apprenticeship, most of which he already knew, but for some strange reason, that didn't detract from the pleasure of hearing her tell it. Occasionally, she would even tell him something or ask him a question that got him thinking about things in a different way.

And she was quickly turning into his favorite sounding board for issues and concerns relating to his textbook ironic, that, considering he had only started the project in the first place to escape unacceptable thoughts of her.

Still, he acknowledged to himself that this increased exposure to Hermione was not helping his quest to excise from his body and mind the lust he felt for her. He decided, therefore, that he would start appearing late for meals, and he would sit between those fools, Trelawney and Binns, if he had to. Apparently, he couldn't count on odds or fate to give him distance from his ever-increasing obsession.

And if it *was* some sort of spell, well, he would have to take action to counteract that, too. He couldn't imagine who would bother casting a spell to make sure he spent every meal in the company of Hermione Granger, but the constancy of her presence certainly seemed to suggest that someone had done so.

For now, however, he would just start with the plan to be late to meals and see how that went.

Hermione walked into the dining hall and looked around eagerly. As much as she loved her apprenticeship, these meals and discussions with Severus had quickly become the highlights of her day.

Part of her recognized that this wasn't what she was aiming for when she had cast her spell and made her potion but she just loved being near him. Talking with him was an unexpected delight.

She still experienced that curling heat of attraction whenever he was near; it had become a familiar, delicious discomfort that she welcomed. Oh, she knew he didn't feel that way toward her he was unfailingly formal with her. He never even suggested that she call him Severus, so it was obvious that he didn't want anything more than a good intellectual discussion from her.

Still, every so often, she caught him looking at her with an expression that she didn't recognize. It wasn't the contempt that she used to see, back in her student days. It also wasn't the sensual look he often wore in her dreams which were still showing up with alarming frequency. It was something else something mysterious, enigmatic. It looked almost as though he was trying to read her in some way as he might assess an unknown specimen in his laboratory. As though he wanted to know her thoughts which was ridiculous because he probably had the power to read them anytime he wanted, despite her training and practice in Occlumency. She was quite certain that he was a very powerful Legilimens, and she sometimes got so caught up in their conversations that she quite forgot to keep her defenses up.

So the idea that he was trying to figure her out was ridiculous. But she just couldn't make a reasonable guess what else that look could mean.

In any event, tonight, she discovered to her intense disappointment that she had beaten him to the dining hall this evening. Perhaps he wasn't coming at all he was usually early, not just for meals, but for everything. An annoying habit, sometimes, since he expected everyone else to be early, too, and sometimes she had the sense that he wanted to deduct points for not being early *enough* to his class. He never had, as far as she could recall, but that didn't change the fact that lateness was totally unacceptable in his view.

She finally took a seat at the end of the table, where they usually sat together. She hoped he would come and join her, until it occurred to her that perhaps this was his way of indicating that he had tired of their conversations and was taking action to prevent her sitting with him anymore.

Sure enough, he came in and sat next to Binns which was likely because his other options, by the time he arrived, were next to Trelawney or in his usual seat next to her. The disappointment the implicit rejection curled through her, and unable to bear anyone looking too closely lest they see the unshed tears in her eyes, she ate alone.

As she did so, she initially thought that she would have to give up her plan and just start eating with someone else. But then the strangest thing happened. She had assumed he would have forgotten all about her would have ignored her as completely and thoroughly as he did everyone he considered unworthy of his attention.

Instead, he reverted to the way he had been behaving just before the Leaving Feast last spring he stared.

Intensely.

Constantly.

Arousingly.

She didn't have to look up to know he was watching her, although every now and then she checked her senses by glancing at him, covering the look by tossing her hair back. Sure enough, he was staring. Just as she had in the spring, she could feel his eyes on her. She was rather amazed that he finished his meal without mishap, since she would swear he never once took his eyes off her to glance at his food or locate his drink. He certainly didn't deign to speak to anyone.

Maybe she had done or said something that irritated him although she had no idea what in which case, maybe, now that he was apparently displeased with her, he would revert to the rudeness she had initially expected. In that case, this was her chance to set her original plan back in motion. In any event, since she knew distance didn't decrease her infatuation, proximity remained her only choice. If he was going to stop sitting with her, she wouldn't have the chance getting close might give her to get over him.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder once more, glanced at Severus, and decided she couldn't let that happen. She would just have to think of some way to ensure that he would resume sitting next to her at every meal.

Minerva looked back and forth between Severus and Hermione. She was completely baffled by their behavior this evening. For the past several days, they had been sitting together at every meal. They had been thoroughly engaged in conversation with each other, to the total exclusion of the rest of the world. She had been a little surprised by how quickly they seemed to have developed this odd, intense friendship, but she had assumed that her prediction to Severus had come true once he had seen her as a colleague rather than a student, and had separated her in his mind from Harry and all the other students he had found so trying, he had begun to see Hermione as the bright, intelligent, sensible young woman she was.

Now, suddenly, Hermione was eating alone, and Severus was sitting with people (or ghosts) he couldn't tolerate. Had they had an argument? She couldn't imagine when they would have found the time Severus was trying to finish his textbook before the students descended on the school and demanded all his time and attention, and Hermione had been extremely busy with Minerva herself.

As Minerva watched, she realized that Severus's full attention was centered on Hermione, despite her physical distance from him. Indeed, he didn't even seem to be making the smallest effort to hide his focus not that anyone but Minerva herself was paying any attention.

Well, Hermione was, too, she amended silently. Hermione seemed at first glance to be completely focused on her food, but every now and then, she tossed her hair back over her shoulder, using the motion to glance covertly at Severus. If Minerva didn't know better, she would call the gesture flirtatious.

She narrowed her eyes could it actually be flirtatious? Was this, perhaps, some sort of odd courtship?

She considered their behavior over the last several months, going back to the faculty meeting when Severus had seemed so displeased with Hermione's plan to stay on at Hogwarts. Could that have been due to an unwelcome attraction to the girl, even then?

If it was, Hermione's behavior suggested that the attraction might be reciprocated. It wasn't just the hair tossing today. As Minerva considered the past several days, along with the meeting in her office last spring, she realized that Hermione's discomfort with the subject of Severus hadn't stopped the girl from seeking him out as a meal companion. In fact, she seemed to have initiated their habit of dining together which made sense because, in Minerva's experience, Severus never sought out relationships with anybody.

Uncharacteristically, Minerva couldn't decide what to do about this, if anything perhaps because she wasn't entirely sure her conclusions were correct.

Or perhaps because, even if she was correct, she wasn't sure what to think about it. Not because of the difference in their positions Severus wasn't Hermione's supervisor or anything, so that wasn't a problem. No, the difficulty lay with who they were as people more specifically, who Severus was. He had been hurt so badly, and he could be so moody and dark. She just wasn't sure Hermione was strong enough to handle Severus at his worst.

Still, it was nice to see Severus take an interest in a woman it had been so long. Years, in fact since Lily, as best she could tell. If it worked, he would probably find his soul, his humanity; and Hermione would probably find herself cherished and loved beyond what she could ever have imagined.

On the other hand, if it went badly, one or both of them would wind up badly hurt. And if that happened, one or both of them would likely leave Hogwarts permanently.

And in Minerva's opinion, Hogwarts needed them both.

The meal ended, and Hermione hurried out with Severus's eyes staring after her long after she must have been out of his sight. Minerva still hadn't decided what to do, so she finally decided to continue doing what she had been doing all along.

She would watch and wait.

As Severus got ready for bed, he tried to mentally congratulate himself on how perfectly his plan had worked. He hadn't sat with Hermione, and they hadn't had a conversation, and he hadn't been fascinated.

Well, that wasn't entirely true, he admitted to himself. He *had* been fascinated just as fascinated as he had ever been. It had occurred to him, belatedly, as he had watched her eat alone, that she might be confused and even a little hurt by his desertion. He had half-expected her to move closer to someone else and start a conversation, since she was generally rather social, and since the rest of the faculty seemed to find her a pleasant and welcome addition.

But she had just eaten quietly, by herself. She had ignored him quite thoroughly, for the most part. Except when she tossed her hair back, and he wasn't even sure if she looked at him on purpose then, or if it was just a side effect of needing to get her hair out of her face.

Once, he had thought her eyes looked like they were glistening more than usual, and it had occurred to him that he might have made her cry. He hoped not, but he was too far away to tell. The mere thought of it had made his meal taste like he was eating cardboard. He certainly hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings. He had just wanted a chance to get away and get his libido under control.

Which hadn't worked anyway. He had been forced to use every ounce of his willpower to keep himself from using his formidable skill at Legilimency to discover exactly what she was thinking and feeling. And *that* had left him without enough willpower to take his eyes off her and concentrate on his meal or to suppress the inevitable reaction of his body to watching her eat. Since when had watching someone eat been such a turn-on, anyway?

So, really, all in all, his attempt at self-congratulation now seemed shallow and almost ridiculous, in light of the way she effortlessly commanded his full attention. There was nothing Severus hated more than feeling ridiculous. Except maybe being forced to rescue that young fool Potter and his friends.

And, sadly enough, he didn't suppose he would mind rescuing Hermione quite so much anymore. Frowning at the thought, he realized that he had actually grown to rather like the girl in the last few days.

Great, he thought, *now it won't be just inappropriate lust that I'm dealing with I'll also be trying to stay away from one of the few people whose company I actually find tolerable.*

On that sad thought, Severus got in bed, completely forgetting to take the Dreamless Sleep Draught he had gotten in the habit of taking months ago, when he had had his first rather uncomfortably inappropriate dream about Miss Granger. He spent some time lying in the darkness, staring at the ceiling, debating what to do about Hermione. Eventually, he drifted off to sleep.

*He suddenly realized she was standing by his bed, glaring at him with her hands on her hips. "What do you mean, 'what to do about Hermione?'" she demanded irritably, doing a credible imitation of his own voice. "You know **exactly** what you should do about me. You're just too stubborn to admit it."*

"I am not stubborn," he retorted, jumping from bed, uncaring that he was wearing nothing but black flannel pajama bottoms. "I am restrained. Strong-willed, perhaps. But not stubborn." And how the hell did she manage to look sexy in Muggle clothing? And, for that matter, what was she doing in Muggle-wear, anyway?

*"Well, of course you're stubborn," she shot back, staring at his bare chest for a long moment before meeting his eyes. "If you weren't stubborn, you wouldn't sit across the room when you would much rather be sitting with me. And this is **your** dream, so don't blame me for what **you** dressed me in!"*

"Never mind about the damned clothes. And what I would rather be doing is completely irrelevant," he insisted. "If I was doing what I would rather be doing, we wouldn't be talking at all!"

*"Well, then, maybe you should just go ahead and do what you want! **I'm** not stopping you!"*

He scoffed. "Like you could stop me from doing anything I chose to do."

*"Oh?" she asked in a voice that had suddenly gone sweet. He heard the steel underneath, however, and nearly shuddered with the force of its effect on certain unmentionable parts of his body. Even though he knew, at some level, that this was a dream she had just said so and he need not restrain himself, he did so anyway. She glanced pointedly at his erection and raised a brow as she continued, "If I had to guess, I'd say you **choose** not to want me, and look how well that's going."*

He growled as his last thread of control snapped; he reached out and yanked her up against him. He didn't give her a chance to say anything he crashed his lips down onto hers. She had unleashed his passion; now she would have to deal with it.

Within moments, he realized that his anger was dissipating rapidly as she kissed him back. He gentled the kiss, slowing down as he realized he might be hurting her. She moaned, but it held no pain it was encouragement. She whispered, "Oh, Severus, yes!"

He tugged at her ridiculous Muggle t-shirt and her Muggle jeans, and within moments, she was naked. It was his turn to moan at how utterly beautiful she was.

Somehow, his clothing joined hers on the floor, and he finally felt her skin against his. He became even more aroused, which he would, only moments earlier, have sworn was impossible. He broke their kiss to whisper, "You have me bewitched."

She smiled mysteriously, saying only, "Good." And then she kissed him again, sliding her tongue between his lips, pressing her body against his, so that he felt every exquisite inch of her. He pressed her down into the mattress beneath him and positioned himself at the entrance to heaven. She captured his eyes with hers and whispered, "Oh, yes," and he slowly began to press forward ...

Severus woke up panting and painfully aroused. He immediately decided he must never, ever go to sleep thinking about Hermione. And he must *really* never forget to take his Dreamless Sleep Draught again.

He tried to slow his breathing, to bring his body under control, but after several minutes, nothing had changed. He couldn't get the image of Hermione's naked form out of his mind's eye, and he couldn't escape the feel of her lithe body pressed against his.

Sighing, he got out of bed and headed for the bathroom, resigning himself to an ice-cold shower.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 28

Severus offers Hermione a cure for disturbing dreams, an unexpected invitation, and a surprising apology.

A/N: Thanks for your reviews! I'm glad you're enjoying the story so far!

I want to mention that I recently read a story (sadly, I can't remember the author or title) in which Severus used a spell similar to the chair spells Hermione has been using in this story. However, as I had not seen that story when I wrote this one, the similarity is purely coincidental.

Chapter 5

The next morning, Hermione felt tired and out of sorts as she headed off to breakfast. She had been up late, amending the spell that had kept anyone from sitting in an empty chair next to Severus. Now, the spell also prevented Severus from seeing any empty chair in the Professors' section that was not next to Hermione.

She had finally finished late last night and had gone to bed exhausted. She had assumed that she would sleep like the dead, rather than have another explicit dream about Severus, but she had been wrong again. It seemed as though her subconscious mind was determined to insert images of her with Severus into her dreams every night; no matter how tired she got, the dreams still came.

She arrived in the dining hall and noted that Severus was late again. Steeling her resolve, she headed back to the usual place they sat, politely declining offers from other professors to join them. He arrived just as her eggs and kippers appeared.

He glanced at her briefly, looked around the room, then seemed to shrug with resignation. He came over and took his usual chair next to her. "Good morning, Miss Granger," he said politely.

Part of her was pleased that her spell had worked. His eyes had slid right past the empty chairs near Minerva and Dumbledore as well as the ones near Binns and Trelawney. His resigned shrug seemed to suggest that, as she had intended, he hadn't even seen the chairs. Still, she was cranky and tired and it was all his fault. If he wasn't moody and stubborn, she wouldn't have been up half the night casting spells.

And if he wasn't sexy and irresistible, she wouldn't have spent the other half of the night having disturbing dreams.

After a moment, she said, "What's good about it?"

He frowned. "Bad night?" He almost sounded sympathetic.

She shrugged, deciding to be vague but honest. "Disturbing dreams. Not very restful, but ..." She shrugged again.

"I could give you some Dreamless Sleep Draught, if you stop by the lab later," he replied helpfully.

She was momentarily stunned. In all these months, she had never not even once considered that she could just make a Dreamless Sleep Draught to get rid of her dreams of him. She stared at him, unsure what to say.

Could a part of her actually *like* these dreams? Want them to continue? What else could explain *months* of "forgetting" one of the simplest potions she knew?

She finally gathered her wits enough to say, "Thanks. Maybe I will." She wasn't foolish enough to turn it down completely not when he was voluntarily inviting her to stop by and see him.

She told herself it was just one more opportunity to work on her plan. Surely, if she stopped by his lab, he would treat her the way he always had treated her when she was there before.

Right?

She returned her attention to her meal, changing the subject. He obviously saw no need to address last night's dinner apart, so she went with a safe topic. "How is the textbook coming? Do you think it will be done before the students arrive?"

"It will be close, I suppose, but it's coming along. The first draft is almost done. You can look at it when you stop by, if you like."

If she had been surprised at his original invitation, she was shocked by this one. He had never seemed to want to share anything with her or anyone else that wasn't already public. Of course, it wasn't like he was inviting her to read his diary or anything, but still this was a first draft, not a final manuscript.

She couldn't help feeling a little bit flattered.

Her mood suddenly lifting, she smiled, "Okay, sure. What time did you want me to come by?"

"I'll just be working on the manuscript, so whenever Minerva doesn't need you will be fine."

"Okay. How about I just come back with you after lunch?"

"That will be fine."

As she left breakfast, she was a little disgusted with herself. It just wasn't fair that all it took to improve her mood was a few kind words and a non-frowning look from Severus. He hadn't even had to smile! Not that he ever would, but still! A mere non-frown should not lighten her mood this much.

But even her self-disgust couldn't override her joy at the moment. She was going to visit Severus after lunch, at his invitation!

As she hurried toward Minerva's office, she barely resisted the urge to dance. As it was, she couldn't resist spinning around with delight, just once.

Minerva watched Hermione through narrowed eyes. She had half-expected the girl to be sullen and depressed this morning, what with Severus having left her to eat alone last night. But then, he hadn't left her alone this morning, had he?

And this morning, he had had more palatable options than Binns and Trelawney as meal partners. Severus might not admit it, but she knew he considered her a friend. And he certainly thought as well of Dumbledore as anyone.

She had kept an eye on the two of them this morning, and had concluded that whatever was wrong between them last night was clearly resolved this morning. Her impression was confirmed when Hermione said, "Minerva, Professor Snape has invited me to read the first draft of his textbook manuscript this afternoon. Would that be all right?"

Minerva was surprised that Severus was letting anyone see the first draft. She said, "Yes, dear, that will be fine. You're well past the level of expertise you need to achieve before the students arrive, and if Professor Snape thinks it would be advisable for you to see his manuscript, then you should certainly do that. It's a measure of his respect for you that he's offered, you know." She watched Hermione carefully, gauging the girl's reaction.

She was rewarded with a light blush and an eager, "Do you think so? I really want him to respect me, you know. Especially since he wasn't really in favor of having me stay at Hogwarts."

"Well, as I told him at the time, once he got past his general disdain for students and for anyone who associates with Harry, he was sure to discover that you have the makings of a fine professor. It appears that despite his skepticism, I was correct."

"Well, that's good," Hermione said. "He's very smart, and I have a lot of respect for him, so it's nice to think he might someday think of me as a worthy colleague."

Or perhaps something more intimate? Minerva wondered silently. "I'm sure he already does, dear, or he wouldn't let you see his manuscript." She changed the subject. "Now, let's talk about your role in the classroom once the students arrive. I thought we would start with you acting as an assistant instructor, demonstrating some of the transfigurations we're teaching, and perhaps tutoring some of the students who are struggling. Would that be acceptable?"

"Oh, yes," Hermione said, "That sounds wonderful."

"And over time, we will perhaps progress to having you deliver portions of specific class lectures, and eventually entire classes, with me acting as your adviser and consultant."

"That sounds wonderful, Minerva," Hermione said again.

They spent the next few hours practicing advanced Transfiguration, so that Hermione would be prepared to tutor the seventh-years as well as the younger students.

After lunch, Severus walked with Hermione back to his laboratory. He invited her politely to have a seat, then went to his office to get his manuscript. He said, "While you're looking through that, I'll mix you a fresh Dreamless Sleep Draught."

Of course, he probably had some already made, but he didn't bother looking, since he needed a distraction while she read. He couldn't very well stand over her and watch her read that would be too uncomfortable for both of them. As it was, he had gotten almost nothing done that morning, distracted as he was by thoughts of locking them both in his office and getting this lust out of his system once and for all.

He was also having trouble keeping his curiosity at bay. He was dying to know whether she was upset about his desertion last night, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep from using Legilimency to find out.

What stopped him was the knowledge that he would not necessarily get that specific information right away. Also, there was the problem of how to do it without angering her. As he mixed the potion by rote, he glanced at her to see if he could get a clue about her reaction to the textbook. Did she find it interesting? Useful? Boring? Well-written?

He despised himself for caring.

Eventually, the potion was finished, and he bottled it for Hermione. She was only about halfway through the book, and she appeared thoroughly engrossed, which he supposed was a good sign. Although, given her relationship with books in general, perhaps it meant nothing at all. Unfortunately, her focus on the manuscript left him at loose ends. He watched her for a few moments; upon feeling his arousal stirring, he decided that was a bad idea.

He began taking inventory of his herbs and other supplies, but he kept catching himself sneaking peeks at her, wondering what she was thinking.

She shifted in her chair, and suddenly, for no reason at all that he could see, he flashed back to his dream of her. It suddenly occurred to him to wonder if her 'disturbing dreams' were in any way similar to his.

Then, a truly disturbing thought occurred to him what if she was having 'disturbing dreams' about Weasley? Or worse, Potter? Sure, she had denied having any romantic interest in Weasley, but he hadn't thought to probe on the subject of Potter.

He glanced at her, desperate to know if she could possibly be interested in such unworthy children.

It seemed like fate that, at that very moment, she happened to be staring into space, and he was able to see her eyes. Before he could think better of it, his mind whispered silently, "Legilimens."

Fortunately or unfortunately, his entry into her mind required no effort, since she apparently felt comfortable enough with him to be undefended. She didn't even seem to notice he was there.

The first thing he saw was her imagining the steps to make a potion. He recognized immediately that this was one of the potions in Chapter Three, "Advanced Use of Muggle Ingredients". He was amused to see her get distracted by one of the ingredients. In fact, she stopped thinking about the potion altogether, and began to recall her delight with the chocolate she had received on her last birthday.

He turned his attention away from that area, and began seeking information related to Potter or Weasley. Fortunately for his peace of mind, her memories of them seemed innocuous enough, and he got no impression of any kind of romantic aspect to the emotions she held toward them. It seemed more like she thought them the brothers she had never had.

He knew he should get out now, before she noticed, but he couldn't resist trying to find out if he had hurt her feelings last night. Unfortunately, when he tried, he found the first hint he had seen that she was defended at all.

Which seemed odd. He quickly exited as gently as he had entered, hoping she hadn't noticed anything amiss, then pondered why that memory would be defended, when she had no defense in place relating to Weasley and Potter.

After all, given her knowledge of his dislike for them, and even the way she verbally defended them whenever he said anything negative about them, he would have thought she would have all her thoughts and memories about them completely locked away while she was in his presence.

After awhile, he concluded that the only reasonable interpretation was that she was not concerned that he might harm her friends, despite the contempt in which he held them. He was flattered that she trusted him in that way especially since there had been many times when he hadn't been sure he wouldn't kill the two fools himself.

But then, if she trusted him not to hurt her friends, why would she defend the memory of dinner last night?

Apparently, she must feel that if he knew her thoughts about that, it would pose some threat to her which still made no sense to him.

He barely restrained himself from asking her. Instead, he said abruptly, "I should apologize for dinner last night."

She had been looking down at the manuscript again, and her head jerked up to look at him. "Wh-what? Why?"

He wished he had left it alone, because there wasn't much he could say. "Because it was rude," he said lamely.

"You can sit wherever you want," she said, and her expression looked just a tad guilty for a fleeting second. But the look disappeared so quickly that he thought he must have imagined it. She said, "You don't owe me anything."

"Still," he said, wishing he could just let the subject drop, but finding he couldn't, "I didn't intend for you to wind up eating alone. You could have joined Minerva or someone," he finished lamely.

"I'm a big girl, Professor Snape," she said lightly. "All grown up, in fact." His feelings toward her could certainly attest to that, he thought. "I'm perfectly capable of deciding whether to eat alone or to ask to join someone. So, don't worry about it."

He changed the subject, in case she decided to ask him why he had decided to leave her alone or why he had re-joined her this morning. He didn't want to say the former was because he was hot for her and trying to get over it, or that the latter was because there were no other empty seats available. Instead, he nodded toward the

manuscript and asked, "Will it do?"

"What?" There was a pause while she shifted gears. "Oh, yes, it's wonderful. I can't wait until it comes out. I'm dying to try making some of these potions."

He suppressed a smile. "Well, whenever you have free time, you're welcome to come and try them out here."

Wait, had he just said that? Had he really given her carte blanche to come to his lab anytime she wanted?

He must have, because she blushed a little, smiled, and said, "Thank you, I think I'll do that. If you're sure you won't mind?"

He opened his mouth to take it back, but instead said, "Just as long as I'm not teaching, and you let me know when to expect you."

Her smile widened and she said, "Great! I'll do that." And she went back to her reading with the smile lingering on her face.

Severus groaned inwardly. Apparently, he was more into self-torture than he had ever realized.

That night, as she got ready for bed, Hermione looked at the bottle of Dreamless Sleep Draught that Severus had given her. She still couldn't believe it hadn't occurred to her even once in all these months to take it, and that made her uncertain whether she should take it now.

She thought back over the afternoon. It had been such a pleasure, just reading while he puttered around the lab. She smiled to herself the idea of Severus 'puttering' anywhere seemed so incongruous. Yet, once he had finished making the sleep draught for her, there was really no other word to describe what he had been doing. Well, except when he had basically apologized to her and who would have seen *that* coming? Not her, certainly.

There had also been a few strange moments, when she had read a recipe that included chocolate and had started thinking about the delicious chocolate that Harry and Ron and Neville and Ginny had pooled their money to get her last year. And then her thoughts had drifted further afield, and she had found herself thinking a little nostalgically about Ron and Harry and the course of their friendship. She should really call them perhaps they could arrange to spend some time together at the holidays or something.

However, it was really early to be thinking that far ahead. She was probably just missing them because this would be the first year she would spend at Hogwarts without them.

Anyway, she had suddenly realized she wasn't concentrating on the manuscript, and had just managed to return her full attention to it, when Severus had blurted out that apology. She had been caught so off guard that she hadn't known what to say. And, when he hadn't offered any explanation, she had been afraid to ask him why he had chosen to sit across the room, anyway.

Of course, she knew why he had come back. She felt a little guilty about practically forcing him back to her side, but, she reasoned, she hadn't forced him to invite her to his lab, or to let her see his manuscript, or to offer her the use of his lab to practice the potions in his manuscript.

So maybe he wouldn't be too upset about it if he ever figured it out, she reasoned optimistically.

Right, she thought glumly. If he ever figured out that she had used charms to get closer to him, there probably wouldn't be enough left of her to apologize to him.

She suddenly decided that her best chance, in the event that happened, would be to be well-rested, with her wits sharp. That being the case, she grabbed the Dreamless Sleep Draught and took a dose before she could change her mind.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 28

Hermione's spellwork is at risk of discovery, while Severus ponders her disturbing dreams ...

Chapter 6

She wasn't at breakfast. Arriving late again, Severus glanced around the room, and strangely, although Hermione was not in sight, there were no empty chairs. Had someone rearranged the Great Hall?

Severus stood in the doorway for a moment, trying not to be worried about Hermione, which distracted him from the question of the chairs. He had never known Hermione to miss a meal unless she was sick or in danger due to her foolish friends. Since her friends weren't here, and he hadn't heard of any trouble stirring, he assumed the latter was not the issue. But she might be sick. Worse, it might be his fault.

What if, in his distracted state yesterday, he had used the wrong ingredients and poisoned her?

Normally, he was confident of his abilities and his meticulous care in using the right ingredients, in the right way, for the right potions. But with his constant state of preoccupation with Hermione recently, he was no longer quite so sure that he was accurate with anything he was doing.

Turning abruptly, he decided to go check on her. He headed through the courtyard, toward faculty housing, forcing himself to walk briskly rather than run, and as he rounded a corner, he bumped into someone. A sense of déjà vu filled him as he glanced down to find Hermione in a heap at his feet once again. He sighed.

"Do you make a habit of knocking yourself over with everyone, Miss Granger? Or am I just special?"

She looked up at him for a full thirty seconds before she said, "Sorry, Professor Snape. I just woke up late and I was afraid I would miss breakfast. But where were you going?" She took his outstretched hand and let him pull her to her feet. Unfortunately, this put them in closer proximity than was strictly comfortable for him. And that made it difficult for him to think clearly.

"Oh," he said, momentarily at a loss for words. Finally, since he couldn't think of another remotely reasonable explanation, he admitted, "I didn't see you at breakfast, and I was concerned. You didn't take too much of the Dreamless Sleep Draught, did you?"

For some unfathomable reason, she seemed inordinately pleased with his answer. "You were coming to check on me? That's so sweet!" He scowled he was many things,

but 'sweet' certainly wasn't one of them. She seemed oblivious to his displeasure as she continued, "No, I just think I haven't had a good night's sleep in a while, so once the dreams were gone, my body took the chance to catch up, you know?"

His frown deepened. He decided to probe what she had meant by 'disturbing' dreams, by describing them a bit differently. "Exactly how long have you been having bad dreams? And why didn't you make yourself a draught? Or ask me for one?"

She blushed, staring into his eyes for a long moment. Finally, she glanced away and said, "Well, a couple of months, I guess, but they weren't exactly *bad* dreams just um, a little disturbing. And," she admitted in a chagrined tone, "it didn't occur to me to make or ask for a draught."

So, he thought, '*disturbing*' but not '*bad*'. That really *did* sound like the kind of disturbing dreams he had been having about her. Forcing his attention back to the conversation at hand, he asked, "But the draught worked properly last night?"

"Sorry?" she asked, and he wondered what she was thinking about that had her so distracted. Were her dreams *that* disturbing? "Oh, yes, thank you. It worked perfectly." But she frowned slightly, then abruptly changed the subject. "We should probably get to breakfast before we miss it completely."

"Of course," he said politely. He gestured for her to precede him, realizing as he did so that he was still holding her hand. He tried to let go casually, as if it were nothing to him to hold her hand or not.

But as soon as he let go, he felt the loss more acutely than he cared to admit.

What was happening to him?

Hermione hurried ahead of Severus to breakfast, while trying not to appear to be attempting to outrun him. If she wasn't seated when he looked her way, he wouldn't see the chair next to her, and that would be awfully hard to explain when he *did* see it moments later. At one point, he called after her, "You're in quite a hurry, Miss Granger."

He didn't sound annoyed, though, so she just called over her shoulder, "I'm *hungry*, Sev Professor! I don't want to miss it!" Fortunately, he continued to follow at a sedate pace.

He was several steps behind her when she entered the Great Hall, and she was able to skid into a seat just as he got to the doorway. He glanced around quickly and joined her in his usual seat to her left, just as her waffles showed up. She sipped some pumpkin juice before digging in, willing her racing heart to slow down.

They ate in silence for awhile, and Hermione got lost in her thoughts. She should really reverse this spell, she thought she had barely escaped discovery this time, and he was too smart to fail to notice something like that more than once. She was just lucky he had come looking for her.

Frowning thoughtfully, she wondered why he had done that. It almost seemed like he was worried about her he had even *said* he was concerned. Did that mean he actually cared about her? Her heart leapt at the mere possibility, and she had to restrain herself to keep from asking him to say it again *I was concerned*. Who knew three little words could mean so much to her?

She had told him the truth the Dreamless Sleep Draught had worked exactly as it was supposed to, and she had had an uninterrupted night of sleep for the first time in months. What she hadn't said, though, was that it wasn't as satisfying as she had expected. She had woken late, but more than that, she had been sad and out of sorts because she had missed seeing her dream version of him. The one who smiled at her lovingly and lavished kisses all over her body, and hung on her every word and laughed with her all the time.

She had decided halfway through getting dressed that if she couldn't have any version of Severus in real life, she wasn't giving up the dream version that she could have in sleep. So, she would just have to go back to being tired all the time, because she wasn't taking that draught again.

Even if he *had* made it especially for her.

Abruptly, she realized she had been silent for several minutes, and he had been watching her curiously. "What?" she asked, suddenly self-conscious. "Do I have jam on my face?"

"No," he said simply. "You seem distracted."

"Oh," she said. "Maybe I'm not fully awake yet."

"Perhaps," he replied in a thoughtful tone, one that said he didn't think that was it, but he wasn't going to press her on it. She was surprised at his next question. "Are you coming by to try some potions today?"

"Oh, um, well, yes, if you're sure you don't mind," she replied, flustered. Maybe reversing her spell wouldn't reduce her time with him, after all.

"I wouldn't have offered if I minded," he pointed out coolly. "Shall I expect you after lunch?"

"Yes, although I'll have to check with Minerva to make sure she doesn't need me then."

"All right, then." He finished his meal and stood. "I'll see you at lunch." And then he was gone, leaving her staring after him, perplexed.

Severus brooded about Hermione all morning, taking a break only once to send an owl to Hogsmeade for the chocolate she would need for the potion he had observed her thinking about yesterday he had all the other ingredients on hand already. When it arrived, he realized he had accidentally ordered significantly more than she would need for the potion, though, so he decided he would just let her have the excess as a treat.

He refused to admit to himself that that seemed an awful lot like a gift.

Specifically, like a gift that a man gave a woman he was interested in. It wasn't, not really. It wasn't his fault that he had ordered too much. And chocolate wasn't useful for very many potions, so he might as well give the excess away. That way, it wouldn't clutter up his lab unnecessarily.

He wondered yet again about the dreams she was finding 'disturbing', but not 'bad'. He tried to think about what kind of dream besides the one he had already thought of he might have that he would describe that way. Not dreams about the various battles he had been involved in over the years those were disturbing, but also bad. For him, dreams in which he protected her annoying friends would fit the bill, but he didn't think that she would find those disturbing *or* bad. He faced facts: most of his disturbing dreams were also bad, and most of his non-bad dreams weren't disturbing, either.

Except the ones that had led him to start taking the Dreamless Sleep Draught himself.

Was it possible? It was just so difficult to imagine Hermione having that kind of dream about anyone. But he really couldn't imagine another kind of dream that she would describe that way.

He frowned, wondering again who she might be having erotic dreams about. Whoever it was certainly wasn't good enough for her. Even without knowing who it was, he was sure of that.

At least he was reasonably confident that it wasn't Potter or Weasley. Based on what he had seen yesterday, she thought of them as she would siblings, so she certainly wouldn't be having such dreams about them.

Who else might it be? he wondered, seriously displeased at the idea of Hermione having romantic *sexual* interest in anyone.

Well, he decided, he would just have to pay closer attention until he figured it out. And then he could help her realize that whoever the fool was, he was unworthy of her.

Satisfied with this plan for the time being, Severus glanced at the clock and realized he had wasted the entire morning. It was nearly time for lunch, so there was no point in starting anything now. He ignored the feeling of anticipation that came with the realization that he would see her again shortly, and that he would have the entire afternoon with her.

As he walked to the Great Hall, though, he couldn't help wondering when he had so thoroughly given up the idea of avoiding her that he was now actively seeking her company.

Pushing the thought aside, he headed into the hall and looked around. He was a little early, so there were a number of empty seats. Hermione wasn't present yet, but he nevertheless headed for their usual little corner, confident that she would join him when she arrived.

Sure enough, moments later, she approached, but strangely, she asked hesitantly, "Hello, Professor Snape. Do you mind if I join you?"

He frowned at her. "Of course not. Why would I suddenly mind? We've been eating together for nearly a week."

"Well," she stammered, looking uncomfortable and guilty, "I just thought, that first day, you weren't too happy about it, and I thought maybe since then, you were just being polite. Like maybe I forced you into it. You don't have to sit with me, you know."

"Yes, yes," he said testily, waving his hand impatiently. "You've said that before. Now, will you sit down before I injure my neck irreparably?"

"O-okay," she said, looking uncertain. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather be alone, Professor?"

"If I wanted to be alone, I would say so. What on earth has brought on this sudden ridiculous hesitancy? Have I done or said something to suggest that I don't desire your company?"

"Um, no," she said, then seemed not to know what to say.

"And another thing, Miss Granger," he said abruptly, then stopped. Was he really about to say this?

"Yes?" she asked carefully.

Apparently, he was. "Don't you think it's time you called me Severus? You're no longer a student." He couldn't keep the grumpiness out of his tone. It seemed that he was constantly doing things he had sworn never to do where Hermione was concerned.

"Um, sure, okay," she said, looking mystified. "Thanks." Then she added, cautiously, "But won't that sound a little odd if you're still calling me Miss Granger?"

"Well," he drawled with exaggerated patience, "I had thought perhaps I would call you Hermione. If that's acceptable."

"Oh, um, yes, sure, of course you can call me Hermione," she said.

"That's settled, then. Now, did you check with Minerva about this afternoon?"

"Y-yes. She said it's fine. She thinks it would be useful for me to learn more advanced potions she says all knowledge is potentially useful, in the right circumstances."

"She is correct," Severus agreed. "In fact, I think perhaps we should plan regular times for you to come to practice in my labs."

"Are you are you offering to tutor me?" she asked.

