

La Chasseresse

by livvy6

Hermione decides to leave Hogwarts behind and live in the wizarding world by her rules.

Into the Wood

Chapter 1 of 24

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Hermione Granger sat up on the dais fiddling with her robes, nervously waiting her turn to speak to the graduating class.

Soon I'll be free! she thought and repeated it to herself as the seconds ticked off. Looking out into the crowd, she saw Harry and Ron. Their hurt faces trained on hers sent a pang of regret and shame throughout her body.

I can't blame them, she told herself. They deserved better than the lies I told them. I just hope one day they will be able to see I had no other choice.

Hermione lowered her head, unable to look into the earnestness etched on their faces. Then she remembered when she had first seen them after the battle. She had stood before them in a filthy robe, shoes, and a wand that were not hers, and clung onto her silence as they had bombarded her with questions.

"Hermione?" Harry asked her, advancing slowly towards her as if she were a wounded animal. "What happened? Where have you been?"

She stood dazed and bone-weary. She looked down to see her wand hand was shaking.

At first, she didn't realize she was talking, but as she went along, she got used to the sound of her voice. "I was stuck. First, I was lost on patrol, and then Greyback and his pack settled down near my hiding spot. I had to remain there."

Ron's brow furrowed. "Three days, Hermione? You could have bloody died! What about your Galleon?"

"Lost it," she lied as she squirmed inside her robe.

Harry had remained uncharacteristically quiet and unobtrusive with his treatment of her. He asked no questions, and Hermione volunteered no information. The whole thing probably would have been forgotten, if only she had remained the same old Hermione.

However, she was no longer the old Hermione. Her convenient lie had silenced all inquiries about her three-day absence. Besides, everyone had their own personal hell to live with. Not one person who had escaped with their lives was exempt. Reminders were all around. An empty bed, a vacant chair, a hairpin someone had worn who was now dead; all of them ate or starved, slept or bolted awake, screaming from nightmares, worked like machines with no thought for anything but the problem or potion at hand, or stood stiffly...as if petrified...with large, empty eyes that betrayed nothing but terror, gazing into the distance. She was no different.

Hermione smoothed down her Gryffindor commencement robes and felt entirely at peace with her decision. She would continue to keep her secret and continue until the

end. It was the best she could do. The girl who never settled for less than perfection had become a woman who accepted to live in the grayness of life and the flaws that came with it.

"Hermione Granger!" announced Professor McGonagall.

Hermione walked up to the podium and received her certificate. She was now officially a graduate. After Harry, Ron, Neville, Draco...all of those who were of the class of 1998...had received their own certificates, she stood from her seat on the dais, which had been especially set aside for her as the highest ranking student Hogwarts had seen in many a year.

She had remained quite still during the entire ceremony, wedged between Hagrid and Professor Snape. She had managed the last five months to keep her distance from the wizard who had resented her very existence for whatever reason since the very first day she had sat in his first-year's Potions class. She easily was able to keep her side from touching him this day. Hagrid never minded closeness. After all, he was already bawling buckets of tears for Hermione, Harry, and Ron. Hermione just kept a calm hand steady on his huge arm to comfort him. Leaning over into him helped her mask her need to keep a physical and mental distance between herself and the malicious wizard.

When her name had been announced, she stood up, walked to the center of the stage, and began her speech by casting a Sonorous Charm on her throat. First, she gave her platitudes of thanks and kindness towards the present dignitaries and her professors before launching into her address:

"Now has come the time to shrug off this husk of childhood. Many of us already feel as if we completed this task after fighting in a war. That may be true enough, but after the dust had settled, and our friends had been buried along with our grief and tears, we still had Hogwarts to draw us in like a mother with its large turrets and strong walls, waiting to envelop us with soft four-poster beds, clean sheets, and hot cocoa.

"This is no longer an option. We are now prepared to delve into this magical world to search and find our fortunes while others, like myself, who were not raised within the magical community are only beginning to appreciate this new world and will with eyes wide open see all the possibilities that lay before us.

"It is a sad and frightening prospect to leave the comforts of a place we have called home for so long, but our fear is only of what we cannot name. The joys and the gifts that are ours for the giving and the taking are just within our grasp.

"Do not weep for what might have been; rather, if you must weep, weep for the loss of what once had been, but is no more. Then, when the tears have ceased, smile for what you have survived and accomplished. That will be a legacy no one can ever steal from you. The willful choices of youth, the follies, and rash decisions with their consequences need no repeating. However, never should we forget the lessons learned, for we are starting a new life. Refuse to turn backward to childish things. It is the dawning of a new day, so let us leave what encumbers us behind and strive for the future. It is, after all, what you will make of it."

Hermione sat down after a moment had passed. Some wept openly, wiping their faces at the words she had spoken. But Hermione had no tears left. She had shed too many.

After the ceremony ended, Hermione hurried to leave. Unfortunately, a solid wall of black halted her progress.

"Miss Granger, your choice of words was rather cryptic. I was almost persuaded to believe you were speaking of the war, but there was a tenor in your voice that piqued my curiosity. Your words held multiple meanings, did they not?"

Hermione looked first at his buttons; then her eyes roved over the billowing material on his shoulders and arms. She finally settled her eyes on his black hair and wondered if he had ever cared enough to give a damn about it.

She heard his voice, his words, and decided not to answer. Instead, when she spoke, her voice was calm and resigned. "Goodbye, Professor Snape. You will never have to worry about my presence or questions in your dungeons ever again."

She turned and walked away where Neville, Luna, and his Gran were waiting for her.

Neville looked extremely nervous, just as he had in his first year. "Damn it, Hermione, what did that beast want?" he hissed.

Hermione lowered her head, but kept her eyes alert. "He found my speech amusing, with hidden meanings. I never doubted he would wonder. But it is finally finished, and I am so very tired," she whispered with a sigh.

"Of course you are, Hermione, dear," said Augusta Longbottom as she took the younger witch's arm into her own. "I think we should just leave now, don't you think, Neville?"

"Certainly," he replied. "Luna, are you prepared?"

"Oh, yes. I am rather excited by this prospect, really. It will be such an amazing experience."

Hermione managed to smile weakly before Mrs. Longbottom ushered them outside, looking obviously irritated by the words of her future granddaughter-in-law.

Before she lost sight of the Great Hall, she caught sight of Ron and Harry. She waved to them, and they waved sadly in return. Hermione felt so sorry for them, but she couldn't help it. As far as the wizarding world would know, she was embarking on a yearlong vacation to Australia to see her parents. Neville and Luna were joining her as a trial run for their engagement, with Hermione acting as chaperone...at least that was the plan so far. There were still some decisions that had to be made. As the four of them walked out the main gate towards the Apparition point, Hermione reflected on all that had occurred in the last week.

"It's ridiculous!" Ron bellowed. "We are your best mates; we should be going!"

"Please understand, Ron," she begged him. "I need space, a change of scenery. After all we did with the war earlier this year...Harry, can you please explain it to him?"

Harry grinned widely. "Ron, Hermione loves us, and she wants to continue to love us, but sometimes friends need space to sort their head. You know how Hermione is. She's always got a lot on her mind. Luna is her best friend, and Neville is, well, so easy-going, you know?" he clarified...without much success.

"Oh, I see," Ron said as he began to pout. "We're not good enough!"

Hermione had enough of him. She sat down, covering her head, and whispered, "Ron, I'm tired, and I am sick. I need rest and peace. I would love to have some grand adventure with you, but I am ill, and Luna and Neville just make things better."

"Bloody hell," Ron whispered. "You're not still having problems from your wounds, are you?"

Hermione smiled weakly. She had lied to them, saying a nasty hex hit her during the battle, and it had continued to make her ill from time to time.

"I'm actually going to see a doctor in Australia and have him take care of it for good," she lied. "I'll be back, and then we'll have some fun, okay? We can celebrate the return of my health!"

She reached out and grasped Ron's cheek with one hand, and he gave a half-hearted smile. "Well, take care of yourself, you hear?"

"I promise," she whispered.

Hermione sat in Augusta's sitting room with her legs propped up and her back reclined. It was an odd house, much more stifling than the Weasleys', who always had someone coming in and out of the door. Augusta Longbottom was a woman of great values and ideals that kept her proud and upright. She expected nothing less of those in her charge. Neville, poor hen-pecked boy he was, had grown into a formidable wizard. Augusta finally approved of her grandson after his glorious triumph in battle, facing and slaughtering three Death Eaters in one fell swoop. He had led the charge to push forward when nearly every Gryffindor had desperately wanted to retreat. He had been awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class, and Augusta had wept with joy.

Hermione remembered that day as she watched the proud witch fuss about her sitting room. It struck Hermione that Augusta DID cry...and legend said Augusta Longbottom never cried. She hadn't cried when her son, Frank, and his wife, Alice, had been declared mentally insane, nor had she cried when Bellatrix Lestrange taunted the old witch during her trial for casting the Cruciatus Curse that had destroyed her son's and daughter-in-law's minds. Augusta was like a piece of granite, unable to neither move nor manipulate. Hermione gazed at her in wonder. How she wished she could be as strong.

When Neville had soberly received his medal, she had burst into sobs, her vulture hat shaking as she clutched her white lace handkerchief in her hand to cover her weeping. After the ceremony had ended, she had flung her arms around her grandson and wept openly, declaring Neville was as good a man as his father had been, and she never had been prouder.

"Are you comfortable, Hermione, dear?" Augusta asked Hermione.

Hermione was dragged from her thoughts as the older witch spoke to her. She gazed at the older woman, her back straight and proud as she stood before her guest with regal grace.

"Oh, quite well," she replied. "I hope I'm not too much of a bother."

"No, no, Hermione," Neville said in haste. "Now, we really must hash out the plan so everyone knows what stories to tell when asked."

Hermione looked at Neville. How considerate he was to make her feel as if she hadn't turned their lives upside down. His gracious manners never ceased to amaze her.

Hermione recovered from her wool-gathering to allay his concerns. "Of course, Neville. What are your thoughts?"

"I will sometime, I'm sure, bump into Harry or Ron, or one of the Weasleys, and explain that my Gran just can't care for Uncle Algie like she used to, so I had to stay behind, but that Luna went ahead with the trip as we had planned," he said. "I've thought about it, and if you have the baby in Australia, that's just not going to work. Ron and Harry would want to see her, and then there is all that paperwork for long-distance Apparition. What if we all stay, pass Luna as pregnant, and hide you here? After the baby is born, then you can go to Australia. I don't reckon your parents would be too keen seeing their daughter pregnant and then giving away their only grandchild. So, how does that sound?"

"I think it is a sensible idea, Neville. Hermione and I will stay hidden until the time comes," said Luna. "Hermione, how much longer is it now?"

Hermione hadn't thought of it. She tried very hard to not think about it at all. When she did, it all came rushing back in flashes. She remembered her capture, and the three horrible days she had spent as a prisoner in the dead of winter and the start of a new year: January. What a wretched time to have been a prisoner! If the freezing cold wouldn't kill her, her captors would, she had been positive. Then, after her miraculous escape, as the final battle had commenced, she had done her utmost to fight in the war and had passed off her injuries as only war wounds. There had been so much chaos, so much death and blood no one tried to examine her fully. She had escaped the infirmary as quickly as she could and had thrown herself into her studies to avoid intrusive questions about her three-day disappearance. Harry and Ron had been pretty beaten up as well, with their own war wounds tormenting their bodies and minds. But they had made it. They all had survived, and that was what mattered the most. The boys had tried to talk to her about the days she had been missing. The entire Order had been terrified, they had told her. She said she had found herself in a dicey situation with Greyback and had to stay where she was until the pack moved on from their hiding place. Both boys had breathed a sigh of relief, as had Hermione. It had been a horrible time to start the New Year...a POW...but she had survived.

She drew a sharp breath and shook herself free from her thoughts, and replied, "I'm at the end of my sixth month or round about. I have it somewhere so I wouldn't have to keep calculating it in my mind," she explained as she rifled through her rucksack.

"Here it is," she said with relief as she took out a piece of parchment. "According to my calculations, my due date is the second of October."

Augusta tapped her chin thoughtfully as she slowly paced the floor. "Well, at least it won't be an interminable length of time. You are more than half done, thank Merlin."

Hermione rested her head back as they all spoke around her. She closed her eyes, not wanting to hear the chattering of details, and the memories of how her life had spiraled so quickly out of control and had changed forever.

Around Valentine's Day, Hermione's noticed her breasts were growing tender. She had been in the shower and winced when her washcloth dragged across her nipples. They were painful to the touch. She looked out for the rest of the girls to leave and came out to face herself in the mirror. She turned sideways and touched the swell and heaviness of them.

It must be my monthly, she had thought and dismissed the oddity away.

She was inwardly relieved. When the end of January came and no period had arrived, she had been in a near state of panic.

She told herself it was nerves. Of course! she rationalized. The war! This eased her mind. When her period had not arrived at the end of January, she had been petrified. She still felt a nagging sense of unease.

February's period was lighter than usual, and she was experiencing more bloating than normal, but she shrugged it off after the period stopped after its customary week. Towards the end of February and the start of March, she felt strangely queasy. Food wasn't appetizing as it once had been, and chocolate was simply revolting, which was odd. She adored chocolate.

One day, she was getting dressed and could hardly button her pants. Lavender stared at her as she strained to close the gap.

"Uh, Hermione, are you okay?"

Irritated, Hermione said, "I'm fine! I just get really bloated when my monthly comes."

"Oh," Lavender replied, looking satisfied with her answer.

Hogsmeade weekend in March was terrible. Hermione spent the whole time hiding her nausea and new aversion to chocolate from Harry and Ron.

Ron was chatting away about Quidditch as usual while waving a bar of chocolate around as he gesticulated. Each waft of the scent made Hermione want to retch.

What is going on with me? she wondered.

Hermione decided to forget her physical troubles and focus on her NEWTs. There was only one hitch in her plan: she couldn't remember anything!

Ron walked into the Gryffindor common room holding the study chart Hermione had made in one hand and scratching his head with the other.

"Er, Hermione... I know you are the expert here, but this schedule makes no sense!"

Hermione huffed as she snatched the paper from him. She had completely disregarded his class time and had instead made a hodge-podge of Harry's and her own.

"Ron, I'm sorry. I'll make you another one."

"Look, Hermione, I'm not as clever as you are with books and things, but I've never seen you like this."

He started touching the post-it notes she had covering her books and folders.

"What's all this about? I mean, this isn't like you."

"Of course, Ron!" she snapped. "Have you ever thought perhaps I'm having a hard time because of the war? I hurt too, you know!"

She snatched up her books and papers and fled the room, leaving Ron looking confused.

Okay, so I'm stressed! she thought. But what about that stone you've gained? It happens, maybe I need to eat less and workout more.

No, her mind butted in. You've not been eating enough to keep a baby bird alive.

Bugger off!

Her breasts were a bit larger and firmer, and her hips were spreading. She told Luna and Ginny about it, but Ginny brushed it off, saying she looked much more mature and womanly with her new curves. It didn't help matters when Hermione finally conceded that she had to buy new clothes or just go starkers under her robes.

Ginny tried cheering her up as they went into Hogsmeade one weekend to shop for new clothes. "After all," she said, "you are eighteen, and I think your body is just catching up! You're just a late bloomer. May I be so lucky!"

Hermione knew that both Luna and Ginny despaired over their lack of "assets," but seeing Hermione filling out so lovely gave them hope.

"And my goodness!" Luna had said dreamily, "Your face is just radiant and bright. Your hair is so relaxed, and your curls are so soft. You look simply stunning!"

Hermione ignored the fact that she barely ate anything since she felt so turned off by food. She told herself it was "nerves" and forced herself to eat anyway. Soon, the boys were ogling her, and her uniform was getting too tight. She went to McGonagall, who smiled knowingly at her when she handed her new clothes.

"You are becoming quite the talk of the school, my dear," she gushed. "You look twenty years old. You've turned into a lovely woman, Miss Granger."

Hermione blushed. She had noticed the attention boys were showing her. At first, it had been Ron and Seamus staring at her chest before she zipped up her robe and glared at them. Then, she knew she was in trouble when Draco Malfoy stopped calling her 'Granger' and became tongue-tied in her presence. Finally, when she thought nothing worse could happen, she had accidentally brushed against Harry as they worked in Potions class. She was still getting used to her new bosom, and Harry reacted nervously to her breast crushing against his chest as she reached for an ingredient. Later, she noticed Harry was beet red and working hard not to look at her.