"No, I am not," he said clearly. "I am offering you the opportunity to use my lab to teach yourself new things from my new textbook. You may, however, ask for advice, consultation, and assistance at any time."

"O-okay," she stammered, but it was obvious she didn't see the distinction. And he obviously couldn't explain that if he were to *tutor* her, his feelings toward her would once again be completely inappropriate, but if he were offering advice and assistance to a colleague, he could feel any way he wanted.

Not that he was going to do anything about it.

Except, apparently, torture himself some more by *not* tutoring her.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 28

After some time together in Severus's lab, Hermione's spellwork comes to light, with surprising results ...

□

A/N: Thanks for your reviews! Here's the next chapter. I got the Latin from an online translation tool -- hopefully, it loosely translates as "wizard addition." My apologies if it's not correct.

Also, I'm honored that this story was chosen as a featured story for September 2010. I appreciate the compliment, and I'm glad people are enjoying this tale. Thank you!

Chapter 7

That afternoon, Hermione had trouble focusing on the potion he had provided ingredients for. She kept finding herself sneaking peeks at him, trying to figure out what was

with him today. He seemed like he was in a bad mood or something, but he was suddenly offering her even more access to his lab, more time in his company, and a significantly increased level of familiarity. And she had removed both of her chair spells, yet he had seemed irritated that she questioned whether he wanted to sit with her.

She just didn't get it. It almost seemed like he *wanted* to sit with her. She half-wished she hadn't picked today to stop taking her confidence-boosting potion. She certainly wouldn't have been stuttering and stammering like an idiot at lunch if she had still been taking it.

But she had foolishly, as it turned out decided that she should *get all* magic out of her relationship with Severus, not just the spells she had used to get him to spend time with her. She thought perhaps it was her awkwardness that he used to find annoying, and so, maybe, if she reverted to her normal, awkward self, he would start treating her with contempt again, and then she could get over him.

But even that wasn't going as she had planned. Sure, he had seemed irritated with her at lunch, but apparently, that hadn't stopped him from being willing to have her around. He had practically ordered her to sit down next to him, and then he had invited her to spend more time in his lab with him.

Again, she almost had the sense that he *wanted* her around, although he obviously didn't want to talk about it.

And what was the deal with the tutoring-that-wasn't-tutoring? Try as she might, she didn't see the difference between what he had described and tutoring.

She decided to test out just how irritated he was. "Severus?" she asked cautiously.

He immediately looked up from his papers, as if he had been waiting for her to call him. "Yes, Hermione?" Her name came out sounding like a purr, and it rolled over her like a caress.

She pulled herself together with an effort. "Um there seems to be significantly more chocolate here than the recipe calls for."

"Yes, well, I must have accidentally obtained extra. Feel free to take it with you when you leave. I don't want it cluttering up my lab."

"O-okay," she said. Then she asked, "It says to add the grain alcohol and the egg after partially melting the chocolate. I'm not sure how much to melt it ...?"

He dropped his quill on the desk and came to see what she was doing. "You'll want the chocolate to be about two-thirds melted. If it's not melted enough, the grain alcohol will heat enough to catch fire as it melts the rest of the way. If it's too much, the egg will start cooking as soon as you add it."

"Oh, okay," she said, expecting him to go back to his work.

Instead, he waited while she added the remaining ingredients and stirred the specified number of times, then said, "All right, now grab your wand and say *Veneficus eptheca*." He stepped behind her and took her wand hand.

She repeated the words, and as she did, he moved her arm with the wand in a zigzag with a clockwise circle at the end. The mixture in the cauldron bubbled and changed color, from dark brown to a translucent tan. "Quite acceptable, Hermione," he said in a satisfied tone, peering over her shoulder at the potion. "It looks as it should." She smiled, pleased with her success pleased with what, for him, was the equivalent of anyone else gushing with compliments.

Now that the spell had been cast, though, she was suddenly overly conscious of the heat of his body behind her. She fought the urge to lean back into him she so wanted to feel his arms come around her the way they did in her dreams. Fortunately, he stepped back before she could do anything so foolish.

She turned to face him and said, "Thank you for helping me with this, Severus." Nodding toward his manuscript, she added, "I can't wait to try some of the other potions in there."

His voice was gruff as he replied, "You're welcome to come whenever you like."

"Except when you're teaching, and I'm supposed to let you know when," she replied, reminding him of what he had said earlier. She smiled again.

He cleared his throat and said, "Of course."

"Might I come tomorrow after lunch?" she asked, feeling brave.

"Certainly," he said. "Now, it's nearly dinnertime. Shall we walk together?"

"Sure," she answered. "May I leave the chocolate here? Perhaps pick it up tomorrow?"

"Won't you want it later?" he asked.

"Well, maybe," she admitted, "but I don't want to bring it to dinner."

"We can stop back after dinner and get it for you, then."

"Okay, if you're sure you don't mind."

He narrowed his eyes. "Why are you suddenly asking me all the time if I mind things that I offer? You weren't doing that before today."

"Oh," she said. After a long moment, she decided she might as well be honest. If he was going to hate her for it, she'd rather it happen now than later, since proximity didn't seem to be making her attraction to him decrease in the slightest. In fact, it was getting stronger as she spent more time in his company. She said, "I might have had a little help in the confidence department before today."

He said nothing, but raised a brow. She continued defensively, "Okay, so I made myself a Confidence-Boosting Potion, and I've been taking it whenever I knew I was going to see you." He looked surprised, so she added with a hint of sarcasm, "You might not be aware of this, Severus, but you can be downright intimidating. And I knew you were opposed to me staying on as an apprentice, so I needed a little confidence boost to deal with you. So what?"

"What changed?" he asked, not commenting on her sarcasm or her defensiveness.

"What?" she asked. She had prepared herself for the obvious question why would she think she had to deal with him at all? so his question caught her unprepared.

"What changed?" he asked again. "What made you decide to stop taking it?"

"I don't know," she replied. He waited, and eventually, she said, "I guess I figured if you were willingly letting me come to your lab, you must not hate me as much as you used to."

"I didn't hate you."

"Come on, Severus, of course you did. You hated everyone who had the slightest association with Harry. And I was an annoying know-it-all, too."

"I'll admit you were annoying," he said, and she could swear he was suppressing a smile. "And your taste in friends could do with significant improvement. But I didn't actually hate you to tell the truth, I generally didn't think about you at all for most of your years as a student here."

"Oh," she said. "What changed?" she asked, deciding to turn the tables on him.

If she hadn't known better, she would swear he blushed. All he said, though, was, "You outgrew your more annoying traits, and your dubious friends aren't constantly underfoot anymore." He gestured toward the door. "Now, unless you want to miss dinner, we should go."

She nodded and preceded him out, and they walked in a strangely companionable silence to dinner.

After dinner, Severus walked Hermione back to his lab to get her chocolate. He sat with her while she nibbled on a bit of it, enjoying her obvious pleasure in its rich flavor.

"This is delicious chocolate, Severus. Are you sure you don't want some?"

"I gave it to you," he replied.

"Yes, but I'm offering to share it," she replied in a teasing tone. "It's really, really good," she added, in a singsong tone that, surprisingly, did not annoy him. Instead, it made him want to kiss her.

He said, "I wouldn't want to deprive you of such pleasure."

She broke off a piece and held it out to him, saying, "Oh, go ahead. You should enjoy life more, you know. You're too serious. And chocolate is a nice, safe place to start."

Safe? he repeated silently. Not the way she ate it. He said, "Life is serious."

That didn't faze her in the least. She said, "All the more reason to take pleasure where you can you know, in the little things. Like chocolate."

Chocolate wasn't exactly what popped into his mind when he thought of 'taking pleasure'. Still, "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

She grinned. "Nope. Here, try some." She held it up to his lips, and he found himself eating out of her hand. "Now, wasn't that delicious?" she asked.

"Delicious," he echoed, and all he could think of was how desperately he wanted to kiss her.

She stared at him, seemingly aware suddenly of the intensity of his gaze on her. She didn't look away, and he wondered what she was thinking. Without conscious thought, "*Legilimens*" popped into his mind. This time, however, she was paying attention, and he immediately felt her raise her defenses to keep him out.

Her eyes widened, and she gasped. "What are you doing? That's not fair you can't just use Legilimency on me whenever you feel like it!"

He flushed, realizing he had been way out of line. "I'm I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to."

"What do you mean, you didn't mean to?" she demanded. "You don't just *accidentally* try to shove your way into someone's thoughts!"

"But I did!" he protested, in a fervent, pleading tone that he had never imagined he would use. "I was just sitting there, and I wondered what you were thinking, and then '*Legilimens*' popped into my head."

"Well, stop it. If you want to know what I'm thinking, ask me."

That distracted him from his own defensiveness. "Would you tell me?" he asked, intrigued by the possibility that she might willingly tell him her thoughts if he asked her.

"Maybe," she said. "But even if I don't, no trying to read my thoughts. I mean it, Severus. Don't do it again. My thoughts are mine, and it's my choice if I want to share them or not."

He supposed this would be the appropriate time to tell her that he had already read her thoughts once, but she was already mad. Besides, he didn't want her thinking it was a habit. Suddenly, he felt her trying to get into *his* thoughts. Apparently, she had picked up some Legilimency somewhere along the way.

"Hey!" he protested, blocking her easily. "If I can't do that to you, you can't do it to me!"

She nodded. "I know. I knew you wouldn't let me in, but it seemed important that you realize exactly what it's like to have someone you trust, or at least respect, invade your privacy like that."

She trusted him? He was amazed at the possibility. "You trust me?" he asked, just to be sure he hadn't misunderstood.

She looked surprised by the question. "Well, yes," she answered. "Why wouldn't I trust you?"

"Most people don't," he replied. "Because I was a Death Eater."

"Well, I do," she said firmly. "You've always behaved honorably with me, and even with Harry, even when you obviously would have preferred not to." She paused, looking at him consideringly. "I don't suppose you trust me?" she asked finally.

He thought for a long moment. "I don't know," he said eventually. "I'm not a very trusting person."

She looked disappointed, but she said, "Do you at least respect me? Even a little?"

"Yes, of course I respect you," he said, surprised she even had to ask. "I don't spend any more time than necessary with someone I don't respect."

She suddenly looked guilty. He watched her intently, giving her the hard stare that had led more than one student to confess a multitude of sins to him, without the need for him to ask a single question. She fidgeted for a moment, suddenly not meeting his eyes. She stared at a point past his shoulder. "About that ..."

"About what?" he asked, not following her.

"About the whole spending time with me thing," she clarified, then stopped. Her gaze skittered over him and then away, looking around at every corner of the room, never stopping.

"Yes?" he finally prompted. "What about it?"

"Well, you might not have exactly had much choice about that," she whispered, and he had to strain to hear her.

"Hermione," he said, growing impatient, "Just look at me and tell me what you did before you worry yourself to death. It can't be that bad."

She continued avoiding his gaze for a moment longer, then finally, she sighed and looked at him. "Um, well, I made it so that you didn't have much choice except to sit with me."

"How?" he asked flatly, trying to figure out what she might have done.

She looked away. "Um initially, I cast a spell so that none of the other professors would notice empty chairs next to you." She glanced back at him, as if gauging his reaction. She looked poised to flee, as though she expected him to hex her or something.

Instead, he felt himself relax slightly. "That's irrelevant. Most of them prefer not to sit with me anyway." It was certainly true enough more often than not, he had eaten alone before she had started joining him. But then her wording struck him, and he narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean, initially?" She looked away again. "Tell me," he insisted.

"I um well, after the other night when you sat across the room I cast another spell so you wouldn't notice any empty chairs that weren't next to me." Again, her voice was so soft he had to lean forward to hear her.

When he realized what she had said, he stared in shock. He should have been angry he knew he should and later, maybe he would. But at the moment, he just couldn't help it it was so very, unexpectedly, distinctly un-Gryffindor so very *Slytherin*, in point of fact that for several long moments, he could only stare at her as he thought back over the past several days.

He remembered his fleeting thought several days ago about how unlikely it seemed to find himself sitting with her so very often. And he particularly remembered breakfast, when Hermione hadn't been there, and he had thought it odd that there were no empty chairs. Then he had been distracted by his concern for her well-being, and he hadn't thought anything more about it.

As he sorted through his reaction to her confession, he realized that almost no one else could have slipped this past him. A Slytherin certainly would never have gotten away with it, because he would have known to be alert to the possibility. But Gryffindors were usually so forthright, so brash, so lacking in subtlety, that it hadn't occurred to him to consider whether magic might be at play in the sudden frequency with which he found himself in her company. And of course, as much as he had tried to tell himself that he didn't want her around, he obviously hadn't been particularly motivated to keep her away.

So he had missed it completely.

He watched her for another long moment. She was shifting anxiously in front of him, waiting, as only a Gryffindor would, obviously expecting him to explode in rage. But really, he couldn't seem to work up the necessary anger after all, he didn't find her presence displeasing. If he were honest with himself, he rather liked having her to converse with. Certainly more than he liked conversing with anyone else who might sit with him. If he verbally tore her to shreds, as he probably would do to anyone else in this situation, she would likely never come near him again.

This was not a result he desired.

So, all things considered, he wasn't going to blow up. Instead, he decided to take a page from her book and do something completely unexpected.

He allowed the humor of the situation to come to the fore, and he began to chuckle. The sound was rusty, as one might expect considering how many years it had been since he had laughed. Certainly, for all the years of the war, he had had little enough reason, and now that it was over, he was too accustomed to seriousness to find humor in things. But now, as he thought of her cleverness, her unexpectedly delightful sneakiness, his chuckle turned into a full-blown laugh. After several moments, he realized that she was staring at him, open-mouthed.

Which was probably because she had never seen him laugh before, he realized, and that made him laugh harder. Eventually, he calmed himself enough to gasp, "Oh, Hermione, you are unexpectedly much less predictable than I ever believed you to be."

She looked at him doubtfully. She asked, "You're not mad?"

He asked a question in return, still smiling, even though it made the muscles in his cheeks hurt after so many years of disuse. "Do I look mad?"

"Well, no," she said cautiously. "But I really thought you would be mad."

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Has it escaped your attention that I've voluntarily invited you here on more than one occasion in the last few days?"

"N-no," she said. "And I promise, I didn't cast any spells to make you do that," she added in a rush.

"I know," he said arrogantly. "If you had tried something more complicated than making me unable to notice chairs, I would have recognized it immediately. It was the sheer simplicity of it that made it work. That made it brilliant, actually. It flew under my radar." He gave her a severe look. "But don't do it again. You're too Gryffindor to pull this off now that I know to look for it."

She blushed. "No, no, I won't. I already decided I wouldn't when I removed the spells this morning."

There was a short silence, then he couldn't resist asking, "Out of curiosity, what made you do that? Remove the spells?"

"Well," she said slowly, and he rather thought her confusion over his reaction was slowing her brain, "two things. One was the same reason that I told you before, about why I stopped the confidence potion. And the other well, I realized that if I got delayed, you would think there was nowhere to sit, and I would probably get caught once I arrived and you suddenly saw empty chairs that weren't there before."

"Ah," he said. "Like this morning. Which also explains why you were in such a hurry to get to breakfast."

"Yes," she said sheepishly. "It does."

He asked, "Why did you decide to tell me about this?"

"I don't know," she replied uncertainly. "I guess I felt guilty. And I didn't want to lie to you. How will you ever trust me if I lie to you?"

He was surprised again. "You want me to trust you?"

"Well yes," she said, sounding surprised by the question. "Why wouldn't I want you to trust me?"

"I just don't know why you would care," he said truthfully. "Actually, that's the only thing I don't really understand about all these spells and potions. Why would it matter that much to you to spend time with me?"

She blushed again, seemed to search for words, and then suddenly turned away. "You know what, Severus? I think I'm going to choose not to answer that. It's getting late, and I'm going back to my room." She headed for the door, then paused to look back at him. "I'm glad you're not mad at me. I'll see you tomorrow."

She turned to leave again, but paused when he spoke. He just couldn't resist. "Hermione?" he said.

"Yes?"

"I'll join you at breakfast. No matter how many empty chairs I see."

Her blush deepened, and she said, "Good night, Severus."

"Good night, Hermione." And she was gone.

After she left, he thought about their discussion about what she had told him, and even more, about what she had refused to tell him.

And wasn't *that* intriguing?

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 28

When Hermione begins to worry about an absent Minerva, Severus endeavors to ease her concerns.

A/N: Thanks so much to everyone who has taken time to review! The next few chapters are each on the short side, simply because of where the breaks worked best in the flow of the story.

As always (whether I remember to say it specifically, or not), these characters all belong to JKR, as much as I would like to keep them for myself ...

Chapter 8

Hermione arrived early at breakfast the next morning, feeling lighter and happier now that she was no longer deceiving Severus. She was still amazed at his reaction to her confession she never, in a million years, would have seen that coming.

She had been so shocked at the time that she hadn't even noticed how much his laughter turned her on but if her dreams last night were any indication, it was a lot. She had dreamed of him laughing with her, even as they made love, and it was so delightful to have the joy merge with the passion even if it was still just a dream.

And he apparently still wanted her company it seemed she had not been imagining that, after all. His parting comment had sent a little thrill through her. When had he unbent enough to tease her?

And even the whole *Legilimens* thing sure, she was mad that he had tried that on her. But part of her was a little bit flattered thrilled, even that he was curious enough about her thoughts to try to read them. As long as he kept his promise not to do it again, she thought darkly.

"That's quite a frown," Severus said as he slid into the chair next to her. "Care to share?"

"Oh, it's nothing important," she said. "Good morning."

"Good morning," he returned. He had reverted to his usual serious demeanor, and she smiled at him.

"How was the rest of your evening?" she asked, just because she didn't know what else to say.

"Brief," he said. "As you know, it was quite late when you left. I retired almost immediately."

"Oh," she said, frowning slightly. "Me, too. I hope I didn't keep you up too late."

He looked at her askance. "That was not a complaint or criticism, Hermione. It was a statement of fact."

"Oh," she said again. After a moment, she added, "I'm sorry, I don't know why I feel so awkward this morning."

He shrugged. "We had a relatively intense discussion last evening."

"Yes, but *you* don't feel awkward, do you?" she pointed out, suddenly irritated that she was always flustered and he was always smooth and hard to read.

He said, very quietly, "If you must know, I feel awkward most of the time." After a pause, he continued, "You see, apparently I do trust you, at least a little, or I wouldn't have told you that."

"Really?" she asked, her mood improving again. "You trust me?" She smiled delightedly. "And you feel awkward?"

"You don't have to sound quite so happy about it," he grumbled.

"Actually, I'm more surprised than happy you hide it so well," she said admiringly. "I wish I could do that."

"You're fine the way you are," he said offhandedly.

"You think so?" she asked, shocked.

"Yes, I do," he said. "Although you could use a bit more self-assurance and not the kind that you have to take like medicine," he warned.

"Oh," she sighed. "I don't really know how to go about getting more self-assurance without making a potion."

"You don't need a potion," he insisted. "You just need a little time, and you'll develop the real thing."

"Really?" she asked. It had never occurred to her that she might someday be truly confident without the aid of a potion.

"Yes, really," he said impatiently. "Few people are truly self-assured until they've lived a little. And Confidence-Boosting Potions interfere with the development of the real thing."

"Oh," she said, "I never thought of that, although I suppose it makes sense."

She finished her breakfast, then stood. "I have to go meet Minerva she must have come and gone very early this morning. I got here early and I didn't see her at all, did you?"

"No, I haven't seen her, either," Severus replied, glancing around the room.

"Okay," Hermione said. "I'll see you at lunch, and then maybe afterwards, I can try another new potion?" she asked hopefully.

"Certainly," Severus replied. "Have a good morning, Hermione."

"You, too, Severus."

By lunchtime, Hermione was starting to worry. She hadn't seen Minerva all morning, and she had had only a brief message sent by owl to say that Minerva was feeling under the weather and would not be leaving her quarters that day. She asked Hermione to continue with the reading and the transfigurations they had begun the day before.

So Hermione had done as Minerva asked, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something was really wrong. It just wasn't like Minerva to stay in her quarters all day. And Hermione wasn't even sure if Minerva had been at dinner last night she had been so focused on Severus that anyone might have been there, or not, and she wouldn't have noticed.

When she got to lunch, she found Severus already there, sipping pumpkin juice and preparing to eat a sandwich. She greeted him absently and joined him. As she ate, she kept watching for Minerva to show up, even though her message had clearly stated that she wouldn't leave her quarters today.

After a while, he asked, sounding mildly curious, "You're very quiet. Is something wrong?"

"What?" she asked, really looking at him for the first time. "Oh, I'm sure it's nothing. At least, I hope it's nothing. It has to be nothing. Right?" She really needed reassurance.

He didn't give it to her. "I can't answer that, since I have no idea what 'it' is," he said reasonably.

"Never mind," she said, unaccountably disappointed. "I'm sure it's nothing." She fell silent again, looking back toward the door, and felt herself fall back into her worry for Minerva.

Awhile later, Severus dragged her from her thoughts again. He sounded insistent. "You're starting to make me worry, Hermione. What are you so anxious about? And why are you watching the door?"

"She said it was nothing serious," Hermione said, not caring that she wasn't really answering his question. She just needed to hear out loud that it was nothing serious, even if she was the one reassuring herself.

"*Who* said *what* was nothing serious?" Severus asked, and now he had progressed to sounding frustrated. "Would you please look at me and tell me what's going on?"

"What?" she asked again. She finally looked him in the eye, and she could see him resisting the temptation to just read her thoughts and get it over with. She pushed her worry aside and said softly, "Thank you, Severus."

"For what?" he groused. "All I did was ask you what was bothering you a question, I might add, that you have still not answered in any coherent way."

He was really worried about her, she realized. "I'm sorry," she said, as he frowned darkly when she smiled at the realization that he must care about her if he was this upset that she was worrying. "Minerva wasn't in the lab this morning she sent a message saying she was under the weather and that it was nothing serious. I just can't help worrying that it might be worse than she's letting on."

"Why's that?" he prompted when she fell silent again.

"I don't really know," she admitted. "It's nothing I can put my finger on, but something seems off." She paused, thinking. What had her so worried? Realizing at last, she said softly, "I guess it's that it's so unusual for her to isolate herself, and she's not young, you know?"

"True," he said. "I could check on her, if you like." He looked a little surprised at his own words.

"Would you?" She was so relieved at his offer that, before she could think better of it, she reached out and squeezed his hand where it rested on the table. "Thank you, Severus. I won't be able to relax until I'm sure it's really not serious." When she realized what she had done, she felt herself blush, and she started to draw her hand away. She was amazed when he turned his hand over and squeezed hers back.

"Relax now," he ordered. "I'll drop by and see her right after lunch. You can go ahead to my lab." He gave her the password.

Despite her worry, all she could think was, *Wow! He really does trust me!*

She relaxed and enjoyed the rest of lunch.

As Severus approached Minerva's quarters, he wondered what in heavens he thought he was doing. Minerva was probably fine it was probably nothing serious, just as she had said. She was probably resting, and would probably be annoyed with him for disturbing her.

He should just go back to the lab immediately and tell Hermione that everything was fine.

Unfortunately, he found himself reluctant to lie to her. Which was more disturbing than he cared to admit, actually he had never had a problem lying to anyone when it suited his purposes. Normally, his lies had involved subjects related to the Dark Lord and protecting that annoying Potter or his arrogant friends, but he wasn't above lying to prevent his own embarrassment.

Or at least, he never had been before but he was suddenly finding that knowing for sure that someone trusted him changed everything. He had never had anyone place such faith in him before. Not even Dumbledore, who certainly *seemed* to trust him and with fairly important issues, too had ever evinced such total relief and freedom from worry as Hermione just had when Severus promised to check on Minerva for her.

And so, wishing he was anywhere else, but determined to keep his promise, Severus found himself knocking at Minerva's door. After several long moments with no answer forthcoming, Severus frowned and knocked again. Perhaps Hermione's concern was not unfounded after all.

Still getting no answer, he knocked again, louder this time, and called, "Minerva? It's Severus. Are you all right?"

She still didn't reply, and he wondered if she was even there. Frowning more deeply, he considered what to do. Most of his options involved invading Minerva's privacy in one way or another, which he didn't think she would appreciate. He found himself more concerned about that than he wanted to be, but there it was. Apparently, his willingness to trust and be trusted by Hermione was having ripple effects in other parts of his life.

He finally decided to consult with Dumbledore. That way, he could be sure that he wasn't doing something inappropriately intrusive simply because Hermione was worried. He hurried over to Dumbledore's office, gave this week's password ("jelly beans") and knocked at the door. Dumbledore called, "Enter."

Looking up as Severus entered, he said, "Severus! Did I forget a meeting?"

"No," Severus said simply.

Dumbledore smiled benevolently. "What brings you here? And in such an agitated state?"

He felt a little ridiculous, but he announced gravely, "Miss Granger is concerned about Minerva."

"Miss Granger is?" Dumbledore asked, sounding surprised. "Then why are *you* here, instead of Miss Granger?"

Severus felt a flush creep up his face, but he gamely replied, "Miss Granger did not feel it would be appropriate for her to check on Minerva, so she requested that I do so."

"That's very nice of you, Severus," Dumbledore replied. "I must confess, I'm a bit surprised that Miss Granger approached you with her concern. However, that is neither here nor there. I assume you checked on Minerva and she is not in good condition? No," he amended, "If she was not in good condition, you would have simply provided her with an appropriate remedy, rather than involving me." He dropped his voice to a confidential whisper. "You may not know this, Severus, but you generally keep your own counsel about matters like this." Eyes twinkling with some inner amusement that Severus didn't even try to decipher, Dumbledore finally reached the right conclusion. "Am I to understand, then, that when you went to check on Minerva, you were not able to ascertain her condition?"

Growing impatient with Dumbledore's less-than-efficient thought process, Severus grumbled, "She didn't answer the door. And before you ask, I knocked several times, loudly, and I called out, as well."

"Did you try ... anything else?" Dumbledore asked cautiously.

"I didn't wish to be rude, or invade her privacy, without consulting you first."

Again, Dumbledore rang annoyingly with pleased surprise. "That was very ... considerate of you, Severus."

Severus's patience was now hanging by a thread. He had known it was a bad idea to take this on for Hermione. Dumbledore was even now trying to figure out why he was suddenly so involved with other people's concerns, and Severus could only hope that his agile mind didn't draw the wrong conclusions.

Or the right ones, either, a voice in his head whispered.

Suddenly realizing he had been silent too long, and that Dumbledore was looking at him curiously, waiting for some response, Severus finally said, "It is easier for me when Minerva is not unduly irritated with me."

"Hmmm," was all Dumbledore said. He continued watching Severus consideringly for several long moments, during which it was all Severus could do not to squirm like a schoolboy. Finally, he stood. "Well, let's go, then."

Severus stood and, without a word, followed Dumbledore back to Minerva's quarters. He was annoyed that Dumbledore's demeanor said he was merely humoring Severus. He waited several feet away while the older man repeated his own earlier actions, with the same lack of results. Then, suddenly seeming to take the situation more seriously, he gave the password, and the ward immediately granted them access.

Severus waited in the entryway, uncharacteristically uncertain of what to do, while Dumbledore began looking around, calling out, "Minerva? Didn't you hear me knocking? I hear you're under the weather, and people are concerned."

Severus finally heard a response a weak, incoherent moan coming from the direction of what he assumed was the bedroom. Dumbledore must have heard it, too, because he hurried in that direction, now looking more gravely concerned than he had mere moments ago.

"Oh, Minerva," Severus heard Dumbledore say in a very anxious tone. "How long have you been like this?" Severus couldn't make out her response, but apparently Dumbledore did, because he exclaimed, "Since midnight?! Why didn't you call someone? Or make a potion? Or do something?" Suddenly, he called out, with an unusual tone of command, "Severus, get in here!"

Grateful to finally be told what to do, Severus hurried toward the room. He glanced at the bed, where Minerva looked frail and sick and every one of her seventy-plus years. She coughed weakly, and his concern increased even more than it would have if her cough had been strong.

Dumbledore said, "Minerva tells me she didn't feel that bad initially, but she woke around midnight feeling too weak and sick to even call for help."

Severus frowned. "She sent an owl to Hermione this morning." He didn't notice the sharp look Dumbledore gave him at his use of Hermione's first name.

"Arranged it ... last night," Minerva whispered weakly, between wheezing, labored breaths.

"Well, obviously, you're in much worse shape now than you were then," Severus replied. "Other than the cough, what are your symptoms?"

"Trouble breathing," she replied. "Fever ... congestion ... aching ... all over ... general weakness."

"All right, sounds like some sort of flu, with possible pneumonia. I'll go fetch a potion."

Dumbledore nodded. "Meanwhile, I'll stay here and help Minerva drink some tea."

Severus was hurrying toward the door and didn't hear her reply.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 28

Dumbledore and Minerva are surprised by Severus's solicitous behavior, while Hermione worries about her mentor's health ...

□

A/N: Another short chapter - I'm hoping to get the next one up in a couple of days. Thanks for continuing to review - I really appreciate each and every one!

As always, I really, really, really wish it were mine ... Alas, I am doomed to disappointment, as it is not and it never will be.

Chapter 9

While they waited for Severus to return, Dumbledore supported Minerva's head as she sipped the tea he had brewed for her. He propped pillows behind her back and head to help her sit up, and, using his wand, he levitated her from the bed while a house-elf changed her sheets. Feeling mildly embarrassed - even though with magic, it shouldn't have seemed as personal as it did - he said, "We can also change your nightgown for you, if you like."

Something he had done must have helped, because her breathing sounded less labored than it had moments ago when she answered. "No, that's all right. How did you know to check on me?" The house-elf immediately disappeared, likely back to the kitchens.

"Hermione was worried and apparently mentioned it to Severus. He came to check on you, and when he got no answer, he came to see me."

She gave a wheezy chuckle. "I'm surprised he didn't just Floo me to see what I was doing. Or use a password or something."

"He didn't want to invade your privacy, he said."

She looked surprised. "When has rudeness ever stopped Severus before?" She paused to cough, then took a sip of her tea. "I thought rudeness was a point of pride for him."

"It is odd, isn't it?" Dumbledore mused thoughtfully. "I thought the same thing myself. And he seems genuinely concerned about you, as well."

"Well, in his own way, Severus considers me a friend."

"Yes, but he doesn't normally allow that to show, does he? And another thing since when does he consult me when he could just as easily take care of things himself?"

"As you say, Albus, it's odd." She took a deep breath, which triggered a coughing fit, and then sipped some more tea. "He's been spending a lot of time with Hermione lately, so perhaps her sweet nature is rubbing off on him."

"Do you think so?" Dumbledore asked. "I know they've been taking meals together, but I assumed that was just because he was tutoring her in something or other."

"I don't think so," Minerva replied. "Their demeanor doesn't suggest business. It's more like a friendship."

Any reply Dumbledore might have made was forestalled by the return of the wizard under discussion.

This time, he used the Floo network to enter the room. Brushing himself off, he said, "Forgive the method of entry. I didn't think you'd mind, since you were expecting me."

"No, that's all right," Minerva replied. "I appreciate your speed in returning."

He handed her a bottle. "Two tablespoons now and one tablespoon twice a day until the day after your symptoms are completely gone." He gave her what Dumbledore recognized as his most intimidating look. "*Completely* gone, Minerva. If that runs out before they're gone, you must either ask me for more or make more yourself."

"Yes, of course," Minerva replied. "Thank you, Severus." The men both watched while she took the two tablespoons and then set the bottle on her nightstand.

"And you will do nothing but rest for at least two days," Severus decreed, in a voice that brooked no argument, then frowned. "Perhaps you should go to the infirmary. Poppy will ensure that you don't overdo." Dumbledore had intended to demand the same thing; he was fascinated by the fact that Severus beat him to the punch. Had she been feeling herself, Dumbledore was sure Minerva would have protested Severus's highhandedness.

Now, though, all she said was, "No, no, that's not necessary," as forcefully as she could manage in her weakened state. "I already feel much better. I can conjure or summon anything I need."

Severus looked at her skeptically. "I realize the potion is magic, Minerva, but it's not quite that fast-acting." Dumbledore was shocked. Had Severus just made a joke a sarcastic one, perhaps, but he did seem to be trying to use humor ...?

Minerva waved a hand dismissively. "I'll be fine."

"Nevertheless," Dumbledore finally interjected. "You will stay on bed rest for at least two days more if you don't improve significantly in that time. Someone will be checking on you twice a day until you're back to full health. And if you don't answer a knock in a reasonable time, we will not hesitate to let ourselves in by any means expedient."

She nodded, acknowledging the necessity for such a proviso. After all, if they hadn't let themselves in today, she might well have died.

Dumbledore pushed himself to his feet, saying, "We'll leave you to rest, now, Minerva. We'll see you later."

They let themselves out, and Dumbledore couldn't resist prodding Severus, just a little. "I hear you've been spending time with Hermione Granger. Are you tutoring her?"

"Not tutoring, no," Severus said tersely, looking uncomfortable.

"No?" Dumbledore asked. "How delightful."

Severus frowned, looking nonplussed. "Delightful?" he echoed. "What's delightful about it?"

"It's delightful that you're developing a friendship with her. Her other friends are no longer here, you know," he added confidentially.

Severus's frown deepened. "She needs a higher quality of friends," he muttered darkly.

Dumbledore was fascinated to find that Severus's new attitude toward Hermione, and even toward Minerva and himself, did not appear to extend to Harry Potter or any of Harry's other friends.

"Well, it's nice that you're taking her under your wing," Dumbledore said.

"I haven't," Severus insisted, still looking uncomfortable. "She's just a tolerable mealtime companion, and she's a helpful recipe tester for my new text."

And with that, Severus stalked off toward his lab, effectively ending the discussion.

Hermione paced the lab, unable to focus on anything. Severus had hurried in, grabbed a potion, and then used the Floo network to leave, barely saying a word, beyond, "Minerva is ill and needs a potion. I'll be back shortly." She could only assume this meant he was seriously concerned about Minerva, and she restrained the urge to pepper him with questions about her mentor's condition.

Anyway, she wasn't yet comfortable enough to start digging through Severus's supplies to try to find the ingredients for the potion she was supposed to be making today. So she waited, she paced, and then she waited and paced some more. She thought about leaving it felt a little strange to be alone in Severus's lab, even with his explicit

permission. But she didn't want to wait any longer than necessary to find out what was going on.

It seemed like forever before he finally returned, this time through the door. She asked, "Is Minerva all right?"

"She'll be fine, despite her foolishness." He didn't look at her he was too busy trying to brush the remainder of the ashes from his clothing. Which seemed strange, since his black clothing didn't really show dirt.

"Foolishness?" Hermione asked. She had never thought of Minerva as foolish.

"Yes, foolishness. She was ill already last night, but she didn't make or ask for a potion, and then she woke up too ill to do anything about it. If you hadn't sent me over there, the outcome might have been very unfortunate."

"You mean she might have died?" Hermione was horrified. She felt tears well up in her eyes. His tone had been so brusque that she somehow *knew* he was extremely worried. "What's wrong with her?"

"She seems to have some sort of flu, possibly with pneumonia." He glanced at her, saw a tear spill over. "Stop worrying. She'll be fine. She was already looking improved when I returned, and she's agreed to have someone check on her twice a day. She'll be fine," he reiterated.

Hermione hastily wiped her eyes. "I know. I was just thinking of what might have happened. I can't imagine Hogwarts without her."

He sighed. "Well, don't, then. She'll be *fine*. Now, what have you been doing while I've been gone?"

She felt a blush creep up her face, "Oh ... well, um ... if you want the truth ..."

He gave her a dark look. "Always," he said emphatically.

"Well ... mostly just pacing and worrying."

"Why?" he asked grumpily. "You said you trust me. We agreed that I would see to Minerva and I did. So why were you still worrying?"

She didn't want him to think she didn't trust him. "I *do* trust you, Severus." He looked at her skeptically. "I do," she said again. "It's just hard to not know what's happening. And what if you got there too late to do anything? And you seemed so worried when you came to get the potion."

"Still, the distraction of work would be welcome, I would think."

He sounded less annoyed, now, so she gave him a tiny grin. "Well, I don't know your thoughts on the matter, but I always thought it might be dangerous to brew potions without one's full attention. I suspect you might be a bit miffed if I blew up the lab or something."

His lip twitched, and she thought he might be just a little bit amused. "Well, perhaps it's best that you worry and pace, if that's the alternative."

Her grin widened. "Glad we're in agreement."

He glanced at the clock. "There's plenty of time, if you still want to make the Shielding Serum."

She said, "Sure. What ingredients do I need?"

He began gathering them, and this time, he didn't go back to his own work. Instead, they worked together, alternately chatting companionably and falling into comfortable silences, as they assembled the potion.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 28

Severus and Hermione have a disagreement, and Dumbledore's curiosity grows...

Chapter 10

At dinner, Severus noted that Dumbledore seemed to be paying a lot of attention to him and Hermione. He was not pleased by this development. He had suspected, since that little mini-interrogation earlier in the day, that his burgeoning friendship or whatever it was with Hermione might come under greater scrutiny from Dumbledore. He had hoped against hope that he was wrong, but it seemed he wasn't that fortunate.

Still, there was nothing truly wrong about what he and Hermione were doing. They were simply talking to each other and working together. She wasn't really his trainee and anyway, they were hardly more than friendly, professional acquaintances.

He ignored the little whisper in his head that said, *yeah, except for the way all your blood rushes to your groin whenever you so much as think about her*. He didn't have thoughts that crude, so he must not have heard himself correctly.

Hermione interrupted his brooding, asking, "You're very quiet, Severus. Are you more worried about Minerva than you've let on?"

"No," he said simply.

She didn't let it drop. "Well, then, why so quiet?" Apparently she was already developing the confidence they had so recently discussed.

Perhaps he shouldn't have been so forthcoming about that. He demurred, "I don't have anything to say, particularly."

"Right," she said, with a touch of sarcasm.

"Contrary to what you seem to think, *Miss Granger*, I don't generally speak just to hear the sound of my own voice," he said irritably.

Oh, she didn't like that, he saw. Sure enough, her tone was frosty when she replied, "Well, *Professor Snape*, perhaps you should."

He honestly had no idea what that meant, so he asked her. "What does that mean?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but then her demeanor changed, taking on a blank, shuttered look that he didn't like at all. She said calmly, "Never mind. If you're so determined to take out your bad mood on me, I think I'll go sit somewhere else." And with that, she pointed her wand at her place setting, then pointed to an empty spot near Dumbledore and without another word followed her dinner to her new seat.

He watched her go, shocked that she had the audacity to just walk away like that and the dramatic wand-waving was clearly a dig at him, as well. After a moment, he snorted to himself and resumed eating his now-solitary dinner.

Confidence, indeed.

Hermione quickly regretted her melodramatics. She found she had jumped from the frying pan of Severus's bad mood into the fire of Dumbledore's avid curiosity.

She had barely asked, "May I join you, sir?" and taken her new seat, when Dumbledore dove in although he started so benignly that it took her a few moments to realize he was interrogating her, very subtly.

"Severus in a bad mood this evening?" he asked lightly.

"When is he *not*?" she retorted grumpily, then realized he didn't deserve her bad mood any more than she deserved Severus's. "Sorry," she mumbled.

He just laughed and patted her hand. "It's all right. Severus has been known to have that effect on all of us at one time or another. You mustn't hold it against him. He needs all the friends he can get."

She looked at him, thinking it odd that he would say something even slightly negative about a professor to a mere apprentice. "Erm, okay," she said cautiously.

"He must be in a worse mood than usual tonight that looked like quite a little spat you two had. Very impressive exit, my dear. Did you say the incantation aloud, or just walk away?"

Spat? That made them sound like ... *lovers*. Where would he have gotten that idea? She replied quietly, "I used a non-verbal spell."

He nodded approvingly. "Combined with the dramatic wand usage, that's the best choice. The perfect mix of drama and power."

She smiled modestly and shrugged. "It seemed like the right way to go. He dislikes 'foolish wand-waving,' as he likes to tell his students."

"Oh, it was excellent, my dear, it most definitely was." He paused to eat a bite or two of his chicken. After a moment, he asked nonchalantly, "I assume you're aware that he's staring daggers at us both?"

"I wouldn't know, sir. I'm ignoring him." She forced herself not to feel guilty about the half-truth. She really *was* ignoring him, but she was also very well aware of his eyes on her, as always.

"Well, I'm sure you two will work it out," he said reassuringly. "Just don't expect him to explicitly apologize. He's not very good at those, you know."

"Oh, but " she stopped herself before admitting that Severus had already apologized to her once. Well, sort of ... 'I should apologize for dinner last night' was close enough. She abruptly changed the subject. "I understand you checked on Minerva. How is she?"

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully, but he didn't press her to finish her thought. "Yes, I saw her earlier, with Severus, and I checked on her just a short while ago, on my way here. She's doing much better. The potion Severus gave her is working wonders already."

"Oh, that's a relief," she said, smiling genuinely. As she had said to Severus earlier, she couldn't imagine a Hogwarts without Minerva it didn't bear thinking about.

"I'm sure she'll be back at work with you in a couple of days." He pushed aside what was left of his dinner and stood. "Well, dear, I must go. If you'll excuse me?"

He left abruptly, giving her no opportunity to say so much as good-bye.

Suddenly not very hungry, although she had eaten very little, she decided she might as well leave, too. As she headed for the door, Severus appeared at her side, walking with her toward her room.

"I didn't mean to make you mad," he said without preamble.

She wasn't ready to forgive him yet. "Yes, you did."

He didn't answer right away, and eventually she glanced at him. Returning her look with an inscrutable one of his own, he finally said, "You're right. I did."

"Why?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. She gave him a look. He amended, "I was in a bad mood and I took it out on you."

"You weren't in a bad mood before dinner," she pointed out. "Your mood turned in the blink of an eye, and suddenly you were picking a fight with me. What changed?"

He flushed. Instead of answering, he asked, "What did you and Dumbledore talk about?"

"At dinner?" she asked, surprised by the question. He nodded, and she asked pertly, "Why do you want to know?"

"It's relevant," he said simply.

She looked at him for a long moment, trying to figure out how her *subsequent* conversation with Dumbledore could be related to Severus's *prior* bad mood. It didn't make sense to her, so she finally relented, interested to see how he thought they were connected. "Okay, fine," she said tersely. "He saw our disagreement and he said I shouldn't hold it against you. He thought I made the perfect exit." She heard a hint of pride in her own voice.

Severus ignored that and remained focused on the content of Dumbledore's conversation. "Did you ... get the feeling he was fishing for information about ... you and me?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "You and me? Yes, why? Did he ask you about it, too? No, of course not, you didn't talk to him tonight."

"He did," Severus corrected her in a gentle tone. "Earlier today, when we were leaving Minerva's quarters."

"Oh," she said, then again, more emphatically, "Oh! I'm sorry, Severus. I'll stay away from now on."

She had expected him to be pleased, but his expression darkened. "Why would you do that? We're not doing anything inappropriate."

"Oh," she said, confused now. "I thought I didn't mean to put you in an awkward position, you know. But if you aren't trying to make me stay away from you, then why ...?" She trailed off, not asking all the whys that were ringing in her head. *Why did you pick a fight with me? Why are we talking about this? Why **aren't** we doing anything inappropriate?*

"I'm just not used to having anyone scrutinize my behavior with my colleagues."

"Or your students," she supplied.

"You're not my student," he said flatly. "You're my colleague. A junior colleague, but a colleague nonetheless."

It seemed important to him, for some reason, so she nodded agreement. "Okay, I suppose I can see where you wouldn't be thrilled about Dumbledore scrutinizing us. So what do you want me to do?"

His eyes glittered suddenly, then he made them blank again. "I want you to do what you've been doing. Except for tonight. I don't want you to do that again."

"You deserved it," she pointed out.

"Perhaps I did," he admitted. "But you asked me what I want you to do, so I'm telling you that I don't want you to do that again. Not even if I deserve it."

Suddenly, she was amused. "You don't want much, do you?" she teased.

His lips twitched; he said cryptically, "If you only knew. Good night, Hermione." And, just as Dumbledore had done a short time ago, he left without giving her a chance to respond, leaving her completely bewildered about what he might have meant.

After Hermione went inside, Dumbledore reversed the Disillusionment Charm that had made him invisible to them and headed slowly back toward his own quarters.

So, Severus wanted Hermione, did he? At least, that was the most reasonable interpretation of his last remark. Especially combined with his version of an apology and the frequency with which he sought the girl out. And, of course, the informality between them as they discussed his own curiosity about them was illuminating.

In light of Severus's now-obvious feelings for Hermione, Dumbledore understood why the man had been so tersely emphatic that he ~~was~~*not* tutoring Hermione. He also realized he would have to be far more subtle in his information-gathering. He had expected that each of them would suspect he was more interested than he tried to let on, but he hadn't anticipated that they would compare notes. As he had commented to Minerva earlier that day, he was accustomed to Severus keeping his own counsel unless forced to do otherwise.

A simple question like the one Hermione had posed could certainly not be viewed as force. Severus was as good as anyone Dumbledore knew at freezing people out with a look or a word, but he had seemed to be going out of his way to make Hermione feel comfortable. He had actually *explained* himself to her, something Dumbledore could rarely remember Severus doing for anyone.

Wanting Hermione must be torture for Severus, since he obviously thought he couldn't have her. Albus wondered briefly when Severus's feelings toward Hermione had changed. Not very long ago, he suspected; as recently as last spring, the younger wizard had been adamantly opposed to having her remain at Hogwarts, and he had given every indication of resenting and disliking her just as much as he did Harry Potter and all his friends.

Of course, it was also possible that Severus's opposition to her apprenticeship had been triggered by an already-burgeoning desire for her, which at that time would have been strictly off-limits. As torturous as unrequited passion could be, unrequited *forbidden* passion would have to be much, much worse.

Dumbledore thought about it some more, looking at it from all angles, trying to ensure that he hadn't missed some other possibility. He finally concluded that no other explanation made sense. Severus wanted Hermione, and that was all there was to it.

The problem was, knowing that Severus wanted Hermione was only half the issue. Did Hermione want Severus, too? The evidence there was murkier, although Dumbledore was fairly certain that she would be able to come up with adequate reasons to avoid him if she wanted to.

So, she at least must like Severus a little bit. He considered how he might find out just how much ...

Finally, he decided he would have to keep watching and look for opportunities to gain information. Maybe Minerva would have some ideas. Dumbledore suspected that she had more information about the pair than she had shared to date. What had she said? *Their demeanor doesn't suggest business...*

He would ask her to expound on that further when he stopped in to check on her tomorrow morning.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 28

Severus and Hermione spend some quality time together, while Minerva tries to convince Dumbledore to mind his own business ...

A/N: The Latin in this chapter came from an online translation site, so please forgive me if it's wrong.

Also, a quick warning at the beginning of this chapter, Severus may seem a bit OOC to some people. I'm not sure, but I think it's possible he would behave this way for three reasons: 1) Throughout canon, we only ever saw him through Harry's eyes and he would hardly show Harry this side of his personality; 2) as I recently read in another author's note, Severus written purely as he appears in canon would never fall in love (with Hermione or anyone else); and 3) he's way out of his depth and off-balance because of his feelings for Hermione, so it would be normal for him to try to throw her off-balance a bit, too. And really, who among us doesn't behave a little bit OOC as we're falling in love? Anyway, enjoy, and comments are always appreciated!

As always, I'm borrowing these characters from JKR.

Chapter 11

At breakfast the next morning, Severus sat in the usual spot and waited for Hermione. He hoped she wasn't still mad at him. He didn't really know what he would do if she came in and sat somewhere else. He was tempted to cast the same kind of spell she had used for those first few days, but he was afraid she would get mad at him all over again.

Then it occurred to him she almost certainly would *not* get mad, since she knew he had found it funny. She would realize immediately that he was teasing her a little, so she would probably find it funny, too.

Thus, he went ahead and cast a non-verbal spell, making it so she wouldn't notice any empty chair except the one she usually sat in. Then he calmly sipped some pumpkin juice and waited for her to make her appearance.

Eventually, she appeared in the doorway and glanced around. She started walking toward him, then stopped suddenly, eyes narrowing, as she did a double-take and looked around the room more closely. Her eyes flew back to his, and he kept his expression neutral as she approached.

"Severus?" she asked.

"Good morning, Hermione," he said blandly.

"Severus, did you cast a spell this morning?" She sounded so confused that it was all he could do not to laugh.

"A spell?" he asked, trying to sound perplexed. "What kind of spell? Why would I cast a spell? Although," he added, lowering his voice conspiratorially, "I *am* a wizard, so I do cast spells occasionally."

"Severus," she asked sternly, "did you or did you not cast a spell so that I would come sit with you?"

"You were going to come sit with me anyway, weren't you?" he asked, as though that had been perfectly obvious. At her look, he added helpfully, "If I *did* cast such a spell and mind you, I'm not saying I did but *if* I did, it would have been to ensure you didn't have trouble finding your seat."

Suddenly realizing that she was being teased, she burst out laughing. He resisted the urge to laugh with her, but he couldn't prevent the corner of his mouth from twitching upward. She sat down next to him and playfully punched him. "You're something else, Severus, you really are. Just when I think I've got you all figured out, you do something totally unexpected like this." She patted his shoulder and rubbed her hand up and down his arm briefly, then added brightly, "Thank you! A good laugh is a delightful way to start the day."

Her meal appeared and she started eating her bacon, seemingly unaware that he felt completely frozen in place. His arm and shoulder burned where she had touched him; the heat had shot a path straight to his groin, where he was thankful for the concealment of his heavy robes and the table. He would have to eat slowly, he decided, or his condition when he got up to leave would be very embarrassing.

So, he started a conversation. "Are you coming by this afternoon?" he asked.

"Sure," she replied easily. "I've finished everything Minerva left me to work on, so until she's healthy again, I'm at loose ends."

"Oh, then perhaps you'd like to spend the whole day in the lab. There are several potions I'd like you to try, so that I can be sure the explanations in the text are clear enough."

"Okay, sure," she said, flashing him a quick smile before taking a sip of her tea. "That sounds great!" And she sounded like she really meant it.

If he didn't know better, he would think she might actually like him, just a little. She had already said that she respected him, which was all he usually expected from people, and that she trusted him, which was far *more* than he expected of anyone. Perhaps it was greedy to hope that she *liked* him, too. But the lifting of his mood at her cheerful acceptance of his invitation suggested that he really, really wanted that, too.

He realized suddenly that he was in way over his head with this particular young witch. First, he had wanted her. Then, he had respected her. Lately, he had even found himself trusting her.

Now, suddenly, he was realizing that he liked her, too.

What was she doing to him?

Somehow, he kept up his end of the conversation, although he later realized he didn't remember any of it. He also was careful not to let his sudden anxieties lead him to pick another fight with her, although he felt several caustic remarks try to push their way through.

On the positive side, his anxiety had, for the moment, overpowered his arousal, so when she was finished eating, he was able to walk out of the dining hall without incident.

Dumbledore knocked at the door to Minerva's quarters a short while later. He was more determined than ever to figure out exactly what was going on between Hermione and Severus. The pair had been in their own little world at breakfast. It even looked like Severus was teasing Hermione with his little chair spell, but that was impossible. Wasn't it?

No, no, he must have misread that situation. Hermione had laughed with delight, but Severus had just watched her neutrally.

Minerva called out for him to enter, so he went in to find her sitting in an armchair, sipping some tea.

"You look much better, Minerva," he said approvingly.

"Yes, my symptoms are nearly gone. I expect I'll be back to normal tomorrow."

"Good," Dumbledore said. In hopes of catching her off-guard, he asked, "Is Hermione Granger in love with Severus?"

She looked at him sharply, but didn't answer immediately, as he had hoped she would. Eventually, she asked, "What makes you ask such a novel question, Albus?"

"I just wondered," he said. He should have asked her yesterday, he thought, while she was still weak.

"Why did you wonder?" she asked, pinning him with her eyes.

Shifting in his chair, he considered his answer briefly before admitting, "Because I think he's in love with her, and I'm trying to decide what to do about it."

"No!" Minerva said emphatically. "You are not to do *anything*, Albus. Do *not* interfere in any way."

"Well, I wasn't thinking of *interfering*," he said defensively. "I just thought, if the feelings were mutual, perhaps I could help them out a bit."

"Oh, no, no, *no*, Albus, that's a *terrible* idea!" She sounded more horrified than the idea warranted, in Albus's considered opinion, and when he didn't immediately agree with her, she continued scolding him. "Love cannot be manipulated by magic you *know* that. Just stay out of it."

"But all I was going to do was place a Magnet Charm and a weak one at that!"

But she stood firm. "*No*, Albus, I'm begging you, don't do it! Let them work it out for themselves or not. Stay out of it."

"But a Magnet Charm doesn't really try to manipulate love, Minerva it just draws them together. And then they spend time together, and nature takes its course!" He smiled, delighted with his own reasoning.

"Albus, stop and think for a minute. Where are they right now?"

"In his lab, probably."

"Both of them?"

"Well, they left breakfast together, so I assume so."

"And where were they earlier this morning?"

"At breakfast."

"At breakfast *together*, correct?"

"Well ... yes." Reluctantly, he was beginning to see her point.

"And how about last evening?"

"They had dinner together, until they had a spat."

"And then what happened?"

"Well, when she left the Great Hall, he followed her; he apologized and walked her home." Fortunately, Minerva didn't delve too deeply into how Albus knew that last bit.

"What about yesterday afternoon, other than the time when he was here?"

"They were in his lab, working on his textbook potions."

"Just as they were the day before that, too. Albus, don't you see? They're *already* drawn together, without any work on your part. They're spending practically every minute they can find with each other. If you mess with it, it's just as likely to steer them off-course as to speed them on-course."

Dumbledore almost pouted with disappointment. He hated to admit it, but, "You're right, Minerva. I should just stay out of it."

"Promise me, Albus. Give me your solemn word that you will not assist, interfere, or otherwise involve yourself in any way."

"All right, all right, I'll stay out of it," he conceded. "For now, at least. But if they go too far off-course, I reserve the right to help them."

"All right," she said, "But only after you've discussed it with me. Maybe you should take a wand oath," she added thoughtfully.

He was a little insulted. "I've already promised," he said balefully. "I value your opinion, Minerva, you know I do. I don't know why you would need a wand oath."

She considered him for a long moment. "All right, Albus, I'll accept your word. But I must emphasize how important it is that you trust me on this where matters of the heart are involved, you do *not* want to get involved. More often than not, it leads to disaster, and you'll find yourself getting caught in the crossfire."

"I know you're right," he said, mildly irritated at her persistence when he had already promised not to involve himself. "Which is why I've agreed to take no action at all to assist them without consulting you."

"Good," she said. "See that you keep your word, Albus."

Of course, there was involvement, and then there was *involvement*, Albus mused as he took his leave a short time later. As long as he was subtle, no one need ever know.

Hermione and Severus spent a delightful day together really, they weren't out of one another's sight for more than a minute or two, she thought, as she got ready for bed that night. From her perspective, the day was near-perfect. Oh, Severus had gotten moody a few times, but never for long, and he had seemed to go out of his way not to provoke her, even when she could see he wanted to.

As she lay in bed, waiting for sleep to take her, she finally acknowledged to herself that her plan wasn't working at all. Familiarity was not breeding contempt. Instead, the more time she spent with him, the more she wanted to be with him. The more she wanted him, full stop.

She knew she couldn't have him, of course. He simply didn't see her that way. Oh, he found her intelligent, she was sure. Otherwise, he would never let her near his manuscript. And he found her company tolerable these days at least, he never seemed eager to push her out the door or anything, and he had even teased her with the chair thing this morning. So, she thought, a real friendship might not be too much to hope for.

She would just have to keep her libido under control somehow, so he didn't get disgusted and decide to have nothing more to do with her.

As she pondered that, an owl appeared at her window carrying a parchment envelope. Taking it, discovered to her delight that Harry had written her a brief letter. Since she wasn't really tired yet, anyway, she lit her wand to read it.

Dear Hermione

I hope your apprenticeship is starting off well and McGonagall isn't working you too hard. I have some stuff I wanted to run by you, so I thought I would drop in for a visit next weekend, if that works for you. I know the students arrive this week, and I know how chaotic that gets, but things usually simmer down by the second week, right?

Anyway, let me know if it works. If it doesn't, maybe the following weekend?

Best, Harry

She lowered the letter to her lap, staring at it in dismay. Just days ago, she had wished for a visit with her friend, and she was, of course, happy at the prospect of seeing him. But things were going so well right now with Severus ... they were developing a real friendship. Or at least, she hoped they were.

As much as she loved Harry, she knew his arrival could only damage that. If she wasn't careful, all the trust and respect Severus had started to show her would disappear. If only Harry didn't hate Severus quite so much. And vice versa, she thought glumly. If only they could each see the other the way she saw them. Sighing, she wondered if there was a charm or a potion for that. Somehow, she doubted it. Too bad she couldn't ask Severus he would surely know. And then it occurred to her she *could* ask Severus, if she were careful about how she did it. Leaving the how for tomorrow, she composed a note back to Harry, asking him to postpone his visit to the weekend after next, using Minerva's illness as an excuse for why she might still be catching up on work next weekend. She told herself it wasn't really a lie she didn't know, as yet, what else Minerva might have planned for them in the next few weeks. She fell asleep trying to figure out how to ask Severus about the spell or potion she needed.

Meanwhile, in his own quarters, Severus was also thinking about their day as he readied himself for sleep. He absently performed his evening ritual. As usual, the last thing he did before getting in bed was to take his Dreamless Sleep Draught.

Unfortunately, not until he reached for the bottle did he remember that he had planned to spend the morning making more of it a plan that he had completely forgotten when Hermione had agreed to come and work with him on his textbook potions.

Did he want it enough to go back to his lab and make it now? He was torn. It was very late, so by the time he finished making it, he would get little sleep anyway. On the other hand, if he *did* make it now, what little sleep he managed to squeeze in would at least be undisturbed.

Then it occurred to him that Hermione probably hadn't used all of the bottle he had given her, so he could just summon hers. She was probably long asleep by now, so she wouldn't even notice. He could probably even get it back there right away, and she would never know it had been gone.

Mind made up, he quickly summoned the bottle from Hermione's room, relieved when it arrived without mishap. He immediately took a dose, capped it, and sent it back with a wave of his wand and a simple, "*Reverto*."

He went to bed pleased with himself for his ingenuity.

Hermione woke from another very explicit dream about Severus, tingling all over and wide awake due to the lingering sensations of him licking her *everywhere*. As she lay there, once again willing her body to calm down, she caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Turning to look, she saw her Dreamless Sleep Draught levitate off the counter and fly through her bedroom and out the window.

How very odd, she thought. *Who on earth would summon my Dreamless Sleep Draught at this hour? And why?*

Thinking about that was as good a distraction as any, she supposed, although she immediately realized that the why was obvious. Someone had probably woken from a bad dream and wanted to take some of the potion before going back to sleep. Whoever it was must not have any of his or her own.

But *who* would steal it? One would think it would have to be someone who knew she had it, since if they didn't, they likely would have sought to take it from the hospital wing. After all, Madam Pomfrey was sure to have some on hand. But the only person who really knew Hermione had it was Severus and wouldn't he have some of his own on hand? Why would he need hers? Why, for that matter, would he need *any*? What was he trying not to dream about, anyway?

She wished she could believe he was trying to suppress explicit dreams about her, but she knew that was wishful thinking. He just didn't see her that way at all. He probably had nightmares about the war or something, she thought glumly.

Finally, she gave up on the question. No matter, she thought. She hadn't been using it anyway, so she hoped whoever had it found it helpful. She started to turn over to go to sleep, but out of the corner of her eye, she saw another movement. To her surprise, the bottle flew back in the window and placed itself carefully back on the counter, right where it had been before.

So, apparently someone had been borrowing it, rather than stealing it. Her last thought before she fell back to sleep was, *how very strange* ...

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 28

Hermione asks Severus for help; will Severus realize her motives?

A/N: As always, I greatly appreciate reviews. And, also as always, these characters still belong to JKR, though I wish they were mine. If only I could cast a spell ...

Chapter 12

The next morning, Minerva sent word by owl that she was feeling much better, but on the advice of some of the other faculty members, she would not return to her usual work until the following day. When Hermione mentioned this to Severus at breakfast, he smirked and said that he wasn't surprised, which made her wonder if he had been one of the faculty members in question.

By tacit agreement, they headed for his lab immediately after breakfast. She assumed that they would work together again, as they had yesterday, but he said, "I have to make some Dreamless Sleep Draught. Why don't you get started on one of the new potions? I'll join you shortly."

"Okay," she said. She had forgotten all about the Dreamless Sleep Draught happenings in the wee hours, but now they came flooding back. She asked carefully, "Severus?"

"Yes?"

"May I ask you something?"

"Yes, of course," he replied. "You ask me things all the time."

"Oh," she said. She chewed her lower lip for a moment, then blurted it out. "Did you ... borrow ... my Dreamless Sleep Draught last night?"

He flushed and looked away. He didn't answer immediately; instead, he asked a question of his own. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I woke up in the wee hours, and I thought I saw the bottle go out the window, and then a short while later, it came back."

"Why did you wake up?" he asked, sounding curious. "Didn't you take the draught yourself?"

"Oh ... um, no," she said, feeling herself blush now.

"Why not?"

"Oh," she said, unsure how to explain. He just watched her until finally, she shrugged and said, "I guess the dreams weren't as disturbing as I thought. I um missed them, you might say."

"You *missed* disturbing dreams?"

"Well, yeah," she said. "Anyway, you didn't answer me? Did you borrow my Dreamless Sleep Draught, or not?"

There was a long silence, while they stared at each other. "Yes," he said at last, sounding defensive. "I did. I forgot to make it yesterday, and I was out, and I didn't feel like making more at that hour."

She smiled, relieved. "Oh, good," she said. "The alternative was that someone else was paying way too much attention to my life."

He looked surprised by her reaction. "You're not mad?"

"No, why would I be mad?" she asked. "I'm glad you thought of it. I'm surprised you need it, but if you did, you're welcome to it." She made no effort to hide her curiosity, but she didn't ask why he needed it.

She was pleased when he answered her unspoken question. "I have disturbing dreams when I don't take it," he said simply.

She hadn't expected him to say that much, but still, she couldn't resist asking, "Disturbing, or bad? Or both?"

He smiled slightly, remembering when he had pressed her on this very point. "Just disturbing. Not bad. But I like my sleep undisturbed my temper is bad enough when I'm well-rested."

"Oh," she said, smiling back at him. "Good."

A bit later, he had finished making his draught, and they were once again working on a recipe from his new textbook. Hermione had been trying to work up the nerve to ask him about the kind of potion she wanted for Harry's visit. After a long silence, Severus asked, "Hermione, you seem very distracted today. You're not worrying about Minerva again, are you?"

"What?" she asked. "Oh, no, I'm sure she's fine. She probably would have been back today if you hadn't frightened her into staying home one more day," she guessed aloud.

"I didn't frighten her," he said, glaring.

"If you gave her *that* look while she was sick, I'm sure you did," Hermione insisted, but without heat.

"Minerva doesn't intimidate," he said firmly.

"I'll bet she does if she's sick," Hermione shot back.

"Be that as it may, I'm sure she just saw the wisdom of my suggestion. And you haven't answered my question. What are you so preoccupied with today?"

"Oh," she said, cursing her fair complexion as she felt herself blush again. "Well, I wanted to ask you something," she stalled.

"Again?" he asked, but in a teasing tone, so she smiled despite her nervousness.

"Yes, again," she answered. "Asking you questions is one of my very favorite things to do all day. You mean it's not yours, too?"

"Oh, I live for the thrill," Severus replied dryly.

She grinned, then took a breath and let it out. Did she really want to ask him this? After a moment, she decided he probably wouldn't give up until she did. "Okay, there's something I want to do, and the only way I can think of to do it is by magic, only I don't know a spell or a potion or anything that would do it. And I thought, if anyone would know one, you would, so I was thinking about asking you about."

"What exactly do you want to do?" he asked, seeming pleased by the fact that she thought he would be a good source of information.

"Well, I have this friend, who has two other friends, who don't like each other very much. They're constantly at each other's throats, in fact, which is very uncomfortable for me my friend, you know? She mostly tries to keep them away from each other, but there are times when that doesn't really work, of course times when she has to be around both of them, or risk offending one of them. And she really loves them both, and she doesn't want to hurt either one of them by choosing the other ... Anyway, my friend was thinking that if only she could get her friends to see one another the way *she* sees them, then maybe they would at least be civil to each other. So I wondered if there was some spell or potion that might make two people see each other the way a third person does?"

Merlin, she hoped he didn't realize she was talking about herself and him and Harry. He would probably kill her if he knew that. Of course, with that convoluted explanation, she thought ruefully, she'd be lucky if he had followed it at all.

He thought about her question for a long moment, watching her carefully. "It's always dangerous to use magic to muck up people's emotions, Hermione. Couldn't you just talk to these two people instead? Tell them how hard it is on your friend that they can't be civil to one another? Or don't they care about her enough to make her more comfortable?"

"I would," she said, "But these particular people are completely irrational on the subject of one another. They hold very old grudges against each other, which may or may not be warranted. I don't really know, for sure I think perhaps not, since they've both been very good and loyal friends to me my friend but they both feel completely justified in their disdain for each other. And I think they *do* both care about my friend it's just that their way of showing it is to try to convince her that the other person isn't worthy of her."

Severus nodded thoughtfully. "Do I know these people?" he asked. "Perhaps if I spoke to them ...?"

"Severus," she shook her head on a surprised laugh, "*I really* appreciate the offer, but I don't think calming explosive relationships down is exactly your strong suit."

He smiled slightly, apparently recognizing the truth in her words rather than taking offense. "Perhaps not, then," he allowed, "although maybe we can give them the flu and I can intimidate them into behaving, like you seem to think I did with Minerva."

She laughed aloud, delighted at how frequently he teased and joked with her these days. She said with mock enthusiasm, "Ohhhhh, that's a great idea!"

He chuckled, too, then. "All right, Hermione, if you're sure you want to try this, I can make you a potion to give them. I just hope your friend knows what she's getting herself into. The effects of the potion will wear off and they'll almost certainly go back to hating each other. If they recognize that it was a potion, they may each be convinced that the other is the culprit who slipped it to them, and if they have such negative views of one another, she may find both of them redoubling their efforts to remove each other from her life."

"I guess she'll deal with that if it happens," Hermione said, beginning to doubt the wisdom of this course of action. Then she thought about what an entire weekend of Harry and Severus at each other's throats would be like for her, and she hardened her resolve. Maybe, eventually, she would be able to tell both of them about this, and they would forgive her.

Or maybe not. She just knew that there was no way she would survive two nights and days with the pair of them playing tug of war, with her acting as the rope. This was her best option.

Indeed, it seemed like it was her *only* option.

Severus couldn't shake the feeling that he was missing something important about Hermione's request for a Third-Party-Vision Potion. He couldn't figure out what it could be, though. He pondered the question as he made the potion.

If only she had told him who the people involved were, maybe he could figure out some other course of action. Despite her conviction that this was the only option, he couldn't help thinking that there must be some other way. Perhaps Dumbledore could speak with them or Minerva, now that she was feeling better. They were both skilled at peacemaking.

He should be able to figure out who she was talking about. She hadn't claimed they were Muggles, when he had warned that they might suspect one another of casting a spell, so that meant they were witches or wizards. Which meant it was almost certain that he knew them, or at least knew *of* them. The wizard community simply wasn't that big; having acted in several capacities amongst several factions at various times, he found it hard to believe he hadn't crossed paths with them at *some* point.

But who hated each other that much? He pondered the question for a while, and other than himself and Harry Potter, he couldn't think of anyone.

As he had that thought, he realized what he had been missing.

She didn't want the potion for a friend she wanted it for herself!

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 28

Severus considers Hermione's request, and decides on a surprising course of action.

Chapter 13

Severus continued making the potion by rote, the familiar motions of chopping and stirring helping him to keep his temper in check as he considered the situation. He felt he had begun to know her, and after her apparent guilt over her little chair spells, it seemed odd that she would attempt a deception such as this one.

He ruthlessly suppressed his anger he had begun to trust her, and if his analysis was correct, this would be a major betrayal. She couldn't be planning to do this to him. She said she wanted him to trust her, and she had to know that if she did this, he would never trust her.

She must be feeling desperate, he realized. She must have some reason to think she was going to have to be in the presence of both him and Potter, sometime soon probably for an extended period of time. And she must feel incapable of handling their sniping at one another. His anger eased, just a bit, as he considered how upset she must be about this.

He glanced across the room to where she was seated, reading through another chapter of the manuscript. He had two options he could ask her about it or he could wait and see if she tried to slip him something or if Potter showed up and he found himself thinking of the arrogant pain in the ass as his brother, since that was how she seemed to see Potter.

He suddenly wondered how she saw him how Potter might see him if she succeeded in slipping him the potion. Frowning, he thought back over how she had described the problem. *Two friends ... constantly at each other's throats ... she loves them both, and she really doesn't want to hurt either one ...*

His anger abated a bit more. If this potion really *was* for him and Potter, then she not only thought of him as her friend, but she loved him and didn't want to hurt him by choosing Potter over him. He already knew that she loved Potter like a brother well, the idea that she might love *him* like a brother, too, wasn't all that palatable, really. But if she cared about him as much as she did about Potter, to the point where she felt like she had no way out but to dose them both well, that was ... unexpectedly pleasing to him.

Just as long as it wasn't a sibling thing.

Still, he hadn't yet decided whether to let her go ahead and use the potion or to simply ask her about it. He thought about it for awhile, then decided she would probably wind up confessing to him herself before she ever used it. Unfortunately, she would probably torture herself with guilt before she ever got around to it, if the chair-spells were any indication. She was just too honest for her own good, he decided.

Normally, he would have let her make herself miserable for a while, but now, he found that he couldn't do it. He finally acknowledged that he would have to ask her about it, because he cared too much about her to let her do that to herself. Part of him was convinced he was a fool, but more of him recognized what a difficult position he and Potter had put her in by waging war around and through her a person that, according to her, they both cared about.

Finally, having decided on a course of action, he tried to make it as painless as possible for her. "Hermione?" he asked.

She looked up from the book. "Yes?"

"Is this potion actually for Potter and me?" No point in peeling the plaster off slowly that would only hurt more. It was best to just grab an end and rip.

She went white, opened her mouth and closed it again. Her eyes welled up with tears. She looked away. "Yes," she finally whispered, tears starting to spill over. "It is. I'm sorry." She stood up and headed toward the door, her posture defeated.

"Where are you going?" he demanded, stopping her in her tracks.

"I assumed you were about to kick me out and tell me never to come back again," she said, still in a whisper.

"You should never assume, Hermione have I taught you nothing?"

"Look, I know you probably hate me right now, but I wasn't trying to hurt you or make you mad. It's just " She stopped, shrugged. "I guess it doesn't really matter now," she said mournfully. "You'll never trust me again, anyway."

"Hermione," he sighed. "Turn around and look at me, please." She didn't move for a long minute. "Please look at me," he said again.

Finally, she turned around, and he could see her steel herself to look at him. He crossed to her and held her gaze, willing her to hear and understand him. "I did not bring this up because I thought you were going to actually go through with it. You're far too honest to do anything that deceitful."

"But I "

He cut her off, shaking his head. "I'm talking now, so you be quiet and listen. I am bringing this up simply because you would most likely have tortured yourself for however much time there is between now and when Potter arrives I assume he is planning a visit?" She nodded slightly. "I did *not* want you to make yourself miserable for something that you wouldn't have done anyway."

"How do you " she began, but stopped, apparently realizing that he hadn't yet given her permission to speak.

He answered the question she hadn't finished asking. "How do I know you wouldn't have done it?" He smiled ruefully. "Apparently I recognize your innate honesty more than you do. You couldn't even stand the guilt of the simple spell you used to ensure I sat with you at meals. How in the name of Merlin did you think you were going to manage to keep something like this to yourself? You would have driven yourself mad in a matter of days, and when the time came, you wouldn't have done it anyway." He fell silent and when she didn't say anything, he said, "Do you have anything to say now?"