"What's your problem?" she hissed.

"You, uh, pushed against me with your, uh..." he stammered out.

"Sorry, Harry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me," he said with a lop-sided grin. "I just never in a million years would have thought I would get a hard-on in Potions class."

Hermione looked down and saw an impressive bulge in Harry's pants. Suddenly, she wanted him, wanted to touch him and have him touch her. Her mind was whirling with dozens of lust-filled images when Professor Snape interrupted coldly, "Ten points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger, for day-dreaming in class. Back to work!"

It was hard seeing Professor Snape every day. She tried her best to put him out of her mind and not think about that night, but she couldn't. She avoided him at all costs and never gave him a moment's trouble. She even stopped helping Neville covertly in class. There were days she could feel Snape's eyes on her, and she would feel sick and nauseous. She just told herself during these times to breathe and count to ten. She refused to let that wizard ruin the rest of what was left of her life.

Hermione stayed with Luna during the Easter holidays, and the dreamy witch talked about her recent engagement to Neville. The brilliant Ravenclaw had done so magnificently well on her OWLs, Dumbledore had allowed her to jump her sixth year and begin her seventh year with her fiancée. It had been a trial for her; she had to work twice as hard to keep up, but she was doing marvelously.

"Luna," Hermione said one day. "I feel so bloated all the time, and I keep gaining weight. My breasts, hips and waist are getting out of control. I'm worried something might be wrong with me."

"Well," Luna began, "I wanted to say something to you, but everyone has been so positive on your looks, I didn't want to ruin it. Besides, I don't want to offend you by assuming."

"Assuming what?" Hermione prodded.

"I think you're pregnant."

Hermione's face felt numb, and her heart was racing. "I can't be pregnant!" she blurted out.

"I know," Luna agreed with a sigh as she sat next to her friend. "I know you're a virgin. Yet, I just can't think of any other reason. Plus, you have the glow!"

"The glow?" Hermione said slowly.

"The pregnancy glow. Your skin is just so radiant and gorgeous! But I know I have to be wrong. I've been wracking my brains over it. Maybe an infestation of boolar, you know, they can infiltrate your digestive system and wreak havoc!"

"Hermione?" she asked softly as she took her friend's hand in hers. "What's wrong?"

Hermione burst into tears. "It can't be. H-He couldn't finish. He said it was too s-sordid!" she said through her sobs.

Luna turned Hermione to look at her. Hermione had never seen Luna look so concentrated before.

"Tell me," she whispered. "It was when you were missing. I knew that the Greyback story was a ruse. Just tell me," she prodded gently. "You'll feel better once you've said it all."

Hermione began to tell her story, and once she started, she couldn't stop. "It was January eighth, and it was so cold. I was ready to call it a night where I was patrolling when I came face to face with two Death Eaters. I gave chase...Stupefied one, I think. I was just running. So stupid! Why didn't I just Apparate?"

"I was caught with a Tripping Jinx, and they forced me to kneel in the snow. They ordered me to keep my hands behind my head. One of them had my wand. They searched my pockets and found the Galleon."

"The ones for the D.A.?"

Hermione nodded. "I was so stupid."

"No, you weren't. We were supposed to have them on us for communication." She shifted her eyes to the side. "How they knew so quickly it wasn't just a regular old Galleon...someone must have told them!"

Hermione continued after wiping away the tears from her cheeks. "They immediately began to interrogate me. They wanted to know my name, my rank in the Order, who my contact was...Luna, they knew exactly what to ask me...everything!"

Luna's face was pale. "I wonder if the traitor is still among us?"

Hermione shook her head. "I-I didn't tell them anything. If they knew my name, I was afraid they would k-kill me. I told them I was nobody. 'Why do you think I'm in the fucking snow in the bleeding dead of winter?' I just gave up. 'I'm nobody, I swear. I'm nothing.'"

Hermione sniffed and wiped her nose. "T-The o-one bloke got in my face and said, 'Well, if you won't give your name or give us your hiding location where all your little friends are, you must be somebody. Only nobodies pretend they are somebodies, and only somebodies pretend they are nobodies.'"

"I kept my silence, and they decided to take me in. They declared I was a Prisoner of War, and that I was going into their custody. I was jostled around by my arms to stand up. I couldn't see. They had placed a burlap sack on my face while I had been on my knees. I thought they were going to kill me, but I thought, 'I'm not in some Muggle movie! This isn't how wizards kill.' It was a bit worn with a small hole where it had thinned, so I could make out some things. So, once they got me on my feet, they Apparated me with them, and I was marched to some Death Eater hideout. I remember going downstairs into a dark room. I was starving and so thirsty. For one whole night, I was alone in some cold, damp place. They came with some water and told me it was dawn...not that I could tell from where I was. Then they stripped my clothes from me and told me to stand up against a stone wall with my backside exposed. I thought they were going to whip or r-rape me, but instead, t-they b-branded me."

"Oh, Hermione!" Luna breathed as she raised a hand to her mouth.

Hermione pulled up her jumper and showed Luna her back where a black "V" was burned into her flesh, on her right shoulder blade.

"I screamed and cried; I was ready to tell them anything! I was so scared what else they were going to do with that branding iron, but they didn't want anything from me. They just kept me in that dark, dank, damp, and smelly room. There was nothing to help me clean the wound, and I was in so much pain. I tried to take off the burlap sack, but it had been magically set in place around my neck. Then, they just came for me and said I was to be a gift to one of Voldemort's men."

Hermione's eyes glazed over, and she said in a staccato voice, "It was his birthday. I was a present. They kept the burlap over my head as they gave me over to some women who washed me up and poured Murtlap on my wound. I saw so many Death Eaters that I knew, but hadn't known that they were for sure Death Eaters until then. I-I was terrified!"

"He declined, but he wasn't allowed to for some reason. I just know that Voldemort wasn't there that night. I didn't see him, and no one mentioned him. I watched the wizard as he stared at my b-body. I curled into a ball, and he wrenched me apart, never saying a word."

"I just went limp, and he moved my limbs around to where he wanted them. I felt his hands touching and handling my body. I watched him open his pants and then watched him as he spit in his hand...I knew he was going to hurt me, and he did. I cried out for him to stop until he placed his hand on my throat and told me to shut up. He made a noise, and then I felt nothing. He said to the group that was watching us in the cell that he couldn't find enjoyment with a young virgin, so I curled up into a ball on the floor. I watched him as he buttoned his trousers and stormed out of the room. How can I be pregnant?" Hermione cried out.

Luna conjured a book, and Hermione read the selected passages. "Dear God," she moaned as the book fell to the floor.

Luna took her wand and said an incantation. A shimmer of pink rose came from Hermione's belly.

"A girl," she said with a weak smile.

Hermione quickly calculated in her head the figures. Merlin! I'm already in my second trimester. Fifteen weeks? What am I going to do?

Luna took hold of her arms. "Does the wizard know that it was you?" she asked.

"No," she answered numbly. "I was locked away in the cell after he left and left to die. At least they took off the sack from over my head before leaving me all alone. However, I heard the men who were guarding the dungeons that the wizard had taken another witch and gave them all a show of sorts. I got to hear all the sordid details. I stayed another day until I finally got out of there. All of the protective wards must have fallen while everyone was dashing about to join Voldemort for the battle. I found an old robe and came across a wand. I don't even know whose it was. I stopped only to steal some bread and water and made my way outside far enough where I could Apparate to Hogwarts. Luna, I just never would have thought this could happen. He wasn't inside me more than a minute!"

Luna sighed. "I know this must seem like a nightmare, but it's true. I'm so sorry, Hermione. This should never have happened to anyone. How far along are you, you think?" she asked.

"Fifteen weeks," Hermione mumbled. "I'm in my fourth month."

"She'll be here right at the start of October!" Luna smiled. "Don't worry, Hermione. You'll be able to hide your pregnancy with your robes and then we'll figure out something."

Luna's smile faded. "Hermione, who was it?"

Hermione wiped the tears from her face and shook her head. "I can't. I can't say it aloud. I can't THINK about it for more than a few seconds, or I'll go mad!"

"You can do this," Luna said as she gripped Hermione's arms with her hands. "Just look at me, Hermione. Just say his name."

Hermione looked up at Luna and smiled weakly. "What am I going to do? It's hard enough looking at Professor Snape, knowing what he did to me."

Hermione closed her eyes and hid her face.

"It's okay, Hermione," Luna whispered as she held her friend, "We'll find a way."

Hermione detached herself from Luna and began to fiddle with her hair. She asked in a small voice, "What would you think of me if I told you I felt something between disgust and envy when I heard he had sex with that woman?"

Luna ran her fingers through Hermione's hair. "I would think that I have no right to judge anything you felt or didn't feel. I can't imagine living through what you have experienced." Her tone was soft and soothing.

Hermione's eyes welled up with shameful tears. "He wasn't our professor. He was a man who wanted that woman, not me. He did things to her that made her sigh and respond to him. I know! I heard all the nasty remarks the Death Eaters said about them. I felt so stupid, like a 'silly girl' who couldn't handle being a woman. I should have been stronger, Luna. I should have gritted my teeth and showed them all I wasn't afraid of them. All I did was cry through everything. I am a Gryffindor, right? What happened to me?" she asked her friend.

Luna hugged her and whispered, "You were terrified for your life, and you thought you were going to die. Then a teacher, a wizard who has never had a kind word for you, appears, and he rapes you. They subjected you to hearing that this wizard, whom we've never thought of as a man, had sex with a willing witch in public. They wanted you to feel humiliated. They deprived you of your sense of sight, and brutally tortured and beat you. Still, you managed to come back to us. You came back and you fought...you fought in the battle! You are a true Gryffindor. You are brave, Hermione. And you won't have to live through this alone..."

Hermione was brought back to the present with Neville calling her name. "Hermione, we need your answer."

"I'm sorry, I'm just so tired," she whispered.

"Well, we need to have this all sorted and have a solid plan," snapped Mrs. Longbottom. "I think that Luna should stay with you here and have people see her at least once, very pregnant."

"Why?" asked Hermione.

"Think of how it will look, Hermione," Luna told her. "Neville is staying here. I can't just come back into England with a baby and no one the wiser. It would look very suspicious, like someone was trying to hide something. Then, there would be the question of why wasn't Neville with me. It just makes more sense this way. Neville and I will get married just before the birth, and then it will never be up for discussion as to the baby's parentage."

"You'd all have better start thinking about how that child is going to come out!" Mrs. Longbottom reminded them. "Brown hair, brown eyes, bushy hair can all be explained away by my Neville's hair and eye color and Luna's loose curly hair. A cousin can be made up that had bushy, curly hair, and it will pass. But what if it comes out with black hair, black eyes, and pale skin? You're all just lucky it's a girl and not a boy!" She sat down wearily in her chair. "Lord, help me. A boy could come out the spit of his father! Thank goodness we won't have that to consider. Although you never know with genetics, and Severus' features are so dominant...we may have to consider glamors, you realize, if worst comes to worst."

"How are we going to pull this off? Honestly, it was a superb idea when Luna came to you and Neville. I was so desperate...but how are we in reality going to do this?" Hermione panicked.

Augusta Longbottom stood up from her chair and held her back straight and tall. "Now, you listen, Hermione Granger. You have served the Order well. You never gave in, even when they tortured and humiliated you, you came back to fight in the final battle. You have given your all, and you will give once more."

She leaned over Hermione and continued, her eyes blazing. "You are going to suffer, oh, yes, my girl, you will suffer. You will carry this child to the bitter end, and when the time comes, you will give birth. You will hurt as you have never hurt in your life, but you will take it. Why? Because it will be the most productive day in your life. The hardest day's work for you will be pushing that child out of your womb and giving her life.

"You then will heal. You'll go and heal your body, heart, and mind. You will make something of yourself and use your mind to be someone great in our world. You will find a man one day who will understand what choices you had to make, and he will forgive you for giving away your only child. Then, if God is kind to you, he will give you another to soothe your empty heart. And it will be empty. None of this will be easy. Luna will carry the stigma of getting pregnant before marriage. She and Neville will have to live meager lives so your child can live safely and securely. None of this will be easy, but it must be done, unless you want to explain to Severus Snape about your condition."

Hermione shook her head violently. There was no way she could do that. *Never*.

Augusta straightened her back. "Severus Snape has suffered. You know that. We all were aware of the trials and the humiliations he suffered. All of those evil cretins were thrown into Azkaban for their heinous crimes! One thing Severus Snape has been able to do is hold his head up high because he never tortured or violated anyone. Don't you recall those poor women and men crying in the witness chair, telling all and sundry the shameful things inflicted on them? Do you want that? You would crush the man if he knew it had been you. As it is, he already knows in his soul that somewhere dead or alive, some unfortunate girl was violated by him. But he can be spared being branded a rapist. Can you do that for him at least, for all the sufferings he endured for all of us?"

Hermione nodded. She wiped her tears and agreed with the plan. As soon as she could stand after giving birth, she would Floo to Xenophilius Lovegood's house and convalesce there with Augusta standing by to aid her. Neville and Luna would remain at the Longbottom house and begin their life with their new daughter.

"What will you name her?" whispered Hermione to Luna.

"We thought Alice Hermione," she said, her eyes glazed over in happiness.

Then Hermione began to cry.

A/N: Thanks to my beta, karelia, for her hard work and to beaweasley and Braye for the cheerleading! Please review. I live for reviews! :)

Into Hiding

Chapter 2 of 24

Hermione waits safely hidden at Augusta's house.

A/N: Sorry for the delay and the shortness of the chapter. The next chapter will be up sooner and longer. Please review! As always, thanks to my beta, karelia, and to my cheerleader, Braye.

The days passed on at a snail's pace. By the end of July, Hermione was purely miserable. She was getting sick from no exercise and being cooped in the house. So, Augusta Disillusioned Hermione, and she was able to go outside after dark for a walk in the country.

"I'm glad we are able to do this, Hermione," Luna said as she wore her "pregnancy pillow," just in case someone should see her.

"It's Harry's birthday tomorrow; you're sure you want to go ahead with this?" she asked nervously.

"Sure," Luna said as she looked about her with a wide smile. "These walks make me really feel comfortable with this fake pillow on. I have to do it anyway, so it's a good a time as any. Besides, I'd rather get the first visit behind me."

"Seven months, Luna. In two months, you will be having a baby. Ready to be a mum?" Hermione whispered.

"Hermione," Luna whispered. "Neville and I talked about it, and we know Alice won't be ours forever."

Hermione jerked her head towards the blonde-haired witch. "What?" she nearly screeched. "What are you talking about?"

"Hermione," Luna said calmly. "When you've finally found your security and the wonderful career that I'm positive you will have, you will start thinking about Alice, and then she'll go to Hogwarts. She'll do something, say something, and Professor Snape will know. He can't be fooled forever."

"Then there shall be the devil to pay!" Hermione raged. "Don't let her go to Hogwarts—when the time comes, I'll pay for her to go study in America, France! Luna, why are we doing all of this if it will all come apart in a decade?"

"To give you and Professor Snape time," she whispered.

"This is insane!" Hermione snarled. "Does Augusta know about this?"

"Of course not, silly!" she said as she laughed. "She would kill us all with just her rage."

"No, Hermione, you will see when she's ready to leave our home. She'll find her father first and then you. That's when it will really be hard."

Hermione was aghast. She had been given a ten-year reprieve. What was she going to do once Alice went to Hogwarts?"

"Harry and Ron are coming!" yelled Neville. Hermione got up as quickly as she could with Neville's help and waddled up the stairs. Augusta came into the kitchen to greet the two young wizards and give Neville and Luna time to get arranged.

She opened the door, and said, "Well, Messrs. Potter and Weasley! Do come in."

The two wizards bowed slightly and gave their thanks. "Are Neville and Luna here, Mrs. Longbottom?" Harry asked.

Augusta smiled. He looked so afraid of her. *How precious!* she thought.

"You both come inside and make yourselves comfortable. Neville and Luna are both in the sitting room."