"I'm sorry," she said through her tears. "I already felt guilty when I asked you about it. But then I thought about how it would be for me torn between you and Harry, probably hurting both of you, having both of you mad at me, and I just couldn't take it."

"Obviously," he said dryly.

She sniffed. "So does this mean you don't hate me?"

He sighed again. "For whatever reason, which I will never understand, you care deeply for Potter. However, if I understood you correctly earlier, this is only a problem for you because you also care for me. That being the case, I recognize that you were in an untenable position, which is partly because of my refusal to be civil to your friend. I will endeavor to change that, so that you won't feel the need to do this to yourself again." Her tears increased, and he paused to conjure and hand her a handkerchief, then continued, "That being said, I hope you don't expect me to grow to like him that would be asking too much. And even if I'm civil to him, he will likely continue to be nasty to me, so perhaps you could try asking him to be civil, even if you think he won't do it."

Her tears increased again. "I know he won't. Maybe I should just tell him not to come," she said.

"No, you shouldn't," he said, much to his own disgust. "I'm sure you want to see him. When is he coming?"

"Weekend after next."

"All right, to make it easier for you, I will plan to spend that weekend away from Hogwarts. I shall visit my house at Spinner's End."

"No, Severus! You shouldn't have to leave just because Harry's coming!" she protested through her tears.

"I will not stay here and watch you torture yourself trying to keep us both happy," he insisted.

"But ... it's not fair for you to have to leave. Maybe I should tell Harry I'll visit him instead."

"That is unnecessary, Hermione. I'll be fine at Spinner's End."

"No!" she insisted. "Let me talk to Harry. I'm sure I can convince him to be civil." *Never mind that moments ago, she was convinced she couldn't* he thought.

But the idea of him leaving seemed only to be upsetting her more. "Hermione, I'm trying to make this easier for you. Why won't you let me?" Seeing that she had soaked through the handkerchief, he conjured another one and handed it to her.

She took it absently and swiped at her cheeks again. "I don't want you to leave," she wailed.

"It's for two days, Hermione. Not forever just two days." He couldn't understand why she was so upset.

"I don't care," she insisted. "I don't want you to leave. I just don't."

"Why on earth not? I left for almost two months this summer, and you did, too. You were fine. You'll be fine for two days."

"But I wasn't in love with you, then!" she burst out, then clapped her hand over her mouth, eyes wide as saucers. She whipped around to leave, but he immediately used a non-verbal charm to lock the door before she could open it.

"What did you just say?" he asked in a low, urgent tone, stepping close behind her. "Say that again," he demanded in a whisper near her ear.

"No," she said petulantly. "I don't want to. It was embarrassing enough the first time."

"Say it again," he demanded, turning her to face him. "I don't think I heard you right, so I need you to say it again."

"Fine," she spat out. "I'm in love with you. Are you happy now?"

"Very," he assured her, and then he kissed her.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 28

The aftermath of the kiss isn't quite what Hermione expected ...

A/N: I apologize for the delay in posting this chapter – RL decided to kick my butt for a couple of weeks. But thanks for all the reviews! They feed my soul ... and my muse! LOL

Still not mine, to my everlasting regret ...

Chapter 14

Severus was kissing her! After a moment of pure shock, in which she tried to process the fact that he was actually kissing her – and very passionately – she lost all ability to think coherently. She felt herself melt into him, kissing him back with everything she had tried to suppress for so long.

He seemed to sense her acquiescence, and he gentled slightly, although his passion didn't abate even a little bit. He gave her long, slow, mind-numbing kisses. Her lips parted of their own volition, inviting his tongue in to explore her mouth more fully, and he wasted no time accepting her invitation.

She had no idea how long they stood there, snogging. She found she couldn't get close enough to him to suit her, and she kept trying to press her body tighter against his. Not that he seemed to mind – whenever she pulled herself closer, he responded by tightening his arms around her even more.

She could now feel his erection against her belly. She thought vaguely that she ought to be frightened, considering her lack of experience, but she wasn't. Instead, she was increasingly aroused. Eventually, he tore his lips from hers and stared down at her. She held his gaze for a long moment, then whispered, "Wh-what ... where did that come from?"

He didn't answer, just kept staring into her eyes, sliding his hands repeatedly over her arms and back. Her own arms had found their way up around his neck, and her fingers played with his hair. She couldn't really believe this was happening.

If things had progressed further, she would have thought this was one of her 'disturbing' dreams. Although, she realized, in her dreams, she had never blurted out her love for him in the middle of an argument. But something new seemed to happen in nearly every dream she had, so she wasn't sure.

He still hadn't said anything, so she asked shakily, "Is this really happening? Or is this another dream?"

He finally spoke, eyes flaring. "You mean – your disturbing dreams?"

"Y-yes," she whispered. "Do you mind very much?"

"No," he said, his voice low and gravelly. "I don't mind at all." He smiled ever so slightly. "I minded when it occurred to me that you might be having 'disturbing' dreams featuring another man."

"Really?" she asked. "You were jealous?"

"Jealous?" he frowned, as though considering the possibility for the first time. "Perhaps I was, at that," he murmured. "I have wanted you for months," he added.

"Months?" she echoed, delighted. "Really? You never let on. Since when, exactly?"

"Exactly?" he echoed, and she thought he would say that he couldn't pinpoint it, that he just knew it had been months. But he surprised her. "I can tell you precisely the moment, actually."

"You can?" she asked, thrilled beyond measure.

He kissed her briefly, said, "If you stop interrupting, I can." She grinned at him, raised her eyebrows, and said nothing. He kissed her again. "It was that day in the Great Hall, last spring, when the Weasley girl made you laugh."

"Really?" she squealed, knowing immediately the moment he meant. "I thought something changed after that, but I didn't know what it was." He sighed suddenly and extracted himself from her embrace. "What?" she asked, alarmed by his withdrawal. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Not wrong, Hermione," he reassured her. "It's just – you're so very young. And I'm – not. I don't want to take advantage of you."

"You're not," she said emphatically. "You wouldn't be. I *love* you."

"How do you know that? How could you possibly? You've hardly lived. Maybe it's just a passing fancy."

"But, Severus, it's *not*. I've been attracted to you for months, but I didn't know it was love until these past weeks, when we've spent so much time together."

"Be that as it may," he decreed, "I think we should take things slowly, so that you can be sure this is what you want."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Well, I *don't* think we should take things slowly. I think we should dive right in immediately, because I'm already sure this is what I want."

"Hermione, I'm saying this for your own good," he insisted. "You think you want me, but you're still young. You may well change your mind."

"I haven't changed my mind and I'm not going to," she said stubbornly. "I'm in love with you, and no matter how long you make me wait, that won't change. What you really should be asking yourself, Severus, is what *you* want. I'm perfectly clear on what *I* want. Now, if you're going to stand way over there, instead of coming over here and kissing me some more, then I'm leaving." She stalked over to the door and tried to open it, first manually and then using the *Alohomora* Charm. When that didn't work, she

swung around to glare at him. "I want to leave, so please unlock the door."

"No," he said, contrarily. "I don't want you to leave angry with me. I want you to understand, this is not about what I want, it's about what you want."

"Great," she shot back. "Then get back over here and kiss me some more."

"Hermione —"

"Well, is it about what I want or not? And come to think of it, why the hell *isn't* it about what you want, too? What you want matters, you know. So, if you don't want me, just say so. I can take it."

He growled in frustration. "You already know I want you," he said. "As naïve as you are, you can't have missed the evidence of that. But the point is, I want you to be sure."

"But I *am* sure," she said again. "What do I have to do to prove it to you? You already said I'm honest — well, this is me, being honest. I'm in love with you, and I'm not going to change my mind, whether you make me wait a week or a month or a year — although if you make me wait a year, I may have to kill you for torturing me."

"A month," he announced.

"A month what?" she asked, nonplussed.

"If you still want me in a month, we'll talk."

"We're talking now, Severus. I don't want to talk in a month. I want to convince you now."

"Well, you can't," he said. "If you still want me in a month, then I might believe you."

"Might?" she asked incredulously. "You *might* believe me in a month? What if you don't? What then? Will you make me wait another month? How long is this going to go on?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I just don't understand why you would love me, I guess. It's going to take a while before I believe it."

"You should have unlocked the door when I asked, Severus, because I'm madder now than I was five minutes ago. And I'll give you a month, if you insist, but only on condition that you don't disappear on me. And that I get to kiss you at least twice a day. In public, if necessary."

"Why would I disappear on you?" he asked, apparently ignoring her other condition for the moment.

"I don't know," Hermione replied, letting her displeasure show. "I still don't understand why we're arguing when we should be, at the very least, kissing."

"And what do you mean, 'in public, if necessary'?"

"I mean exactly what it sounds like I mean. If you don't arrange it so I get to kiss you in private twice a day for the next month, then I'm going to kiss you in public."

"You wouldn't," he said in a deadly tone.

"Try me," she said. "Now, either kiss me or unlock the damn door."

Sighing, he unlocked the door. She glared at him when she heard it click. "Wrong choice, Severus." She stalked over, planted a firm kiss on his mouth; then, as soon as she felt his response, she pulled away, turned, and left without another word.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 28

Severus struggles to exercise self-discipline in the face of ever-increasing temptation and provocation.

Chapter 15

For the next two and a half weeks, she tortured him or so it seemed to Severus. He should never have agreed to twice-a-day kissing not in public, and certainly not in private. Not anywhere.

He had only briefly considered seeing whether she would make good her threat to kiss him publicly, before deciding that was a chance he simply could not take. Dumbledore was already probing for information, and when Minerva returned to her normal activities, he started to notice that she seemed to be watching him with Hermione, too.

Even if there wasn't anything really wrong with him kissing Hermione, it was none of anyone else's business. And if he was totally honest with himself, he wasn't entirely convinced he would be able to control himself, even in public.

As it was, she was testing every drop of the legendary self-discipline he had managed to develop over the course of a lifetime of doing things that had required it. Things like spying or protecting Potter and his friends.

Things that really should have seemed a lot harder than resisting one determined young woman.

Thinking about it now, as he lay in bed trying to sleep, he realized nothing could have prepared him to resist a Hermione who was bent on seduction. His self-control was stretching thinner every day he was really starting to believe that he wasn't going to last another *minute* without making love to her, so he had no idea how he would manage to last the rest of his self-imposed month. He was even a little bit grateful that Potter was due to arrive tomorrow!

Well, almost, anyway.

He was beginning to suspect that Hermione had an overabundance of previously untapped potential in the field of strategic warfare. She certainly seemed to think so. She

seemed to know just when to time her demand for the day's kisses so as to catch him in a weak moment.

Not that he really had any strong moments when it came to that, but how did she seem to know the perfect moment every time?

He would have thought she was using magic, but after the debacle with the potion and her guilt over the chair spells, there was no way she would do that again. And with his skill at Occlumency, she couldn't use Legilimency without his knowledge, even if they hadn't made that agreement not to do that to one another.

The students had been back for nearly two of the two and a half weeks that Hermione had been torturing him. At first, he had assumed teaching would provide a welcome and effective distraction from his total immersion in all things Hermione. At a minimum, he had thought, teaching his classes would prevent him from spending so much time with her.

Unfortunately, his students were, as usual, a bunch of dunderheaded fools who managed to get on his nerves constantly and then, just when he had depleted his reserves of self-discipline to keep himself from killing them all, class would end and Hermione would appear, ready for some "private time."

Private time, indeed. They seemed to be spending every spare minute together come to think of it, his agreement to twice-a-day kissing really wasn't making much difference, considering they were, by now, kissing more like ten or twenty or perhaps a hundred or a thousand times a day. It was hard to keep track when you had snogging sessions that lasted hours. How long could possibly be counted as a single kissing session?

He should have realized he was in trouble the very first day, when she had Flooed into his lab before breakfast. He had commented on his surprise at seeing her there so early; giving him a mischievous look, she had said, "I thought I would let you get today's first kiss out of the way, so you wouldn't be worrying that I might do it at lunch or something." They had wound up snogging for fifteen minutes before realizing that they were about to miss breakfast entirely.

Later that same day, when she had come by to try out some more potions after lunch, they had never gotten around to any potions at all. Instead, they had spent the entire afternoon getting familiar with each other's mouths.

Now, two and a half weeks later, she often Flooed in for a few moments several times each day. Last night, she had even dropped in near bedtime; her reasoning had been that Potter was due to arrive tomorrow, so they had to get ahead on their kissing quota. When he had tried to point out that they were already way, way ahead if two a day was the agreement, she had pouted and insisted that they had to get *further* ahead. And then she had started kissing him, making him quite forget to argue anymore.

Severus refused to look too closely at the fact that if he had really been opposed to all this, he could quite easily have closed the Floo connection. Of course, that could be justified quite easily by his worry that she really would start kissing him in public if he denied her the private time that she wanted.

It really was a miracle that he had held onto his determination not to take things too far until a full month had passed. Each day, they seemed to edge closer to the brink. His hands, of their own accord, seemed to delight in removing the outer layers of her clothing her robes were nearly always tossed aside within moments of being in his presence; usually, by the time he came to his senses and stepped away from her, whatever she was wearing underneath the robes was untucked, unfastened, and gaping open.

This morning, she had dropped in just after the first-years had completed and left his class, and they had wound up missing lunch altogether. Even now, hours later, he could still feel her straddling him, could hear her moaning with delight as she pressed against him. The memory of it made him hard, and he feared what would happen if she dropped by tonight.

He sometimes wondered if she was as frustrated as he was. Was she walking around in a constant state of arousal? It certainly felt to him like he was he was semi-erect nearly every waking moment except the moments when he was actually with her or actively thinking about her, at which times, he was fully erect instead.

He sighed and started to get out of bed, planning to take yet another ice-cold shower. Just as he stood, though, she Flooed into his fireplace and announced, "I came to kiss you good night."

"Hermione, what are you wearing?" he asked, floored at the sight of her.

"This?" she asked disingenuously. "It's called a nightgown, Severus. I was on my way to bed, and I wanted a kiss good night, so I dropped by here first. Is that some kind of problem?"

"You know we agreed to wait a month," he grouched. "How am I supposed to stick to our agreement if you show up looking like that?"

"I agreed to that under duress," Hermione declared. "I didn't want to wait a single minute, let alone an entire month. So don't think for a second that I'll be sorry if we make love tonight instead of waiting two more weeks."

"Hermione " he began, but she cut him off.

"I know, I know, you've said it all before. But, Severus, do you have *any* idea how frustrated I am? I can't sleep, I hardly eat, I can't concentrate this can't *possibly* be good for me!"

He doggedly stood his ground. "This isn't easy for me, either, Hermione, and you coming here dressed like that isn't helping matters any."

"Too bad. I never agreed to make it easy for you. Why should I? If I have to suffer, then you do, too."

"You think I'm not suffering?" he asked incredulously.

"Well, then, stop being ridiculous and make love to me already."

"I can't," he insisted.

"Of course you can. You just don't want to," she accused.

That was *it!* Anger flaring, he yanked her up against him. "Don't tell me you don't feel how badly I want you, Hermione! You know better than that!" He pressed his hips into hers, making sure she felt the evidence of his desire.

Instead of backing down, she pressed closer against him. "I just can't take much more of this, Severus. I really can't!" She suddenly burst into tears. "I feel like I'm crawling out of my skin and there's nothing I can do that will make it better. *Please* don't make me wait anymore! Please, Severus, I can't take it."

"Shhhh," he soothed, his own anger and frustration forgotten. "Don't cry, it's all right." He kissed her lips gently, then began kissing her tears away. He kept murmuring soothingly and kissing her until she calmed down.

Predictably, things started to heat up between them, and before he knew it, they were lying on his bed, with her nightgown up around her waist, and he was making love to her with his tongue. He couldn't give her everything she wanted he needed to be sure she really knew what she was getting into, so he was determined to wait the full month if it killed him.

But he could, at least, give her relief from her frustration.

Moments later, she called his name as she orgasmed. He watched her face, thinking her pleasure was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. He crawled up and lay

next to her, taking her in his arms and cuddling her close.

After a long time, she whispered sleepily, "Thank you, Severus. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he whispered back. "Now go to sleep," he told her firmly, but unnecessarily, as her breathing had already grown slow and even.

He lay awake watching her sleep for a long time before he drifted off himself.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 28

The morning brings intimacy and confusion for Severus and Hermione.

Chapter 16

Hermione woke early the next morning to find herself enveloped in the heat of Severus's warm embrace. His even breathing suggested he was still sleeping, yet he held her securely nestled in his arms, spooning her sweetly.

She thought about the events of last night. She really hadn't intended to stay the night at least not consciously. She had just needed to see him once more before trying to sleep, and she had figured she would kiss him for a bit and then go back to her own lonely bed. She hadn't realized how edgy she was how desperately her body would cry out for relief.

She blushed as she thought about how she had begged him not to make her wait any longer, but considering the outcome, she couldn't regret it. She had begun to think that he was toying with her or something she just didn't get why he was so set on waiting when it was all they could do these days to keep their hands off each other long enough to have a coherent conversation. She couldn't help thinking that once they finally made love, they'd be able to talk to each other a little more intelligently again.

Cautiously, she turned in his embrace, trying not to wake him. This was the first time they had spent a full night together, and she was curious about how he might look asleep. She didn't want to wake him, though, which made it difficult to change position. His arms kept tightening around her, even though he showed no sign of waking up.

She finally managed to shift enough to see his face. He looked relaxed and carefree in a way she had never seen him, and for the first time, she was able to picture him as a boy. He would have been thin and serious, but totally adorable, she decided, smiling to herself.

She suddenly really wanted him to wake up and kiss her good morning. She had never experienced anything as wonderful as the intense orgasm he had given her last night, and she hadn't slept that soundly and peacefully in months. Not even the night she had taken the Dreamless Sleep Draught.

Come to think of it, sleeping here, with Severus, had worked just as well as the draught had. And she obviously hadn't overslept, since he wasn't even awake yet. In any event, just watching him sleep was making her start to feel tingly again a feeling she now had no doubt was the stirrings of awakening desire. So, despite having experienced total relief from her frustration last night, she knew it was just a matter of time before she reached that point again. And now that she had some small idea of what she had been missing, she doubted she would last another two weeks before her passion got the better of her.

Frowning suddenly, she considered more carefully the fact that he hadn't taken the same relief for himself that he had given her. She didn't know how he could stand it unless he wasn't as desperately frustrated as she had been. Her frown deepened as she realized that not only did he seem more in control of his body than she was, but he also had never said anything about his feelings for her.

Except that he wanted her, which didn't really count.

His quiet voice startled her. "You're looking very serious, considering the day hasn't even started yet." Her eyes flew to his, which she now saw were very slightly open, glittering as he watched her watch him.

"Oh," she said, flustered. "I was just ... thinking."

"Serious thoughts, if that frown was any indication."

"Oh, um ..." she cast about for something to say. She started babbling in an attempt to cover her confusion. "I was wondering what time it is. And thinking about how much I have to do today. And wishing you would wake up because I wanted to kiss you but I didn't want to wake you up. How long *have* you been awake, anyway?"

He smiled lazily. "Long enough. Now, I believe you said something about kissing me?"

She couldn't help smiling back. "Yes, I believe I did."

"Well, then, get over here, woman." Tugging her closer, he didn't wait for her to kiss him; instead, he kissed her languidly and quite thoroughly. She pushed aside her misgivings in favor of giving herself up to the amazing feelings he was effortlessly bringing back to life.

Gradually, their kisses became more heated, more urgent. Hermione felt her passion building, but she tried to keep a little control, because she was determined that he should have some pleasure this time, too. She had a feeling that once he gave her relief, he would pull away, so she had to make sure he had some relief first.

She pressed closer to him, rubbing sinuously against him. She slid a hand down his bare chest, enjoying the feel of his muscles reflexively quivering beneath her fingers. Always, before, she had stopped when she got to his waist, but this time, she boldly slid her fingers into the waistband of his pyjamas, and for the first time, she really touched him.

In fact, without giving him a chance to protest, she explored his erection with her fingers, familiarizing herself with its shape and texture. He moaned into her mouth, and then she took him firmly in her hand. His hips jerked reflexively, and he moaned again. His hand covered hers, and he began moving their hands, demonstrating the grip and rhythm he wanted, until she caught on and took over.

Part of her was embarrassed at the intimacy, but mostly, she was just thrilled that she had this effect on him. It reassured her that she wasn't as far out on a limb in this budding relationship as she had begun to fear. She became caught up once more in his unguarded response to her ministrations, and then his fingers began playing with her most intimate places.

In the end, they both found relief together. As their breathing slowed, he held her close, stroking her back and kissing her hair. Eventually, he said, "You didn't have to do that, you know."

"I know." Kissing his chest, which was doubling as her pillow at the moment, she smiled. "I wanted to." She paused, then couldn't help asking, "It was ... okay?"

She felt him smile against the top of her head, and then he said, "'Okay' isn't quite the word I would use. 'Fantastic' or 'magnificent' would come closer."

She blushed and whispered, "Good."

Several more moments passed before he said, "Much as I would love to stay here like this all day, we should probably get cleaned up. I believe you're expecting a visitor today?"

She groaned. "Yes. I am. But I don't want to move yet. Can't we just stay here awhile longer?"

He chuckled. "We could, I suppose. Perhaps if you aren't home when he arrives, he'll just go away."

She smacked him lightly, then kissed the spot. "You promised to be civil, remember?"

"And I will. But you can't blame me for hoping he changes his mind about visiting."

"All right, all right," she replied, resigned to the fact that two of the most important people in her life would probably never be more than civil to one another. "But let's talk about something else right this minute, okay?"

"We could go back to my original statement we should probably get cleaned up. We're about to miss breakfast, you know."

"I'm not hungry," Hermione replied, even though she was, a little. She just enjoyed this mellow, relaxed Severus so much that she didn't want to move for fear that something would happen to ruin things between them. "I don't need any breakfast today. It's a well-known fact that people are in the habit of overeating these days. And you could just do a quick Cleansing Charm, if you want."

"Well, Miss Know-It-All," he said, sounding tender and amused, "It's also a well-known fact that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. And has it escaped your attention that you've burned quite a few calories already today, which need to be replaced so you don't waste away into nothing?" Nevertheless, he executed the Cleansing Charm.

She couldn't help it, she giggled. "Oh, have I been active this morning? I don't remember anything like that. It seems to me that I've just been lazing around in bed all morning."

He chuckled and began tickling her ribs, making her giggle harder. "Oh? Perhaps I should refresh your memory, then. Let's see if this helps bring it back to you." He rolled half on top of her, pushed her hair aside and began kissing her neck.

Her pulse leapt, but she managed to reply, "This? No ... I don't think this is familiar at all."

He pulled back and gave her a mock glare. "No? Well, perhaps this will help." He pushed her nightgown off one shoulder and began kissing along her collarbone.

This time, her voice quivered when she answered, trying to sound doubtful, "Maybe ... I'm just not sure... Maybe you should try something else." She could feel his erection growing against her thigh, and she shifted restlessly against him, desperately wanting to feel him inside her, but afraid to push lest he stop again.

He whispered, "Perhaps this will remind you, then." He unbuttoned her nightgown, pushing the sides apart and blazing a path with his mouth to her breasts. He laved first one, then the other with his tongue, sucking and licking until she forgot what they were talking about forgot everything except the sensations in her body.

She heard herself moan as she tried to tug him more fully atop her. Thankfully, he settled right where she wanted him, and she wrapped her legs tightly around his waist. She felt his tip at her entrance, vaguely wondered where his pyjamas had gone, and then he groaned and whispered, "Say no, Hermione. Tell me to stop, before it's too late."

But she was too far gone to say anything except "Please ..." And apparently, that really was a magic word, because suddenly he was sliding forward, entering her waiting warmth.

He paused halfway in, then groaned again, said, "I'm sorry," and thrust forward until he was seated as deeply as he could go. She flinched at the slight twinge of pain that elicited, and he paused to ask, "All right?"

She nodded, unable to speak immediately as she adjusted to the strange, yet wonderful, feeling of their bodies connected so intimately. He remained still, watching her closely. After a moment, she whispered, "It feels so ... amazing."

He smiled then, looking as carefree and lighthearted as she had ever seen him. "Just wait it gets better." And then, expression growing intent once more, he flexed his hips, just once.

Her eyes widened at the sensation that created. "Ohhhhhh," she sighed. He moved again, and this time, she reflexively squeezed her internal muscles in response. He kissed her and began to move in earnest. She quickly caught his rhythm, and they moved together. Her body tightened and tightened, until finally, a warm rush of pure pleasure washed over her, and she moaned her release. Moments later, finding his own release, he collapsed against her.

After a few seconds, he whispered, "I'm crushing you. Sorry." He rolled to his back, but she didn't let go, and they wound up in the reversed position, with her lying on top, still joined intimately to him. She rested her head on his chest, listening to the comforting sound of his heart beating beneath her ear.

Uncertain of his mood, she didn't know what to say. So she just lay there quietly, enjoying their closeness.

After a while, he said, "That wasn't supposed to happen." He didn't sound mad, though, which was a relief to Hermione.

She said lightly, "Well, I hope you're not going to apologize for the best experience I ever had in my life."

"No," he said seriously. "I *should* be sorry, perhaps, but I find I'm not." He ran his hands up her back. "It appears I'm more selfish than even I realized."

She lifted her head to look him in the eye. "It's not selfish when we both want the same thing." Her doubts of earlier that morning came rushing back. "Unless ..." she trailed off, not sure how to ask him.

"Unless ..." he prompted.

She didn't answer directly. Instead she looked away and asked softly, "What are we doing, Severus?"

He waited until she looked back at him. He said, "I should think it would be obvious."

She bit her lip, afraid to push, yet needing reassurance. "Maybe it is, to you. But ..." She paused again. "I guess I just don't know what this is to you. What I am to you."

He didn't answer immediately. He watched her, looking thoughtful. Eventually, he asked. "Do we really have to put a label on it?"

"A label?" she asked, feeling her anxiety grow. He wasn't answering, so maybe he thought she wouldn't like his answer. She tried to slide off him, but his arms tightened around her.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

She could feel tears trying to escape, but she was determined not to let him see her cry. She said, "It's getting late. I have to get cleaned up and get to Minerva's office. And you should probably get ready for class. You don't want your students getting the idea that it's acceptable to be late."

He frowned. "We're in the middle of a discussion, Hermione. You can't just leave."

"Well, I have to." She pushed herself off him, and this time he let her go. She pulled her nightgown back on, buttoning it hastily. "So we'll have to talk about this later." *Or not*, she thought, not sure anymore that she wanted to know what he thought about their relationship.

As she turned to head back to the fireplace, intending to get safely back to her own room before crying, he sat up and grabbed her hand. He pulled her back toward him and kissed her soundly. When he finally pulled back, he looked her straight in the eye and said, "Count on it."

Once again, she was at a loss. When she brought it up, he didn't seem to want to talk about it, but when she tried to make a graceful exit, he suddenly did.

As she arrived back in her room, she couldn't help but conclude that Severus Snape was the most contradictory, confusing person she had ever met.

After Hermione left, Severus lay in bed, trying to figure out what had happened. She had suddenly seemed upset, when just moments earlier, she had seemed blissfully happy. And she had started a conversation and then shut it down before he really said anything in response to her question.

When he couldn't figure out what had prompted her about-face, he decided there was no point in trying to figure out a confusing, contradictory woman. He would just have to ask her about it later.

And if she wouldn't tell him, he wasn't above breaking his promise not to use Legilimency on her anymore. There was only so long he was willing to tolerate having her upset with him without having any idea why.

Sighing, he glanced at the clock. Now he really needed to get moving, or his students really would have the unacceptable experience of seeing him arrive late to class.

He rose quickly, executed another quick Cleansing Charm, and made his way to his classroom. Considering his frustration with not knowing what had Hermione so upset, he was in a surprisingly tolerant mood.

At least, until he discovered the hard way that Colin Creevey had accidentally made an Exploding Elixir rather than the Fire Protection Potion he was supposed to be making.

Honestly, how did these dunderheads ever expect to become productive members of wizard society if they could make such first-year errors in their seventh year?

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 28

Harry arrives for a visit, and Hermione struggles to tell him what's new in her life.

Chapter 17

That evening, Hermione waited anxiously in the entrance hall, pacing as she waited for Harry to arrive. She had no idea how she was going to tell him about her developing ... whatever it was ... with Severus. After classes had ended and she had finished her daily meeting with Minerva, she had gone back to her room and spent some time using Cleansing Charms to put her room to rights. Then, she used a Shrinking Spell on some of her furniture. That done, she had enough room to transfigure the arm chair into a guest bed.

She had seen Severus at lunch, as usual, but he had been in a bad mood because of Colin Creevey's incompetence, and she had been worrying about whether Severus still wanted her or not, as well as what Harry would say when she told him whatever she managed to tell him. So they had both been distracted and, as a result, had talked very little.

She had also decided not to visit Severus for the rest of the day. She figured they had taken a huge leap in their relationship; she, for one, needed some space to let her heart and mind catch up to her body. So she had told Severus that he shouldn't expect her at dinner, because Harry would just be arriving and they would have pizza or something.

That way, she reasoned, she would have a chance to prepare Harry for eating breakfast with a person he viewed as a mortal enemy.

If only she could figure out what to say.

Finally, Harry arrived. He was slightly out of breath after hurrying from the main gate up to the entrance hall, and she wondered if he was finding any time to play Quidditch these days. When he spied her, he hurried over and swept her off her feet into a hug.

"Hermione! It's so great to see you! You look marvelous! Did you do something different with your hair?"

"Harry!" she squealed. "Put me down. You're making me dizzy, swinging me around like that."

Setting her back on her feet, he gave her an engaging grin. "I've missed you! I don't have anyone to turn to when I need a know-it-all anymore. Now, I'm starving. Am I too late for dinner?"

"Oh," she said anxiously. "I thought it would be more fun if we just asked the house-elves for a pizza and a little butterbeer and caught up in my room. That way, we won't have everyone else tripping all over themselves to greet you."

He grinned at her. "See? That's why I need you around. I didn't even think about that! Lead the way."

She led him to her room, and they sat on their beds and ate pizza and caught up. She absently asked about all their mutual friends Neville, Ron, Lavender and then promptly failed to take in his answers, because all she could focus on was how to broach the subject of Severus. She just couldn't think of a way to do it. She almost regretted that Severus had figured out her original plan and stopped her but of course, he was probably right that she wouldn't have gone through with it, anyway. And, of course, the argument *that* whole thing had precipitated had led to lots of fantastic snogging and the events of last night and this morning, too.

All that aside, however, Harry was her best friend what if he didn't understand? Which was a distinct possibility, she supposed, since she didn't really understand it herself. What if he was so disgusted that he never spoke to her again? And what if that happened and then it turned out Severus didn't love her at all?

Eventually, Hermione realized that Harry seemed preoccupied, too. She suddenly remembered that he had said something in his first note about having something to discuss with her. She gratefully took that excuse to postpone telling him her news. "Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Is everything all right? You seem distracted."

"Do I?" he prevaricated. But then he sighed and said, "It's just well, I wanted to tell you something, and I just hope you don't get mad at me."

His words were so similar to her own thoughts that she smiled. "Just tell me, Harry. It can't be that bad. And hey, friends support each other, no matter what, right?"

He smiled, seeming relieved. Still, he took a deep breath and released it, then said in a rush, "The thing is, I know everyone thinks I should be an Auror, and maybe I will, someday, but for right now, I really want to give professional Quidditch a try first."

She stared at him, surprised he had been so anxious about this. Sure, she didn't care for Quidditch, but even she recognized that he was really good at it, and how much he loved it. "Is that all?" she asked on a laugh. "The way you were carrying on, I thought ... well, never mind." She pulled him into a quick hug. "Anyway, I think you should do whatever you think is best just as long as you don't expect me to show up at every single match."

He laughed. "No, I know that would be too much to ask. I'll settle for every other match."

She said, "Every other match? Ha! You'll be lucky to get every fourth match out of me this year. Apprenticeship is very busy business, you know."

He grinned. "*Sure* it is, Hermione. I know you too well to fall for that. You just don't want to watch Quidditch if you can possibly avoid it. I can see you running to McGonagall and saying, 'I need more work otherwise Harry will start dragging me to Quidditch matches! Help!'" He said this last bit in an exaggerated falsetto that made Hermione laugh helplessly.

"You're ridiculous," she gasped. "I would never admit to Minerva that I need an excuse to get out of Quidditch!" He started laughing, too, and soon they were both flopped on their beds, giggling helplessly.

Their conversation grew more mundane, and as it got late, started to be punctuated by silences. Each time it got quiet, Hermione tried to work up the nerve to tell Harry about Severus, and each time, she found herself choosing another, safer topic instead. Eventually, he stood and said, "I don't know about you, Hermione, but I'm getting tired. Why don't I slip outside for a bit and give you time to get yourself together?"

"Oh," she said, knowing she really should tell him now, but finding she couldn't. She would tell him first thing in the morning. No sense spoiling both their sleeps, right? "Okay, sure. I'll see you in a bit then."

He grinned easily and headed outside. She glanced at the clock and realized it was after midnight. She wondered if Severus was asleep yet. Maybe she should just do a quick Floo over there ...

No, that was too risky. Harry might come back before she did she and Severus had a tendency to get *distracted* and she didn't want Harry to be alarmed if he found her gone.

Sighing, she quickly washed up and changed into her nightie. She went to brush her teeth; when she returned, an all-too-familiar voice said in a dangerous tone, "I've come to collect what you owe me."

Outside in the courtyard, Harry thought back over the evening, pacing as he tried to figure out what was worrying him about it. Hermione's reaction had been far more understanding than he had dared hope for. He knew she didn't get why he loved Quidditch so much. He had always assumed that she thought it a dangerous waste of time, so he was surprised she had basically told him he should go for it, and that she would support him no matter what.

Out of the darkness to his left, he heard movement before a familiar voice called cheerfully, "Harry, m'boy! I heard you were coming to see Hermione! It's a pleasure to have you back. How are you?" Dumbledore appeared, smiling widely.

"I'm fine, Professor," Harry smiled back. "It's good to be back at Hogwarts I've missed the old place. I'm just giving Hermione a few minutes of privacy."

"Oh, that's good," Dumbledore said. "Have you two made specific plans for the weekend?"

Harry laughed. "I'm hoping to persuade her to come to the Quidditch match, but other than that, nothing special."

Dumbledore laughed, "Good luck with that, Harry. Our Hermione doesn't love Quidditch as much as one might hope." He paused, and there was a new, probing quality to his next question. "So, everything's all right between you?"

"Sure," Harry replied, perplexed. "Shouldn't it be?"

"Oh, of course, of course," Dumbledore said hastily. "It's just that sometimes, as people mature, they grow into choices that old friends might not approve. One of the great challenges of friendship is to maintain our love and respect for people who want to do things that we disapprove, or develop close ties with people we dislike, or change their lives in ways that we think harmful. Those changes tend to come faster when friends are separated. I just hope that doesn't come between you and Hermione you've been so supportive of each other over the years." He paused and peered at Harry through the darkness. "What am I saying? Of course you and Hermione will support each other, no matter what. It's what you've always done, isn't it?" Harry nodded, but as he had no idea what Dumbledore was talking about, he didn't quite know what to say. After a moment, Dumbledore smiled benignly and said, "Well, it's late, so I'm off to bed. Have a good night, Harry."

"Good night, sir," Harry replied absently, trying to figure out what the old wizard had been trying to say. When he was alone again, he stared up at the sky, wondering what that could have been about. Could Dumbledore have heard about his plans for professional Quidditch? Harry couldn't imagine how although that wasn't unusual, as Dumbledore always seemed to know things he logically shouldn't. But if he thought Harry's choices would cause a rift in their friendship, wouldn't he have spoken with Hermione about supporting choices you disagreed with?

Suddenly, it hit him he wasn't the only one who was changing now that he and Hermione were separated. She must be changing, too, and some decision she had made had Dumbledore concerned that Harry would disapprove. Looking back over their conversation, he realized now that Hermione had been preoccupied on and off all evening almost as though she was afraid to tell him something.

He couldn't imagine what it might be Hermione had always been very smart in her choices, so he rarely had any trouble supporting them. It was one of the reasons he valued her opinion so greatly. It seemed unlikely that whatever she was doing now would be something he would have a serious problem with.

He decided to head back inside and just ask her about it. She would worry until she told him, and he wanted to reassure her right away that he was her friend and would support her no matter what.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 28

Harry catches Severus and Hermione in an embrace.

Chapter 18

Stepping purposefully out of the fireplace, Severus saw Hermione startle when he spoke. She whipped around to face him and whispered urgently, "Severus! What are you doing here? You have to get out of here! I haven't had a chance to tell Harry about you, yet, and he'll be back any minute." She tried to push him toward the fireplace, but he didn't budge.

Instead, he looked around and frowned as he calmly flicked a stray ash off his shoulder. "I told you, I've come to collect what you owe me. And what do you mean, he'll be back any minute? He's not staying *here*, is he?" The rest of her statement registered, and he added darkly, "And how can you not have had a chance to tell him yet? You've spent the last six hours together."

Her voice was just a little bit anxious when she replied. She ignored his last question for the moment. "Well, where else would he stay? He's my friend, and he's here to see me; we need time to catch up. And what on earth do you think I owe you anyway?"

He frowned more deeply. "It's inappropriate for him to stay in your room, Hermione. You're not children anymore. As to what you owe me, have you forgotten our agreement?"

"We're not doing anything inappropriate," she argued, sounding even more anxious. "He's my friend more like my brother than anything, and anyway, it's none of your business where he stays. And what agreement?"

"Two kisses a day," he reminded her in a growl, feeling his temper slipping. This was not going at all as he had planned. "And I'm making it my business. I won't have my woman sleeping with some other man especially not Potter."

She looked surprised. "Sleeping in the same room is not the same thing as sleeping *with* him, Severus," she said emphatically. "And when did I become your woman? You don't own me."

"You became my woman this morning, if you weren't already before then. I warned you that you should be sure of what you wanted, and you insisted you were. Are you changing your mind?"

"No, of course not," she snapped, her previous anxiety apparently morphing into irritation. "I love you. I just don't get why you're so upset about this. Harry is my friend and that's *all*. He's not my lover and he never will be, so stop being ridiculous. Now, I'm going to bed. Good night."

She tried to flounce off, but he caught her arm. "Not so fast. You never answered my other question. How did you not find time to tell him about us in six hours?"

"It didn't come up, okay? We were talking about other things and it just never came up. I'll tell him in the morning."

That didn't explain anything, in Severus's opinion. "If it didn't come up, it's because you didn't bring it up. Why not?"

"I don't know!" she cried. "I kept trying to, but then I would find myself saying something else instead. I'll tell him tomorrow before breakfast."

"Why should I believe that?" Severus asked. "If you haven't told him in six hours, what should convince me that you'll tell him in six hours more? Or in six days or six months?"

"I will, I promise."

"Then tell him now," Severus persisted. "Tell him when he comes back. Don't even say hello first just tell him."

"I can't!" she wailed, sounding completely frustrated now. "I'm scared and I don't know what to say, okay?" She made a visible, but ultimately futile, effort to calm herself, then added anxiously, "I don't even know what we're doing, because you won't talk about it, so how exactly am I supposed to explain it to Harry? And what if I *do* manage to explain it to him, and he says he never wants to see me again, and then you get tired of me? Then I lose both of you. I can't lose both of you, Severus. I just can't." She stared at him, seemingly unaware of the way she was anxiously wringing her hands together, and he felt some of his anger drain. She looked ready to cry; as he had discovered last night, he just couldn't stand to see her cry. He would do whatever it took to prevent it.

He tugged on the arm he still held, and she fell into his arms. He stroked her back soothingly, enjoying the way she held him tightly in response. "You're not going to lose me, Hermione," he promised. "I can't speak for Potter, but I am quite certain that I will never tire of you." He kissed the top of her head, then slid a finger under her chin and tipped her face up to his. "And I seriously doubt that Potter is fool enough to ruin your friendship just because he doesn't like your boyfriend." He sneered the last word just a little, but then he kissed her lips gently. When he felt her tentative response, he began kissing her in earnest.

They were still kissing several long, passionate minutes later, when Harry burst through the door, "Hermione, I " Hermione tore her lips away, looked toward Potter, then gasped and tried to pull away from Severus. Severus held her close, refusing to even loosen his hold. He was determined to protect her as best he could from whatever stupid thing Potter might say. When she realized he wasn't going to let go, she stopped struggling and leaned into him just a little as she stared at Potter apprehensively. With the way she was holding him, even Potter couldn't mistake the situation, but Severus braced himself in case Potter attacked first and asked questions later. Still, Severus watched Hermione for a moment longer, then turned to look directly at Potter, too. The young fool was standing there, mouth gaping open, throat working convulsively as he tried to speak.

Severus finally broke the silence himself, greeting the bane of his existence as civilly as he could manage, for Hermione's sake: "Potter."

That seemed to jar the younger wizard out of his shock. He spoke to Hermione, though, rather than return Severus's greeting. "Snape? You're shagging *Snape*? What the hell are you thinking, Hermione?" Severus felt her tense, so he gave her a reassuring squeeze as Potter continued. "He's a Greasy Git and he hates us both, and you're

shagging him? Have you completely lost your mind?"

Tears had started trickling down Hermione's cheeks, and Severus could feel her trembling, but she gamely defended herself and him. "Don't talk about him like that, Harry. He doesn't deserve it you may not like each other, but he's never harmed you in any way. In fact, he's gone out of his way put his own life at risk more than once to protect you. And I'm not 'shagging' him, as you so crudely put it I'm in love with him, so you can just deal with it or leave." She turned her face into Severus's shoulder; he absently ran a hand soothingly up and down her back.

"And *you*," Harry sneered, turning to Severus as though Hermione hadn't spoken. "What makes you think it's all right to take advantage of a girl half your age? I always knew you were a Greasy Git of a Death Eater, but this is low, even for you."

Severus felt Hermione sob against his shoulder and wanted to rip the brat in half for being so insensitive. But he knew that would only upset her more, so instead of responding directly to Potter, he said wryly to Hermione, "Perhaps I should have given you that potion you wanted, after all." In the scheme of things, Potter wasn't important, anyway. Hermione was.

She gave a hiccupping laugh and lifted her head to look at him. "Perhaps you should," she said softly. "It's not too late, you know. You could get it for me now."

"Yes, but how would we get him to take it?" He wiped her cheeks with his thumb.

"What potion?" Harry demanded. "What are you talking about?" His voice held a slightly hysterical edge, as though he couldn't believe what he was seeing and hearing.

"Shall I tell him?" Severus asked Hermione seriously, then pointed out, "You'll probably get too apologetic, when you should be proud of your ingenuity."

She gave a watery giggle. "No, you'll probably just make him madder. I'll tell him."

"Someone just tell me already!" Harry demanded. Severus could feel the waves of antagonism radiating from the younger man. It must be quite a shock, he reflected, for Potter to find himself on the outside of a shorthand conversation one that screamed comfort, closeness, and even intimacy between his best friend and his worst enemy. Severus almost managed to feel a little bit sorry for the boy except the fool was upsetting Hermione, which negated any compassion Severus might otherwise have mustered. He ignored the fool, gently continuing to wipe fresh tears from Hermione's cheeks. Fortunately, the tears slowed and then stopped as he kept wiping her cheeks with one hand and stroking her back soothingly with the other.

Eventually, Hermione gave him a grateful half-smile, then looked back at Harry and said, with quiet dignity, "I knew you weren't going to take this well, and that was before Severus and I were really together we were still just friends, then. So I had the idea that I could give you both a potion that would make you see each other the way I see you, figuring that way, I wouldn't have to spend the entire weekend keeping you two from killing each other."

"You were going to *poison* me?" Harry challenged, rather melodramatically, in Severus's opinion. "Doesn't that tell you something about what a bad influence he is on you? Really, Hermione, I just don't get you at all."

"Not poison," Severus clarified blandly. "This particular potion doesn't have anything dangerous in it at all. And she was planning to slip it to both of us."

"Is that supposed to make it better?" Harry snapped, flashing a glance at Severus before returning his gaze to Hermione. "How could you use a potion on me without my consent?"

"Well," she retorted, composure slipping as she finally started to get irritated (rather belatedly, in Severus's opinion), "what else was I supposed to do? Let the two of you tear me apart with your sniping at each other? Happily sit in the crossfire while you two did your best to kill each other? Ignore someone I care about to keep you happy? Lie to you? Pretend Severus isn't my friend? Let him leave, *like he offered to* so I don't have to deal with it? You tell me, Harry, what *exactly* was I supposed to do?"

"Well, you could have at least given me some warning," Potter ground out, but he looked chagrined, apparently recognizing despite himself the impossible position she had been in. "You could have told me this hours ago, given me time to get used to the idea, instead of springing it on me like that. I'll be haunted by that image for the rest of my life!" he groaned, bringing his fists up to his eyes and rubbing them hard. Severus suddenly had to fight to keep a straight face, amused despite himself because Potter sounded so deadly serious about it. Potter paused, taking a deep breath, then asked more calmly, "What changed your mind? About the potion, I mean."

Hermione shrugged, calming again now that Potter seemed to be willing to consider her point of view. "Severus figured it out and talked me out of it."

"How did he figure it out? Did he catch you making it?" Hermione blushed and looked away.

"No," Severus cut in. "Hermione asked me to make it for her. She pretended it was for friends of a friend of hers, of course, but it occurred to me that no one in the wizarding world perhaps no one anywhere hates one another as much as you and I do. So I asked her, and she admitted it."

"What were you *thinking*, Hermione?" Potter asked, looking almost as shocked by that sequence of events as he had when he had first seen them together. "Why on earth would you do that?"

She shrugged and said, "I already told you why. I don't know how else to explain it."

"Not why you wanted the potion," he clarified impatiently. "Why you would ask *Snape* to make it for you."

"Oh," she said, sounding uncertain. "Um ... well, I guess I figured he would know how to do it. And he was my friend, so ..."

When her voice trailed off, Severus interjected again, "My theory is she wanted to get caught, since she didn't want to go through with it anyway. She would have felt too guilty."

Potter nodded once, curtly, but other than that, didn't acknowledge that Severus had spoken. "Okay, about this friendship," Potter said to Hermione, obviously letting the potion go for now, "Since when were you friends with him? Last I heard, you hated him as much as I did. And he's never been particularly nice to you, either."

"Well," she said slowly, "Things changed when I came back as an apprentice instead of a student."

"How?" Potter demanded. Severus frowned at his tone, but it didn't seem to faze Hermione.

"I can't describe it, exactly," she said thoughtfully. "He just ... we just ... I don't know." She looked to Severus. "Do you know what changed?"

"You grew up," he said, although he knew it wasn't really as simple as that. "And, as you are now Minerva's apprentice rather than a student, it is no longer my responsibility to discipline you." He paused, but he couldn't resist adding, "And when you're away from Potter's bad influence, you aren't nearly as annoying." Hermione smacked him lightly on the chest, then caressed the spot soothingly.

Meanwhile, Potter frowned at that dig, but he didn't respond. *Progress*, Severus thought. Maybe it wasn't too much to hope that Potter would be civil for Hermione's sake, after all. Potter said, "Yes, but that doesn't explain why *you* stopped hating *him*, Hermione."

She considered that for a long moment. "I never hated him like you did in the first place, Harry. So when I started my apprenticeship, I guess I initially thought that I should try to get along with him, since he was going to be my colleague." She shrugged. "And then I got to know him, and I discovered I really liked him."

"Oh." There was a long silence. Potter finally said, "I would ask about how you wound up as *close* as you apparently are now, but I'm not sure I want to know." There was

a question in his voice, though, which Severus chose to ignore. Hermione said nothing to that, either, so after a moment, Potter said to her, "This is going to take some getting used to. A *lot* of getting used to."

"It's late," Severus announced. "I'm going back to my quarters now. I'll see you both tomorrow." Now that Potter's anger was under control, Hermione wouldn't be in any real danger, and Severus was suddenly exhausted.

Hermione looked up at him and said, "Breakfast, right?" Her tone was hopeful.

"Right," he confirmed, not caring whether Potter agreed or not. Since it would be Saturday, he asked, "What time?"

Hermione replied, "Considering how late it is, perhaps we should plan for around ten?"

He nodded, squeezed her once more, then let go and headed back to the fireplace. She walked with him. He turned before stepping in and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "He seems like he's calmed down, but if things get difficult, come to me, no matter what the hour."

She looked surprised, but she nodded. "I'm sure it will be fine, Severus, but thanks." She glanced toward Potter, who had moved to stand at the window, looking out, then she stretched up and kissed him quickly. "I love you," she said.

He nodded once and left.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 28

Harry and Hermione discuss her relationship with Severus; Hermione sneaks out to see Severus; and the three have an awkward breakfast.

Chapter 19

After Severus left, Hermione took a deep breath and turned to face Harry. He was still looking out the window. After a long silence, she asked, "Do you hate me?"

"Hate you?" he replied, seeming startled. "No, I don't hate you. I don't understand what you see in him, but I guess it's not my business, is it?" He paused. "Are you sure he's not using you?"

"He's not," she said firmly. "He wouldn't do that. He cares about me."

"How do you know? Has he said so? And he's Slytherin, so even if he *has* said so, how can you trust him?"

"He doesn't have to say so," she said, but she heard a slight defensive edge in her tone, which made her angry. Nevertheless, she forged ahead. "He shows it all the time."

"How? By shagging you? I hate to tell you, Hermione, men like that don't need to care about a woman to shag her."

Hermione found herself irritated by his condescending tone. "Really, Harry? How about to *not* shag her when he desperately wants to? Does he need to care about her to do that?"

He rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me you're not shagging him, Hermione. It's completely obvious."

"Not that it's any of your business, but if it were up to him, we'd have waited a lot longer than we did. *I* seduced *him*, not the other way around." Her voice rang with pride she had, after all, managed to undermine the man's legendary self-control.

"Ahhhh!" Harry yelled, putting his hands up to his ears. "Don't say that! Please don't tell me that! I don't want to hear it! I don't want to know about it!"

"*You* started the conversation, Harry," Hermione pointed out, reluctantly amused by his reaction. "Don't blame me if you don't like where it went."

"Fine," he said. Suddenly he smiled. "I propose a deal, then. How about you promise never to tell me anything remotely related to you and him shagging ever again?"

"That's not a deal, that's a request," she said when he fell silent. "What do I get out of it?"

"Well," he said, apparently unsure what he could give her in return. Then he brightened. "How about I promise not to say 'I told you so' when he breaks your heart?"

Hermione frowned. "That would be nice, Harry, but I would hope that, as my friend, you wouldn't say that to me if my heart were broken regardless."

He looked uncomfortable. "You're right." He thought for a minute, but apparently couldn't come up with anything he considered suitable. Finally, he said, sounding frustrated, "Well, you think of something, then."

Hermione smiled, knowing exactly what she wanted from him. "How about you agree to be civil to Severus?"

"For how long?" he asked warily. "And do you mean all the time?"

"For as long as I'm friends with him," she said firmly. "And yes, I do mean all the time."

"But what if he's not civil to me? Can I at least defend myself?"

Refraining from commenting on the whine in his voice, Hermione focused instead on answering his question. "That won't come up. He's promised he'll be civil to you." Her own voice rang with confidence she knew Severus would keep his word.

"But he's Slytherin!" Harry protested. "His word can't be trusted!"

"I trust him," she said stubbornly. "But fine, you can be uncivil if and only if he's uncivil first."

"Fine," he said. She knew he figured Severus wouldn't be able to resist being nasty to him, which would mean that he had given up nothing. But she had known when Severus had been here earlier that there were several times he had wanted to hit Harry, or worse, and he hadn't. So, now that Harry had agreed to be civil unless provoked, she was cautiously optimistic that things would work out all right.

She said, "It's really late and I'm tired. I'm going to bed. Feel free to use the shower or whatever. Stay up as late as you like."

"All right," he replied. "Good night, Hermione."

"Good night, Harry."

Severus also stayed up for a while when he got back to his quarters. Although Potter had calmed down by the time Severus left, he still wasn't entirely sure that Potter wouldn't rip into Hermione again as soon as they were alone, and he wanted to be awake if she arrived upset.

So, instead of going right to bed, he paced back and forth in front of the fireplace, wanting to just use the Floo network to peek in on them and make sure she was really all right. But he didn't want Hermione to think he thought she couldn't handle her annoying friend's temper, so he resisted the urge to take even a quick look. He didn't like it, though.

It would be so much simpler if he hadn't grown to like her so much if he could just shag her when he felt like it and not think about her at all the rest of the time. Instead, he missed her when she wasn't around to the point where he had fabricated that ridiculous excuse to go see her this evening, inadvertently setting in motion that entire confrontation with Potter. It really hadn't occurred to him that Potter would be sleeping in Hermione's room.

Frowning, he realized that his displeasure over that state of affairs had been forgotten as they dealt with Potter's angry reaction to seeing them kissing. He still didn't like the idea of any male who wasn't a close relative sleeping in Hermione's room with her except him, of course. Perhaps he would try to discuss that with her again tomorrow.

Now, he worried about whether that insensitive lout Potter would hurt her feelings. In a way, Severus was glad he had triggered the confrontation when he was around to defend her and to deflect some of Potter's ire onto himself. He was used to it, and as annoying as it was to have to censor his own words, he wouldn't have liked the idea of her facing that reaction on her own. He suspected that Potter's reaction would have been that bad regardless of how he had learned of their relationship.

Severus just had to hope that the worst of Potter's anger was spent by now, and that they had simply said good night and gone to bed, separately, as soon as Severus had left. He doubted it, though.

It would be unlike Hermione to just leave it be. She would probably ask Potter if he was mad or something, and then Potter would question again what she was doing with a 'Greasy Git,' and then they would be arguing again this time, with Severus not there to support her.

After a while, he forced himself to go to bed. As he had once told Hermione, his temper was bad enough when he was well-rested, so he didn't want to have to deal with Potter when he was tired. After all, he had assured her that he would be civil to her pain-in-the-arse friend.

He was just dozing off to sleep when she slid into bed beside him. He turned to look at her, seeking any sign that Potter had upset her again.

"Did you miss me?" she asked eventually.

"Never mind that," he replied. "Are you all right? What did he say?"

"Oh, he tried to warn me that you can't be trusted and that you're probably just using me for sex, and I told him I trust you and if you're using me for sex, you're not doing it very well. He didn't want to hear that, so we made a deal that I won't tell him anything related to our sex life, and he'll be civil to you unless you're uncivil to him first." She smiled proudly, "So, you see, things are going better than I had hoped."

His attention was stuck on an earlier point, however. "What do you mean, I'm not doing it very well? You told him sex wasn't that good?"

"No!" she exclaimed, blushing and looking horrified that he would think that. "Why would I tell him that when it's amazing? No, I mean that I told him it would be hard for you to use me for sex, when you've been holding out on me for ages, and I finally had to seduce you."

He was slightly mollified to realize she hadn't been complaining to Potter about his prowess. Still, he pointed out, "You didn't really seduce me, you know."

"Well, what would you call it? I practically had to beg, which I wouldn't do for just anyone, you know."

"Seduction is more calculated than what you actually did, Miss Know-It-All. What you actually did was, you wore down my resolve, just by being around me. And with a lot of kissing," he added ruefully.

She smiled. "I think I'll take that as a compliment, Severus." She kissed him lightly, then said, "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome," he replied, realizing suddenly and much to his chagrin that he was now fully aroused. "But if he didn't upset you, what are you doing here?"

She gave him a mischievous look. "Well, I went to bed and managed to go to sleep, but then I had a very disturbing dream, and I woke up feeling ... wicked," she replied. "And Harry was sound asleep, so I snuck out to come see you. Do you mind?"

"No, I don't mind," he growled, and pulled her closer. "But I think it's time to stop talking now." He kissed her deeply.

When he paused to unbutton her nightgown, she reached for his pyjama bottoms and purred, "Oh, I totally agree, Severus. No more talking."

The next morning, Hermione and Harry arrived at breakfast before ten, and Hermione led him over to where she usually sat with Severus. Since it was the weekend, a more informal atmosphere prevailed than existed on weekdays, and people were coming and going whenever they felt like it. Severus wasn't here yet, which was probably a good thing, since Harry was still a bit of a celebrity. Even so long after the final battle, the students still looked up to him. And of course, the professors wanted to say hello and catch up. He greeted them all with good humor, chatting easily with those he knew and liked, being courteous but briefer with those he either didn't know or didn't care for.

By the time they arrived at their seats, then, it was nearly ten-fifteen. They sat down, and Hermione immediately started to worry because Severus wasn't there yet. What if he had changed his mind? What if he was annoyed that she had slipped out without waking him, when she had woken up just as dawn was breaking?

Of course, she had *wanted* to wake him, but based on recent experience, she had thought that would likely lead to another round or perhaps two of lovemaking. And then, who knew if she would get back to her own room before Harry woke up?

Finally, five minutes later, Severus appeared. Hermione could almost feel a lot of the room hold its collective breath those who knew their history couldn't help bracing themselves for some kind of drama. Hermione was well aware that they fully expected one of two things to happen: either Severus would find a seat elsewhere, or there would be an explosion of the ongoing tension between him and Harry. She really hoped their promises to her would prevent either of those outcomes, though.

He approached slowly, and when he was close enough, he said, "Good morning, Hermione, Potter. I apologize for being late I didn't sleep much last night." He sat down in his usual chair to Hermione's left. Their food immediately appeared, and Hermione quickly took a sip of pumpkin juice.

Harry said, "Snape."

Hermione, although pleased that Harry was at least trying to be civil, felt herself blush lightly at Severus's implication she just *new* he was thinking about why he didn't sleep much. She worked to keep her tone even as she said, "Good morning, Severus. I'm glad you're here now. I'm starving." Then she could have kicked herself, because although he didn't actually smile, she could feel his amusement as he apparently drew a conclusion as to *why* she was so hungry. She felt her blush deepen, knowing that his conclusion was probably correct.

He leaned closer and said, for her ears only, "You left very early, Hermione. You should have woken me."

She glanced at him, wondering if he was angry, after all. But his expression gave nothing away. She whispered, keeping her voice light, "Sorry, but I wanted to get back to my room before Harry woke up, and I thought the odds of that would go down substantially if I woke you."

In a soft, teasing tone, he said, "Perhaps, but now you'll have to find more time for kissing later."

From her right, Harry broke in, "Hermione, if you want me to be civil, you should probably stop whispering with him right in front of me."

"Sorry," she replied, glancing at him apologetically. She asked the first thing that came into her head. "So, what did you want to do today?" She took a bite of toast.

"I was kind of hoping we could go to the Quidditch match," Harry replied.

"Hermione hates Quidditch," Severus said flatly. She glance at him just in time to see him slide half of his orange onto her plate.

She gave him a questioning look, which he either ignored or didn't see, then hastily refocused on the conversation, saying, "Well, no, I don't hate it, exactly. I mean, it's not my *favorite* thing ever ..."

Her voice trailed off as she saw that Harry was glaring at Severus and, unsure what else to do, she ate a section of the orange. "I know it's not her favorite thing," Harry said, with exaggerated patience, "but she doesn't mind going once in a while."

"But why should she have to waste time on something she doesn't enjoy?" Severus asked silkily.

"She doesn't have to if she doesn't want to," Harry said. "She asked me what I wanted to do and I told her. It's up to her if she'd rather do something else instead."

Hermione broke in before Severus could respond. "Okay, stop, both of you." She shook her head in frustration. "Stop talking about me like I'm not here. I'm perfectly capable of deciding for myself, without any help from either of you, whether or not I want to go to a Quidditch match."

They both looked at her, and neither one said anything. Honestly, she wanted to smack them both for putting her in the middle, again. If this was their idea of civility, it wasn't much better than incivility, in her estimation. And the decision wasn't clear cut, anyway. She didn't really want to go, but she didn't want to disappoint Harry, either. Harry finally said, "Well? Do you want to go to Quidditch, or not?"

She sighed and decided to just tell the truth. "Honestly, not really, but you shouldn't let that stop you from going. I mean, it's one thing to go and watch my friends play, but other than that, there are probably a hundred other things I would rather do."

Harry looked disappointed, but Severus looked smug, so she kicked him under the table. He flinched slightly, but all he said was, "There, it's settled. Potter will go to Quidditch, and we'll do something else, and then Potter will rejoin us later."

Hermione looked at Harry anxiously, "Is that all right with you?"

"I suppose it will have to be," Harry said, a little less graciously than Hermione would have liked. She kicked *him* under the table, too. He let out a yelp, and said, "What was that for?"

"For ..." she paused, not sure how to answer. Technically, he hadn't crossed the line into outright rudeness. Neither one had, actually. But they were both being provoking, nonetheless. She snapped, "For being ungracious about being civil."

She stood and said, "I'm going back to my room now. *Alone*. I trust you'll manage not to kill each other." She took the rest of the orange and her toast and walked out, leaving them both gaping after her.

After Hermione left, Severus and Harry ate in silence for a few minutes. Severus considered going after her, but decided he would let her cool down first. Eventually, Potter said, "I thought we were being civil, for Hermione's sake."

"She can't be expecting miracles," Severus replied. "She must know we aren't going to suddenly become bosom buddies."

"Still, we could probably do a little better," Potter argued. "It's only for another day and a half, after all."

"This time," Severus grumbled. "Unless you're planning to drop out of her life completely after this weekend?" He didn't quite manage to keep the hopeful note out of his tone.

Potter rolled his eyes. "Not a chance. Someone has to be around to pick up the pieces when you break her heart."

"And what makes you so sure I'll break her heart?" Severus asked sourly.

"Because ... well, because you're you, I suppose," Potter replied, unhelpfully, in Severus's opinion.

"Ah," Severus replied, rising. "On that note, I believe I'll leave you to enjoy the rest of your breakfast. Enjoy the Quidditch match."

He headed out to find Hermione. If she hadn't calmed down yet, he would simply have to charm his way back into her good graces.

Chapter 20

While Harry's at the Quidditch match, Hermione and Severus spend a relaxing afternoon together. Meanwhile, Dumbledore seems unable to resist meddling ...

Chapter 20

After Hermione left Harry and Severus at breakfast, she headed through the courtyard toward her room, munching on her toast. She was halfway across the courtyard when someone called her name from behind her. Turning, she was surprised to see Dumbledore hurrying after her.

"Hello, sir," she greeted him as he neared. "Did you need something?"

"No, no, not really," he replied. "You left breakfast rather abruptly, and I wanted to be sure you were all right."

"I'm fine," she replied, surprised. "I just decided that I didn't want to be caught in the middle of Harry and Severus taking verbal potshots at each other, so I left."

"Oh," Dumbledore said agreeably. "I hope you aren't angry with them. They've got a lot of built-up hostility toward one another, you know," he said in a confiding tone.

"I know," she sighed. "And I'm not really mad, I'm just disappointed. They both promised to be civil to each other, for my sake, and I guess I hoped they wouldn't just skate the edge of hostility like they are."

"Well, my dear, give it time. Perhaps they'll do better eventually. Right now, they're still getting used to the idea that they can't just go after each other the way they've always done." He paused, then patted her arm reassuringly. "They both obviously care deeply for you, Hermione. I'm not sure there's anyone else they would even make an effort for."

She sighed again. "I'm sure you're right, sir. It's just exhausting to be around them at the moment."

He nodded understandingly, "I imagine so. In any event, I mustn't keep you. Have a good day."

"You, too, sir. And thanks for your concern." He headed off, and Hermione continued on her way to her room.

When Hermione reached her room, she closed the door and sighed with relief, only to jump when Severus spoke. "I hope you're not upset with me."

"What are you doing here, Severus?" She frowned. "And how did you get here before I did, anyway?"

"I assume you stopped somewhere," he replied. "And I'm here to make sure you're not too upset."

"You can't just let yourself in here whenever you feel like it, Severus," Hermione said crossly. "I thought I made it clear that I wanted to be alone." She stepped into the bathroom to rinse her hands, since they were sticky with juice from the orange.

"I assumed you meant that for Potter," he replied smoothly, when she came back into the room. "But I'll leave if you want me to."

"Never assume, Severus, isn't that what you always say?" Suddenly, the fight drained out of her. "I don't want you to leave, though." She crossed to him and hugged him tightly. "And I'm not mad, either. A little disappointed, maybe, but I didn't *really* think you would suddenly be best friends or anything."

He slid his arms around her. "I'm sorry to disappoint, but that's about as good as it gets between Potter and me." He kissed her gently. "Now, what would you like to do while Potter is at Quidditch?"

She nestled against him, saying, "You'll be bored. You don't have to stay if you don't want to."

"Why don't you let me decide if I'll be bored or not? What is it you want to do?"

She smiled sheepishly. "Well, considering I hardly got any sleep last night ..."

He asked seriously, "And whose fault was that?"

She ignored the question, continuing as though he hadn't spoken. "... What I really want is to take a nap."

His lip twitched. "A nap, hmmm? Well, it so happens that I could use a little extra rest myself, since *someone* kept me awake half the night."

She grinned, and pointed out, "I didn't hear any complaints at the time."

"And you're not hearing one now, either," he rejoined. "I was merely making an observation. Now, where did you want to take this nap?"

"I hadn't really thought about it."

"Might I suggest that we adjourn to my quarters, considering that Potter could decide to return to yours at any moment?"

"Oh, good point," she said. "I knew you were smart."

He led her to the fireplace. "Do you want to go first, or shall I?"

Two hours later, Severus gradually came awake. He watched Hermione sleep for awhile, trying to will her to wake up, but without using any magic. When that didn't work, he began nibbling on her earlobe, and then shifted his attention to her neck. She sighed and murmured in her sleep, and he set about seeing how aroused he could make her without waking her up.

Very aroused, indeed, as it turned out. By the time she woke up, she was writhing and panting with need, and the moment her eyes opened and met his, she started to come apart in his arms. She called his name, and he held her tightly as she shuddered her release. As she started to relax, he began again.

She moaned softly. "Severus," she whispered, sounding surprised that she wanted him again so quickly. He smiled at her.

"Hmmm?" he murmured.

She shook her head, as though not sure what she wanted to say. Suddenly, she caught him off guard, twisting so that he was suddenly on his back and she was straddling him. She lowered herself slowly, taking him all the way inside her. He hissed with the pure pleasure of being there, but forced himself to wait and let her go at her own pace. When he was as deep as he could go, she paused and looked at him for a long moment, then leaned over and kissed him deeply.

She began to ride him, slowly at first, then gradually with more urgency. He watched her, spellbound by the intensity of her focus on the sensations she must be experiencing. Suddenly, her eyes widened, her back arched, and her body started shaking with an intense orgasm. He flipped her over onto her back and began pumping his hips rapidly. It wasn't long before he followed her into bliss.

He must have dozed for a while. Eventually, he woke up to find her draped half across him, watching him, with her chin resting on the back of her hands, which were clasped on his chest. When she realized he was awake, she whispered, "Hi."

"Hi, yourself," he murmured in reply. He couldn't resist pulling her up for a kiss. "How was your nap?"

She blushed. "It was delightful," she said primly. "Very restful."

He smiled. "Good."

"How was yours?" she asked.

"Delightful," he teased, "and very restful."

After a moment, she sighed. "I suppose we'll have to get up soon. The Quidditch match must be over by now, and Harry will be wondering where we are." Still, she didn't move except to snuggle more comfortably against him and close her eyes.

He groaned. "Hermione?"

"Yes?" She turned to look at him again.

"If you ever hope to have me tolerate Potter," he said dryly, "You probably shouldn't bring him up as a reason why we have to get out of bed."

She stared at him for a moment, then giggled when she realized he was teasing. Sort of. "Well, we also should probably show up for dinner, unless you want everyone speculating about us."

He sighed. "I know, I know. That's the problem with a place like Hogwarts it's impossible to keep private affairs private." He paused. "Speaking of Potter, we never finished discussing the fact that I don't like him sleeping in your room with you."

"Yes, we did," Hermione said. "Because you have nothing to worry about. The very idea that anything would happen between Harry and me is ridiculous, and you know it."

"And yet, I still don't like it," he replied. "It doesn't help that I know he's probably taking every opportunity to remind you that I'm not worthy of you."

She shook her head. "Harry doesn't get a vote about that. Now, do you trust me, or not?"

"It's not a question of trust, Hermione."

"Yes, it is. And it's not even that much trust at that, considering I spent most of last night here with you, and I'll probably do the same tonight. *Unless*," she said pointedly, "you persist in this ridiculous topic of conversation. Is that what you want?"

"No," he replied with alacrity, "But I still don't like it."

She looked at the clock across the room. "Severus, may I point out that we have about half an hour before we absolutely have to get up? Would you like to spend that time on this discussion, or do you perhaps have other ideas for what to do?" She glanced meaningfully down below his waist, where his 'other ideas' were causing the sheet to tent.

He chuckled at her obvious ploy. "You know perfectly well that I have all sorts of ideas. Shall I demonstrate?"

"Yes, please," she replied brightly.

And that, Severus thought wryly, was the end of the discussion.

At dinner that evening, Hermione once again sat between Harry and Severus. Their behavior toward one another since Harry had rejoined her and Severus was marginally better than it had been that morning. Hermione suspected this was because both men were in particularly good moods Harry because of Gryffindor's Quidditch victory over Ravenclaw; and Severus, she could only assume, because of the afternoon they had just spent lazing around and making love.

As everyone settled in, Dumbledore rose and called for everyone's attention. When the room quieted, he said, "Hogwarts has much to celebrate today a new school year has recently begun, and today we have had our first Quidditch match of the year. And, as most of you know, we have an honored alumnus and guest visiting us. Therefore, I have decided that a celebratory dance is in order. I will expect to see you all back here in the Great Hall tonight at 8 pm. That is all."

Looking around, it had already seemed to Hermione that the eyes of the entire room were on the three of them. Not for the first time, Hermione wished that Severus and Harry's legendary dislike of one another wasn't quite so legendary and that Dumbledore hadn't just drawn attention to Harry again with his announcement. She just knew that Severus would be displeased about a celebration that was even a little bit in Harry's honor.

Sighing, she asked Harry something about the Quidditch match, then didn't really hear his response, because Severus was stroking her thigh playfully under cover of the table. She was amazed by his ability to maintain a completely neutral facial expression as he touched her. She was rapidly getting aroused again, and she tried to discreetly remove his hand, but he wasn't having any of that. She glared at him once, wondering if this was his way of ensuring that she sought him out as soon as she could manage later. He gave her a bland, inscrutable look, and she resigned herself to being tortured for the remainder of the meal.

She had no idea what Harry was talking about, but she must have done a credible impression of paying attention, because he didn't seem to notice anything amiss. She couldn't wait for dinner to be over, though and now, there was the long evening ahead, as well, where Harry would be a guest, but she and Severus would be more like chaperones for the students.

She couldn't wait for this evening and, for that matter, this weekend to be over.

After making the announcement about the dance, Dumbledore considered what else he might do to help Hermione and Severus along on their quest for true love. It didn't help that he wasn't sure how far along the path they had gotten on their own. He watched the unlikely trio as he nibbled on some cornbread.

It certainly appeared that his word with Harry last evening had done the trick as far as Potter was concerned. The three looked to be having a perfectly civil conversation. Although, looking closely, Harry was doing most of the talking, Hermione was nodding absently now and then, and Severus was staring neutrally straight ahead, apparently ignoring them both.

Although, he was eating lefthanded, with his right hand out of sight under the table ...

"Albus!" Dumbledore jumped when Minerva's sharp voice cut through his musings. "Just what do you think you're up to?"

"As I just announced, Minerva, I'm arranging a celebration for the entire school." He smiled benignly. "It's important to keep school spirit up in fact, we should make this a new tradition. The Quidditch Ball, we'll call it, in future years."

"We've never had a Quidditch Ball before, and no one's suffered because of it." She narrowed her eyes. "This had better not be an excuse to interfere in Hermione and

Severus's relationship."