They sauntered in and greeted Neville warmly.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" Neville said as he extended his hand out to Ron's as well.

Neville scratched the back of his neck and leaned in to speak, "Luna won't be able to come with us, and she's not feeling all that great."

Harry and Ron both looked at Luna who was sitting with a blanket snug up under her bosom, smiling serenely.

"Hello, Harry, Ron!" she called out.

"Hey, Luna," said Harry, "Sorry you're out of sorts."

Ron looked at Harry as if he had just sprouted a horn on his head. "Is that all the better you can say?" he barked. "Bloody hell, Harry—look at her!"

Augusta felt it was the right time to intervene. "Mr. Weasley, I would appreciate it if you would refrain from cursing in my home," she said coolly.

"Sorry, Mrs. Longbottom," Ron mumbled as his face turned red.

"Is that true?" Harry asked.

Neville put on his best sheepish face and said, "Yeah, it was around the time everyone was scared in January about people missing from the Order. Luna and I just got all caught up in it. Hermione was a real peach, trying to cover for us, taking us to Australia with her, but Gran just wouldn't have it."

"I should say so!" she thundered. "My son's only child, my only grandchild is having my great-grandchild! I won't hear of any such thing!"

"So, you're here until the birth?" asked Harry.

"Actually, we'll be married just before the baby arrives. Then we'll live here while Neville works on his apprenticeship with Madam Sprout. Once I get a foot in the door, so to speak, you know, earn my stripes, then I will be able to get rooms of my own, and we'll move in there."

"So, Hermione is all alone?" asked Ron with worry written all over his face.

"Oh, no," said Luna. "She gave Neville a cell phone, and we get an owl the day before and she writes the time and date. Neville goes out into the field a ways and we talk. She says to wish you a 'Happy Birthday.'"

"I just don't understand why she didn't owl herself!" Harry retorted.

"Mr. Potter," Augusta interrupted. "You need to consider Miss Granger's feelings. She's had quite the time with her parents. It's been difficult. It will take time for them to work things out. Just give her time to sort things out with her parents."

"Oh. I guess I didn't think about it that way."

Augusta smiled as she stood up straight and tall. "That's all right. Neville will be more than happy to have a night out with you. Have a Happy Birthday, Mr. Potter."

"What is it?" asked Ron staring at Luna curiously.

"A girl," she replied dreamily as she patted her bulge. "We are naming her Alice, after Neville's mum."

"Oh," was all that came out.

Augusta could see the sentimentality was getting to the young wizards, and they left quickly.

Hermione heard the door close as she rubbed her hands in circles over her bulging middle. "Alice Hermione," she said aloud. "I hope you come out looking more like me than your father. Never forget that I love you. I love you too much to keep you and have you look down upon me. It would destroy your father and ruin all our lives. This way, you will have the family of a pure-blood name to shield you. Being the child of a half-blood Death Eater wizard and a Muggle-born witch isn't really the best start for you. But I love you, nevertheless."

Augusta had stopped on the stairs as she peered into the upper room where Hermione lived. She watched the young woman pat and stroke her large belly delicately. She heard the tender words Hermione muttered to herself and brushed away a tear. She sighed and returned downstairs to get Hermione's dinner. It wouldn't last forever. Severus Snape would sniff his progeny out of the child and demand his rights. But until then, she was safe. At eleven she could understand more the circumstances of her parentage. But until that day, they would love little Alice Hermione as their own, and if she could help it, keep it that way.

Pain

Chapter 3 of 24

Hermione gives birth to Alice.

A/N: I want to thank everyone for the wonderful reviews! Keep them coming; I love each and every one. :) I realize many of you are thinking, "Where the hell is Snape?" Let me assure you, Snape will arrive shortly, and his thoughts about the war and what happened that night at Avery Manor on his birthday will be addressed. Thanks to my beta, Karelia, who works so hard to get these chapters out for you all to read. Also, I want to thank Braye for her cheerleading. Last, but not least, to a real sweetheart who read this story ages ago and gave me her impressions and thoughts WAY before anyone else saw it, Shellsnapelover. Enjoy and PLEASE REVIEW!

"AARRUUGGHHHH!" Hermione screamed. "This fucking hurts!"

Hermione's labor began two days after her due date. She had woken up at four in the morning moaning in pain. Augusta and Luna readied her by walking her around the little annex where she lived.

By nine o'clock, Hermione was crying as the two witches held onto each of her arms, keeping her upright and walking. Neville watched in horror as his Gran ordered him to watch.

"You'll remember this, Neville!" she had chided to him as Hermione moaned through each contraction. "Childbirth is not for the weak. You and Luna remember that when you get married. Sex is all grand and wonderful in the moment, but be careless just once, and you'll have to pay the fiddler!"

"I can't do this," Hermione wailed as she started to sink onto the floor. "Let me lie down!"

Neville was feeling decidedly ill as he watched Hermione writhe and cry as each contraction passed. Soon, she was sleeping after each contraction and would wake up crying and screaming as another came. Neville continued to watch, horrified at the look of anguish on Hermione's face. He wondered how women could do this. He thought of Molly Weasley and his stomach lurched. How could she allow herself to go through this kind of torture? *Well, at least Luna will have a child of our own to love and be a mum to, and she didn't have to suffer to get her.* He thought of Hermione as she continued to cry and moan. *How much would she suffer! How will she be able to walk away from her baby after so much pain?* He realized then that Luna was right. Hermione would come back to claim her when she was older and in a better position to care for her. *Either that or Snape will suss it out. Nothing ever gets by that thrice-damned wizard* he swore to himself.

Augusta set her mouth in a firm line and nodded sharply to Luna. Luna sat up against the headboard and let Hermione rest against her. She was dripping with sweat and crying for her mother.

"Forget your mother, Hermione," Augusta voice pierced through her cries and pleas. "You are the mother, and you have to remain in control. Self-control, discipline, and hard work will get you through! Now you need to focus and when the time comes, make each contraction count!"

Neville decided to make himself useful by bringing strong coffee for his Gran and Luna as Hermione struggled through her labor. "I'll get you some coffee, Gran," he whispered before dashing down the stairs.

What the hell is wrong with me? he thought. I fought in a war! I've seen bodies broken in pieces, gaping wounds in my friends' bodies as they screamed before dying. Why can't I face this? It must be the unfairness of it. Hermione didn't conceive Alice out of love. It was a cruel and brutal act that hurt her and now she has to suffer even more pain. Snape should be the one screaming in agony, not her!

He came up the stairs and heard his Gran talking Hermione through another contraction.

"You are doing well, Hermione," Augusta assured her. "It's happening fast. Alice is eager to come into the world!"

"I can't believe this," Hermione groaned as another contraction washed over her. "It hurts like nothing I could fucking imagine! AAAAAHHHHHHH!"

It continued on for another hour. Hermione was tired. "Why is this taking so goddamn long?" Her voice was hoarse. She collapsed back onto Luna who kept a cool cloth on her forehead and wiped the hot sweat that drenched them both.

"First-time babies are notoriously slow, Hermione. Your body hasn't done this before; it takes longer. But you've been at it for seven straight hours with a lot of good contractions. Now get up, and walk around. It will help get the baby to drop," the older witch advised.

"Or let's have her sit on the toilet, that should really help with the gravity," Luna suggested.

"Excellent idea, Luna," Augusta said as she mopped her forehead.

Hermione was dizzy and ill. "I'm going to throw up," said as her body began to shake uncontrollably.

Augusta gave her a pan to retch in. The force of her vomiting made Hermione scream in excruciating pain.

"Oh, shit!" Hermione cursed. "I wet myself!"

Augusta laughed heartily as she shooed Neville out of the room in order to change her. When Neville came back, Hermione was in a new nightshirt and her legs were exposed and spread apart widely.

"W-Why a-am I s-s-so c-cold?" Hermione said as she shook terribly.

Luna wrapped a blanket around Hermione's trembling shoulders. "It's transition, Hermione," Luna explained. "It won't be long now, and then you can rest."

Hermione's eyes grew large, and she pushed herself upright on the bed. "I have to push, I have to push!" she shouted. She didn't wait for Augusta to check her; she bore down and pushed.

"Wait!" shouted the older witch as she placed her hands on both of Hermione's exposed thighs. "Do you want to tear yourself into ribbons? Let me see what's going on."

Hermione moaned piteously and looked at Neville. The pain in her light chocolate eyes terrified him. He had never seen her in so much agony or fear. Not even during the war or even after her escape from the dungeon where she had been held captive. She had carried on with her normal single-mindedness that had always steered her as long as he had known her. Seeing her like this was tearing his heart apart. He swore he would never let Luna conceive. Never. He would sterilize himself before putting her through such horrific pain and terror.

"Superb!" Augusta said. "Now, each time the contractions come, I want you to push as hard as you can until I say stop. Luna, Neville grab her under her knees and hold them back."

Neville pushed all his disgust out of his mind and, with everything he had, grasped onto Hermione's leg. There was a lot of urine, shit, and blood, but there was a bulge protruding out from her.

"Okay," Hermione gasped as she felt the next wave come over her. She bore down, and Augusta said, "It's the head! She's coming! Give me one more push, Hermione," she urged her.

Hermione weakly pushed again and again. She thought it would never end, and she would die like this...and Snape would never know...

Hermione would remember for the rest of her life how she felt the moment Alice Hermione was born. A great pain had seized her terribly, and she had sincerely thought she was dying. Then a gigantic wave of pressure had washed over her, and the pain just stopped. She had fallen back into Luna's arms, and then had slipped into sweet unconsciousness.

When she woke, Augusta was by her side in an old rocker. The old witch smiled at her and said as she continued to knit, "You did well enough, Hermione, once you got your head about you. You had a healthy, baby girl. She was around a little over eight pounds...a good size babe. She has fair skin and curly dark hair, but not black. Her nose is small and pert like yours, and her eyes are dark. We'll have to see if they remain dark like Severus'."

Hermione thought it was so strange that her baby girl was not even here in the room. Also, how Mrs. Longbottom called Alice's father "Severus" and not "father," but then she remembered that she had already given her away. Her eyes smarted with prickling tears.

"You will be very emotional for a while. Just remember it's your hormones fluctuating. Go ahead and cry if you need to. Makes no sense at all to hold it all back. You have to realize the depth of the reality here."

"I want to see her," Hermione rasped. "I can't just walk away and not know her face."

Augusta kept rocking. "In a while, Hermione. Now you need to sleep some more. Your body is healing," she said softly.

Hermione was extremely tired, and felt the urge to sleep again. She sighed and pulled the covers tighter around her.

"W-Why is my chest bound?" she asked. She was awake now and scared. What had they done to her?

Augusta handed Hermione a cup. "Drink it down, Hermione. It's a calming draught and a sleeping potion. Luna and I bound your breasts to stop your milk from coming in,"

she explained.

A shrill wail came up the stairs to Hermione's ears. "She needs me," she called piteously as she cried. "I need her," she whispered as sleep overcame her.

Into the Meadow

Chapter 4 of 24

Hermione goes to be reunited with her parents, and they get her to thinking about her future.

Sorry for the wait. I had a small surgery, but the aftermath was a haze of Vicodin (now I know how it feels to be House!). Hope this intrigues you. And for those who are waiting to hear about Snape, he will be in the next chapter (rubs hands evilly).

Thanks to my cheerleaders, Maria and Beth! And an extra round of applause for Karelia, who somehow finds time in her very busy life to deal with my crappy grammar! ;)

For three days, Hermione rested and healed from the birth. She felt she had been soundly thrashed, but at least she could walk around. As soon as she was able to get down the stairs, Augusta announced it was time for her to recuperate at the Lovegood house.

Hermione was so drugged on all the various potions Mrs. Longbottom made her take that she felt numb the entire time. Luna came to her just before they went to Floo to the Lovegood house in Ottery St. Catchpole to show her Alice Hermione.

Hermione took Alice into her arms and looked at the slumbering child. She indeed had curly hair, a darker brown than her own chestnut hair, but it seemed a bit more tamed than her bushy locks. Hermione thought how odd she should thank Professor Snape for his lanky hair. Only his genetic disposition for stick-straight locks could spare her daughter from a lifetime of agony over frizzy hair.

She stroked her hair and her skin, imprinting on her mind the delicate fingers and fair skin. Baby Alice jerked in her sleep and opened her eyes a bit. They were dark; however, all babies had dark-blue eyes when they were born, unless they were brown. These eyes were definitely blue, like a midnight blue. Hermione kissed her daughter gently on her soft lips and nuzzled her nose with her own.

"I love you," she whispered as her lips grazed Alice's. "I will always love you."

She looked up to Luna and gave Alice to her new mum. A sense of calm washed over her. If she had to give her child to anyone, it would be Luna she could trust to care and love her.

"Don't worry, Hermione. It's not good-bye forever," Luna reassured her. "You will know her, and she will know you. After all, she will want to know how she got the name 'Hermione!'"

Hermione swallowed a lump that was forming in her throat and followed Augusta towards the Floo. The older witch gave her an approving nod. She had been brave to not fall apart at such an emotional moment.

Life at the Lovegood house was sad and lonely. Xenophilius and Augusta tried hard to make her as comfortable as possible, but she couldn't stop the tears from coming. She tried to tell herself that it was for the best, that if Snape knew, he would be grateful to not have additional shame heaped upon him.

Many days she sat in Luna's old bedroom and looked out the window towards the Burrow. How much would she love to just collapse into Molly's loving arms and tell her everything that had happened to her. She would never be judged or made to feel unwelcome there. She knew the Weasleys would support her, but the secret would never remain hidden. Molly would demand that Snape be made aware of his daughter, and she could only shudder at what Ron and Harry would do.

Every day she had to talk herself through the same argument to keep her from running away to the Burrow.

"You realize that burdening others just because you feel a need to be pitied won't help a soul," Augusta announced one day while she sat knitting.

Hermione was cross. "What are you talking about?" she snapped.

Mrs. Longbottom looked her straight in the eye and said, "You did your duty. You knew the cost; you were made aware of the risk to your life. Still, you wanted to be in the Order. It could have been much worse. You could have been passed around to every wizard in the room and died. Or you could have been tortured into insanity like my son and his wife. But your life was spared. It was tragic what you endured, but you knew the cost! Don't allow this to define you, Hermione."

Hermione whirled around on the older witch. "Define me! It wasn't as if this were only three days of my life taken from me. Giving up my child has *nothing* to do with the Order! Define me?"

She laughed in the woman's face before turning her back and looking out the window. "For the rest of my life, I will have to live with the knowledge that a part of me is living and breathing apart from me. The pain won't ever go away!"

Augusta Longbottom jumped up from her chair and seized the younger witch by shoulders, forcing her to turn and face her. "Now, you know the bitterness of doing what is right. Only fools believe the right thing will always feel good and satisfying. Sometimes making the right choice is not as clear and easy to recognize. You must have an ability to step back and see the sum of all the parts, working together in harmony.

"You will suffer, and you will bear your loss with dignity. Do you think I do not understand the kind of pain that is life enduring? I see my son and his wife fading into nothing as each day passes. Once there was hope, but then it was over. I go every week and face the consequences of what others have done. I could have kept them in my home. There was room, and the Ministry would have gladly paid for any help or additional care for them in order to be with their family. But I chose Neville over them. I CHOSE my grandson over my own son, so he would not have to see his parents every day in their hell! I lived with my choice because I knew it was best for Neville. Yes, I could have been kinder and more loving to him. Yes, I faltered and allowed my anger rule me, but you listen to me, Hermione Granger. Let my errors show you a better way.

"Hold on to what is best and noble for your daughter. She will be safe in a family of pure-bloods. She will never face the stigma of being a Death Eater's child. Just knowing her parentage would strike a chord of pity into every witch's heart, and Alice would have to bear the shame for being a rape child!"

Months passed, and Augusta Longbottom's words reverberated in Hermione's mind. After she had healed from the delivery, she went to Australia to find her parents. She hadn't known what to expect, but it all worked itself out well.

Yet, it was still difficult for Hermione. She would half-listen to her mother talk incessantly about the strong connection between a mother and her child, especially between mothers and daughters. Hermione would smile weakly and hug her mum, telling her she loved her.

One evening her father decided to take them all out for dinner. It was a lovely restaurant, and Hermione narrowed her eyes as she looked at her parents. They were up to something.

She laid down her menu and took a sip of her wine. "Fine," she said. "Why don't you both tell me now what you are doing so I will then be able to eat in peace?"

Her mother and father smiled and clasped hands. It drove a knife through Hermione's heart. Oh, how she wished it were possible for someone to love her!

Her mother jarred her from her thoughts.

"That's what I'm talking about," said Jane Granger.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at her mother's accusing finger. "What is wrong with you two?" she asked.

Her mother took Hermione's hand into her own and said, "I know that it must be hard for you. Your father and I never had to go off to war, and we certainly never expected for our daughter to do so; nevertheless, the fact remains that you are clearly unhappy. Now, I won't begrudge you that, but if you were only your true self again! You seem to be so lost, so... *fragile*. We're worried for you, Hermione, and we want you to get back on the horse and reclaim the person you once were."

Hermione withdrew her hand away from her mother's grasp. The voice that emitted from her mouth was foreign to her. It was cold, resentful, and full of underlying rage. "The person you knew was a child, and I am no longer a child. I won't lie; I am having a hard time of it. There are things that happened that I can't talk about, and it is just going to take time for me to figure out who the 'adult' Hermione is."

Hermione's parents were silent for quite a while on the subject as they ordered their food and made small talk.

Hermione's father spoke up next and said, "You know, your mother and I never did get your news about what kind of career you wanted. The last I heard was that a class called 'Ancient Runes' was fascinating!"

Hermione shook her head in exasperation. "Dad, that was four years ago!" she chided him as she chuckled.

She glanced up from her plate to see her father's brown eyes shining down at her. "Well, I think you should fill us in on your final year. What classes did you excel? What ideas and dreams have you *conjured* for yourself, eh?" he replied jovially with twinkling eyes.

"Well," she began, "I did fancy Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, but I don't see a career in that direction, only if I wished to teach...which I don't!"

Jane Granger looked carefully at her daughter. "I was always under the impression that you rather admired your Professor McGonagall. I distinctly recall your mentioning a teaching career."

Hermione felt cornered. "Let's just say I don't want any part in teaching at Hogwarts, so let's drop it, okay?" she snapped back her mother.

"Fine," Jane replied. "What others ideas and dreams do have? You were very passionate about the rights of magical creatures."

Hermione shrugged. "I always thought of having my very own shop once. I wanted to be something of a pharmacist in the magical world. I was good at Potions, but I think it's a silly idea. Research, perhaps for the Ministry, is a good option. I am very comfortable and at home with my books, and I think I could work well in their research and development area."

"Tell me more about this pharmacy business. Aren't there any in the magical world?" asked her father.

"Well," Hermione said as she tried to chew a bit of her lasagna. She swallowed and said, "People usually go to apothecaries where potions are sold, and also for the very snobbish and rich, there are very high-end stores where people can pay for others to find their ingredients to home brew their own remedies. There are some ingredients that are difficult to find and are either rare or can only be harvested at a certain point of the year.

"I thought that would be fascinating, traveling the world and finding rare ingredients for people. It could be quite lucrative, especially if you are very choosy with your clientele. You must have the best of reputations."

Jane Granger laughed. "Who else but you could ever outshine anyone with your reputation? You have always been the model of the perfect young lady. Besides, you are a M-Muggle-born," she said as she stammered to remember the word, "you would be the ideal person for such a business since you can work within the best of both worlds!"

"Mum," Hermione said as she took a sip of wine, "I am not really eager to return to England. To make a real go of it, I must be in Europe. Outside of Europe, I am nobody. If I were to do this right, I would need to be in England, but I don't want to return."

"Why not live on the continent?" asked her father. "France...there is that school there you told us about."

"Beauxbatons Academie," Hermione murmured. "They are in the south. I would have to start in wizarding Paris, I would think."

"Well, why don't you think on it, eh, Hermione?" prodded her father.

Hermione nodded her head and gave a smile. It had been such an old dream, one that she would fantasize about when she had made Polyjuice Potion second year. It had been such a rush stealing those ingredients from...

She stopped her musings and didn't allow herself to think it. Perhaps it wouldn't be a good idea. If she were to be a procurer of potions, she would have to go all the way and be a success. But if she were a success, she would bound to be face to face with Professor Snape one day. It had been ten months since Alice Hermione's birth, and although a day never passed that she didn't think of her, she never willingly wanted to think of him, but he was always lurking around in the dark corners of her mind.

That night the nightmare came back to haunt her. She hadn't had one in nearly three months and thought she had evolved past them; however, she found herself back on that dungeon floor, the burlap bag on her head, watching her professor force himself inside her; his obvious disgust at her virgin body. Yet, she could not forget the small groan that he had uttered. Hermione knew it must have been at that precise moment a small release of his semen found its way inside of her.

Ironically, that wasn't the worst part.

The worst part was later, hearing the jeers directed at her about Professor Snape having sex with that other witch. Hurtful words filled her mind of her worthlessness, her ugliness, and her disgusting example as a female. It could have been borne, if only they had not told her of the other witch. She could only imagine how beautiful the witch must have been as she climaxed. Hermione had imagined in morbid curiosity how he must have suckled her breasts and kissed her lips like a starving man. She saw her professor's face staring down with his piercing black eyes as he continued to have his way with her, his hands gliding over her legs and arms, preparing her, wanting her.

Then the woman became Hermione.

She was the woman Severus was fucking. She wanted to feel good...she deserved to feel good. He ~~owed~~ her.

Hermione would wake up in a sweat, her nipples aching and her clitoris throbbing. To her shame, she would masturbate. What kind of person was she? Why did she feel he owed her? Was it because she had carried his child for nine months and went through agonizing pain to bring that child into the world, and all she had to thank for all that pain was the harsh rending for her virginity, a couple of thrusts, a groan and then a hasty withdrawal?

Hermione cried after she climaxed. She always did. She was so angry. Sex had not even properly been introduced to her before conceiving and having a baby. She wanted so desperately to be loved, but the thought of a man touching her was exciting and terrifying all at once. She hated Severus Snape for breaking her body and mind apart, destroying the dreams she had laid out for herself, and yet, she wanted him to know that it had been her, that it had been her body he had left damaged and bleeding only to bring another woman pleasure. She wondered if she had conceived as well. Was he married now that the war was over? Did he ever think of her, the young woman in the burlap sack?

A/N: Snape is coming up next! Please review!

The Encounter

Chapter 5 of 24

Severus Snape meets Alice Hermione Longbottom.

A/N: Here we are! Here is Alice and her first encounter with her real father, Severus Snape. Thanks to karelia and Beth for sticking with me and the encouraging words. Please review! I want to know your thoughts on Snape meeting his daughter for the first time! :)

Life for the Longbottoms had been charmed. Alice Hermione was the most adorable child, and she was an absolute joy to everyone who knew her. Neville worked hard for a couple of years and then earned his position at Hogwarts under Madam Sprout. He brought his four-year-old daughter and his wife to live with him, and in no time at all, she was the darling of Gryffindor House.

Alice was a precocious child, and being the pet of so many made her cheekier than a four-year-old had a right to be. She was a willowy thing, petite, with dark, wavy hair. She was also fair skinned and had the most darling pink cheeks that when she smiled, showed a slight dimple on her lower left cheek. Her eyes were so dark they were nearly black, but when caught in the right light, people could notice the soft, dark chocolate color in them.

A week after the Longbottoms moved into the castle, Alice was outside, playing and enjoying the spring air after a good night's rain to fashion mud pies for her afternoon tea with her dolly. She sat in the mud pile in one of her old, worn play dresses that her mummy didn't care if it got dirty and was happily patting away to her heart's content.

Soon, a dark figure loomed behind her, blocking out the sun. She turned around to see who the intruder was and looked up at an angry man with black hair and eyes, wearing all black robes.

"What do you think you are doing, young lady?"

"I'm not a young laa-dee," she said, drawing out the word. "I'm Alice Hermione!"

The dark man folded his arms and responded coldly, "Your father is Mr. Longbottom, correct?"

The little girl furrowed her eyebrows and, without a word, turned her back to him and went back to her work.

"I am speaking to you, Miss Longbottom." His voice was soft and controlled. "Didn't your mother have the common sense to teach you manners?"

Alice stood up and faced him. "Don't you say anythin' 'bout my mummy!" she yelled. "And I don't like you! You're rude!" Then she took one of her mud pies and threw it at the front of his robes.

"You little hellion," he seethed. "You get out of here this minute, and go to your father." He took out a handkerchief and wiped the mud off of him. As he cleaned himself, he muttered aloud, forgetting the child hadn't moved a bit. "Stupid boy, first he gets that Lovegood girl up the duff, and now look at the result!" He looked up to see her still there, looking defiantly at him. He glared at her. She set her face in a terrible scowl and firmly placed her balled-up hands on her waist.

"Look at the state of your dress; it is disgraceful!" he snapped at her. "Tell me, what kind of loving parent allows their child to wander about looking like common gutter trash?"

Alice stomped her foot on the ground. "I'm not scared of you!" she shouted at him. "And my mummy loves me, even if I do get my dresses dirty."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "You'll be a Gryffindor for sure," he sneered. "What sort of little girl are you? You have the temper of raging hippogriff!"

Alice stood her ground against the looming wizard. "You're a mean ole man! There's nuthin' wrong with my dress, and I don't have a temper!" she snapped back at him as she stomped her little foot. She then reached down for another mud pie and was stopped in her tracks as her mud pie flew out of her hand and smashed on the ground with a flick of the wizard's wand.

"Don't even think about throwing mud again on me, Miss Longbottom. You happen to be playing in front of my private entrance into the dungeons, and I am far too busy to

deal with little spoiled brats who can't maintain their manners or check their tempers!"

Alice, still scowling, said, "You're an old bully, and I hate you!" She dissolved into a puddle of tears and ran off to find her daddy. He would make it better. That mean old man would get it once her daddy heard the things he said.

She ambled into one of the greenhouses where her daddy was working and tugged on his robe. "Daddy," she said.

Neville looked down. "There's my princess! My, my, what have you been up to?" he asked as he looked at her muddy dress, hands and face.

"Am I a brat?" she asked.

Neville stooped down. "No, darling," he replied as he wiped the tear streaks that had been smeared with mud from her face. "You are my sweet girl."

"There was a mean man who yelled at me and said my dress was ugly. And he said I don't have manners." Her lower lip quivered as she spoke, and large tears were filling up in her eyes.

Neville closed his eyes and sighed. "What else did he say?"

"He don't like us. He said I look like trash. It was rude!" She furrowed her brow and continued, "I don't like it. He said mean things 'bout mummy and you. So I throw'd my mud pie at him."

Neville figured his face had to be ghostly white. *My Lord, she has her mother and her father's temper. Now she's gone and really done it!*

"Alice Hermione," he began sternly, "you were rude and disrespectful to Professor Snape. That is his name. *Professor Snape*. You and I will have a talk about this later, and then you will apologize to him at dinner for being rude."

"But *he* was rude!" she shouted in anger.

Neville held up his hand to silence her. "I will have a talk with him too, but I want you to stay away from him from now on, do you hear?"

"Yes, Daddy," she mumbled.

"Professor Snape?" called out Neville as he reached the Potions classroom.

Snape came out of his storeroom, looking viciously angry. "Longbottom!" he snarled. "I would greatly appreciate it if you could keep your offspring out of trouble and away from my property."

Neville sighed. "What did she do? Break your wards and steal into your stores?" he asked with a hint of sarcasm.

Snape sneered as he crossed his arms in front of him. "Your daughter was playing in the mud, directly in front of my personal entrance into the dungeons. She looked like an urchin...a homeless beggar! Is that the best you can do for your family? Or is she mentally stunted? I know I had always believed you to be."

"Look, Snape," Neville replied as he stood up to him. "Insult me all you want. I know you don't respect me. But Alice is only a little girl. You leave her be. I've already told her to stay away from you, but she will come round to apologize for her behavior at dinner."

Neville turned to walk away, and Snape said, "You would do better to keep your eye on that temper of hers, Longbottom. She must take after her grandmother."

Neville smiled as he turned around, his wand hand at the ready. "Oh, yes. I still have never gotten that picture out of my head of you dressed as her when I was a third year," he said wistfully.

He walked away as the older wizard began to rage in front of him. Finally, he had his revenge on the professor for seven years of torment.

Luna sat at her vanity, brushing out her hair, laughing raucously.

"I really don't see the humor in this, Luna!" he chided.

"Oh, Neville," she said sweetly. "It is funny. Ever since she first showed us her little personality, she has always had a temper. She's just giving back to the professor what he gave her from his own genetic pool!"

"Do you think he will ever suspect?" he whispered as he pulled a chair close to her.

Luna shrugged. "I can't say, darling," she replied. "All I do know is that one day it will come out. Secrets like these never can remain forever. I just pray that it won't be anytime soon."

"Well, she is apologizing. I made that quite clear to her," he said firmly.

"Certainly, Neville," she said dreamily as she stood up. "Let's wake up Alice and go to dinner."

Professor Snape sat at the head table and spied on the Longbottom family. They were a decidedly happy family. However, something nagged him about their daughter. As he looked at the complexions of her parents, he couldn't help but think she seemed out of place. Her hair was too dark. Moreover, there was something familiar about her face. Something was amiss, yet he couldn't place his finger on it.

In due course, the girl and her parents came over to have Alice apologize. She stood in front of him, her huge dark eyes looking up at him imploringly. "I'm sorry we lost our tempers," she whispered.

A Gryffindor? he thought. *That was a Slytherin move if ever I've seen one.*

He raised his eyebrow as he sat facing the little girl. "I did not lose my temper, Miss Longbottom," he said, keeping the tenor of his voice smooth as satin, "however, I will admit to being unkind. It happens to be a part of my nature. I shall overlook the soiling of my clothes if you will promise to control your tongue." He gave her a smirk, waiting to see what she would do next.

The girl gave him a warm smile, showing off a dimple on her left cheek. He looked carefully into her face. She then threw her arms around his neck. "I promise I'll be good," she whispered into his ear.

He grunted in reply and endured the unabashed attentions of a four-year-old as she kissed his cheek. He looked up at her beaming parents and saw the most curious thing. Neither of her parents had dimples.

Snape was shocked. She couldn't possibly be their child. But why? Why would these young people place themselves directly into the line of the gossips' fire proclaiming a hasty wedding due to the bride being pregnant, especially such a well-respected wizard as Longbottom? He decided to continue to observe the girl and figure out the mystery of her true parentage.

Into the Clearing

Chapter 6 of 24

Hermione allows herself to become close to a wizard who mentors her in the art of gathering.

A/N: Sorry about the delay. Thank you for being patient. I promise Snape will be in the next chapter. Things are going to get complicated after this chapter. Please review! As always, my deepest thanks to my beta, Karelia, and to my cheerleaders, Beth and Maria.

As the Longbottoms were making Hogwarts their home, a bright and intriguing young witch was staking her territory in wizarding Australia. Her parents had convinced her to become a merchant of potion ingredients, so she began a two-year quest with Potion masters of Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand, learning about all the various exotic herbs and roots that were easy to find, if one was indigenous to the territories. She studied with a fine, rugged Australian named Jack Muldoon. She had met him through some of the contacts she made in the wizarding community near where her parents lived. She had been desperate to meet him. He was an expert bushman and tracker of potions ingredients. Jack immersed into hands-on instruction. Hermione's training of Herbology, Flora, and Fauna had been more exciting and educational with him than in any classroom setting.

Jack was an older wizard, but not so much older that there couldn't be an attraction between them. His back was strong and his shoulders wide. He could work for hours on end without tiring. Jack was a man in his prime. There was twenty years between them, and yet, Hermione did not see how a younger wizard could best him. Hermione watched him often, regarding his muscular form and the strength he displayed when needed. Spending time together on "walk-about," meeting with the Aborigines, who were not wizards, but could see the magical world around them, had been most accommodating and helpful. At times, Hermione and Jack were the only white faces around for kilometers. Often, they were accepted as husband and wife by the Aborigines and expected them to behave as such. Jack, who spoke their languages, would always laugh and explain that she was his student, learning about the art of potion making, alchemy, and gathering the various potions ingredients in their region.