Dumbledore tried to look shocked at the mere suggestion. "What do Hermione and Severus have to do with anything? Do you seriously think I would invent an entire social event in honor of Severus's least favorite person, no less in an effort to bring Hermione and Severus together?"

"Well, then, why spring it on us so suddenly? Why is this the first anyone's heard of it? And why now?"

"Now that the war has been over for a while, we don't want to forget to fully enjoy life's little blessings, do we? And it occurred to me just this afternoon, when I saw Harry at the Quidditch match. Really, Minerva, you're seeing some Machiavellian plot where none exists."

Minerva looked at him skeptically. "Remember, Albus, you promised not to interfere, and I'm holding you to that."

"Of course, Minerva, I haven't forgotten. Now, shall we discuss the decorations? Or perhaps the music?"

Sighing, Minerva said, "All right, you win. Did you want something seasonal? Or something sporty? Or did you have something else altogether in mind?"

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 28

At the impromptu Quidditch Ball, Severus and Hermione dance to the tune of a meddling Dumbledore ...

Chapter 21

The Great Hall had been decorated in a fall motif. There were autumn leaves and pumpkins, and a hologram of an autumn night sky (complete with a harvest moon) temporarily displaced the usual ceiling charms. It seemed an odd choice to Harry, as this was supposed to be a celebration of Quidditch, not of the harvest season, which was still a few weeks away.

He looked around the room, trying to decide who to talk to. At past celebrations, of course, he would have spent the evening with Ron and Hermione, most likely, since this event had been announced too late for anyone to find dates. If history were any guide, they quite likely might have spent a crazy evening getting themselves into and out of trouble.

However, Ron wasn't here tonight, and Hermione was with Snape. Harry still couldn't believe she had chosen Snape, of all people, to fall for, so Harry was at loose ends. Oh, he could have stayed with Hermione and Snape, of course, but he wasn't sure that he and Snape wouldn't start sniping at each other again, which would irritate Hermione.

Instead, he found himself heading toward Ginny. There had been a time when they had actually dated briefly, but they were long past that now, and had settled into a comfortable friendship. When she saw him approaching, she smiled. "I thought you'd be too important to visit with a mere student, Mr. Guest-of-Honor."

"Well, I am, of course," he replied, tongue-in-cheek. "But I have to have something to report back to Ron when he asks how you are." He leaned down to kiss her cheek. "So, what shall I tell him?"

"Tell him to mind his own business," Ginny replied pertly. "Now, are you going to dance with me or what?"

"Sure," he said, as an uptempo beat started to fill the hall. "Let's go."

Hermione felt awkward and out-of-sorts, standing next to Severus and watching the students and Harry gyrate around the makeshift dance floor. She didn't know how to behave toward Severus at an event like this. Meals were comfortable and familiar now, but she and Severus had never really been out in public in any other context. Frowning, she realized for the first time that they had never really even had a date.

Perhaps she would have to suggest that sometime soon. For now, though, she just wanted, more than anything, to dance with him—slow, fast, whatever—it didn't matter much. She loved to dance, and he was really her only option, except she wasn't sure he even danced. At any school ball or dance or party or whatever, he had always stood around glaring at the students, particularly those who got a little too close to one another in the slow dances, or looked like they were trying to sneak off somewhere together.

So she had never seen him dance; therefore, she was afraid to ask him lest he turn her down. And even if he did dance, he might not want anyone to know that they were involved with each other, so he might turn her down anyway. Which meant that unless he asked her to dance, she wouldn't get to dance with him at all.

Unfortunately, she couldn't really dance with anyone else, either. For one thing, she wasn't a student any longer, so it would be awkward to dance with anyone who was. But the professors, other than Severus, weren't people she could even imagine cutting loose with on the dance floor.

So she was just standing around, watching the students to make sure none tried to do anything inappropriate and trying to think of something to say to Severus, when Dumbledore spoke from just behind her. "Hermione, dear, you should be out there dancing! Severus, why don't you go dance with Hermione?"

Severus was startled by Dumbledore's question, and he glanced uncomfortably at Hermione. He found her watching him with what looked like a mixture of hope and embarrassment. He hated dancing, and he really didn't want to fuel any speculation that Dumbledore or anyone else might be engaging in, and anyway, someone had to make sure the students stayed out of trouble.

He opened his mouth to say he didn't dance—which wasn't a lie because even though he knew how, it was certainly true that he didn't actually do it. "I don't," but then Hermione's face fell, and he forgot all the reasons why he had intended to say no. Instead, he said, "I don't know if she wants to risk the injury-free status of her feet by dancing with me."

Her face lit up, and he was a little bit disgusted with himself at how ridiculously, out-of-proportion happy that made him. She said, "Really? You dance? I love to dance, and I'm sure you won't step on my feet. I'll bet you're very graceful."

"I wouldn't count on it, but I'm willing to give it a try," he replied, holding out a hand. She took it, and he led her onto the floor. Just then, the music changed from an uptempo jitterbug to a slow, romantic waltz. Severus barely managed to keep from groaning. Dumbledore was trying to kill him, he was sure of it.

Hermione must have sensed something, because she said tentatively, "We could wait for something faster, if you want."

Again, he wanted to agree, even opened his mouth to say *yes*, *that would probably be best* Once again, however, he surprised himself by saying in an agreeable tone. "No, we're already here, so we may as well try it, at least."

She smiled again, and his stomach did a little flip-flop of delight. He bowed formally, and she curtsied, and then they started to dance. He was surprised at how natural it felt. For the first time in his life, he understood why people might enjoy dancing. They glided and twirled and flowed around the floor, and he quite forgot that the entire Hogwarts community was present, and perhaps watching. He simply lost himself in the music and in Hermione's beautiful eyes. A small part of him remained a little bit disgusted by his sappy thoughts, but most of him simply didn't care what anyone thought not even that cynical part of himself.

After a while, the music changed, yet Severus had no inclination to leave the dance floor. Apparently, neither did Hermione by tacit agreement, they simply shifted into a new dance, one that matched the faster beat of a cha-cha. A little later, the music changed again, and again, they continued dancing to the new beat.

In fact, they danced through so many changes that Severus lost count. He vaguely thought that he should be getting tired by now, but he wasn't. Instead, he was exhilarated, dancing with Hermione and watching her total immersion in the experience.

At long last, the music stopped altogether. Severus looked around, realizing suddenly that nearly everyone was gone. Only a few stragglers remained Dumbledore, Minerva, Potter, and the Weasley girl and they were all intently watching him and Hermione.

He felt himself flush with embarrassment. He would have said something, but he had no idea what to say. Fortunately, Hermione beat him to it. "What's everyone looking at? Haven't you ever seen anyone dance before?" He was still holding her hand; despite his discomfort, he didn't let go.

"What? Oh, yes, of course," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "We were just pleased that you were enjoying yourself so much, Hermione. Weren't we, Minerva?"

Minerva gave Dumbledore a chastising look, but she said only, "Yes, of course we were."

Miss Weasley assured them, "Oh, Hermione, you two were so graceful! I mean, of course I knew you danced you dance with Harry and Ron all the time. I just I didn't know Professor Snape could dance I don't think I've ever seen him dance before. And I didn't know you were friends with him, either. Although I probably should have realized, considering you've been sitting with him at meals."

Miss Weasley prattled on for several minutes longer, and Severus just tuned her out. He was busy watching Potter, who just stood there, looking a little shellshocked as he stared at Severus and Hermione's linked hands. Finally, Potter seemed to shake himself out of his reverie. "Come on, Ginny," he interrupted the Weasley girl, who was asking Hermione something about salsa dancing lessons, "You're out past curfew, so let's go before Snape deducts points." Severus raised an eyebrow, but said nothing; with the Headmaster there looking benignly on, deducting points would have seemed a bit presumptuous, in his opinion.

Hermione hugged her friend. "We don't see nearly enough of one another anymore, Ginny. Maybe we can go shopping next Saturday?" Severus inwardly groaned. He had forgotten or more likely, repressed that next week was the first Hogsmeade weekend. He could only hope he wouldn't be forced to chaperone.

"Oh, yes," Miss Weasley enthused. "Let's do!" Before she could say anything more, Potter dragged her away. Hermione called something after her, and Miss Weasley responded, but Severus paid no attention. This time, he glanced at Minerva and Dumbledore, who seemed to be having a silent conversation. Minerva's look was accusing and scolding, while Dumbledore was trying, rather unsuccessfully, to look innocent.

Severus sighed. Well, it was clear that something was up, but he had no interest in it. It was bad enough that his students and colleagues had probably all seen him dancing with Hermione. He certainly didn't want to hang around while Dumbledore plotted and Minerva tried to rein him in. "Are you ready to go?" he asked Hermione. She nodded.

"Yes, I'm suddenly feeling exhausted."

"Then let's go." He led her away, calling a terse good night over his shoulder to Minerva and Dumbledore.

Harry was thoughtful as he walked back to Hermione's room after leaving Ginny at the entrance to the girls' dormitories. Ginny had peppered him with questions about Snape and Hermione all the way back there. In fact, the questions had begun as soon as she had seen Hermione dancing with Snape, and the only time she had let up was during that brief conversation she had had with Hermione right before they left the dance.

Initially, he had tried not to answer her at all. He should've known that wouldn't work, however; Ginny wasn't one to let a potentially juicy story go. Then, he had told her, "Apparently, they're friends now. Or so she tells me."

Which was true, as far as it went. Hermione did seem convinced that Snape cared about her not that Harry really believed that. The Greasy Git never *really* cared about anyone at all, in his opinion. Still Hermione said he was her friend, so that's what Harry told Ginny.

But Ginny still wasn't satisfied. "Come on, Harry, people don't look at their friends like that. They never took their eyes off each other, for hours! They must be in love. There's no other explanation. But why wouldn't Hermione tell me if she and Snape were in love? I mean, I know we've hardly seen each other since school started this year, but we're still best friends!"

"I don't *know*, Ginny," Harry snapped, losing patience with her. "Hermione would hardly talk to me about being in love with Snape, would she?" He determinedly ignored the fact that Hermione had, in fact, done just that, both last night and again earlier today. It didn't count, he decided, because Hermione was mistaken. She had to be.

She *couldn't* be in love with Snape, Harry assured himself. It must be just a crush Snape had probably used some sort of spell on her, or perhaps a potion, and once it wore off, she would realize that Snape was still the nasty, rude, obnoxious pain in the arse he had always been.

Now, though, Ginny was mad at Harry. Apparently, snapping at her was not the way to stay in her good graces, as she had snarked back, "Gee, I wonder why," and had slammed the door in his face. Sighing, he had turned and left, promising himself that he would apologize to her tomorrow. After all, it wasn't her fault that the sight of Snape holding Hermione's hand so firmly had unsettled him.

For tonight, however, Harry ignored the little voice that whispered, *Snape wouldn't hold Hermione's hand in public if he were really just using her...*

When Severus and Hermione were gone, Dumbledore quickly began waving his wand, as if he were anxious to restore the Great Hall to order. He tried to ignore the way Minerva was looking at him, focusing instead on his task, and on directing the house-elves who popped in to assist him. For a while, she watched him, occasionally transfiguring something back to its original state, or vanishing a stray leaf or pumpkin, but eventually, she said, "So, Albus, I imagine you're rather pleased with yourself."

"Me? Why, Minerva, whatever for?"

She glared at him. "You know *exactly* what for," she insisted. "And after you promised faithfully that you wouldn't interfere, too."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Dumbledore insisted stubbornly. Over the years, he had learned that some things must simply be adamantly denied, *ad infinitum*. He couldn't quite manage to keep the satisfaction out of his voice, however.

"Right." Minerva scowled at him. "I suppose it was just a coincidence that a waltz started just as Severus and Hermione started dancing together? And, I might add, that they took the floor at all?"

"I merely commented that Hermione would probably enjoy dancing. Either one of them could have said no."

"They wouldn't have danced at all if you had minded your own business, *like you promised* Albus."

"And look how much fun they might have missed," Albus said reasonably. "In any event, I didn't interfere. I made a suggestion; fortunately for everyone involved, they took it and had a good time. Where's the downside?"

"Albus, you really haven't thought this through," Minerva said. "Which is rather surprising, considering you spent an entire war strategizing with a longer-term view than anyone else. Are you out of practice or just bored?" she asked him, managing to sound both annoyed and curious.

He didn't answer. It was true that life had been a tad dull since the defeat of the Dark not that he would wish for that sort of excitement to return. He had certainly seen enough of it to last several lifetimes. He acknowledged to himself, though, that if he had something more urgent to focus on, he probably would not have cooked up this little soiree at all.

When he continued silent, maintaining his innocent expression, Minerva continued, "*You know* that Severus hates to have anyone know his business, but now, because of your 'suggestion,' the entire student body, not to mention the whole faculty, all know how he feels about Hermione. When he realizes that, who knows how he'll react? He may well decide it's not worth all the attention, and end things before they have a chance to really begin."

"He wouldn't do that," Dumbledore replied, more confidently than he suddenly felt. "He's in love with her."

"If he *is*, now *everyone* knows it," Minerva said again. "He is *not* going to be happy about that. No matter that most people might be happy for him it's just going to seem to him that everyone knows his weakness. If you had let him keep it to himself for a while, he would have been able to get used to the idea to prepare himself for what people might say or think. But now, he's going to be forced to deal with people's reactions, whether he's ready or not." She shook her head. "Honestly, Albus, for one of the smartest wizards in history, you have a lot to learn about people and their emotions. I just hope you didn't do any lasting damage."

With that, she left him standing in the Great Hall, wondering if she might be right that it might have been better to stay out of it completely.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 of 28

After dancing, there is ... anxiety?

A/N: Characters & concepts still not mine ... sigh.

Chapter 22

Severus was very quiet on the walk across the courtyard, back to Hermione's room. If not for the solid warmth of his hand holding hers, Hermione would have panicked. As it was, she was nervous, wondering what he was thinking, wondering if he was angry or worried or what?

The evening had been magical there was really no other word for how it had felt to dance with Severus for so many hours. She had been so sure that he wouldn't dance with her, even if she screwed up her courage enough to ask and then, with very little prodding from Dumbledore, *he* had asked *her*.

Even then, she had thought he would dance one duty dance with her, and that would be the end of it they would go back to chaperoning the students and he would likely never dance with her again. Not to mention, she had assumed the duty dance would be something fast and athletic, not something slow and romantic.

But again, he had surprised her he hadn't treated any of it like a duty or a chore. Rather, he had surrendered to the music and the moment in a way she had never expected he would. And he was an amazingly skilled dancer, too he led her confidently, no matter what the dance, and she felt like they were floating together across the floor.

So, as a whole, the night had been as close to perfect as she could have dreamed up right up until the end, when they had come back down to earth with what was starting to feel suspiciously like a thud. She had an awful feeling that now that Severus realized people had been watching them, he would decide to go back to giving them nothing to see.

As in, he would dump her. Especially if he thought of his attraction to her as a weakness which she had a sinking feeling he did. Somehow, she just knew that he wouldn't take kindly to feeling exposed even vulnerable as he must be feeling right now.

And the longer he was silent, the more Hermione's silent anxiety grew. At last, she could take it no more. "Severus?" she asked tentatively. He didn't immediately answer. After a moment, she spoke again, more insistently. "Severus?"

"Yes?"

"Are you are you mad?"

"Why would I be mad?" he asked neutrally.

"I don't know," she answered softly. "You're just really quiet, which well, that sometimes seems to mean you're mad."

"No, I'm not mad," he said, and she felt herself relax ever so slightly. "I'm just I don't know," he finally said. "I'm not entirely comfortable with everyone knowing our business. It was bad enough when Dumbledore and Minerva suspected, and then when Potter knew." He shrugged. "Even if everyone hadn't been there, Miss Weasley is not known for her discretion. I was just trying to reason out what effect this may have on my ability to discipline my students."

She frowned. "Why should it have any effect on that?"

He gave her a speaking look. "When you were in my class, what did you think I would do if you misbehaved?"

"Ummmm, I don't know. Take off points from Gryffindor, give me detention, lower my grade, I suppose."

"And why did you think that?" he pressed.

"Because that's what you always did. You were very consistent about it," Hermione said.

"Oh?" he asked. "Not because you thought me a heartless, cruel disciplinarian?"

"Well," she said thoughtfully, "Maybe initially back in first year, when we thought you were trying to kill Harry." She glanced at him apologetically. "But you weren't, and you've proved again and again since then that you would do what was necessary to protect your students. You were very consistent about that, too. You'll still be consistent, won't you?" He nodded once. "So why should this have any effect on anything?"

He looked thoughtful. Eventually, he said, "I can't vouch for my temper if they say anything about you, or about us."

"Just ignore them, and they'll stop. Especially after you give them a few detentions."

"Well," he said doubtfully, "what's done is done. I suppose there's no point in worrying about it now."

"It'll be fine, you'll see," Hermione reassured him, hoping it would be true. "Now, did you want to come in?" They had reached her door some time ago and had been standing outside, quietly finishing their conversation.

He looked tempted. "I don't suppose there's any chance Potter will transfigure himself into a female so he can stay the night with the Weasley girl?" he asked morosely.

"Not likely, with Professor Snape running around just waiting for an excuse to deduct points," she teased, wanting desperately to coax some humor out of him because that was the only thing she could think of that would calm her nerves.

But he didn't laugh, or even smile. He just sighed and, still sounding gloomy, said, "I thought not even if it weren't against the rules, I'm just not that lucky. In that case, I'd better not come in."

"All right," Hermione agreed. "Did you still want me to come by later?"

His lip finally twitched. Seeing it, Hermione relaxed marginally. He said, "If you don't, I'm quite likely to come to you, like I did last night." He lowered his voice to a mock confidential tone. "Consistency is one of my finer qualities, or so I'm told."

She grinned, relieved that he seemed to be throwing off his mood. "Oh, it definitely is." She glanced around to make sure they were alone, then stretched up and kissed him quickly. "I'll see you shortly."

He touched her cheek briefly, then turned away, disengaging his hand from hers at last, and walked off toward his quarters. Sighing, she let herself into her room.

Mere moments after Hermione had changed into her nightgown and robe, Harry knocked on the door and called, "Are you decent?"

"Yes, Harry, come on in!" she called back. He let himself in, and she watched as he dithered around the room, seeming agitated and unsettled.

"Are you all right?" she asked eventually. "You seem upset. Did something happen with Ginny?"

"What? Oh, no," he answered, then immediately amended, "Well, yes, I suppose it did. She slammed the door in my face, actually."

Hermione frowned. "Why would she do that? What did you do?"

Harry started to protest, "Nothing much!" At Hermione's sharp look, however, he sighed and said, "I snapped at her, and she got mad."

"Why did you snap at her?" Hermione asked.

"Never mind," Harry said, "It's not important, really. I'll apologize tomorrow and everything will be back to normal. Sort of," he added under his breath, so quietly that Hermione almost missed it.

"What do you mean, 'sort of'?" she asked suspiciously.

"Nothing." She gave him another look, and he finally admitted, "Okay, fine. It's not going to seem *really* normal as long as you're shagging Snape."

Hermione suppressed the urge to stamp her foot in frustration. She did *not* need to go through this again right now. Not when her own anxiety was rising up again, threatening to engulf her. She said, "Oh, come on, Harry, do we have to go through this again?"

"Apparently, we do," he said doggedly. "I just don't get what you see in him."

She forced herself to stay calm, "That's because he's different when we're alone."

"And how is that a good thing?" Harry argued. "If he's only nice to you in private, then how much can he possibly care for you?"

"I don't mean alone, as in no one else around," Hermione said irritably. "I mean, alone, as in not around *you*. You bring out the worst in him, and he doesn't do much for your charm and wit, either."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I just don't get it," Harry said. "So make me understand. What makes you think you're in love with Snape?"

"Hmmm," He seemed to genuinely want to know this time, so Hermione calmed herself and thought for a moment. "It's hard to explain, really," she said finally. "It's a whole lot of little things that make me just ... know."

"Like what?" Harry persisted. "Give me something specific something that makes sense."

"Like the way he listens to me," she said.

"Lots of people listen to you," Harry pointed out seriously.

"Not the way he does. It's like his entire focus is on me and what I'm saying. And I know he doesn't have patience for most people, so it really means something that he likes my company." She paused and shook her head. "He also talks to me. And sometimes, he laughs, and I feel like I've won the lottery, because he's usually so solemn. I feel like he needs me. He's so alone, so much of the time, you know."

Harry shook his head again. "I still don't get it. I mean, I get why *he* would want *you* any fool can see you're the tops. But I still don't get why you would want him."

Hermione thought some more; after a long moment, she said, "He has total faith in me, Harry he trusts me, when he hardly trusts anybody. And whenever I need him, I know I can count on him."

Harry frowned, looking like he was going to argue some more, but then he just sighed. "All right, all right, you win. I still don't get it, but it's obvious that *you* do, so I guess I'll just have to hope that you're right about him. I don't want you to get hurt."

"I appreciate that, Harry, I really do. But you don't have to worry," she said, pushing aside the worry that threatened to reassert itself.

"I can't help it. I'm worried," he declared. "But I suppose it's something that he danced with you. I don't think he's ever danced at a Hogwarts function before."

She smiled her remembered delight. "It was amazing," she confided. "It was like gliding on a cloud. I didn't want the night to end."

"We *all* saw that," he replied dryly. She threw a pillow at him.

"Yeah, I know," she said. "Did you have to stare like that? It made him uncomfortable."

"He didn't look uncomfortable to me," Harry said. "He looked just as grumpy as ever."

"He did not!" Hermione exclaimed hotly, irritation flaring to life again. "He was just fine until everyone stared at us."

"Right," Harry said wryly. "Which explains why he glared at me and Ginny for talking to you."

"He doesn't like people watching him, and who can blame him? He used to be a spy, so having people watch him must feel dangerous to him."

"Okay, fine, I can see where he might be uncomfortable having us watch him," Harry was forced to concede. "But " He stopped.

"What?"

"Never mind. It's nothing."

"It's not nothing. Spit it out."

"It's just. I was a little freaked out with the way he was holding your hand." He shook his head. "Snape doesn't do affection, so I just don't know what that was all about."

"Severus is very affectionate," Hermione said severely. "You just don't know him like I do. I mean, of *course* he doesn't run around holding hands with everyone. Who would?"

"I suppose I'll have to take your word for that, too," Harry replied. He changed the subject. "Now, won't he be expecting you?"

"Wh-what?" Hermione felt a flush rise in her cheeks, but decided to try to brazen it out. "Why would he be expecting me? We just said good night."

"Right. And I'm sure he's perfectly fine with me sleeping here, too."

"He's okay with it." He gave her a speaking look. "Well, okay, he's not thrilled about it, but he trusts me."

"But he *doesn't* trust me," Harry said reasonably. "And anyway, I woke up in the middle of the night last night, and you weren't here, so unless you want me to believe that you were somewhere else entirely ..."

Hermione was thoroughly embarrassed now. "All right, fine, I went to see Severus. I could tell he was worried about what might happen after he left, and I wanted to reassure him."

"Oh, you wanted to *reassure* him," he said meaningfully. "Is *that* what they're calling it these days?"

"You know what?" Hermione asked testily, "If you're quite through embarrassing me, I think I'll just leave you to your own devices. Good night." She headed over to the fireplace and pulled out her Floo powder.

Harry laughed at her discomfiture, but all he said was, "Good night, Hermione. And say good night to Snape for me."

She glared at him from the fireplace and left without another word.

While he waited for Hermione to arrive, Severus sat up in bed, trying to read. He had no idea what he was reading, however, because he couldn't concentrate. Despite their earlier discussion, he couldn't shake the idea that the events of tonight were going to ruin everything.

Hermione seemed confident that he could maintain discipline and order in the face of whispers and gossip, but he wasn't so sure. Perhaps they ought to cool things off for a while.

He didn't like the idea, but he got little enough respect as it was, what with his history as a Death Eater. Never mind that he had renounced all that and done at least as much to support the right side as anyone. Most people still thought themselves above him because they hadn't made the poor choices he had when he was young.

It probably wouldn't matter much, if Hermione was really in love with him, as she insisted she was. But Severus knew that was just the fantasy of a young girl who was in love with the idea of love. He should have resisted her, he knew, long enough for her to wake up and realize her mistake, and he should bow out gracefully when she eventually fell for someone worthy of her. Like perhaps a younger, better version of Dumbledore.

The sad truth was, he was selfish enough to take this time with her, even though he knew it would eventually end, and probably before he was really ready for that to happen. And it would have been bad enough dealing with her moving on in private, but now, everyone would know. It would be humiliating, and he would lose whatever grudging respect people might have had for him.

He would be back where he started, with nothing and no one.

His dark thoughts were interrupted by Hermione's arrival. She stepped out of the fireplace, brushing the ashes from her hair and garments. She was muttering to herself apparently Potter had said something that irritated her. Despite his dark thoughts, Severus found himself mildly amused. She seemed fully aware of Potter's more annoying habits, yet she insisted on maintaining her friendship with the dolt.

When she continued for several seconds muttering and cleaning herself off the hard way, rather than with a simple charm, he finally inquired slyly, "Something wrong?"

She looked up, as though surprised to find him watching her. He had no idea what else she might have expected, considering she was in his bedroom at this hour. She smiled suddenly. "No, Harry was just being irritating, as usual. But everything's fine."

He asked, "Perhaps you would like some help cleaning up?"

Her smile widened, taking on a mischievous quality that had Severus groaning inwardly. Whatever she was thinking, it was bound to be trouble.

He was right. "Actually, I was thinking I might like to take a shower, or perhaps a nice, hot bath." The image of her naked body, with water lapping all around it, flashed into

his mind, causing an immediate response in his body, pushing aside the remnants of his dark thoughts.

She noticed it immediately, of course, and began untying her robe. She said, "I see you like that idea. Come on, then. Join me." She shrugged the robe off her shoulders, dropping it at her feet, and headed toward his bathroom. He resisted the urge for several minutes, before he realized the very idea of resistance was an exercise in futility and that he didn't really want to resist, anyway.

He put his book aside, tossed back the covers, and hurried after her. She had drawn a bath and was just stepping into the steaming tub. She smiled in welcome, and he rapidly shed his pajamas and joined her. They settled themselves into the tub, relaxing with her back leaning against his chest.

She had used a vanilla-scented bubble bath, which she must have conjured or brought with her, since he was certain he didn't keep *any* kind of bubble bath around. He found it pleasant and relaxing, and he supposed he should be grateful she hadn't chosen something floral. He shampooed her hair for her, massaging her scalp and playing with the curls as he rinsed them. Then he grabbed a flannel and began running it languidly over her body, spreading the bubbles into creative designs on the skin of her stomach and breasts, sometimes sliding down onto her thighs before coming back up and repeating the same path.

He continued to play with her like this for ages, until little sighs of pleasure began to escape her lips. Soon, she began to move restlessly against him. She whispered his name, in a pleading tone. He let the flannel stray nearer to her core, asking in a low tone, "Yes, Hermione?" She responded with a low moan. "Tell me what you want, Hermione," he urged.

She was nearly incoherent by this time, but she managed to answer, "You ... I want *you*, Severus. Please."

He said, "As you wish," and turned her to straddle him. He kissed her at the same moment that he entered her, and she immediately began to orgasm around him. He waited, kissing her deeply, until she slumped against him, and then he began to move. Her body quickly responded again, and this time, when she came, he was right there with her.

She relaxed into him again, whispering, "I love you, Severus."

He didn't know what to say to that, so he simply squeezed her tight against him, trying not to think about what he would do when she inevitably realized she didn't.

After a long moment, she said, "We should probably get some sleep." Her tone was light, but somehow, he knew it was forced. She wanted him to say he loved her, too, but he couldn't do it.

He wouldn't say it just to make her happy because eventually, she would realize he had been humoring her, and that would hurt her far more than his silence now. Or, perhaps worse, she would realize that she didn't love him, but would stay with him out of sympathy, or pity, or something equally humiliating, simply because she would think she owed him that after making him love her.

And how could he explain that he would never be free to love her the way that she wanted him to that, even now, after all these years, he still loved Lily Evans Potter? What he felt for Hermione was something else something different entirely.

Because he didn't know how to say all that, he said only, "Yes, we probably should sleep." Standing, he silently used a drying charm on both of them and carried her to his bed.

When he laid her into bed, she was shivering from the chill of the dungeon. He absently summoned another blanket and spread it over her before climbing in himself and settling beside her. She lay on her back, not touching him, and the few centimeters between them might as well have been a thousand kilometers.

He lay awake for a long time, aware that she wasn't sleeping either, but unsure of what to say to make things better. He could feel her emotional retreat and thought it would be a matter of mere days, weeks at most, before she left him forever.

At last, he gave in to the urge to touch her. Rather than pull her into his arms and cradle her tightly against him, as he really wanted to, he settled for reaching across the space between them and taking her hand in his.

He had never before thought much of hand-holding, but it was comforting to have tangible proof that she was here with him, at least for now.

Moments later, he felt her breathing slow. Exhaustion had at last claimed her. Soon afterward, he drifted off to sleep himself, still trying not to think about how he would survive when she tossed him aside.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 of 28

Severus lets his fears get the best of him, while Hermione confesses hers to Ginny, who comes up with a plan ...

Chapter 23

The following week was as bad as Severus had feared it would be. Every time he turned around, it seemed, students were watching him and whispering behind their hands. Sometimes, at meals, he felt their eyes on him and Hermione, and then he heard them giggling.

He couldn't hear what they were saying, of course no one was foolish enough to let him overhear their comments but he was certain they were nasty, just the same. Every now and then he caught a word here or there (usually "dance" or "Granger," accompanied by sideways glances or puzzled looks), and once he had even heard almost an entire question (" ... she be thinking?"). All in all, it was enough to persuade him that he had been right to fear that people would gossip about him that they would *laugh* at him.

And there was nothing he could do about it. Oh, he deducted points and gave detention and sneered and stalked about and anything else he could think of, but he knew that to confront it outright would only make it worse. So he pretended he hadn't heard anything and didn't know what was going on, and that the points and the detentions were for other, ordinary rule infractions.

The professors were only slightly better than the students. They didn't whisper or laugh or any of that at least not in front of him. No, they just stared at him, some with curiosity, others with what looked like worry. Dumbledore and Minerva, in particular, seemed very concerned.

Minerva had even tried to talk to him once, apparently trying to reassure him that he had a right to try to be happy with Hermione or anyone else he chose, but he had simply stared at her, saying nothing, until she gave up and went away. No matter what she or anyone else thought, he knew he didn't deserve Hermione, and the sooner he got used to the idea, the better.

He found himself withdrawing further and further into his isolation. Sometimes, he wished he could bring himself to just end things with Hermione completely, to spare them both the agonizingly slow death of feeling that was sure to come. But, to his everlasting self-disgust, he couldn't quite manage to make himself to do it.

Instead, he just found himself getting more and more quiet. Where once, he had enjoyed stimulating conversations at meals, now those same meals were gradually overtaken by an awkward, heavy, pervasive silence. Where once, she had stopped by his classroom or his lab whenever she had time, now his cool welcomes and unhappy demeanor seemed to have driven her away.

The only thing that he couldn't make himself do was stop making love to her. After last Saturday, and his awkward silence in response to her declaration of love, she hadn't said it again. At least, not until he dragged it out of her by making love to her until she couldn't stop herself. He had tried to tell himself it was better that she didn't say it, considering how awkward it was each time, when he said nothing in return, but he found that he was driven to make her say it. And she always did, eventually.

Then, halfway through the week, she had stopped coming to his quarters at night. He had tried to tell himself it was for the best, that she was tiring of him sooner than expected, that it was better this way. He hadn't even lasted half an hour before he had gone to her, half-expecting that she would have closed her Floo connection. But she hadn't. She had welcomed him into her room and into her bed, and he had made love to her until she was gasping out her declarations of love.

And he had continued to go there, telling himself that he shouldn't that he should just let her go. He still couldn't make himself do it, though, and she never attempted to keep him out. Still, he could feel the desperation starting to take him, as though he knew that any day now, she would tell him to go away and never come back. As though he knew he needed to brand her into his soul *now*, while he had the chance.

He could see the unspoken questions in her eyes, could feel the weight of her awkward attempts to reach him to make him talk to her. To get back the easy comradeship they had had before their dancing had exposed their relationship to the whole Hogwarts community. But he didn't respond he couldn't, because he still had no idea what he would say to her, even if he could have gotten a word past the lump of pure, unadulterated fear that was blocking his throat.

And the worst of it was, after a week of this increasingly awkward combination of strained silence and desperate passion, *he still* had no idea what he would do without her.

On Saturday, Hermione sat at a corner table in Three Broomsticks, across from Ginny, and tried to focus on the conversation. She had been getting so little sleep for the past week that she was tired and out of sorts, but it wasn't Ginny's fault, and she didn't want to take her fear and frustration out on her friend.

Severus had grown increasingly distant over the past week. She could feel him slipping away from her, and nothing she did to try to bring him back had any effect whatsoever. He just grew colder and further away as the days went by, and she was running out of ideas to get through to him.

Worse, she was starting to question whether Harry had been right all along. Maybe Severus had simply taken advantage of the feelings she had thrown at his feet, and now he was tiring of her. At least, outside of bed.

He still made love to her every chance he got if anything, his passion in that arena had grown more intense. And, much to her embarrassment, he seemed determined to make her say she loved him every single time. She didn't understand why, since he was obviously uncomfortable when she *did* say it, but it was the only thing that made sense of his behavior. After his non-response last Saturday, she had decided she wouldn't say it again unless he said it first after all, she didn't want to make him feel awkward just because he didn't return her feelings. But his response to her reticence, rather than the silent gratitude she had expected, had been to keep making love to her until she finally couldn't hold back anymore. The words would escape her, and for just a moment, he would seem satisfied before that awkward, awful silence would descend again.

She no longer went to his lab during the day, and after a number of meals taken in total silence, she had stopped eating in the Great Hall altogether. Instead, she asked Dobby or one of the other house-elves to bring her sandwiches or soups or whatever was simple, or sometimes she just popped into the kitchens herself. Her appetite was non-existent, anyway, and it only got worse when she sat in silence next to him, pretending everything was fine. So, she reasoned, why put herself through unnecessary torture?

Now, Hermione realized Ginny had stopped talking and was looking at her curiously. "Hermione, are you all right?" she asked, sounding concerned. "You've hardly said a word all day, and you barely even looked at anything in any of the shops not even the bookstore. And you didn't eat much of your stew, and now you haven't even touched your chocolate-pumpkin pasty, which I know you love."

"I'm not very hungry," Hermione said softly and, to her dismay, she felt her eyes fill with tears. She took a deep breath, trying to bring herself back under control.

But then Ginny said, "Oh, Hermione," and her tone was so sympathetic that Hermione started crying in earnest.

Ginny said, "Let's get out of here. We'll go somewhere private, and you can tell me what's wrong."

Hermione nodded morosely. "Okay," she sniffed. They left some coins on the table, and Ginny grabbed Hermione's chocolate-pumpkin pasty ("in case you want it later," she said, although Hermione couldn't imagine wanting to eat anything anytime soon). Hermione forced herself to focus long enough to Apparate them both to the gate outside Hogwarts, since Ginny didn't yet have a license, but Ginny suggested that they should head down to the lake instead of going right inside. Since Hermione wanted to minimize the chances of running into anyone, she readily agreed.

They sat in silence, staring at the water for a long time. Hermione found the area soothing she always had, really and after awhile, without any prompting from Ginny, she said, "I'm in love with Severus."

"Okay," Ginny said cautiously, when Hermione didn't continue. "How long have you been in love with him?"

"I don't know, really," Hermione said. "A while, I guess. I was attracted to him last spring, before the Leaving Feast. I didn't even know what it was, at first." The entire story of their strange courtship came pouring out of her, and Ginny listened quietly, nodding and murmuring sympathetically.

When Hermione got to how things had changed in the past week, she began to cry again. She finished on a sob. "I should never have told him I loved him. I should have known he didn't love me and wouldn't want me to love him."

Ginny conjured her a handkerchief, then slipped an arm around Hermione's shoulders. "Oh, Hermione," she said, "I can't believe I didn't know any of this before."

"I'm sorry, I should have told you," Hermione said, feeling guilty. Ginny was her best girlfriend, after all if you couldn't talk to your best girlfriend, who could you talk to?