Still, sometimes they were placed in the same tent and given the best of bedding, food, and comforts the people in the village could afford. One evening, as they lay on their sides in their tent, facing each other and telling stories about their lives, Hermione found herself staring into his green eyes. His hair was a dark auburn, and he had roughened skin from a life out in the outback.

"Hermione," he whispered as his strong hands caressed her small, suntanned one. "Do you know how beautiful you are?"

Hermione had found herself out of her depth. "I was just thinking about one of my best friends," she replied. "He has green eyes like yours."

She had been nervously looking down at where his hand was touching hers. Her chin was tipped upwards, and she could feel herself shaking terribly against his touch.

"Hermione," he said softly. "I'm a man who has always gone from woman to woman. I won't lie and say I haven't had many lovers...I have. But it has been a long time since I have found someone so enchanting. I think I'm ready to be a one-woman man. Do you think there could be room in your heart for me?"

Hermione felt her body freeze as he looked so closely into her eyes. Before she could realize what was happening, he was closing the gap between them, and she could feel the warmth of his breath on her skin.

"NO!" she screamed as she scrambled from him and ran out of the tent and into the desert. She just ran as fast as she could. The tears in her eyes stung, and she felt cold on her face as she ran. She wished that she could run fast enough that the past could be left behind. Then she could be free. Flashes of memories whirled in her head. She was so cold and scared in the dark dungeon room, naked and bleeding. She could hear her professor's groan as he ripped into her, breaking her, the months in the upstairs annex of the Longbottom house, she remembered the ripping, searing pain as she gave birth to her daughter, her daughter that was no longer hers, but bore her name.

She tripped and fell on the ground, gasping for breath. Jack was next to her on the ground, and it all came out: the war, her capture, and her fears that she still held inside.

"Oh, damn, Hermione," Jack said gently as he held her to him as a friend would. She exhaled jaggedly as she relaxed into his arms.

"There's more than just the war and being a POW, isn't there?" he whispered.

Hermione tensed and drew away from him. "I can't," she whispered.

Jack gently took her face into his hands. "Hermione, I think I love you...no, I do love you. Can't we just hold each other?"

"If you knew the real me, you would despise me," she whispered. "Let's not talk about it."

She drew herself up, resting her chin on her knees.

"I could never despise you, Hermione," he said. "You are so lovely, inside and out. I feel I've waited my whole life for someone as perfect as you. Your mind is so brilliant and, I...forgive me...I just can't stop thinking what it would be like to make love with you."

"I had never been kissed," she whispered as her eyes stared off in the distance. "I was a gift to a Death Eater. It was his birthday. They took off all my clothes and kept my head hidden in an old burlap sack that had worn places and a couple of small holes that I could see through. He was my teacher. I knew he was a spy, I knew he wouldn't...couldn't hurt me like that, but he did. Fortunately for me, the war started the next day. I got myself out of there and fought. I never told anyone. I just slipped away after I took my NEWTs."

Jack looked at Hermione...hard. "I know of only one teacher at Hogwarts that would even come near Voldemort. Around twenty years ago, he was in the paper constantly. 'Was he or wasn't he a Death Eater?' that was the speculation. I'll kill him!"

"NO!" Hermione shouted as she grabbed his shoulders. "He doesn't know...when I came back to Hogwarts, he looked *delivered*. I saw the look on his face. He let his guard down for a moment when he saw I was alive. There were a few Order members...female Order members never seen again. I think he believed I was one of them. He was

his same old self in a day or two; it helped me to think it had never happened at all..."

Her voice had just trailed off. Jack looked into her eyes and said, "Let me make love to you, Hermione. I love you. I can do things to you that will make you feel so good you will never confuse what he did with what being with a man is supposed to be like. I know I can't take away the memories; just let me prove to you how it can be and should be for a woman. Please, Hermione."

He lightly slid his hands up Hermione's arms and kissed her neck. "Stop," she breathed. "I can't. I can't do this, and you don't know the worst part of it."

"Then tell me!" he pleaded.

"I can't," she whispered as the tears swam in her eyes. "It's not over. Not until he knows." She lowered her head and sobbed as Jack stood up.

"Do you just want to be miserable, Hermione? Let this consume all of who you are?" He leaned over her and said, "You are more than what happened to you in the war!"

"It didn't happen in the war, goddamn it!" she screamed. "I got pregnant!"

She cried as she held her head in her hands. "He got me pregnant, and I gave her away to be raised by my best friend and her husband. Everyone thinks my daughter is theirs."

Jack pulled away from her. "Why would you give up your child?" he demanded in a shocked voice.

"Her father is an ex-Death Eater, and even though he spied for the Order, he still remains on the fringes of polite society. Though we won the war, prejudice still lives on in our world. My daughter would have been treated like rubbish. Think about it: the daughter of a former Death Eater and a Muggle-born, who were student and teacher? They would know she was a child of rape. It could be something that would completely destroy any chance for him to redeem himself in the public's eye," she explained.

Jack blew out a strong breath. "I can't argue with your logic, Hermione. Is her situation better though? She needs her mum!"

Hermione was quick to answer him. "Oh, and she does! Both her parents are pure-bloods, but they fought with the Order in the war. They never believed in all that tommyrot about blood status. But for my girl, she will have the protection of a good name that will keep her safe! That is what is important...keeping her safe."

"How old is she?" he asked.

"She's four," she whispered. "I wonder how she is, what she looks like. I wonder how I will feel when I see her again."

Jack eyed her. "You are certain you will see her again?"

"Yes." Her tone was resolute. "Her name is Alice Hermione. My best friend said that one day she will want to meet the woman whom she was named after."

It was hard carrying on, knowing that Jack wanted her. Hermione still dreamt of Professor Snape...wondering about him, if he ever knew or thought of her.

No, he probably doesn't.

She and Jack finally parted company. He just couldn't understand her unwillingness to claim her own flesh and blood. Harsh words were spoken, and although he apologized, and she forgave him, the damage had been done. They agreed to separate. Hermione decided she had spent enough leaning on others. It was time to make her own way and live her life by her rules.

In the Open

Chapter 7 of 24

Hermione settles in wizarding Paris, much to the shock of some. Severus goes to hear Avery's confession before his sentence.

A/N: Hope all are well during the Arctic Blast! I'm stuck at home, no school for my girl, and mommy's gettin' stir crazy! So please review! As always, love to beta, Karelia, and my cheerleaders, Beth and Maria!

Hermione set up a small shop in wizarding Paris. The entrance was through *Le Chaudron Percé*, the French translation of The Leaky Cauldron. She was surprised to learn that every wizarding city used the same name, just in their own language to enter the wizarding community.

It was positively audacious, Hermione had first thought, to have the entrance to wizarding Paris right on the *Champs-Élysées*. Yet, she did admire their boldness. The French, and especially Parisians, are notorious for their confidence and arrogance. To hide in plain sight on the most beloved and famous street in Paris was a stroke of sheer genius, not to mention daring.

Once entering wizarding Paris, Hermione had opted to remain there. Nothing really mattered to her in Muggle Paris. The traffic was horrid, the air smelly, and the apartments were going at extortionate rates. The main street in wizarding Paris, *La Lisette de Lapin Boulevard* was like Diagon Alley, except the shops were extremely high-end and gilded in colors of lily-white, gold, silver and deep ivories. It was a breathtaking sight. The magnificent street was named after the fifteenth-century witch who was convicted of witchcraft by the Muggles. She had escaped the day before her execution through her Animagus form, which was a bunny. Legend said she was taken away in a cauldron and eventually became an advisor to England's Henry VI. There were many alleyways, or *Allées* in French.

She walked, feeling she would soon be lost if she didn't reach her destination soon.

Hermione walked and walked until she found Gringotts, the wizarding Bank that was the same as in London. She made her transfer of funds from Australia to Paris and felt content that she was now officially here to seek her fortune. After she and Jack had parted company, she had enough knowledge to embark on her own trips. She learned in another two years about the exotic locales of many a magical plant or herb, and she had a nice collection to begin her enterprise.

Hermione went deeper into the heart of wizarding Paris, which was at the center of *La Lisette de Lapin Boulevard: La maison de Guinevere*. There was an old magical stone made of rose quartz and next to it a small golden fountain. Hermione read the plaque and learned it was the last piece of masonry left from the small castle Lancelot had built for Guinevere after they had fled Camelot in shame and haste.

The energy, light, and glimmer of the stone gave the entire boulevard an extra magical aura. However, Hermione was carried away by the romance of it all. She needed a place to live. She found some at the edge where the boulevard dead ended in a "T" cross pattern with another road called, *Rue de Bistrot*, or Bistro Row. There was a very small building on the corner that looked quite shabby, but the price was decent.

In addition, the ivory with gold finish on the building had faded. Not having many Galleons, she figured that what she lacked in aesthetic quality, she could make up for in advertisement. She decided to contact the owner and begin negotiations immediately.

The building, which was terraced, as every other building on the boulevard, had two stories. Hermione was quite pleased. She could use the second story as her living quarters and the main room for her business. In no time at all, Mlle. Hermione Granger was hanging out her shingle, which was done in ivory and gold for the lettering and border. She named her new store to reflect exactly the function for which it served: *La Chasseresse*, meaning "The Huntress." For that was what she would do for her clients. She would hunt and search for whatever ingredients were needed.

All she had to do was to hire a solicitor to make sure she could not be held liable for any ingredients obtained and sold in her establishment that were used for Dark magic. It was a dilemma, for so many various, hard-to-find ingredients were used both in perfectly legal potions and Dark potions alike.

Her solicitor, Monsieur Bonhomme, said it was a clear matter of having the buyer sign a magical waiver that would, when signed, be automatically sent to *Ministère de la magie* the French equivalent of England's Ministry of Magic.

So it had been settled. Hermione was ready to begin her life as an entrepreneur and have the career that she had only dreamt of having. She only prayed that her good name and reputation for being an honest witch would catch on and spread. After all, she had only so many Galleons. She styled herself as a no-nonsense young spinster and wore the nicest Muggle clothes she could afford. She would live and compete in this world of Potions, but she would do it as a woman and as a Muggle-born witch.

Whenever she was spotted walking in wizarding Paris, she cut quite the figure and stood out amongst the other witches. Most of her time was spent either in her shop or out on the field, searching for an ingredient for a client. She hired a witch who was part-Veela but not as snobbish as Fleur Delacour had been and left the shop in her capable hands when on a job.

So when Mlle. Granger was in town, it was a bit of entertainment for the local Parisians. Some witches asked about her clothes and the shoes she wore. She made no apologies for being a Muggle-born. She explained to any of the old cats that came sniffing their disapproval her need to live in both Muggle and wizarding worlds. She chose what she liked and made her own rules of style. Soon, she was known by many as *La Chasseresse*, or The Huntress.

It had been Monsieur Philippe Valois who had broken the stalemate of a silent war between the old guard of wizard potion makers and the new witch upstart. He was a well known flamboyant old wizard who was a cousin of Lucius Malfoy, whom he referred to as "a pompous ass." Hermione had laughed so readily and her voice so full of mirth that he declared, "*A un jeune chasseur, il faut un vieux chien*"

Hermione allowed herself to be taken under the old gentleman's wing and quickly learnt the intricacies of the elite in wizarding France.

Before long, Mlle. Granger was an established and respected businesswitch. Her honest nature and organizational skills along with her innate bossy temperament had made her quite the standout. And if the French loved one thing, it was *une originale*.

It had been in the ninth year after Alice Longbottom's birth that Severus Snape received an owl from Azkaban Prison. Makepeace Tyne Avery, convicted Death Eater, was finally going to receive the Dementor's Kiss. Snape heaved a sigh as he read the parchment in the privacy of his quarters. He wasn't surprised that Avery's time had arrived. He had exhausted all his appeals. What bothered Snape the most was that Avery was asking as his final request to speak with Severus Snape one last time, in the presence of an Auror, to confess a wrong he had committed against the person to whom it had been committed. It couldn't have come at a worse time. The Ministry had found a body in a shallow grave near Malfoy Manor, and the testing at St. Mungo's proved it was the remains of Hannah Abbott.

Hannah. Her name had etched itself upon his soul. She had to have been the one he had violated that night all those years ago. He had always wondered what had happened to that faceless young woman. Did she know him? Did she realize it was he, her professor? The shame of it had never gone away, never faded. Tomorrow was her burial. He would go and pay his respects and beg her forgiveness. Yet another young woman he had to make absolution for...

The service had been very quiet and somber. He stood in the back, under some trees, not wanting anyone to see his grief. He felt the tears roll down his face and begged for forgiveness. After the funeral party had left, he went forward and placed a long-stemmed white rose on her freshly dug grave. She would always be pure, always be a sweet girl, who had never deserved what fate had given her.

Later that night, after he had come back from visiting Hannah's grave, Snape stared into the fire for a long time. Suddenly, he felt his age. He had felt at times older than this but only when he had been ill. He was perfectly fit and healthy, but now he *felt* forty-seven. He read the letter from Avery over again. He remembered the old days at Hogwarts when it had been all so easy and they had been so eager to join the Dark Lord. Snape closed his eyes and envisioned the laughing face of his old friend, his friend who would soon be no more than a shell.

A/N: "*A un jeune chasseur, il faut un vieux chien*"

(A young hunter needs an old dog.)

Tracking

Chapter 8 of 24

Snape receives news that turns his world upside-down.

A/N: Hope everyone is having a wonderful Christmas season! Here is my thanks for Beth, Maria and my long-suffering beta, Karelia.

Azkaban Prison was a terrible place, even for visitors. Luckily, Snape had very few happy memories in his life, so the Dementors left him alone. A guard led him to one of the visitation cells where he had been told an Auror would be waiting. He loathed the confiscation of his wand. He felt naked without it, but it was the rule.

He walked into the cell, and there stood Gawain Robards, the Head of the Auror Department himself. *Bleeding hell!* he thought. *What could be so fucking dangerous about two old friends having a chat?*

Snape was rather inclined to not recognize the wizard's presence, but the Auror said in a calm, sedate voice, "Good Afternoon, Professor Snape."

Snape nodded politely in reply. Robards walked to the other side of the cell and opened the door that allowed the prisoner to enter. Snape's heart was crushed to see his old friend reduced to such a pitiful state. Avery had been second only to Lucius Malfoy in regal good looks. His thick, brown, wavy hair had turned limp and grey. He had a beard that rivaled Dumbledore's, and he was so emaciated, all the muscles, the fit body that had been so strong and powerful was now thin and weak. Yet, his eyes...his brown eyes...remained warm as he greeted his old comrade.

"Severus," he rasped. "Thank you for coming. I am so grateful you came!"

Snape was a bit confused. After all, he had been a spy and had helped put him away for his crimes against humanity. *Why would Avery thank me for anything?*

As if he could read his mind, Avery shook his head and chuckled, "No, my friend. I have no ill will against you. You chose the higher path, and as hard as it was, you were right. I will pay for my sins, and I am looking forward to sweet oblivion. But before I go and my memories die, I need to confess to you a great injustice I committed so many years ago."

Snape furrowed his brow. He was getting emotional; seeing Avery so humbled, he just wanted out of the cell.

"What are you babbling about?"

Avery licked his parched lips and clawed at the table nervously. "I think it was ten years ago now, the day before the Dark Lord fell, the birthday celebration at my manor for you. You remember, yes? There had been a young girl we had given to you for your present in the dungeon. Her head had been encased in burlap. Do you recall, Severus?" he asked desperately.

Severus' face fell in shame. Of course he knew. Of course he remembered. Every so often, he would wake up in the night in a cold sweat, Hannah's cries ringing in his ears. The faceless, nameless, young woman whose virginity he had taken by force and then had withdrawn from her haunted him. He had claimed he could not find pleasure in a crying virgin. But in fact, he didn't know how long he could remain aroused. He knew he had to keep the pretense. He had given them all a show; however, they had wanted gore and had not received it. He had left the broken, sobbing Miss Abbot, who had instinctively wrapped herself into a ball in her own puddle of fluid as she lay in the dirt of the dungeon floor. There had been Avery's daughter, Idina. She had been after him for a year, ever since she had become of age. She would not fight him or make him look bad. He had already tucked himself back into his trousers, ignoring the blood, and leered at her full breasts and hips once he had reentered the party.