"No, that's not what I meant," Ginny said. "I just meant that you shouldn't have to be dealing with all this on your own." She paused. After a moment, she asked, "What do you think changed?"

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked. "I just told you, he's distancing himself, and any day now, he's going to dump me for good. I don't know how I'm supposed to stay here at Hogwarts once that happens."

"No, I know he's distancing himself, but what I'm asking is, what changed that made him start doing that? It's obviously not that you told him you loved him you told him that *weeks* ago, so saying it again, no matter how awkward it is, wouldn't make a difference, would it?"

"I guess not," Hermione said, considering the point for the first time. She had been so wrapped up in misery that she hadn't considered it might be something else. His awkward silence every time she said it had blinded her to the fact that, the first time she had said it, he had actually seemed happy about it.

Ginny added, "And if he really didn't want to hear it, why would he keep making you say it?"

"I don't know," Hermione said quietly. "All I know is, everything changed after the dance. God, I was so stupidly happy that night. The way he looked at me while we were dancing, I half-believed that maybe he really did love me, after all. I should have known better."

"Maybe not," Ginny said, sitting up straight suddenly. "Maybe that's the problem. You weren't the only one who thought he was in love with you. I said as much to Harry, and that's been the gossip all week. Maybe he's really just feeling exposed, and he doesn't know how to handle it. Once he gets used to it, things will go back to the way they were before."

"I doubt it," Hermione said glumly. "Why should a little gossip affect the way he treats me when we're alone? No," she said. "He just doesn't love me, and he's looking for a way out. Maybe I should just do it for him. Let him off the hook."

"That's a *terrible* idea, Hermione," Ginny protested vehemently. "I mean, it's one thing if you don't want him. In that case, it would be only fair for you to tell him instead of stringing him along. But you *do* want him, don't you? So why should you make it easy for him to leave you?" Ginny didn't wait for a response; she answered her own question. "You shouldn't. No, if he doesn't want to be with you, he needs to come right out and say so. But I really don't think that's it. He was only in love once before, as far as anyone knows, and *everyone* knows *that* ended badly. So maybe the problem is, he's in love with you, which is making him completely freaked out, and he's trying to stem the gossip before it gets any worse."

"I guess," Hermione said, but she doubted it. She didn't point out that it seemed a bit of an exaggeration to say that 'everyone' knew about his doomed relationship with Harry's mum, since that wasn't really the point. "But why would he be freaked out about being in love with someone who is very clearly in love with him? One would think he would be *happy* about that. No, it's much more likely that he's trying to spare my feelings by not telling me that he's never going to be in love with me the way I want him to." She paused, trying to think. "And suppose the gossip *is* the problem? There's nothing I can do to change it, anyway, so maybe I should just accept that it's over and move on."

"Well, maybe that's not entirely true," Ginny said, with a sudden sparkle in her eye. "What if we give him what he thinks he wants?"

"What? What does that mean?"

"Well, he probably thinks everything would be just fine if people stopped gossiping about him, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Hermione said. "Assuming, that is, that he's not really just getting tired of me and wishing I would go away."

"He wouldn't keep coming to see you if that was the case," Ginny said dismissively.

"Maybe he would if he really just likes the sex," Hermione said baldly.

"Stop it, Hermione. His behavior suggests that this is anything but casual for him. He seems to want it to be nothing important, but it is anyway. If you put your hurt aside and think about it, you'll realize I'm right. *Think*, Hermione."

"Okay, okay, I'm thinking. What exactly do you want me to think about?"

"Okay, you told me he wanted to wait to get involved because he thought you didn't really love him, right?"

"Yes ..."

"And then he couldn't wait as long as he planned before he got involved anyway, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"And he seemed perfectly content to spend time with you when it was just the two of you and it wasn't just sex, either. You told me you spent hours talking about all sorts of things."

"Yeah." Hermione was starting to think that Ginny might be on the right track, after all.

"And even when being with you required him to be civil to Harry, who *hehates*, he did it, didn't he?"

"Well, yes, or at least, he tried."

"Right. So then Dumbledore threw that dance, and he danced with you all night, even though no one ever saw him dance before, so none of us would have been surprised, and you wouldn't even have been all that upset, if he had just done what he always did before and stayed on the sidelines. Right?"

"Right." Hermione reached her own conclusion. "So you're saying that, once he had basically gone public with his feelings for me, he felt horribly exposed and vulnerable, and then he started hearing gossip, which made him fear that everyone was laughing at him or soon would be, since he never had a chance to get fully convinced that I really love him and that I'm really not going to leave him."

"Exactly," Ginny said, beaming at Hermione now that she had gotten her point across. "And his way of dealing with that fear is to try to distance himself emotionally, on the theory that if you do leave him, it won't hurt so much. But the thing is, he keeps making you say you love him because he needs the reassurance."

"Okay," Hermione said. "I'm still not convinced that he actually loves me, but I'll admit that's a possible explanation. The problem is, I'm still not sure what to do about it."

"Well," Ginny said, "It seems to me that the first thing to do is to turn the gossip somewhere else."

"Oh, like *that's* such a simple thing to do," Hermione said sarcastically.

"Actually, it's surprisingly easy," Ginny said, shrugging. "All we have to do is come up with something juicier for people to talk about."

"Like what?" Hermione asked. "It doesn't get much juicier than the 'heartless' Severus Snape apparently wearing his heart on his sleeve, does it?"

"Ah, but you're forgetting. There's one person we know who's a true celebrity."

"Who?" Ginny just pointedly raised her brows and waited. Realizing, Hermione asked, "You mean Harry? You want to start gossip about *Harry*?"

"Sure, why not? It's not like he's even here, so it probably won't even get back to him."

Hermione couldn't believe how casually they were discussing starting rumors about Harry or that she was seriously considering it. Cautiously, she asked, "Exactly what kind of gossip do you want to spread about Harry?"

"Well, it has to be about his love life. Nothing else is nearly as interesting as that." She thought for a minute. "I know!" she exclaimed. "We'll spread gossip that Harry has suddenly realized he's in love with you, and he's trying to take you away from Snape."

"What?! No, Ginny, that's a terrible idea. No one would believe it, anyway."

"They will when they see the way Harry's going to court you."

"But Harry's *not* going to court me."

"But only you and I will know that," Ginny said with exaggerated patience. "I'll send you little gifts and notes and things, pretending they're from Harry, and I'll mention to a few people in confidence that I happened to see the card or that you showed me a note, and I'll say that Ron is worried about Harry because anyone can see that you're in love with Snape, so his courtship is doomed to failure."

"Ginny, this is a bad idea. Severus is jealous of Harry already this is only going to make it worse."

"Well, of course it is," Ginny said. "But in a good way, because he'll realize that he's in danger of losing you to his least favorite person in the world, and he'll be forced to step up and deal with his feelings for you."

"Still assuming he actually *has* feelings for me."

"He *does*, Hermione," Ginny insisted. "Deep down, you *know* he does."

Hermione decided not to argue, even though she wasn't as sure as Ginny seemed to be. She focused instead on another potential flaw in the scheme. "Okay, but with how strained things are between Severus and me right now, who's to say he won't just step aside on the theory that he's making things easier for both of us?"

"Well," Ginny said, "That's possible, I suppose." She thought for a minute, then asked, "Let's suppose for a minute that you were absolutely convinced that Severus really loved you, but was acting like an idiot because he's scared."

"Okay," Hermione said. "What about it?"

"How would you behave toward him, if you really, truly believed that?"

"I I don't know," Hermione replied uncertainly. "I guess I would probably just ignore his moods and act more like the way I did before last weekend."

"Good," Ginny said firmly. "You should do that."

"I should Ginny, I *can't*! I don't even know if I believe he *likes* me these days, let alone secretly loves me!"

"You *have* to, Hermione. If you don't, he'll still see you being miserable, and he'll ultimately convince himself to let you go for your own good. He needs to see you happy with him, even if things aren't perfect. You need to convince yourself that he loves you, and fast. Eventually, he'll have to admit that you're right."

"But what if he doesn't? I'll be so humiliated if I go about pretending I know he loves me and then find out that he really, really doesn't."

"Do you love him or not, Hermione?"

"That's not fair! You know I love him! You know I do!"

"Then how can you be unwilling to risk a little humiliation?"

"I just I don't know if I could take his rejection after all that."

Ginny sighed. "Let me put it another way. If you *don't* do this, you're going to lose him for sure, and you'll spend the rest of your life wondering whether you could have had it all. Is that what you want? Isn't that worse than knowing for sure, one way or the other?"

Hermione sighed. She hated it, but she knew Ginny was right. It would be awful to always wonder if she might have had everything she ever dreamed of, if only she had had the courage to grab it. "All right, I suppose you're right. But, Ginny, I don't know if I can convincingly act like I know he loves me, when I don't. I'm not very good at pretending, and Severus is annoyingly good at seeing through me when I try."

Ginny thought about that. After a long moment, she asked tentatively, "You don't suppose I could do a charm that would convince you, do you?"

Hermione was horrified. "I don't want to be delusional, Ginny!"

"You wouldn't be!" Ginny hurriedly assured her. "You have to trust me he loves you he does! He's just not handling it very well. And anyway, it would only be temporary just long enough to let him get his head together and realize that he doesn't want to lose you, no matter what people say or do around him."

"But I promised myself I wouldn't use any more magic in our relationship," Hermione argued weakly.

"Well, it's not like you'd be using it *on him* or anything. It's really a lot like the Confidence-Boosting Potion you used when you were first becoming friends with him, except this time, it's to convince yourself of something that your heart knows is true anyway. And really, Hermione, if true love isn't worth using a little magic for, then what is?"

"Well, that's true, I suppose." She thought about it for another minute. Finally, she said, "All right, I guess I'll try it. But promise me that if it becomes clear he doesn't love me, you'll reverse the charm immediately. I don't want to be acting as if he loves me if it's absolutely certain that he doesn't."

"Okay, deal. Even though I'm sure it won't be an issue. Now, the only problem left is, I don't actually know the right charm to use."

"I guess we should go to the library and see what we can find."

"Okay, let's go. We should get this going immediately," Ginny said firmly.

Hermione pushed aside her lingering misgivings and said, "Okay." *For true love*, she added silently to herself.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 of 28

Hermione and Ginny find the spell they're looking for, while Severus considers ending his relationship with Hermione ...

Chapter 24

Ginny and Hermione spent most of Sunday afternoon in the library, looking at different charms that might be suitable for their purpose. Ginny didn't seem impatient to be done with their research, even after several frustrating hours; when Hermione commented on her persistence, she merely smiled and whispered, "Well, this is a *useful* charm we're looking for, you know? Not like most of the spells we learn. I mean, really, I've never had a particular need for a Switching Spell, have I? And even the ones that later turn out to be useful generally don't seem particularly relevant when I'm actually learning them."

Stifling a laugh, Hermione said softly, "You never know what information is going to turn out to be useful, Ginny. Why do you think I'm always so desperate to *know* things?"

Ginny grinned and whispered back, "Well, since you know mostly everything, anyway, why should I need to? I can always ask you, can't I?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and returned her attention to her book. Ginny resumed reading as well, and the two worked quietly for a while. The silence was only occasionally punctuated by the sound of a book closing and another being opened, or when one or the other of them went to look for a new book that had been mentioned in one of the books they already had.

At last, Hermione found it – an even better choice than what they had originally been looking for. It was a spell that allowed one to understand a person's true feelings and beliefs, rather than getting distracted by whatever they might actually say. A rather useful spell, Hermione thought ruefully – so many relationship problems seemed to occur due to misunderstandings and miscommunications.

"Ginny, look!" Hermione whispered, containing her excitement as best she could so as not to attract attention from Madam Pince. She pushed the book across the table to her friend and pointed at the page. "The *Fides fidelis* charm allows one to understand a person's true feelings on a matter, regardless of what they actually say or do. It's cast by the person who wants to understand what someone actually thinks, and it works only if there's a close, positive relationship between them, and it wears off after only a few minutes. I suppose that explains why it never came up as particularly useful for the war," she thought aloud. Returning to her current purposes, she said, "Anyway, this is perfect. Well, as long as the relationship Severus and I have is close *enough*, and assuming he still feels positively toward me despite his current behavior," she added, frowning. "Although, if it doesn't work, I suppose that would tell me something, wouldn't it?"

Ginny frowned, too, although apparently for a different reason. "I thought we were trying to help you believe he loves you, not to read between the lines of what he says."

Hermione countered, "If you're right, Ginny, and he really does love me, it'll have the same effect. And if you're wrong ... look, isn't it better that I just know the truth, whatever it is? That way, I won't be worrying that I'm misreading things because of the spell."

Ginny seemed to tacitly acknowledge the point; instead of pursuing that issue, she asked, "What *if* he doesn't know what he really feels, deep down? Does it allow one to recognize truths that the speaker hasn't yet acknowledged?"

Hermione frowned, pulling the book back across the table. "It seems it should, doesn't it? Otherwise, they'd call it a Deception Detecting Charm or something like that ... *Fides fidelis* means 'true belief,' if I remember my Latin correctly ..." She perused the book for a few moments, turned a page, then said, "It says right here that if one wants to know one's *own* true thoughts, to either ask a friend to ask questions about the topic at hand, or to have a charmed mirror do it for you. So, it would seem that it should get at Severus's true feelings, even if he hasn't yet admitted them to himself."

"So you'd cast it on yourself, then, at the moment you need it?" Ginny asked. Apparently, it was her turn to ponder aloud, as she continued thoughtfully, "It's probably good that it wears off quickly and only works between close friends. You certainly don't want to walk around understanding what *everyone* really thinks, do you? Or to have everyone able to know what *you* really think?" She shuddered at the thought, and Hermione realized that she certainly *wouldn't* want either of those to happen at all. It would be awful to know if people were thinking what a disaster her hair was, or that she was a terrible teacher, or that they hated her for something she had inadvertently said or done. Or worse, if she learned that they were secretly thinking nasty thoughts about one of her friends ... And although she was usually pretty forthcoming with her own opinions, there were times when it was just better to keep one's thoughts private.

Shuddering, Hermione said, "No, I wouldn't like that at all." She caught sight of Madam Pince glaring and added, "Let's check this book out and take it somewhere else to review it more carefully."

Ginny readily agreed, so they quickly returned the other materials to the re-shelving area, checked out the book in question, and after consulting quickly in the hallway, headed for the Room of Requirement.

Severus sat in his sitting room, staring at the book in his lap without really seeing it. Hermione seemed so unhappy lately, and he just couldn't manage to make himself get off the fence he was so uncomfortably straddling. He knew he ought to just let her go, but no matter how he tried, he still couldn't make himself do it.

On the other hand, he didn't know how to tell her what was going through his head. It was all so messy and jumbled up that he didn't understand it himself. Obviously, she was important to him in some way – otherwise, ending their nascent relationship wouldn't be so difficult.

And yet, he didn't feel the way he had when he had fallen in love with Lily all those years ago. Or at least, he hadn't until the past couple of weeks. With Lily, he had *always* been on tenterhooks, from the very first moment he had realized he loved her. He had realized only later that he had been waiting for her to discover his not-entirely-charming side, and to decide to stop wasting her time with him. Which, of course, she eventually had.

With Hermione, on the other hand, things were different – or at least they had been until the awkwardness of the past couple of weeks. He had been *comfortable* with Hermione – he had simply been himself around her. There was a true freedom in being with someone who had seen you at your worst long before discovering there was also something good underneath it all. He simply hadn't had to worry that she would discover he could be a sarcastic, nasty git. She had known *that* since she was eleven years old, and any doubts she may have had on the matter were certainly erased in her fourth year, with his nasty comment after Malfoy's spell had enlarged her teeth.

Unfortunately, the sense of comfort he had felt with Hermione had disappeared once he had realized that people were watching them, waiting for her to come to her senses

and say it had all been a big joke. They were *laughing* at him snickering behind their hands all the time and he simply couldn't tolerate it. And now that she was realizing what it meant to be with a miserable bastard like himself, he could only hope that she would be kind when she ended it, as she certainly would at any moment.

Still, he wished there was some way to show her how important she was to him even if *he didn't* love her like he loved Lily. Maybe if he could do that, they could eventually go back to being friends. They could have long conversations about subjects that no one else seemed to understand, and they could sit together at meals, and everything could go back to normal.

At least, he realized suddenly, until she found someone else. Which she certainly would Severus simply couldn't believe she wouldn't run across someone, sometime (probably soon), who would realize what a gem she was, and snap her up. She would be married and having babies before he knew it.

The very idea of it made him feel rather nauseated. It would ruin everything if she found a new lover. Her career would take a backseat to her marriage and her children, and even if it didn't, she would no longer have time to waste with him, would she? Certainly, this as-yet-unidentified man wouldn't want her to spend hours alone with Severus in his private lab, making potions and talking about the latest research in Charms or Arithmancy. And the unworthy cretin, whoever he might be, would most likely want to have Hermione to himself at meals, not spend hours listening to Hermione try to convince Severus that wand waving needn't *always* be foolish.

Things would most certainly be ruined.

And, as usual, it would be all his fault, he realized. If only he could bring himself to talk to her to tell her what she meant to him to make her understand that just because he didn't love her the way she wanted him to, that didn't mean she wasn't important to him or that he could imagine being without her.

Perhaps he should take Veritaserum, he thought, then immediately dismissed the idea. He was concerned that the truth he would express would only make things worse. Who, after all, wanted to hear the person she thought herself in love with say, "I'm not in love with you, and I never will be, but I really want you to stay with me anyway because I'm a selfish bastard and I need you."

No, he would just have to find a way to talk to her without any magical help.

Ginny and Hermione stayed in the Room of Requirement until Ginny's curfew drew near. After all, when they were hungry, the Room provided a lovely meal, and when they were thirsty, butterbeer or water or pumpkin juice would appear. When they needed a loo, a door appeared in the far wall.

So Hermione was able to focus on teaching herself the spell. It turned out to be rather tricky. If the wand movements were off even the slightest bit, either nothing at all happened, or the spell got twisted into something far less useful. They discovered this latter effect when Ginny, who was playing the role of conversation partner, tried to say, "I love my brother Ron," while thinking "My brother Ron is a pain in the arse, but I love him anyway." Unfortunately, Hermione heard quite clearly, "My brother Ron has a lovely arse, and anyway, I'm in love with him." Fortunately, the spell didn't block her from hearing what Ginny actually said, in addition to the unspoken feeling.

Hermione quickly said, "*Finite Incantatem*," then collapsed in a fit of giggles as she told Ginny what she had heard.

The next one was even funnier, when Ginny said, "There's no love lost between Harry and Severus," and Hermione distinctly heard, "Severus is Harry's long-lost love."

After several more tries, in which equally silly thoughts came through, Hermione finally got it right. Then, at last, Ginny said, "Professor McGonagall is a true Slytherin." When Hermione also heard, "Professor McGonagall is a true Gryffindor," she thought she might have it.

Then, Ginny said, "Severus Snape hates you," and Hermione heard, "Severus Snape is in love with you, even though he won't admit it." Since she knew for sure that Ginny believed that to be true with all her heart, she decided she had it down.

Hermione practiced it several more times, to ensure that she would get it right at the critical moment. After all, it wouldn't do to misread Severus's deepest thoughts about her, would it? At least, not any more than she perhaps already had.

The next morning, Severus brooded while he tried to focus on the essays he was trying to mark. He had woken before dawn and slipped from Hermione's room without waking her, sure that he wouldn't sleep anymore himself, and not wanting to disturb her.

Hermione hadn't been at breakfast, which had made him wonder if she was angry that he had left without saying anything. As he thought about it, he realized she had seemed distracted when he had come to find her last night after completing his rounds. Now, he hoped she was all right. He knew she had been feeling the strain of what was wrong between them, but he really hoped she wasn't making herself ill with worry.

Of course, the way things were between them at the moment, she probably wouldn't tell him if she were hit with an Unforgivable.

Even as he had the thought, the door opened, and she peered around it warily, asking, "Are you busy?"

He looked quickly back at his papers, lest she see the longing in his eyes. He thought, *I'm never too busy for you*, but what came out was "As you see," with a gesture toward the papers scattered across his desk.

She didn't respond right away, and for an awful moment, he thought he had driven her away, but when he looked up, she was grinning at him. Had he said something funny? Frowning in confusion, he asked, "What are you doing here?" Belatedly, he realized that once again he had been rude, but strangely, her grin widened.

She said, "I just wanted to come and say good morning, since I missed you at breakfast."

He frowned. "You need to take care of yourself, Hermione. With your schedule, you cannot be skipping meals. I didn't see you at dinner last night, either."

He was perplexed when her response to that was to cross the room, lean across his desk, and kiss him firmly. "Oh, Severus," she said happily, looking him straight in the eye. "I *do* love you!" And then, before he could formulate a response, she was gone.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 of 28

Severus is completely confused by the sudden shift in Hermione's behavior toward him -- even before Ginny and Hermione put the second phase of their plan in motion ...

Chapter 25

Hermione couldn't wait to tell Ginny what she had learned from her conversation with Severus. Fortunately, Ginny had Advanced Transfiguration before lunch, and Hermione was assisting Professor McGonagall, so Hermione was able to catch her as she was packing her books into her pack. "I did it!" she exclaimed, keeping her voice low.

Ginny's face lit up. "You did? I can't believe you've had time to do it already! Tell me everything!"

"Come on, let's grab something from the kitchens and go to my quarters, and I'll tell you all about it."

Ginny readily agreed, and soon they were ensconced in Hermione's room. Hermione took a moment to close the Floo it wouldn't do to be overheard when discussing such a private topic and Hermione told Ginny all about the conversation that morning.

Ginny listened raptly as Hermione said, "So when I asked him if he was busy, he said " Hermione deepened her voice in a credible imitation of Severus's smooth tones "As you see.' But I also heard, 'I'm never too busy for you.' And then he asked, 'What are you doing here?' but then I could feel him panicking, and I just knew he was thinking, 'please don't let me drive you away.' So I just told him that I came to say hello, because I hadn't seen him at breakfast, and he said, 'You need to take care of yourself, Hermione. With your schedule, you cannot be skipping meals. I didn't see you at dinner last night, either.' And he was thinking, 'I don't know what I would do if anything happened to you.' And then there was this little voice in my head, and I just knew that deep down, where he can't even see it, there's this bottomless well of love for me, but it's all bound up blocked from his awareness by this huge ball of fear." She shook her head, feeling her smile fade at the thought of how hard this must be for him. "I think he's made it even worse for himself, actually he can't let himself see that he loves me, so he's convinced himself that once I realize that he doesn't, I'll leave him. And of course, since everyone saw us at the Quidditch Ball, he's afraid that everyone will know, and he'll be humiliated."

"Oh, the poor man," Ginny sympathized. "But what are you going to do now?"

Hermione was surprised by the question. "I'm going to do exactly what we discussed, of course. I'm going to remember that this grumpiness of his is because he's scared to death he's going to lose me. Eventually, he'll start to realize that I really, really love him and I'm really here to stay, and then the fear will start to go away and he'll realize he loves me, too, and everything will come right in the end."

Ginny looked skeptical a bit surprising, considering this had been her idea in the first place but now that she knew Severus loved her, Hermione wasn't worried.

Ginny didn't argue with Hermione, anyway. She simply said, "All right, then, I suppose I'll start on the other part of the plan. I'll begin sending you notes and gifts, and the gossip will change direction away from you and Snape."

"Are you sure about this, Ginny? Maybe you should send them to yourself, instead. Or I could send them to you."

But Ginny was shaking her head. "No, that would be sure to get back to one of my brothers, and neither Harry nor I would ever hear the end of it. The entire family has been hoping that Harry and I would eventually get back together, you know. No, it's better if it's you. No one who actually knows you two would believe it you and Harry are more like siblings than anything."

"True," Hermione allowed. "I guess it'll be all right. I'm a little concerned that Severus will forget that, though. He wasn't happy that Harry was staying in my room ..."

"Yes, well, if you're spending every spare moment waking or sleeping with Severus, he can hardly think you're sneaking around behind his back, can he?"

"True," Hermione said again. "All right. Let me give you some money."

"Oh, don't worry, I've got it covered."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "How? You don't have any money, last I heard."

Ginny smiled slyly. "That was before I caught Fred and George doing something they *really* don't want Mum to know about."

"Ginny!" Hermione gasped, appalled.

But Ginny was standing and heading for the door. "Oops, got to go. Don't want to be late for class."

"Ginny!" Hermione said again. But Ginny just gave a little wave and closed the door behind her.

Late Saturday night, Severus lay beside a sleeping Hermione and tried to figure out what was going on. Since her Monday morning visit to his lab, she had been a new woman. Or rather, more like her old self, only with a new self-assurance. Gone were the anxious, pleading looks and the attempts to get him to talk to her. Gone, the sad demeanor and the closed-off emotions and the air of tragic resignation.

Instead, suddenly, she was her quirky self again, but even a more cheerful version. She appeared for meals, sat with him, and talked about all sorts of things just like she had in those early days, when their relationship had been just starting. It was almost as though she was once again taking the Confidence-Boosting Potion. Except it wasn't, not exactly.

Now, when she said something and he didn't respond, she sympathetically asked, "Oh, bad day? That's okay, you'll feel better later, when you've had a chance to relax." She started coming to see him at all hours again, too. It didn't seem to matter if he was terse and quiet and morose. She just blithely behaved as though she was certain of her welcome. And there was no longer any unspoken pressure for him to respond in any particular way to anything she said or did.

And now, she told him she loved him all the time several times a day. Whenever she had a moment alone with him, in fact, and sometimes more than once in the same interaction. He didn't have to wait her out or pressure her in any way. She simply told him, unselfconsciously, at random times and places, and there was no longer any awkwardness when he didn't respond.

She began flirting and teasing him again, too. She gave him mischievous looks, and she put a sensual sway in her walk, and when they were alone, she constantly found excuses to touch him which never failed to arouse him. When she inevitably noticed, she would grin with delight and say something like, "See, Severus! I *knew* you were happy to see me, even though you were trying to hide it. You might as well stop pretending, you know." And the next thing he knew, they would be snogging like teenagers whose hormones had gone haywire.

So Severus was just plain confused. He couldn't figure out what had happened. He certainly hadn't done anything to merit this new way she was treating him. In fact, initially, he had grown even more silent and more distant. Instead of retreating, she had merely grinned at him, as though she knew a secret and was waiting for him to figure it out.

Try as he might to reason it out, though, he wasn't getting anywhere. He knew his own intelligence, so it was galling to feel as though there was something he was missing something that she apparently found obvious and incontrovertible.

He had tried several times to force himself to start the conversation he knew he ought to have with her. It really wasn't fair for him to lead her on not when she thought she was in love with him. He could never quite make himself tell her he didn't love her, though, and he had finally decided he should do something first to show her that, even if

he didn't love her, she really *was* important to him. He had spent hours over the past several days brooding about what he could give her that would send just the right message. In the meantime, he found himself watching to make sure she was eating properly and getting enough rest, and wasn't catching a chill.

And today, he had found himself doing something *completely* out of character. He didn't know what had possessed him to do such a thing, especially since he had no intention of ever telling anyone about it not even Hermione. Particularly when he couldn't, even all these hours later, bring himself to think about it himself. It was completely unbearable to admit it into his consciousness he had even considered Obliviating himself to ensure he would never have to think of it again.

Clearly, he was going soft.

At least the students weren't whispering about him anymore, though, as far as he could tell. He heard snippets of conversations as he walked by, most of which suggested their attention was now firmly focused on the love life of Harry Potter. If he was hearing correctly, Potter was trying to court someone, who apparently had the good taste not to be interested. He kept hearing about little gifts the young fool was sending to his newly-discovered amour chocolates, flowers, trinkets, even potions although Severus thought the girl, whoever she was, would be wise not to use the potions. Potter hadn't exactly earned top marks in Potions class.

Now, Hermione stirred in her sleep, and Severus returned to his original concern what was going on with Hermione? She rolled over and opened one eye slightly. Seeing he was awake, she mumbled, "Stop worrying and go to sleep." Her eye immediately slid shut again; within seconds, she was deeply asleep again. He smiled slightly she was so adorable that he couldn't help it, especially when no one would see him and think he was going soft (even if he was).

Deciding he may as well take her advice, since he was getting nowhere in his ruminations anyway, he kissed the top of her head and whispered, "Good night, Hermione."

Pulling her closer into his arms, he finally relaxed into sleep. His last conscious thought was that apparently, he had been wrong in thinking she was about to end things with him.

Hermione awoke the next morning in Severus's bed, feeling generally pleased with life. She had discovered, much to her surprise, that after that five minute conversation with Severus under the *Fides fidelis* spell, she no longer worried even a little bit whether Severus loved her. It was so obvious that she couldn't believe a woman of her intelligence could have missed it. She saw evidence of it everywhere, despite his continuing general grumpiness. She now thought that even if he told her flat out that he didn't love her and never would, she wouldn't believe him.

The proof was there in all sorts of ways, large and small, now that she was looking. The final proof had come with what Ginny had told her last evening. She smiled to herself. He would never, in a million years, have done *that* if he weren't in love with her.

Stretching, she looked over at him where he slept peacefully beside her. He looked so young and boyish when he was asleep. He was utterly adorable, really.

"You're staring," he said, without opening his eyes. She grinned. He was finding it harder and harder to keep her at a distance.

"So what if I am?" she replied saucily. "I like watching you sleep."

"I'm not asleep," he pointed out. "Who could possibly sleep with someone staring at them?"

She giggled. "I wouldn't know. No one stares at me while I sleep."

"You think not?" he asked skeptically, opening one eye. "Then perhaps one *can* sleep with someone staring, since I watch you sleep all the time."

"Really?" she asked, delighted. "Why?"

"Because I like watching you sleep," he replied, parroting her earlier comment. "Although, usually, I'm wishing you would wake up."

"Really?" she asked, rolling over to drape herself half across him. "And why would you want that? I'm cranky when I don't get enough sleep," she confided.

He smiled slightly. "I know," he said, "But you're really rather sexy when you're cranky. And I enjoy the challenge of putting you into a better frame of mind."

He slid his hand down her back. She shivered in response, then she gave him a wicked grin. "I do believe I enjoy the challenge of putting *you* in a better frame of mind, too."

A bark of laughter escaped him. He said, "You've certainly had your work cut out for you, lately."

Her smile widened. "Oh, you noticed you were cranky, did you?"

"It was rather impossible for me to miss it although you've seemed unfazed lately." Frowning, he asked, "I've been trying to figure out why that suddenly changed, and I can't come up with anything."

She said, "I wondered if you'd noticed that."

"It was impossible to miss," he said again, turning to look at her fully. "One day, you were depressed and miserable, and the next, everything was fine. And you were suddenly impervious to my bad mood." He paused. "I don't suppose you'd care to tell me what changed?"

She smiled sweetly. "No, I don't think I'll share that just yet." She ran a hand down his side, then rubbed herself sinuously against him. "In fact, I'm rather certain that you'll figure it out on your own, when you're ready, so perhaps I'll wait for *you* to tell *me*."

He frowned again. "I really wish you would just tell me. It's driving me mad, not knowing."

She kissed his frown away. "You'll survive, I'm sure." She kissed him again, more deeply this time, and swung her leg over him, then sat up astride him. "Now, why don't we focus on why we're both so happy that you woke up nice and early?"

Giving up for the moment, he ran his finger down the front of her body, enjoying the way she responded instantly to his touch by arching her back to give him easier access. "Yes, why don't we?" he murmured, beginning to kiss her in earnest.

Really, Hermione thought much later, sometimes the best conversations required no words at all.

Later that morning, Severus finally heard exactly who Harry Potter was courting. He tried to tamp down the fury that swept through him, he really did.

Just who did Potter think he was, trying to steal Severus's woman?

And after all the effort Severus had put into being *civil*, too.

Never mind that he and Hermione hadn't actually made an explicit commitment to one another. Or that Severus had been so certain it would be better if no one knew about his relationship with Hermione. Or that Severus wasn't actually in love with Hermione himself.

She was still *his*, and Potter certainly knew it. So perhaps this was Potter's way of trying to pick a fight. It was possible that Potter actually wanted Hermione for himself, but it seemed more likely to Severus that the fool just wanted her away from *him*. Potter simply wasn't smart enough to realize what a treasure Hermione was.

Still, why hadn't Hermione told him that Potter was courting her? It hadn't occurred to him until just now that they had been spending all their available time in Severus's quarters this week, rather than Hermione's. Not that she had been turning him away, or anything, but she always came to him since the change in her attitude, thus obviating the need for him to go to her. Certainly, he would have noticed all the gifts Potter had, according to gossip, been sending to her if he had been in her room at all this week. He couldn't help wondering if that was why she had suddenly started seeking him out again.

Severus took a breath and tried to think rationally about this. It didn't make sense. Why would Hermione hide Potter's interest in her? She said she loved Severus said it so often, in fact, and so freely, that he was actually starting to believe her. Besides, all those weeks ago, when he had slipped into her mind, he had seen quite clearly that she viewed Potter as a sibling. That seemed unlikely to have changed suddenly, didn't it?

And her behavior lately certainly backed up her avowals of love. She was *happy* with Severus, this past week or so. She always acknowledged his bad moods, yet seemed to see past them past his rudeness and his generally distant demeanor. Rather than let his mood ruin hers or drive her away she responded only to the part of him that desperately and deeply wanted her company. He found that this soothed his fear that she didn't really know her own mind, that when she finally got clear about her own desires, she would realize she didn't love him at all that it was all a mistake.

So her newly found ability to soothe his deepest fears and grant him his deepest desires had begun to crack his resistance to the idea that she really *was* in love with him. And she seemed so happy that he was slowly giving up the idea that he ought to let her go. If she was happy and in love with him, and he cared deeply for her, where was the harm in keeping her with him?

But now, Severus was having trouble figuring out where Potter's sudden pursuit of her might factor in. Could Potter's interest have been responsible for her sudden shift in behavior? He supposed it might increase her confidence in her own appeal, but that didn't explain why she suddenly seemed so sure that *Severus* wanted her around.

If it were anyone else, he might have thought that she was playing some sort of game with him, but this was Hermione. It simply didn't add up. He couldn't imagine her doing such a thing, and even if she wanted to, she wasn't a good enough liar to carry it off. Not to mention, she hadn't had any time to see Potter behind his back and even if she *had* had the time, Severus knew she wouldn't do something like that. Not to him or to anyone else.

Sighing, anger cooling back into the seemingly perpetual confusion that accompanied his thoughts about Hermione these days, Severus realized he would simply have to ask her. It was the only way he was going to figure out what was going on.

So, for the first time in days, Severus went looking for Hermione before she came looking for him.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 of 28

Severus questions Hermione about her relationship with Harry, and Hermione tells Severus the truth as she sees it.

Chapter 26

Hermione relaxed in her room, nibbling on a chocolate and looking at all the flowers Ginny had sent her in Harry's name. She idly wondered again just what Fred and George had done to make themselves susceptible to blackmail. She wondered if she should offer again to reimburse Ginny it couldn't be good for the sibling bond to have blackmail between them, could it?

The knock on her door startled her. She wasn't entirely surprised when Severus's voice responded to her query, although she hadn't been expecting him. When she had left his quarters a couple of hours ago, he had mentioned having essays to mark today, so she had planned to spend a relaxing Sunday cleaning her room (the easy way), then whiling the afternoon away in the library, or perhaps seeing if Ginny wanted to take a walk around the lake.

Opening the door, she said, "Hi! This is a pleasant surprise." She stepped back and waved him in. "What brings you by?"

"I heard something that I wanted to ask you about," Severus replied.

Frowning, she said, "Okay, sure. What's up?"

Instead of speaking right away, he glanced around the room, eyes pausing here and there on the many flower arrangements. Finally, he asked baldly, "Is Potter courting you?"

He didn't sound upset, just curious, and without even thinking about it, she answered truthfully. "What? No, he's not. Why?"

"Where did all these flowers come from?"

"The flowers?" Suddenly concerned that he might be more upset with the truth than with the rumors, she said, "That's ... kind of complicated."

Severus frowned. "What's complicated about it? You do know where they came from, don't you?"

"Well, yes, but it's going to sound strange, I think."

"Hermione, you might as well just tell me. Did Potter send you the flowers?"

"No, he didn't. Really," she added, when he raised an eyebrow.

"Well, then, is someone else courting you?"

"No," she said. "Ginny Weasley sent them to me."

"Ginny Weasley?" he repeated, sounding even more confused than he had moments earlier. "Why would the Weasley girl send you flowers?"

"Because she wanted to start a rumor that Harry was courting me."

"She wanted to Hermione, that makes no sense. Why would she want to do that? And even if she did, how would sending flowers to you accomplish that?"

"Okay," Hermione said, keeping her tone light and soothing. "Just give me a minute, and I'll explain it, okay?"

"I would appreciate that greatly," Severus said, and to his credit, his tone had only a slight hint of sarcasm.

Hermione explained rapidly, hoping to get it all out before he exploded. "Well, basically, Ginny and I were talking, and she mentioned the gossip that was circulating about well, *us* and I thought maybe that's why you were in such a bad mood. So I commented that it was too bad that we couldn't put a stop to the gossip, and she said we could all we needed was juicier gossip. And we figured gossip about Harry's love life would do the trick, but Harry doesn't actually *have* a love life at the moment, so we had to make one up. And Ginny thought the best idea was to let it slip out that Harry was courting me we couldn't use her because her family is still hoping they'll get back together and we wouldn't want to open *that* can of worms, and we wouldn't want to involve anyone else, either so she started sending me flowers and stuff, and mentioning that Ron was worried because Harry wasn't getting anywhere with me, and ... well, you get the picture." She shrugged. "Anyway, it worked, didn't it?"

"Yes, so it seems, but why didn't you mention it to me?" Hermione took it as a good sign that he sounded puzzled rather than angry.

"Because it wasn't important, and you were in a bad enough mood without mention of Harry." He didn't say anything; after a short silence she sighed, wondering if she had been misreading his reaction. "You're angry, aren't you?"

"What?" he asked, sounding surprised. "Why would I be angry? You wanted to make things easier for me, even if you chose an odd way to go about it." He fell silent again.

After a while, she asked tentatively, "Severus? You're making me nervous. If you're not mad, what are you thinking?"

"I'm just trying to put the pieces together," he answered, sounding preoccupied.

"What pieces?" she asked, letting her frustration sound in her voice. "I told you, Harry's not interested in me, and I'm not interested in him, either not like that, anyway. So what's to figure out? I love *you*. You *know* that. Don't you?"

Her question hung in the air between them. He thought carefully before he answered, surprised to realize that he *did* know that. "Yes, I believe I do." He tried to put into words what was bothering him. Eventually, he said, "What I can't figure out, still, is what happened when you were with Miss Weasley last week that changed your entire way of relating to me. You have to admit, your change in attitude was rather abrupt."

"She talked some sense into me, that's all," Hermione said evasively.

"What kind of sense?" Severus pressed. "Your behavior made perfect sense in light of the way I had been acting, and then suddenly, it was like you started responding to something else entirely. I just can't figure out what it was."

She sighed. "You aren't going to let this go, are you?"

"I can't," he agreed. He didn't really understand why this was so important to him, but he couldn't pretend it wasn't. "I need to understand you, and right now, I'm missing something important, so I can't."

"But Severus, you *do* understand what's important. I love you. That's what matters the *only* thing that matters."

"No, Hermione, it's not. You loved me last week, too, but you weren't happy, then. You were pulling away, and I understood that. It made sense, considering the way I was distancing myself from you."

"Well, yes, but I didn't understand, then."

"Didn't understand what?"

She sighed again. It was obvious that she didn't want to discuss this, and for a moment, he thought she was going to refuse to answer. But finally, looking resigned and anxious, she said defensively, "Okay, fine. I'm not sure you're ready to hear this, but I guess you're determined to know, anyway. I didn't understand, then, that you were in love with me, and scared to death."

"What?" Severus was shocked. For a moment he just stared at her, unsure how to even begin to respond to that. Eventually, he found his voice and managed to ask, "What on earth gave you that idea? I'm not I don't I never said " He tried to get the words out, but for some reason, his lips wouldn't cooperate.

She said petulantly, "See, I *knew* you weren't ready to hear it. But you insisted."

He tried again. "Hermione, I care about you deeply, and I don't want to hurt you, but " he shook his head. He had to make her see that he couldn't give her what she wanted what she needed. "You have to understand, I was in love once, and it was a disaster. I can't do it again. I'm sorry." He braced himself for her reaction. He hoped she wouldn't cry he couldn't take it when she cried.

Suddenly, and in his opinion, very inappropriately, she laughed. "Severus, I hate to tell you this, but you don't actually have any control over who you love." She walked over to him and kissed him. He was baffled by this response. "I know you don't want to be in love with me or anyone else, but you are. If you're really honest with yourself, you can't miss it."

"But, Hermione," Severus insisted, "I'm sure I would know if I was in love with you." Wouldn't he? It wasn't the same as it had been with Lily, so it couldn't be love. Could it?

"Really?" Hermione asked skeptically. "Are you *really* sure you're not just hip-deep in denial?"

"No, of course I'm not," he insisted again. Denial? He was too smart and tough to be in denial especially the deep denial she was suggesting. Still, he asked cautiously, "What makes you think I am?"

She paused, as if deciding what to say. When she spoke, she said something completely unexpected. "Well, for one thing, I cast a spell that told me your true feelings."

Severus stared at her, stunned speechless for several long seconds. She had said she wasn't going to use magic in their relationship anymore. He suspected he would be really angry about this later, but at the moment, he was too shocked to even really process the implications of it.

Anyway, he had certainly given her reason enough to feel she had no choice, hadn't he?

"A spell?" he asked finally. He still had no idea how to react to this, and his tone reflected his confusion. "What spell?" He wondered if he was in some sort of weird alternate universe. This entire conversation maybe this entire *day* seemed completely surreal to him.

"The *Fides fidelis* charm. Are you familiar with it?" Her tone, surprisingly, didn't seem particularly concerned.

"I've heard of it," Severus said, trying to recall what he knew about it. At least this was something he could wrap his mind around not like her contention that he loved her

without knowing it, or that she had used a spell to determine his feelings. A vague memory of the spell she was talking about surfaced. They had briefly considered whether it would be useful in the war, hadn't they? "It's not generally taught because it's generally not a very useful charm, given its short duration and the limitations on the relationships involved." He paused, wondering where she had found it, then realized she had almost certainly found it in a book which meant she had taught it to herself. Why that surprised him, he had no idea. She seemed to teach herself things all the time Polyjuice Potion-making and how to defeat Devil's Snare and the dangers of basilisks and the entire history of Hogwarts sprang readily to mind so this was really just one more thing in a long line. He was almost amused, despite himself, but he suppressed that reaction because so much was at stake. He asked cautiously, "Are you sure you cast it correctly?"

"I practiced with Ginny for hours until it was working reliably," Hermione said confidently. "And anyway, I've realized since then that you tell me a hundred times a day that you love me. Just because you do it without words doesn't make it any less clear."

Severus had no idea what she was talking about he had never said he loved her, in word or deed. He was most careful not to give her false impressions. Or at least, he thought he was. Apparently, he hadn't been as careful as he thought. Clearly, he should stop doing whatever was making her think that. And she *must* have cast that spell incorrectly, despite all her practice. He hated the idea that she was setting herself up to be hurt.

He hated the idea that she might be hurt, period. "How?" he demanded. "How do you think I tell you that?"

She shook her head. "You're not even aware you do it, Severus. And it's only in the last week that I became aware you were doing it." She paused, looking as though she was trying to think of an example. Just when he thought she would admit defeat, she said, "When I walk into a room you're in, I immediately have your full attention." Well, *that* was certainly true. Even if he didn't see her walk in, his skin would prickle with awareness, and he would know she was there. And his attention would be on her from that moment onward, until long after she left. She was still speaking, though. "And whenever you see me, this look passes over your face, so fleeting that I didn't used to notice it."

"What *look*?" he demanded, trying to put a sneer in his voice, but suspecting he had failed miserably when she just smiled blithely. He had worked hard to perfect a poker face a necessary tool for a spy's very survival so she had to be mistaken about some 'look'.

"It's hard to describe," she said, her smile perhaps slightly rueful, but nevertheless firmly in place. "It's kind of ... I don't know ... a flash of longing? And there's pleasure mixed up in it, too joy, even. It's like you're surprised and delighted to see me, I suppose." He suppressed the feeling of recognition that description engendered. Maybe he *did* feel momentarily joyful whenever he caught sight of her, and maybe he was surprised anew every time he saw her that she seemed to want *him*, but he certainly didn't show it. Although, if he kept it as secret as he thought, how did she describe it so perfectly? She wasn't finished, though. "And you do all these little things, too you think I don't notice, but I do. Actually, I'm not even sure you're aware that you're doing them yourself." She shrugged.

When she didn't continue, he demanded, "What things?"

She shrugged again, then rattled off a surprising list. "You pay attention to whether I'm eating properly you sneak more vegetables or fruit onto my plate when you think I'm not looking. You tell me you're in the mood to take a nap when you think I'm tired. You put extra blankets on your bed, even though I know you'd be perfectly comfortable without them."

Well, yes, he *did* do all those things, because otherwise, he worried about her. She needed her nutrients, and her rest, and she was *always* cold ... but taking care of her didn't mean he loved her. Did it? He shook his head and said as much. "Just because I care about your health doesn't mean I'm in love with you, Hermione."

She patted his hand reassuringly. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. Your secret is safe with me."

"Hermione " he began again, but she cut him off.

"Severus," she said, sounding exasperated. "I know what you did for Harry yesterday."

"What?" he said. "I didn't do anything." He ignored the voice in his head that whispered, *of course you did, you sentimental fool. And she knows it, so why are you bothering to deny it?*

"Yes," she insisted. "You did, and I appreciate it."

"What is it you think I did?" She couldn't really know, could she? Potter wouldn't have told anyone, would he?

Her next words disabused him of that notion. "Harry owed Ginny, and she told me, so don't try to deny it."

"Deny what?" he asked.

"That you went to see him to make peace."

"So, I went to see him. So what? Just because I want to make it easier for you to be around both of us doesn't mean " He ignored the voice in his head again this time, it was pointing out that he was awfully concerned about the feelings of someone he supposedly wasn't in love with. And that he had gone out of his way to get along with a person he hated for the sake of a woman he had been sure wouldn't be hanging around him much longer. *I should have gone with my first instinct and Obliviated myself* he thought morosely.

She stopped him. "And you spent *two hours* telling him stories about his mother. Two hours! You would never voluntarily spend two hours with Harry for *any* reason, before except possibly detention, if you couldn't get someone else to supervise it. The fact that you did so now and totally of your own accord speaks volumes. Don't try to tell me you don't love me, Severus." She shook her head reprovingly.

"Maybe I did that for Lily." His voice sounded desperate, even to his own ears. Who was he kidding? He could barely tolerate keeping the little pain in the arse alive for Lily's sake.

Apparently, Hermione knew it, too, because she scoffed, and her words echoed his own thoughts. "Don't be ridiculous, Severus. You had enough trouble making yourself keep Harry *alive* for Lily, and that was even knowing how much the Order needed him. You never quite managed to make yourself be nice to him, and you know it. You don't love Lily anymore, assuming you ever did. You love me."

She sounded so certain that he almost found himself nodding automatically, before he caught himself. "But " Of course he still loved Lily. Of course he did! And what did she mean, '*assuming you ever did*'? Was she really implying that he hadn't truly loved Lily in the first place?

She held up a hand and cut him off again. "Stop. Just stop. There's no point in arguing with me about this, Severus. There is nothing you can say to convince me that you don't love me. It's fine if you don't want to say the words. I don't need them not that I would mind, of course, if you decide that you want to say them at some point. But I know, to the depth of my soul, that you love me. As I said, you tell me all the time, and no, I didn't cast the *Fides fidelis* spell inaccurately," she insisted, apparently reading his next objection on his face. "I did it absolutely correctly and I know what I know." She paused, considering him thoughtfully, then added, "You look a bit stunned, Severus. Now, my guess is that you'll need some time to process this I'm sure it's come as a shock to you, after all so if you need some time to yourself, that's fine. I'll be waiting."

Her eyes were filled with an odd mixture of feminine wisdom, sweet compassion, and pure stubbornness. They made him uncomfortable, so he looked away. "Perhaps it *would* be best if we spent some time apart," he agreed uncertainly, not sure what else to do. He tried to keep his voice even, but he had to admit to himself that it sounded a little defensive when he continued, "Maybe then you'll realize that this is just wishful thinking on your part. I don't want to hurt you, Hermione, but it wouldn't be fair for me

to let you believe this fantasy."

He wasn't even really convincing himself, so he shouldn't have been surprised when she rolled her eyes. "See, I told you you weren't ready to hear this. All right, have it your way. You don't love me and you never will. Blah, blah, blah," she said. "Just remember, I love you, and I'll be waiting when you're ready to admit the truth."

He frowned. Why would she wait for him, when she had just admitted he didn't love her? He fought the sudden, contrary urge to argue with her, now that she had said what he had been trying to make her understand. Except she had really been placating him, rather than actually agreeing with him, hadn't she? "Hermione," he began, then stopped.

She was still speaking, as though she hadn't heard him. He forced himself to listen to focus on what she was saying. "But, Severus, you're going to have to come to me," she continued. "I won't force you to be with me, even though I know it would make both of us very happy. It still has to be your choice, too."

"Hermione," he began again, suddenly not so sure that time apart was the way to go.

She must have thought he was going to try to tell her again that he didn't love her, because she stopped him again. "I *heard* you, Severus. I just don't *believe* you. Now, I think I'd like to take a nap. You're welcome to join me, or not, as you choose." He wanted to, desperately. What if, while he took time away from her to think this through, she gave up on him?

But he owed it to her to figure out whether she was right, or he was. "I I guess I'll see you later," he said.

As he quietly closed the door behind him, he ignored the voice in his head that whispered that only a stubborn fool would miss an opportunity to nap with Hermione love or no love.

I'm not a fool, he told himself firmly. *I'm not*.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 of 28

When Severus returns after his time apart, he engages Hermione in a serious discussion about their relationship.

Chapter 27

He stayed away for two full weeks.

She had known he would fight it, but she hadn't expected him to fight it quite so long. An hour would have seemed like too long to bear, so two weeks felt like an eternity. Still, Hermione knew Severus loved her, even though he was stubbornly refusing to admit it to either one of them.

As she had told him, she knew it in the depth of her soul. She *still* knew it, even in the face of his ongoing absence. If anything, she had grown more sure now that she knew neither magic nor proximity were clouding her mind.

She had been tempted to go to him, but she understood that he had to figure this out for himself if they were ever going to have a chance at happiness. He made it easier to stay away mainly by staying away himself. When he wasn't teaching, he frequently left the castle altogether. She had no idea where he went perhaps to Spinner's End, or perhaps into Hogsmeade, or perhaps he was just wandering the grounds somewhere. In any event, she didn't see much of him, even at meals.

She missed him, and despite her conviction that he would eventually come back and admit the truth, she wondered if he missed her as much. If he did, she had no idea how he could stand it.

Suddenly, without Severus claiming her spare time, she had a lot of it on her hands, and she couldn't quite remember what she had done with leisure hours before she had become involved with him. So, she kept herself as busy as possible with her apprenticeship, and when she found herself with nothing to do there, she sought out Ginny or went to visit Harry or Ron.

Finally, today, on the fourteenth day after that fateful conversation, an entire Saturday stretched out before her. She had just decided, for lack of anything better to occupy her time, to go into Hogsmeade and visit her favorite shops.

When the knock came, mere moments before she was to leave, it startled her. Before she even asked the question, she knew it was him. She whispered a quick prayer that he wouldn't be so stubborn as to end things rather than admit he loved her.

She opened the door, trying not to let her anxiety show. He looked good serious, but good. She drank him in with her eyes. She really hoped that he had come to terms with his feelings for her.

She said, "Hi."

"Hi," he replied, giving nothing away. "May I may I come in?" he asked tentatively.

"Of course," she said, stepping back to let him pass.

He looked around, but didn't say anything about the fact that the flowers that had started their conversation two weeks ago were gone. His gaze darted around the room, and he seemed agitated.

Was he here to break up with her for good? Her own anxiety building, she asked, "Would you like some tea? Or ..." she couldn't think of anything else to offer, so she finished lamely, "... anything?"

"No tea, thank you," he said formally, and her heart sank. He didn't sound like he was about to declare his undying love for her. He sounded like he was waiting to speak with his accountant or something. She felt the urge to cry, but she fought it back. She had gambled, and it looked like she had lost, after all. The silence stretched between them, and they stared at each other. "There is something, though," he said after what seemed ages.

In her growing disappointment, she had lost the thread of the conversation. "What?" she asked, mustering her determination not to cry.

"You asked if I wanted tea, or anything, and I said, no tea, but there is something I want."

"Oh," she said, confused. "What can I get you?" How could he be talking about tea at a time like this?

"You," he said.

"Excuse me?" she asked, certain she had misheard him.

"You. I want you," he said.

"Me?" she asked. "You want ... me?"

"Yes," he said. "You said you would be waiting, and I should come to you when I was ready to admit the truth." He shrugged. "Here I am. Are you still waiting?"

For a long moment, she was sure she had misheard him. But then, the meaning of his words washed over her, and suddenly, she understood. She couldn't contain her smile. "You mean ... you ..."

He nodded. "Yes. I do." He said sheepishly, "I can't quite bring myself to say the words. Not yet, anyway. But that doesn't mean it isn't true. It's not any less real." He looked anxious, like he was afraid that she would demand that he say it anyway, or leave him if he refused.

Instead, she launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. She thrilled at the feel of his arms closing around her, holding her so tightly she could hardly breathe. Not that she cared. She buried her face in his neck, then lifted her lips to his ear. "I love you, I love you, I love you," she whispered, laughing through the tears that were suddenly streaming down her cheeks. "And you don't need to say the words, even though you kinda just did, even though you didn't. You know?" She pulled back to look at him.

Smiling at her babbling, he nodded again. "I know." He gazed into her eyes, and she could see his love for her for the first time, he wasn't trying to hide or suppress it. He asked, "Does this mean you forgive me for being bigger dunderhead than Longbottom ever was?"

"You're not a dunderhead," she said severely. "You were just ... confused for a while." She smiled broadly again. "And now you're not."

"And now I'm not," he agreed. "Now," he scolded, "I believe you owe me twenty-eight kisses."

She giggled happily. "Twenty-eight, huh?"

"Plus interest," he added as an afterthought.

"Well, I'd better get started, then."

"Yes, I think you'd better," he replied. "The interest rate is unconscionably high, you know, and soon you'll be so far behind that it'll take the rest of your life to catch up."

"The rest of my life?" she asked, stunned. He couldn't possibly mean that the way it sounded, could he? He couldn't *really* be jumping from unable to admit he loved her all the way to an entire lifetime together.

Could he? She stared at him, wordlessly willing him to clarify what he meant.

"At least," he affirmed, and she stared at him, amazed.

Apparently, he could.

And then, he must have tired of waiting, because *he* kissed *her*.

Much later, they lay together in Hermione's bed. Severus savored the feeling of being with her again. He had missed her to a completely undignified degree while he had been thinking things through.

That was, in fact, what had finally convinced him that he might actually be in love with her. He had spent the first week reminding himself of all the reasons he couldn't possibly be in love with her, starting with 'I'm still in love with Lily,' passing right by 'She has terrible taste in friends,' and 'She's far too stubborn and optimistic,' and ending with 'She's an insufferable know-it-all.'

Except, as it turned out, the more he thought about Lily, the more he thought she hadn't been particularly kind to him, and that perhaps he had been in love with his image of her a sort of idealized version of her that he had invented in his mind rather than who she *really* was. Which was, ultimately, a young woman who had been in love with someone else, and who hadn't felt enough for Severus to be willing to forgive him for an admittedly big mistake. She had had good qualities, certainly, but could he really have spent his life loving someone who didn't know didn't even *want* to know everything about him? And who couldn't have accepted all of him if she *had* known?

And then there was Hermione. He still thought her taste in friends could stand improving, but the Weasley girl wasn't too bad, he supposed, and at least Potter seemed to genuinely care about her. And, truth be told, her stubbornness and optimism weren't really *bad* qualities, were they? In fact, they were actually rather necessary, weren't they, if she was really going to be happy with him? If she wasn't stubborn, he would unintentionally crush her, and she needed all the optimism she could get, just to balance his cynicism.

And she really wasn't so much a know-it-all as someone who *wanted* to know it all. Someone who thought they already knew everything wouldn't be as quick to ask questions or to run off to the library as she was she was just desperately curious about everything. And now that he knew her better, he didn't find it insufferable so much as rather endearing.

She shifted and mumbled in her sleep against him, and he turned his head to look down at the top of her head, where it rested on his chest. He asked softly, "Are you awake?"

She murmured, "Are you really here? 'Cause if you're not, then I'm dreaming again."

He smiled. "I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere, although we should probably discuss some of your activities that led us here."

She looked up at him, suddenly alert. "Which activities would those be?"

He frowned. "You don't seriously think I'm pleased that you used a spell to read my thoughts, after we discussed the inappropriateness of using Legilimency without permission? And after you clearly stated you had decided to remove all magic from our relationship?"

She colored slightly. "Desperate times call for desperate measures, Severus. Don't try to tell me you wouldn't have done the same thing in my shoes."

"I wouldn't have bothered," he said, then realized she might take that to mean their relationship wasn't important enough. He added, "Why take the time to learn a new spell? No, I'd have used Legilimency, and you wouldn't have known a thing about it."

"You would not," Hermione said. "Not after promising not to. Besides, I would know. And may I remind you that you *didn't* know I used *Fides fidelis* until I told you."

He decided to put everything out in the open, although it went against his instincts to do so. If he wanted her to be open and honest with him, after all, he would have to make an effort to be so with her. He said gently, "I hate to tell you, Hermione, but I certainly could use Legilimency on you without your knowledge. To be honest, I already have, and it's the primary reason why I wasn't more upset about the possibility of Potter courting you. I had already seen that your feelings for him were more in the nature of a sibling affection than anything else."

She sat up and glared at him. "Severus, you promised not to use Legilimency on me "

He cut her off. "It was before I promised."

"Before *before*?" she asked incredulously. "When?" she demanded. "And why?"

"It was the first day you came to my lab. Remember?" She nodded once, and he continued, "I was making you some Dreamless Sleep Draught because you had been having what you called 'disturbing dreams', and you were looking at my manuscript the recipe with the chocolate in it. I started wondering about the dreams thinking perhaps you were dreaming of a lover and the next thing I knew, I had already cast the spell. I just needed to know what you felt about Potter and Weasley."

She thought that over, then suddenly, she grinned. "You were jealous! You couldn't stand the thought that I might be dreaming of another man, so you were jealous!"

He felt himself flush, but he didn't try to deny it. "And if I was?"

"Well, it's sweet, but you had no need to be. The dreams were about you, you know." She giggled suddenly. "So, you were jealous of yourself."

He chuckled at that. "I suppose I was." Sobering, he gave her a severe look. "Now, getting back to the original subject, I do not want you using that spell on me again. Nor Legilimency, nor any other kind of magic. And in return for your promise to refrain from all of that, I will promise you the same in return. It won't bode well for our relationship if the only way we can understand one another is through magic instead of through conversation and honest communication." Part of him thought her Gryffindor nature must be rubbing off on him, if he was favoring the straightforward approach over the rather less direct methods he had always used before.

"All right," Hermione agreed immediately. "You do understand that the situation was getting desperate, though, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," Severus replied. "I understand why you felt compelled to do it, Hermione, and I'm not angry about it because I think I drove you to it. But falling back on magic to smooth over our problems won't be a good strategy in most circumstances."

"I want you to promise not to try to shut me out like that, then," Hermione said, her tone urgent. "I can handle anything you have to tell me, but I can't promise I won't get desperate again if you shut me out."

"Sweetheart, I was shutting you out because I had convinced myself that if I couldn't give you what you were looking for, I should let you go. I'm hardly likely to forget how we feel about each other, am I?"

"I certainly hope not," she said severely. She looked at him through narrowed eyes, then asked suspiciously, "You won't try to convince me to leave you for my own good or anything ridiculous like that, will you?"

"I'm not that unselfish," Severus declared firmly. "Now that I've laid the ghosts of my past to rest, and my fears are under control, I have no intention of giving you any reason to want to leave."

She grinned. "Good. Now, have I thanked you properly yet for going to see Harry?"

He groaned. "I've been trying to forget I ever did that, thank you very much, and now you've gone and reminded me."

Her grin widened. "You can't fool me, Severus Snape. You're going soft, now that you love me," she teased.

"Going soft, am I?" he asked in a mock growl, and flipped her over onto her back. He kissed her. "I'll show you 'soft,'" he whispered, between nips at her ear, and flexed his hips once to let her feel his rapidly growing arousal. "Now, take it back."

She gasped as he kissed his way down her neck, but managed to say, "Soft, soft, soft," in a singsong voice. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him closer, then pulled up his head to look him in the eye. She said, very seriously, "I really, really missed you, Severus."

He kissed her lingeringly. "I missed you, too," he said. "Let me show you how much." And then there was no more talking for a long, long time.

A/N: I was tempted to put a fluff warning at the beginning of this chapter, but it seemed like that might be a bit of a spoiler, so I opted not to.

We're almost done ... just a (rather lengthy) epilogue to go! Thanks to everyone who has stuck with this story, and particular thanks to those who review or comment! (I finally caught up on answering reviews! Yay!)

Epilogue

Chapter 28 of 28

A happy ending for the happy couple! :)

A/N: Warning! Fluff alert! But hey, that's what an epilogue is for, right?

*Sadly, they're still not mine, and I'm putting them back for a while now. Well, not really I have 2 more long stories in the works, which I will begin posting as soon as I have a complete draft (check out my author profile for a preview). Also, the fic Itchyfoot won in the TPP auction is about half written and will be posted here as soon as it's done. I want to thank everyone for reading, and especially those who have reviewed or commented or favorited. I live for that! Of course, if you haven't been reviewing, this is your last, best chance to let me know what you thought of it ... *winks**

Epilogue

Eighteen months later

Harry knocked once, then let himself in. "Are you sure I can't talk you out of this?" he asked.

Hermione laughed, leaning forward to look in the mirror. The hairdresser had done wonders with her bushy hair – it hung in smooth ringlets past her shoulders, with flowers woven through it, falling perfectly to the top of her off-the-shoulder gown. "You don't even really *want* to talk me out of it, Harry. This is the first you've mentioned it, and we've been engaged since Christmas. Admit it, he's growing on you."

"Well, he's not as awful as he used to be," Harry admitted. "And, much as I hate to say it, he really is crazy about you. Not even the most determined Slytherin, which he is, could fake that kind of nauseating devotion."

She laughed again, "Now, Harry, you know you're secretly jealous. You want someone that you can adore that much for yourself."

"No, thanks," Harry responded with a shudder. "Not for years, yet, anyway. I'm enjoying playing the field just fine, thank you very much."

"Just wait, Harry," Hermione said dreamily. "It's the best thing in the world, you'll see."

"Yeah, yeah, so you keep telling me," he replied dryly, then changed the subject abruptly. "Where are your parents?" Harry asked.

"Oh, Mum just headed to her seat, and Dad went with her – said he wanted to make sure everything's ready. He'll be back in a minute."

Another quick knock, and Ginny poked her head in. "You nearly ready?" she asked.

"Yes," Hermione said, thinking back over the past year. "I've been ready for *ages*. For well over a year, actually."

"I didn't mean *that*," Ginny said wryly. "I meant, do you have your flowers, did you do a last check of your lipstick, that kind of thing?"

"Oh, well, I'm ready in that sense, too," Hermione grinned.

Just then, her father returned. "We're all set. The groom is standing at the altar, looking like he wants to be pacing." He looked at Harry and frowned. "Shouldn't you be out there? You're the best man, are you not?"

Harry said, "Sadly, I am." He shook his head. "What's the world coming to, anyway?"

Hermione laughed and stood, turning to face him. She quickly kissed his cheek. "Get out there. It's time for me to be married."

He saluted smartly, said, "Yes, ma'am." He turned to leave. At the door, he turned back to her. He said, very seriously, "Be happy, Hermione. You deserve it."

She smiled. "Thanks, Harry."

Severus fidgeted as he waited for Hermione to make her appearance. He couldn't believe their wedding day was finally here. He had wanted to elope, but as usual, he couldn't bring himself to disappoint Hermione, who wanted a real wedding – a *Muggle* wedding, no less – with her family and friends present to wish them happiness.

Many of his former students were here, and he supposed it was likely that he had grown more tolerant, rather than that they had become less annoying, as it always seemed to him. Hermione had a way of making him take himself, and everyone else, just a little less seriously. So he hardly even heard them whispering about how they never would have thought Severus would actually fall in love and marry someone.

He loved Hermione more every day – more than he had ever imagined he could love anyone. These days, he could even remember Lily with a mild, nostalgic fondness, recognizing that his love for her, while real enough at the time, had been a pale imitation of what he now felt for Hermione.

Potter appeared at his side, patting his pocket to reassure Severus that he had the ring. Severus still wasn't quite sure how it had happened that Potter became his best man – perhaps it was because Dumbledore was performing the ceremony, and Severus didn't really have anyone else in his life that could be called a friend. Well, he amended silently, there was Minerva, of course, but she hardly seemed appropriate as a best man.

Or perhaps it was as simple as he and Potter had developed a friendship of sorts. After all, now that Severus was finally over everything that had happened between himself and Potter's parents, and now that he was happier than he could ever have imagined being, Potter didn't seem to be such a bad guy, after all. For certain, they had a common concern for the happiness and wellbeing of a certain bushy-haired Gryffindor know-it-all to bind them together. As it happened, Severus could tolerate a lot in someone who had Hermione's best interests at heart.

In any event, Severus no longer minded so much when Hermione wanted him to spend time with her friends. Most of them were here today, except the Weasley boy, who was playing professional Quidditch and was out of the country. Severus suspected the boy hadn't quite gotten past the shock of learning exactly who Hermione was marrying, but both Potter and Hermione assured him the boy would eventually come around. Apparently, he had a history of taking his time accepting things he wasn't pleased about.

Severus forced his attention back to more pleasant matters. Hermione would, at any moment, be walking down the aisle that had been created in the Great Hall for the occasion. He smiled in anticipation. She had kept with tradition and refused to see him last night or this morning, and he couldn't wait to see her. He had missed her.

At last, Miss Weasley appeared and began walking down the aisle. Severus hardly saw her, so anxious was he to catch sight of his bride.

When she finally appeared, on her father's arm, she was so beautiful that he forgot to breathe, until Potter elbowed him and whispered, "Breathe! She won't be happy if you faint." Severus didn't even bother to glare at Potter, so enthralled was he by the sight of his bride approaching.

She glided down the aisle; when she reached his side, she smiled up at him and whispered, "I love you."

He smiled, and at long last, the words spilled from his lips for the first time, although they both knew he had said it in a thousand other ways in the past year and a half. "And I love you."

Her smile grew, and with complete disregard for tradition, she kissed him right then, even before the ceremony had a chance to begin.

Several moments later, Dumbledore cleared his throat, and the pair broke apart. Grinning sheepishly at him, Severus said, "Feel free to proceed whenever you're ready."

Smiling benevolently, Dumbledore said dryly, "Thank you, Severus." Then looking delightedly at both of them, he cleared his throat and began, "Dearly beloved ..."

At the reception, Severus waited impatiently for the guests to finish making their way through the receiving line. After what seemed an age, the last stragglers had been greeted, so he took Hermione's hand and led her onto the dance floor. A waltz began; just as he had all those months ago, he bowed formally.

They danced the night away, just like that first time, and like they had on several occasions since then. The difference was, Severus no longer cared that everyone knew he adored his bride. All he cared about was that she was enjoying herself.

They took breaks from dancing tonight, to eat and drink or to chat and laugh with their guests. Hermione danced with her father twice and Potter once. Severus danced once with Minerva, but was otherwise content to watch Hermione enjoy herself.

As the reception wound down, Severus and Hermione slipped away to begin their honeymoon. They would spend tonight in his quarters, then leave in the morning for a long trip to all the most romantic cities Europe had to offer Paris, Venice, Rome, Florence, Athens, Vienna. Hermione seemed thrilled at the prospect all those libraries and museums to explore! They weren't due to return until the end of the summer, in fact, just before the students were due to return for the fall term.

Spying them leaving, Dumbledore turned to Minerva and said, "You see! Everything worked out perfectly, just as it should." He sounded inordinately pleased with himself, in Minerva's considered opinion.

Minerva rolled her eyes. "That was more due to Hermione's patience than to anything you did. In fact, in case you've forgotten, your interference came close to ruining everything."

"Yes, but instead, they wound up closer than ever," Dumbledore said happily. "You know, I've been thinking..."

"Oh, no," Minerva groaned. "Please don't tell me you've set your sights on some other unfortunate couple."

"Who, me?" Dumbledore asked innocently. "No, no, I've learned my lesson. I won't be making any more attempts to help a couple find true love anytime soon even though I *did* pull it off in the end in this one case."

"No, Albus, you didn't," Minerva said severely. "*Hermione* did. *Severus* did. *You* didn't do anything helpful at all." She paused, not sure she should ask. She found she couldn't resist after all, if she didn't know what he was planning, she couldn't try to talk some sense into him. "All right, what were you thinking, if you weren't matchmaking again?"

He smiled. "I was thinking that you and I should get out on the dance floor and show everyone how it's done."

She laughed. "All right, Albus, let's dance."

As they began to dance a foxtrot, Albus said, "Will you look at that? Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley are dancing together. Don't they make a fine-looking couple?"

"Albus," Minerva warned, "Don't even think it ..."

"Why, Minerva, I'm shocked! Didn't I just say I was finished with matchmaking?"

"Oh, Albus, just shut up and dance, will you?"

In Severus's quarters, Hermione was giggling as Severus danced her around the room. "This was the best wedding ever," she said, as he twirled her.

"Of course it was," he said. "It was *ours* nothing could top that."

"True." He dipped her then, and she gasped in surprise. He took the opportunity to steal a kiss. They continued like that for several minutes, dancing and chatting and kissing.

Eventually, he began gradually removing their clothing as they danced. He started with her veil, just pulling a hairpin here and there when one was in reach until it slipped free. He tossed it on a chair as they danced past. Then he shrugged out of his jacket and tugged on the end of his bowtie to open it. Next, he reached for the zipper on her dress; when she shrugged it off, he lifted her out of it, then picked up the dance where he had interrupted it.

She began working the buttons on his shirt, whenever the dance put her in a position to do so. He pulled her slip over her head. She unfastened his trousers and he kicked them away. At last, when their remaining clothes were ill-suited to removal while dancing, he danced her over to the bed. Kissing her, he whispered. "I love you, Hermione."

"I love you, too, Severus."

He kissed her again. "I didn't know I could ever be this happy," he said.

"I know what you mean," she said, eyes misting. "I feel so lucky. How did we get this lucky?"

He smiled. "Well, it all started when you cast a spell." He nudged her backwards; she fell onto the bed, pulling him with her.

"You mean the chair spell?" she asked.

His smile broadened as he began removing her garters and stockings. "No, love, I don't. You had me bewitched long before you cast *that* silly spell."

She giggled. "I did, did I?" She ran her hands over his chest, then slid one into his boxers. He shuddered in response, then freed her from her bra.

He began stroking her with his fingers as he spoke. "You did. And I tried every counterspell I could think of, before I realized that the smart man would simply surrender at once. So, being a smart man, that's what I did."

She moaned, but tried to keep up the conversation as he began following his hands with his lips and tongue. "Mmmmm, you're a very smart " But then she seemed to lose her train of thought; she gasped and stopped talking. Neither of them said anything else for quite a while.

As they drifted off to sleep, Severus heard her whisper, "Love you ..."

He smiled sleepily, pulling her closer. "Love you, too ..."

Just before sleep overtook him, he thought contentedly, *She must have cast a spell ... anything this magnificent must be magic ...*

FINIS