He had made no ceremony as he began to take her as he should have taken the virgin. He had hated himself for hurting a woman whose virtue she had probably been saving for another. Idina had been no virgin, but she had been good, and he, God help him, had found a great deal of gratification in her willing body. She had remained with him the entire night after he returned from the dungeon. The unknown girl had been lying on the floor in a protective hold. His last glance of her was her back, and he had seen how she had been branded by her shoulder blade with a large "V."

He had wanted to cry, but he could not show such an emotion. Instead, he went upstairs, took Idina into his guest room, and fucked her as long as he was able. The next day, the wards had sounded, and the battle commenced at Hogwarts. He learned Idina had perished in the fight, but all he had cared for was the girl. He had figured she must have been an Order member, but who? There were three women in the Order who had been unaccounted for in the end. The only one who fit the description of a very young woman was Hannah Abbot. He grieved over this. Miss Abbot had always been a competent student whom he had never yelled at or terrorized. Although his grief and shame did not leave him, it had lessened when Kingsley Shacklebolt had informed him of the grisly discovery at Malfoy Manor. He took solace in that Hannah had a resting place where she could be remembered and mourned. She could finally rest in peace.

Avery began his story. "I was on patrol with Yaxley when we spotted a young girl or woman we figured for an Order member. We disarmed her and searched her clothes. She had one of those Galleons, you know, the one that dark boy, Dean Thomas, told us about when he had been tortured by Malfoy. Those Galleons were a part of what he called 'Dumbledore's Army.'"

"We took her to the manor, and she was your present. We had interrogated her, tried to get a name, but she refused to tell us anything, just that she was a 'nobody.'"

Severus spoke up. "And we all know that it's always the people who are higher up in rank who declare they are nobodies," he replied hollowly.

Avery nodded. "Yes. We thought to break her. We branded her flesh with an iron 'V' onto her back, near the shoulder blade. She screamed and cried, but she never did tell us her name. We kept her there for you, and when you had your way with her, and found her not up to snuff, we left her in the dungeons.

"We left her there, naked and beaten to starve in the bowels of my home. Severus, please go to my manor house and find her body. I need for her to be found and buried properly. I am so sorry...that poor girl!" the broken man wept and pleaded more with Snape.

"Silence, Avery," Snape said, relieved it wasn't anything worse. "We found her body in a grave by Lucius' manor house."

"No!" shrieked Avery as he stood up shakily. "She never could have escaped from the dungeons! And Malfoy? What sense would it make to bury a dead girl at Malfoy's? We could have just given her to Nagini! No, I tell you, she remains there at my estate!"

Robards spoke up. "Give us a physical description of the girl," he demanded without emotion.

Avery turned sharply towards Gawain. "She was unremarkable... just a thin, slight girl with brown hair, I think," he sputtered.

Severus was confused. "Brown hair?" he asked. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, very sure... it had been pulled back into a bun...so hard to tell in the dark... but she was also thin...petite."

Hannah Abbot's hair was straight and blonde. She was also more on the... full-bodied side. Snape nodded. He stood and stumbled towards the cold stonewall and braced himself with one hand and covered his face with the other. He was disgusted with himself. He couldn't recall any feature of the body of the girl in the burlap mask.

Robards spoke. "All right, Avery. We shall search your house and dungeons as a part of our arrangement."

The guards came in as Robards signaled for them to enter. They grabbed Avery's arms. "Thank you, Severus. Thank you."

Snape looked painfully upon the man as he was led out of the cell. He was trembling. Robards turned to face Snape and in a split-second overturned the table in potent rage.

"So what say you, Snape? How is it that you were never called out as a rapist?" he spat.

Snape glared at the wizard. "Don't attempt to force your self-righteousness on me," he snarled. "Why don't you recall your words, your wonderful words of gratitude at how much I had to do and suffer for our glorious cause?"

Robards walked close up to Snape and shook his head. "Suffer? In which way did you suffer?" he raged. "I reckon that poor girl suffered! Don't you have any shred of compassion in you?"

"Of course I have!" Snape roared. "I have lived in hell every day, thinking about Miss Abbott and how I had played a part in her death...not to mention in hurting her viciously beforehand. I just refuse to break down in front of you or anyone else I would rather not. It is a habit, you realize. An unmoving face does not mean a person is unmoved!"

Robards wiped his face with one hand. "We will search the dungeons and let you know of any bodies we find, Snape, but I'll tell you plain. I know how Death Eaters brand flesh. When we found that Abbott girl, her skeleton had been preserved. There was only a skeleton that remained, but that area of the back would have left markings deep into the bone. I tell you God's honest truth, Snape. There were no markings on her back. Her skull had been crushed. Besides, there was still hair left and it was not brown. It was blonde: a type of blonde that never could be mistaken for brown. You'd best prepare yourself for the possibility that this girl might be alive. We can do the search." Robards looked at Snape in revulsion. "Don't upset yourself further."

Snape jerked his head towards the Auror. "Do not presume to handle me!" he bit out savagely. "I fully intend on joining the search to see if any bodies remain there. We may be able to locate the last two missing female Order members."

Robards sighed and scratched the back of his head. "Fine," he acquiesced. "I'll get Savage and let you know the first opportunity we can go."

Snape waited, brooding and grim. When the guard let them out of the cell, he stalked back to retrieve his wand and back to Hogwarts.

The Huntress

Chapter 9 of 24

The Moscow Potions Symposium proves beneficial in a myriad of ways.

A/N: I hope everyone is well. Thank you all so much for the reviews. As always, my deepest thanks to Karelia, Beth, and Maria. I hope that this chapter will make up for the wait!

The first person to greet Severus' return was nine-year-old Alice Longbottom. She still had the temper of a Manticore, but she had learned to rein it in around the Potions master. She was sitting near the bottom of the main staircase, reading a book that looked as large as she.

He regarded the small girl; her dark hair had increasingly blackened as she had aged. Its wavy curls gave it life and certain prettiness to it. She was deeply concentrated and oblivious to anyone else that might be around.

"Miss Longbottom," he greeted her.

Her face snapped up, as did the rest of her, and he was faced with her pink cheeks and large, dark chocolate eyes. She smiled at him, and he saw that dimple that had always bothered him. He had maintained his distance for many years now, just watching to see if she would one day be one of his Slytherins when the day came. Now, something else was nagging at him.

"Hello, Professor," she said politely with an awkward curtsy.

His lips twitched as he watched her try and train her little legs to do what she wanted.

"Very nice, Miss Longbottom. I assume your Great-Grandmother has been teaching you deportment?"

"Oh, yes!" she said enthusiastically. "I'm reading this book, but I also am learning to walk with it balanced on my head. I'm not quite there yet, but Gran says I am self-reliant and will learn in time. She says it is character building."

Well, far be it from anyone to question Augusta Longbottom, Snape thought with a snarl.

"Miss Longbottom," he began, "I never quite understood the reason for your name. Alice, of course, makes complete sense and is only fitting that your father named you after his mother. I knew her. She was a loving, gentle, young woman. However, how did you come by your middle name?"

The young girl smiled brightly and replied, "My Aunt Hermione...she's my godmother. She writes my mum every week and tells her to read to me all about her adventures! She's lived practically everywhere, studying potions and all kinds of exotic magical plants and their properties. She's in Paris now and owns her own store! My parents say when she is ready to come back to England, I'll meet her. Why? Do *you* know my Aunt Hermione?" She looked up at him with wide, hopeful eyes.

He absent-mindedly traced a finger around his mouth. "In fact, I do. She was a student of mine when your parents were also students. She was a very bright and intelligent witch. She also fought in the war," he recollected.

"She's also best friends with Harry Potter!" She beamed as she talked fast. "I've read all about him and the wizarding wars. First, the war with Grindelwald where he was defeated by Dumbledore, and then the two wizarding wars against Voldemort," she informed him. "I read all about it, in *Hogwarts: A History*."

Snape thought he was going to vomit. It was like having a little Hermione Granger, the eager first-year, reincarnated. He decided then and there if she was to become a hand waver like her "Auntie Hermione" had been, he was going to retire. "Thank you, Miss Longbottom, that was quite... *informative*," he replied before giving a sharp bow and going on his way.

The search of Avery Manor proved fruitless. Robards, Savage and Snape sat down to rest on the front steps after searching the entire dungeons and after finding nothing, collected their thoughts.

"Makes no sense," muttered Robards. "Not one human bone in that rat hole! Reckon he was lying?"

"No," answered Snape. "Unfortunately, I have a feeling she might be out there. A thin, brown-haired woman...not much data to go on."

Robards looked over at Snape and said, "Well, not to be crude, but you saw her up close more than anyone else. Were there any markings, scars, birthmarks, anything that you were aware of?"

Snape hung his head and hid his face with his hair. "No," he replied. "My mind was focused on how to get myself out of the situation alive. To my everlasting shame, I never thought to commit her physically to memory."

Hermione's business was starting to take off, much thanks to Monsieur Valois' help and assistance with the elite French society. She had kept the corner store for a couple of years before moving up the boulevard to a better locale. The name of her business had brought many of the old potioners out of their hidey-holes to test the mettle of the young and tenacious Mlle. Granger. Hermione learned quickly to spot those who were riff-raff versus those who truly wanted top of the line merchandise. It had taken the lady, known as, "The Huntress," a handful of years, but her dedication and inability to be cowed or bullied by the lesser respectable competitors helped to solidify her standing. *La Chasserresse* was now servicing only the best of potion makers.

When she was in the city, and a potential client would enter *La Chasserresse*, they would first be struck by the large and impressive portrait of Diana, the Huntress, or *Diana Chasserresse*, in French. The shop itself was small. A large mahogany desk stood near the painting. The floor was of a plush cream carpet, with ivory and gilt wallpaper. An impressive chandelier hung from the ceiling in the center, and the large window to the right of the entrance was lined with a number of antique gilt chairs with ivory sateen padding.

The client would sit in one of those antique chairs until Mlle. Granger would enter the room from the back and greet the customer warmly, offering them a seat across her mahogany desk. An assortment of coffee, tea, wine or champagne would be offered by her assistant, Thérèse, and then business at hand would commence.

Many of Mlle. Granger's competitors tried to find her techniques and trade secrets. Of course, none of these Frenchmen knew Hermione Granger, the brilliant witch from England, who had helped defeat Voldemort. She knew better spells, charms, and curses to stop any attempts at corporate piracy.

Word spread quickly around the continent that there was a new player in the Potions business, and she was not a witch to be crossed. She never indulged romantically with clients and kept her word to the letter. Soon, *La Chasserresse* was not only catering to the elite of wizarding Paris, but of Europe's privileged as well.

Around the same time Hermione was making a name for herself in Paris, Severus Snape was in Moscow, attending the latest Potions Symposium. He was rather impressed with this year's gathering. The food and drink was exquisite. Vodka and caviar were in abundance and the conversation most stimulating. Never one for being a social man, he easily found himself drawn into many conversations about one of his own country's witches. The French were going on and on *ad finitum* about some sort of huntress woman who had strong-armed and insinuated herself on the sacred ground of wizarding Paris' High Street: *La maison de Guinevere*.

Severus was in a wonderful mood, watching the Old Guard of the Potions world grow apoplectic with the news of a young English chit taking over a wizard's profession and assuming a position which was not hers to assume.

"Severus!" called out a short, thin man sporting a thin, greased mustache and wearing a pince-nez.

Snape turned and smiled warmly. "*Bonjour, mon ami!*"

"*Bonsoir*, Severus!" corrected the Frenchman. "And 'ow eez my favoreet apprentice theez days?"

"Splendid, Monsieur Boulanger," replied Snape with a deep bow.

Severus had been Boulanger's apprentice the same year he had finished his education at Hogwarts. Although both wizards were on an equal level, being Potions masters, Severus preferred not to take on an air of familiarity that so many apprentices couldn't wait to take advantage of, and still treated his old master with the same deference as he had when he was eighteen.

The two wizards weaved through the room together. "'Ave you 'eard about zees witch from your country, Severus?"

"Hmm," Severus replied non-committally. "I have been trying to avoid and deflect all conversations about her the entire day." He took a sip of his vodka and warily watched the room as he spoke.

Boulanger laughed. "You will nevere change, *mon garçon!*"

Another man joined them. "*Bonsoir*, Professor Snape, *Professeur* Boulanger," he said upon meeting.

"Ah!" said Boulanger. "Severus, you remembere Monsieur Roudett? 'E eez one of our most distinguished Governors at Beauxbatons."

The two Frenchmen kissed each other's cheek, and Severus shook Monsieur Roudett's hand.

"Thees 'az been a verry interesting evening, Professor Snape," replied Roudett.

"Indeed?" said Snape, suddenly feeling quite bored.

"Now, Severus," urged Boulanger. "You must tell us alle about zees Engleesh mademoiselle in *La maison de Guinevere!*"

"Antoine," pleaded Roudett. "I am sure Professor Snape doez not want to be bozered wiz theez."

"Howevere," he continued gently as he fished the olive from his martini and ate it. "Do you know zee girl?"

Severus smiled after he drank down the last of his vodka. "Gentlemen, I am sure you are both quite skilled in your abilities in verbal dueling, but I am not in the mood to be skewered."

"Touché," admitted Roudett as he chuckled. "Come now, Severus! You tell us. Theez girl 'oo has no credentials nor has studied Potions eez now working amongst the verry best in our profezzion! 'Oo eez theez girl? This Mlle. Granger. What a brutish name! *Granger.*"

"*Oui,*" replied Boulanger. "Howevere, her name for her buizness eez *génie pur!*"

"What is it called?" asked Severus as uninterested as he could be.

"La Chasseresse."

Back in his hotel room, Severus recounted the evening. He had claimed not to know the young witch who was upsetting the balance of the Potions world in Paris once her name had been revealed. Potions was a wizard's profession, and precious few female Potions apprentices ever made the cut. Many witches tried, but had failed, largely due to sexual harassment and blackmail by their male masters, or apprenticed under tyrants so cruel and abusive they would quit in terror.

There had been one woman there whom he had never seen before at any of the past symposiums. She had been quite the beauty with rich, red hair that flowed to her waist and eyes that were wide and blue. She had been fresh from Durmstrang, Boulanger had told him.

"Ah, Severus, to be young!" he had sighed. "She eez just eighteen, and from what eez rumored, an innocent. That bastard Kazakov, eez 'er master now."

Severus found himself pulled towards her. It probably was the vodka and desire working over on him. He had always lusted after redheads, not orange-red, like the Weasley girl, but lovely, rich, true red that flowed like a river of ruby liquid, just like his lovely Lily's had.

He had introduced himself to her master first and asked if he could speak with her. Ever thinking of protocol to gain his way, Severus had the young woman practically handed to him on a silver platter due to his retiring, uninterested gaze.

Severus had soon found himself in a broom closet with a Lumos Spell on his wand on top of the highest shelf. Her name was Katya. Not the most unique name in the world, but she had been exquisite. She had been no innocent, although she had known how to play the part of the trembling virgin. He had been positive all he would get was a half-hearted wank at best, and perhaps she'd let him suck her nipples while she did it. When the door had closed, the virgin Katya had disappeared, and he had his large, work-roughened hands full of a randy eighteen-year-old who gave him his first fuck in ten years. At first, it had been exciting. She gave him access to all the wonders underneath her robes. Her hair had felt like heavy satin and images of Lily Evans had entered into his head, and he had wondered if it would have been like this if she had let him make love to her.

Around the time he was grinding in rhythm into her hot cunt, her legs hiked up, draped across his forearms, and her body pressed against the wall of the closet, visions of what he had heard of Mlle. Granger, the Huntress, sprang into his mind. From what he had been told by those who had met the elusive witch, she was a lovely slip of a woman, with long legs, but very petite. Her hair hung in long brown curls in a most attractive manner. Her eyes were wide and charming, like a doe, and she dressed like a Muggle aristocrat. The wizards scorned her intrusion into their field, insulted her intelligence, and grudgingly admired the class and charm of a true lady, but had no qualms whatsoever of discussing in detail her physical attributes, and how they wouldn't mind experiencing her favors.

Katya's screaming had begun to annoy him. He knew from the way she was clenching him with fluttering levels of tightness that she was climaxing. He drove into her and shocked himself when a vision of the Huntress, this lady he had known as a girl, swept across his mind. He had no right to think of her sexually; he had known her as a child, and it seemed wrong.

Nevertheless, he could not stop himself as he had felt the stirrings of his impending climax. All he could see was Hermione, not as the girl she had been, but the picture he had created in his mind by his colleagues of a lovely woman with legs that could make an impotent man rise to the occasion. Just to experience them wrapped around his waist, breasts that were as pert as her nose, and full lips that made a man feel what heaven must taste like. He gritted his teeth as he spilled into the redhead, and when it was over, he clumsily extricated from the young Russian witch and mumbled his apologies.

He had gone to retrieve his wand, and she had pointed hers at his throat. "You are Potions master, yes?" she had spoken in her thick accent.

"I am," he replied while keeping his face stern and under control.

She had glared at him with her ice blue eyes and hissed, "You vere good luffer before she joined us," she had commented. She had raised an eyebrow and had said, "You are lucky Potion master that I had my pleasure from your dick, otherwise, I vould haff to hurt you badly. I know my curses. So, go and find your vand, and your bubenčiki so you can fuck the voman you really vant."

She had swept past him and had said as she opened the door, "Mne eto vs'e osto'eblo! Stáryy perdún."

As he lay in bed, Snape was glad he didn't know what Katya had been saying. He was sure if he had, he would have broken her neck. But he had been riveted with thoughts of the lovely woman in his mind. Would Miss Granger be coming back to England? He wanted nothing more than to see her shop, look at her services, what her travels had been like...what *she* was like.

Severus felt strange. It gnawed at him. He had no right to have a claim on her, she had never been his, but his body told him something else. Otherwise, why would she have popped into his head the moment he was just getting into some very good sex with Katya?

Was there something wrong with him? Had he secretly desired his students sexually? *NO!* his conscious screamed out. He had never thought of Miss Granger sexually whilst she'd been a student. But she was no longer a girl; she was a woman, and a lovely woman at that. The image of her he had imagined returned, and he found himself growing hard. As he stroked himself to the thought of her riding his cock wantonly, he swore to himself he would see *'La Chasseresse,'* this *'Huntress,'* and figure out this new found attraction. His body shook violently as he came, hungry for her now more than ever.

Bubenčiki balls.

Mne eto vs'e osto'eblo! Stáryy perdún What a waste of my time! Old man pervert.

The Stag

Harry comes to Hermione's shop to see what has become of her.

A/N: I am so enjoying the reviews! Please keep them coming. Many thanks to Maria (helping me with writing Harry's thoughts) and Beth for their support, and to karelia, my beta, for all her hard work!

Harry Potter stood in front of the shop in the very heart of Wizarding Paris called *La Chasseresse*. He was rather impressed with the locale. Hermione was doing mighty well for herself. He walked in, and a lovely woman with a short black skirt and white silk blouse came to greet him. She was part-Veela, he could see. Her platinum hair and large violet eyes were ethereal.

"*Bonjour, Monsieur,*" she said in a silky voice.

Before she could say anything else, Harry interrupted her. "Sorry, I'm English. I don't speak French. I am looking for my friend, Hermione Granger?"

"Yes, the owner of this establishment," she replied in English with an accent so smooth, she could have passed for a Briton herself.

"Mlle. Granger is working in the backroom, just finishing an order for another client," she explained. "Please, have a seat, Monsieur?"

"Potter, Harry Potter," he said nervously.

The part-Veela was nothing like Fleur or any of the girls he had met from Beauxbatons during his fourth year. She was affable, professional and spoke in a very soothing and disarming way.

"Monsieur Potter, we offer our clients and even friends," she said with a smile, "an assortment of drinks. May I bring you tea, café, wine, champagne?"

"Just water, if you have it. Nothing fancy," he replied. He was impressed at how the look of recognition over his name had not stopped her from being professional.

"Very good, Monsieur Potter," she said as she glided from the room.

Harry sat in the plush mahogany chair in front of an impressive mahogany desk that screamed Hermione; it was so orderly. His eye caught the imposing painting of the naked Diana, the Huntress. It was very provocative and gave sensuality to the surroundings in a way that he never would have thought Hermione could provoke.

He was still gaping like a codfish when she finally entered the room. He tore his eyes from the painting to look at his friend. She was radiant. No longer a girl, she was a woman. Her hair fell long in soft curls down her back, and she was wearing a most attractive outfit. Hermione walked in wearing a suit, a Muggle suit that must have been made just for her. The jacket was cut to emphasize her waist and gave her an hourglass shape he never realized she possessed. Her snug skirt hugged her from hips to knees and nearly made his heart race up a bit. It clung to her hips in perfection and emphasized her legs as she moved. She was, well, *stunning*.

Harry tried to avert his gaze when she removed the jacket because he caught a hint of her cleavage when her blouse opened a bit wider. He tried to stare at her, er, pearls. She was wearing very pretty pearls, iridescent ones around her neck in a three-strand design that looked expensive. Her face was lovely. Her lips were deep red, and the Kohl around her eyes made her look absolutely sultry. *When did she get so sexy?*

She embraced him, and Harry inhaled a scent that was so inviting he thought he had died and went to a heaven where only lovely women lounging half-naked and frolicking lived, and he was the only male allowed. He pulled away and swallowed hard.

"Hermione?" he asked weakly. "You look so different."

"Oh, honestly!" she retorted. "Harry, all I did was grow up. I'm no longer a teenager. Look at yourself! If I didn't know any better, I might take advantage of you. Where on earth did you get to be so muscular? You've gotten a bit taller as well. Well, Ginny is a very lucky witch to have you to warm her bed."

Harry blushed. He felt Hermione had aged a lot more than he had. But come to think of it, they had only been eighteen when the war ended and that was nearly ten years ago. Hermione was a year older. She was twenty-eight, he figured. She must have wizards after her constantly, looking the way she did, dressed so elegantly with the graceful, ample shape of her body.

Harry sat down once Hermione took her seat behind her desk.

"Well, Harry Potter, what do think of my universe?" she said with a smile.

Harry had always loved her smile. Ever since she'd had her teeth fixed in fourth year, she had learned to smile more and more often. She had a cute dimple on the lower part of her left cheek. Harry smiled back at her and felt that crazed part of himself that wanted to indulge in that netherworld of randy women only for him, decide to remember Hermione would always be a girl to him, his best girl, his friend, and sister.

"I think it is amazing, Hermione!" he blurted out. "But I've come here because, well, we all miss you back home. When will you come back and see all of us again? Molly had fits when she learned you were writing Luna and not them. I know I've never been a great writer, but I sent you dozens of owls that were never answered. So, tell me, Hermione. Are we done? Is our friendship over?"

Hermione smiled slightly and said in a soft, sad voice as she crossed her arms, "The war did things that hurt us all in different ways. I couldn't stay and keep my sanity. One day, perhaps, when the time comes...when it feels right, I will return."

Harry leaned forward and said, "Hermione, I'm worried about you. Last week, we finally found Hannah Abbott's body. She had been discovered in a shallow grave near Malfoy Manor."

Hermione sighed heavily and said throatily, "That's terrible, but at least we know now...all of us who were in the D.A. and the Order."

"There were a lot of people there...even Snape," Harry reported. "He stood in the back, and he thought no one noticed him, but I could have sworn he had been crying."

Hermione began shuffling papers around her desk, and the Auror in him could see she was trying hard to disguise the trembling of her hands.

Harry leaned forward again. "Hermione, why didn't you come back? Are you still ill? I mean, after all, you *had* promised to come back and celebrate with us."

Hermione's hands stilled as she looked at him with cheerless eyes. "I'm sorry, Harry. There just wasn't a lot to feel happy about," she whispered.

Harry was silent for a moment and then said carefully, "Hermione, I never believed the story you gave us about Greyback. What really happened those three days?"

"I don't want to talk about it, Harry," she said, not looking at him. Then she faced him and said, "If you ever loved me, Harry. If you were ever my friend, you will just leave and not return. Let them all know that the Hermione Granger they knew is gone."

Harry was shocked. "You can't mean that!"

He stood, looking over her, sitting so gracefully in her chair.

She was looking at the painting as she spoke to him. "Harry, I have a new life now, and neither England nor Hogwarts has a place in it."

"What happened to that bloke, Jack?" Harry asked her.

Hermione's jaw clenched, and she refused to look at him. "There were some things about my past he could not handle. I suppose it is better this way. No lovers, no children, no fuss, no complications. All I need is to make my business a success and show those wretched bastards who think this witch cannot succeed in a wizard's business can not only do so but will work so hard, she'll beat them at their own game!"

Harry had stopped listening after she mentioned the "no lovers" part. "You mean you never had a lover? What...are you going to remain celibate all your life? Don't you realize what happiness you'll be turning your back on?" he asked, incredulous at the thought.

"I know enough, Harry," she hissed as she jerked her head towards him. "All it boils down to a pain-filled, humiliating experience that leads to a larger and more painful, humiliating experience called childbirth. So, no thank you."

Harry felt so sad for her. She was much too full of life to be so bitter. Too young to remain so disillusioned.

Harry stood and walked over to her side and knelt on one knee to face her closely. He took her hand in his own and whispered shyly, "Hermione, Ginny and I have been married for three years now, and have our own son, James. Now, I am no witch, but I think if Ginny believed what you just said, I don't think she would be climbing over me in bed at night and asking me to...to be with her. She even takes over, and that was after James was born! I...I even let her bind me once...but if you ever tell anyone that, I'll deny it!"

He took a deep breath and added, "Hermione, I know it hurt really bad when James was born. She told me I was a bastard, and to get the hell out of her sight. But when I went downstairs, I must have looked like hell. Arthur laughed at me and said that Molly had threatened to hex his bollocks off when she had Fred and George and swore she'd never let him touch her again. But, a few months later, they were back at it of course, for which I'm glad because there never would have been a Ron or Ginny. You see, Hermione, you've got it all wrong! It's not so bad."

She looked at him as if she pitied him. "You wouldn't understand," she whispered. "Just leave me alone, Harry. Just leave me alone." She stood up and walked into the back area, and Harry left, taking a business card with him.

"So, that was how it was left?" Ron whispered.

"Yeah," Harry replied.

"I dunno, mate," Ron said strangely as he gazed at the business card in his hands. "There is something odd. Hermione isn't being forthright."

The three of them were huddled outside the Burrow on the grass while little James napped in his room. They were trying to stay out of anyone's hearing until they thought it was right to talk about Hermione.

Ron's eyes squinted in the sun as he gathered his thoughts. "It was the way she acted when you told her about you and Ginny. It was like she was offended or something."

"Of course, Ron!" Ginny snapped at him. "Like she needs to be reminded that she's never had love in her life." She huffed and said, "I don't care about the children part...it's the way she talked about sex that bothers me. 'A pain-filled, humiliating experience.' It sounds like Hermione didn't have a proper first time. I think she needs to talk about it."

"That's her call, Ginny," said Harry. "She's attractive and alluring...she must have blokes constantly asking her out."

"Well, why can't she talk to us?" Ron interjected. "We were her best mates after all! Everything we went through, and she and Ginny were closer than she ever was with Luna!"

"Well," Ginny said. "After the war, she and Luna did spend an awful lot of time together, remember? She really was attached at the hip to her and Neville."

"There has to be a reason why Neville and Luna became so important to her," mused Harry.

"I think you need to go to Hogwarts, Harry, and have a talk with Neville," Ginny decided.

"Me?" Harry sputtered. "Why do I have to go alone?"

"Look, if you go, Neville will be easier to crack. There is just more to this than the war. There has to be! If we all go in there, he'll get nervous and defensive, and we'll have not learnt a bloody thing."

The Hunter - Part Two

Chapter 11 of 24

Severus returns to Hermione with a plan.

My thanks to Maria for helping me straighten out this chapter! Also, to Beth and karelia who work so hard to cheer me and look out for my grammar errors. I hope you all love this chapter! Severus and Hermione finally are face to face alone!

A few days later, Severus decided to return to Paris and ask for Hermione's services. A luncheon, even with the part-Veela, Thérèse, might allow for further conversation.

He walked up the boulevard to her shop and entered with confidence.

Hermione was with a client. He took a seat amongst one of the antique gilded chairs and waited patiently. He watched her face as she worked with the gentleman across from her mahogany desk. Her cheeks were growing flushed, and her hand shook slightly as she held out the parchment for the gentleman to peruse.

He heard a murmured, "*Excusez-moi*," as she eased herself from behind her desk and made her way towards him.

She was divine... simply divine. Her hair was down with long curls that reached to cover her entire back. She looked like a red rose in bloom. Her red dress was alive: lightweight, translucent, silky fabric wrapping around her frame and hugging each curve while she moved. She wore rubies around her neck and on her ears. But her eyes were flashing danger. He would have to watch for the thorns.

She stood stoically before him and hissed, "What are you doing here? I thought I made it quite clear that I have no time for you."

"Hermione," he began in a low, smooth pitch. "Not everything in my life has to do with you. I am here strictly on business. I need a rare herb that can only be found in Eastern Europe, and as you know, I have only limited time allotted away from Hogwarts."

She narrowed her eyes and spat, "I'm sure that you would be able to garner a week or two away from your duties. Lord knows you're practically a hermit in those dungeons."

Snape winced at her sharp tongue. "Miss Granger," he snapped as he stood to look down at her, "I have my own interests that fall outside of my 'duties,' as you refer them. I have no time to waste on having to explain myself to someone I would be hiring. If my business is unwelcome, I shall find another one of your competitors to assist me... minus the harassment."

Hermione thought quickly. *If I let him go, word might get out that I refused a very important potential client! Although Severus Snape is still not accepted into polite society, amongst his peers he belongs to the elite. To turn him away would only cause the gossips to rumor and conjecture! No, I can't afford it.*

"Fine," she decided with a smile that did not reach her eyes. "Wait here, and when I have finished concluding business with my client, you may come over."

She turned on her heel and strode back to her desk.

What an ass! he thought as he watched her walk away from him.

She rang a bell on her desk and continued to proceed discussing her transaction with the gentleman.

He waited as the part-Veela came out to him, offering him an assortment of drinks. He refused and continued to wait, watching Hermione's every move.

When the gentleman left, Hermione accompanied him to the door. After she had closed the door, she kept her hand on the handle, and spoke to him over her shoulder. "Professor Snape, I want to make something quite clear." She turned to face him and continued, "I do not trust you. I think you are up to something; however, I do not have the clout to turn you away."

She made her way towards her desk and sat down regally in her plush burgundy gilt chair. "So, you might say I am working with you under duress. Now, please be seated and tell me what kind of service you require."

Snape handed her a scroll. He sat in the chair across from her as she unrolled it and began to look over each piece of parchment.

She kept her head down as she spoke. "*Ievshan-zillia*. Yes, I recall hearing about this herb. It is extremely potent."

"Does this constitute a problem for you?"

Hermione raised her head and narrowed her eyes. "No."

She quietly placed the parchments together and sat back in her chair. "*Ievshan-zillia*. What is the story behind your desire to have this herb?"

"I am extremely interested in creating a potion with it. I know you will not be offended if I do not wish to share the particulars."

Hermione smirked. "On the contrary, Snape. I am extremely interested. I have a clause that states I need to know the *particulars*, as you call them. I could be sent to Azkaban if I am implicated in dabbling in Dark magic. So either you start talking or you can leave."

He sat back comfortably in his chair and smiled widely. This was no girl desperate for acceptance. She didn't give a damn about his reputation or his ability to dissemble.

For the next hour, Severus and Hermione discussed the Muggle and magical stories surrounding *Ievshan-zillia*. It was an old story from the Ukraine and was known to Muggles and wizards alike about an herb with a scent so powerful that, when crushed and worn around the neck, rendered even the most powerfully magical persons unable to resist its control. However, it was a mere fable amongst Muggles. Only magical people could locate and use it.

"This is fascinating!" she blurted out as she looked closer on further inspection of Snape's parchments. "I see you translated the fable yourself... very good." She looked up at him and said, "One caveat. Used in its purest form, worn around the neck, it could be disastrous for not only the person wearing it, but for the people around that person. They also would be affected. Not many know about this bit of old magic. However, if you were able to create a potion that would reduce its potency..."

"... it could be very effective for the Aurors as a means of sabotage. Imagine... the potion's fragrance clouding the judgment, feigning illusions of vainglory," Snape finished for her in a rich, dark hum.

Her eyes glazed over, and Snape thought she was so entrancing, he felt a twinge in his nether regions. Her face was completely relaxed and her red lips parted slightly. Snape thought she must be in another dimension.

"An Anti Wit-Clarifying Potion!" she exclaimed.

"Precisely," he replied, enjoying the look on her face as she came to the correct conclusion.

Their eyes met, and Snape could see her breathing had hitched. *There is so much untapped passion there*, he thought. Then the moment passed, and her face grew serious again. He didn't want to go back to the beginning with her, so he tried to carry on the conversation.

"Unlike a Befuddlement Charm, this potion would do more than make the mind fuzzy, inhibited and unable to make a decision. It would cause the victim to actually take grandiose risks, giving his opponent the chance to take an advantage as it is spelled out in that story of old *Kyiv*."

"Well, I shall have to consult with Thérèse and see what type of time frame I can give you. Of course, my fee, as stated in the parchment I gave you, cannot be determined at the present time. I have no idea the cost and time I would need in preparation, and then there is the difficulty of procuring the herb and maintaining its freshness," she replied in clipped tones.

Snape watched her with approval as she made some preliminary notes. "There will be paperwork that will need signing, and some formalities that will need to be discussed about the terms of our agreement..."

He interrupted, taking his chance to spend more time with her. "Hermione, it is time most Parisians take luncheon, is it not?"

She peered up from where she had been writing. "What?" she said, sounding distracted... and annoyed.

Snape stood up tall and straight as he brushed the sleeves of his frock coat. "You did tell me that you take business lunches and dinners. Why not join me for luncheon, and we can discuss more about the terms and legalities involved. Then I shall be able to sign the papers you need signing now, instead of me having to come again for another meeting."

Hermione raised an eyebrow and shifted her eyes around. If she joined him for lunch, then she wouldn't have to reschedule again until the task was done and business concluded. On the other hand, she would be having lunch with him. *Hell and Damnation!*

She smiled as calmly as she could muster and said, "I will have to see if Thérèse is free."

Severus sat back down in the chair with his normal gracefulness. A smile crept wide on his face. Phase Two was going swimmingly.

"Thérèse!" Hermione whispered as she came into the back room.

"Madame?" she asked, walking out of the back kitchen. She was carrying a carafe of coffee with two cups and saucers of her precious Limoges china.

"No, no!" Hermione whined. "Please, not Louis again!"

Thérèse smiled as she set the silver tray down. "Madame, why don't you like Louis? He is named after the kings of France!"

Hermione was desperate. "Yes, including a king who got his head chopped off. I swear, if you do not cancel, I'll make sure he dies like his namesake!" she hissed.

Thérèse looked affronted. "Madame, please!" she insisted. "What is the problem?"

Hermione slumped into a chair and rubbed her head. "Oh, my head!" she complained. "Thérèse, Professor Snape wants to continue our meeting over lunch. You know I don't go out with men alone."

Thérèse placed her hand on one hip and harrumphed. "You know what I think of that!" she snapped. "Why must it be this way with you? No lover, no men, no women. Don't you ever feel for such things?"

Hermione lifted her throbbing head from up between her hands. "Taking a lover and having luncheon with Severus Snape are two separate issues!" she snarled.

Thérèse smirked and nodded her head in agreement. Hermione hated when she did that. It usually meant she was right about something. She walked over to gather the sandwiches for Louis sitting on the counter. "Madame, that wizard may have a different reason for being here than just business."

Hermione's mouth dropped open like a stone. Thérèse turned around and began to laugh.

"Shh!" chided Hermione. "Do you want him to hear you outside?"

"Madame," Thérèse said as she sat at the table with her mistress, "you are truly a lovely woman. Men look at you with desire in their eyes. You even told me yourself that the professor wants to know you as an equal, not his past student."

Hermione felt ill. "You can't mean that h-he..."

Thérèse nodded. "Yes, Madame. That dark wizard wants you. But he wants more than your favors. I think he is truly smitten with you. He doesn't want me about, chaperoning like you were a sixteen-year-old virgin!"

Hermione winced. She felt the tears well up in her eyes.

"Madame?" Thérèse asked quietly. "Please tell me. Why are you so afraid?"

Hermione dabbed at her eyes with a napkin. "I-I just get so nervous around men. I have never been on a real date," she whispered through hiccoughs.

"What about Jack?" she asked. "You traveled with him for two years. I was sure that..."

Hermione cut her off as she steeled her voice and stood up straight and rigid. "Well, you were wrong. Jack loved me enough and wanted me enough, but when I told him about my past, he couldn't accept it...or me."

"I am sure the professor is different," Thérèse whispered. "After all, who doesn't know about Severus Snape's past?"

Hermione stood up and turned her back to her. She knew ALL of Severus' past. Even the past he didn't even know about. How ironic it all was that he would ~~be~~ be in Paris of all places just to court her? A strange thought filled her mind. How interesting would it be for her to discover what his thoughts were about the war, those last days when he had unknowingly violated her and then had sex with another witch to sate his lust.

"Fine, Thérèse. I will go alone," she decided. Her voice sounded weak.

Hermione walked back into the shop and said, "Thérèse has her young man coming for lunch. It shall be only us if that is not inconvenient."

He stood and said deeply, "Not at all, Hermione." She saw his eyes glitter strangely.

He looked happy.

It made her unsure.

"I will only be a moment to gather my things."

"I hope you understand that my reputation is now ruined," she whispered as she darted her eyes around the room.

"Why would that be?" Severus asked as he took a small bite of his carrots. "You are in a crowded restaurant, full of people, in broad daylight. Anyone who knows you can see what you and I are up to, a business luncheon, or is it just being in the presence of my company that has you so uncomfortable?"

She took a sip of her wine and looked around her discreetly. "Oh, it's just that I don't go out with men. I told you before."

"Yet you chose to join me," he countered. "I find myself speechless. Such an honor."

"Well, I admit my change of heart was not altogether a means of ridding myself of you."

He raised an eyebrow in response to her declaration.

"I want to speak with you about the war. Those last days. How did you fare then?"

Severus sighed. "The last weeks before the end were full of tremendous problems, stress, and anxiety. I think the final week before the battle I slept very little. You may have never been told, but I was deeply concerned about your disappearance."

I just bet you were!"What had you thought happened to me?" she asked.

"All of us...I could only imagine the worst," he whispered softly. "I would rather not discuss this over lunch."

Hermione watched his face. He looked disturbed and upset. "I see you no longer try so hard to guard your emotions," she observed.

"I have no reason to, Hermione. I told you that as well. There was a purpose to being the kind of man I was...to some extent. I am still me, and I'm still a private and suspicious person by nature. There are some things that I shall never forget."

"I can appreciate that," Hermione replied.

"What happened to you?" he asked. "You know that no one ever believed for a second that you had been hunkered down for three days trying to hide from Greyback. Lupin told us before he died that Greyback never stayed in one location for more than twenty-four hours."

Hermione knew she was caught. She closed her eyes and said, "I would rather not discuss this over lunch," repeating what he had said earlier.

"It appears that I am not the only one who is adept at hiding things," he observed.

Hermione took a sip of her wine and said, "I think we should discuss the legalities of our arrangement. There are a few documents that need to be signed. I do charge an up front amount of one hundred Galleons just as a down payment for my trouble."

Severus looked over the parchment. "You are quite ruthless, Miss Granger."

Hermione was not altogether sure if that was a compliment or a slight. "I am a businesswitch," she replied smartly, not feeling a need to explain herself in any form. "No more, no less."

They discussed the contract and all the legal ramifications, including the copy that, once Severus signed, automatically disappeared only to reappear inside the French Ministry for Magic.

After the professional portion of their work had been completed, Severus insisted on coffee and dessert. "I think after all this time with me, you would appreciate the sweet to counterbalance the sour," he said with a smile playing around his lips.

In spite of herself, Hermione smiled a true smile, one that reached her eyes. Severus saw a small dimple on the bottom part of her left cheek.

"What?" Hermione asked. "Do I have something on my face?"

"No," he answered quickly. "I was just taken in by your dimple. I never knew you had one."

Hermione shrugged. "My mum has the same dimple, as did my grandmother, and I'm sure her mother as well. All the women in my family have the same small dimple on the bottom of their left cheek. It's one of those hereditary things," she said as she felt face grow warm.

Severus did not want to overplay his hand. After dessert, he made his apologies. "I regret that I must leave for Hogwarts. I shall await your correspondence by owl, yes?"

"Of course," Hermione replied.

Severus stood and helped to pull out her chair for her. He led her through the restaurant with his hand on the small of her back. Hermione became aware of the warmth of his touch, confused by the feelings it built up inside her. Only after he had walked her back to her shop did he Apparate back to Hogwarts. Hermione had watched as he disappeared. She felt somewhat odd but couldn't place a finger on it.

That night the nightmare returned.

Please review!!

The Hunter - Part One

Chapter 12 of 24

Severus pays Hermione a visit.

I am so sorry for all the confusion! This chapter was to be posted before the recent one. This is Snape and Hermione's first encounter. Thanks to my beta team, especially karelia, who still had this chapter saved. Otherwise, it would have been lost. I had no copy of my own. I hope you all enjoy it!

Severus Snape stood in front of *La Chasseresse* and took it all in. It was decorated outside to match all the other heavenly colors of the Boulevard. He had made an extra special effort to be as fit and smart as possible. He strode in and was greeted by a witch who looked part-Veela.

"I would like to see Miss Granger, if you please," he said crisply before the young assistant could utter a word.

"May I ask who is calling on her?" she said in a more abrasive tone. "Mlle. Granger is working hard for a client right now. Is there a specific ingredient you need for a potion? I can show you the list of some of the items Mlle. Granger can locate and deliver in record time to preserve freshness." She started to hand him a thin, gilt book, which he was sure had everything cataloged and priced accordingly. He raised his hand to stop her.

"Thank you, no," he said abruptly. "I am not here on business, actually. I was Miss Granger's Potions master at Hogwarts. I would like to speak with her about her business and congratulate her on her success."

The witch inclined her head and asked, "May I have the name to give to Madame?"

"Professor Severus Snape, Potions master of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," he said with a flourish.

"My name is Thérèse, if you require anything. Mlle. Granger should be out soon."

She scurried away from him, and he smirked at the fact he could make a witch with Veela blood so off her feet.

He watched as the graceful figure of Hermione Granger stepped inside the main room. She was dressed immaculately and elegantly in a dark blue silk dress that had a slit up one side, which gave him a delicious peek of her shapely leg as she walked. She also wore those Muggle contraptions called "nylons" and four-inch heeled blue shoes that showed her calves to perfection. Severus noted the swelling bosom and luscious figure as she reached for a matching jacket that hung on the back of her chair. He smirked to himself as she quickly donned the jacket in an attempt to hide her figure. She failed; the cut of the jacket only enhanced rather than hindered her silhouette. He approved of her taste in the low-key, but exquisitely tasteful jewelry she wore, including a pair of pearl combs to keep her hair from her face.

She took a seat behind her desk and gestured Snape to follow suit. "I am rather shocked to see you here, Professor. I distinctly recall promising never to cross your path again, yet you have sought me out. Why is that?" she asked. She opened a thin hard-covered book, dipped her quill and began to work as if he wasn't there.

Severus was lost as he drank in her face, but managed to remain calm while his insides churned. She was absolutely divine...far more beautiful than in his dreams and imagination.

"I was at the Moscow Potions Symposium, and there was wild talk about a snippy, bossy upstart trying to steal long-time clients from long-time renowned potioners. They call *you*, 'The Huntress.'"

Miss Granger laughed hollowly. "Yes," she admitted as she fiddled with her quill. "I owe so much to Monsieur Valois. He was really the person who invented me."

Severus arched his eyebrow at the unexpected comment. "Invented?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "To get anywhere near success in the business world, one must have a persona for the public to see. Every gesture, every dress, and every stroll down the Boulevard is all calculated and well thought out beforehand. You should recall that exhausting sort of life. You *were* the master for twenty years."

There was an edge, a sharp bite to her comments that made Severus feel she was trying to slash him down to size with very precise cuts that would draw the process out painfully.

Severus glanced up at the large portrait of Diana, the Huntress.

"This piece is quite evocative, Miss Granger."

"Why are you here?" she asked, her voice cold as ice.

Severus was taken aback. "I had wanted to see your success, speak with you about your triumphs, also to let you know now the things I could never have said when you had been my student," he replied softly, looking at his close-cut nails.

She sighed and rubbed her head.

"Miss Granger, are you ill?" he asked, looking concerned.

She drew in a breath and began to shuffle papers on her desk. "I am fine, Professor. I suffer from a malady that unfortunately makes simple stressors into gigantic anxieties."

"A nervous disposition?" he sneered. "Of course, no one would have ever seen that coming." He inwardly berated himself for acting like an arse.

"Get out," she blurted out at him in frustration. "I do not care to hear anything you have to say to me, Snape. I am not your student. You cannot bully me or make me fear you. I have kept my end of the bargain and stayed far away from you as possible. I thought that would please you since nothing I ever did for you was good enough!"

Severus rose from his seat and smoothed down his robes. "Miss Granger, I apologize for my intrusion. I merely thought this would be an ideal way for you and me to meet on equal footing, as it were. I did not mean to cause you distress, only to congratulate you on your accomplishments. I was unaware there was any sort of 'bargain' struck, but in that event, I'd best be on my way."

He turned and walked to the door. "Snape," she said quietly. "I-I regret my brashness. Please excuse me while I get a headache potion, and we can have a cup of tea."

A phial was magically placed into her hand. "That, *Hermione*, is from my own personal supply. I would be most honored if you would accept it."

Miss Granger looked at him for a long time. He began to grow nervous, ready to snap out at her to just get on with it, when she finally unstoppered it and drank it down.

"Thank you," she whispered as she handed it back to him.

"*Severus*," he replied.

"What?" she snapped.

"My name, *Hermione*, is *Severus*," he reiterated.

Hermione stood up and mumbled something about getting tea.

"I see that I have much to make up for."

Hermione stopped in her tracks and turned around slowly. She advanced on him quickly. "What would make you say such a thing?"

Severus decided to take a chance, and he walked towards her, closing the gap between them. He saw the unease in her eyes and the hitch in her breath. He slowly brushed his right hand against her left one, knuckles rubbing clumsily, yet savoring the contact of her flesh against his.

"I have been unable to stop thinking of you, *Hermione*, since I learnt of your new career and life here in Paris. You have exceeded even my own expectations for your future. Your mind is as brilliant as it has always been, and I am not so much an arrogant bastard to not realize that I was cruel to you when you were a child. But you are not a child anymore, and I have no reason to be that kind of wizard any longer. At any rate, I would very much like for us get to know each other as persons, rather than

student and professor."

Hermione looked pale and faint. She withdrew her hand from his and whispered, "Are you trying to say something to me? If you are, I would appreciate it if you would just be clear and not attempt to toy with me."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "The war is over, Hermione..."

"...the war shall never be over for me, *Snape*," she interrupted.

"I thought that once as well," he confessed as he looked hungrily at her, trying to will her eyes to meet his again as he badly wanted her to do. She was not the bossy girl he had known. However, she had become hardened. He couldn't figure out why.

He released a sigh and whispered, "Meet me for dinner, or lunch tomorrow, if you prefer. Let me at least have this chance to show you the real man behind the death mask."

Hermione shivered and said as her eyes darted around as if she couldn't bear to make eye contact, "I do not go out in public alone with men. I do not allow myself to be seen in the company of a man. If a customer wants to have a business dinner, then Thérèse joins us. My reputation must never be called into question."

Severus was truly intrigued by this turn of the conversation. "You mean to tell me that you do not have anyone in your life?"

"Why? Is that such a shock to you?" she asked with a smirk playing around her lips. "I never recalled you being with a woman or ever rumored to have had a paramour." She crossed her arms and stood in a defensive position in front of him.

Severus stepped closer to her. "Ah, well, I unfortunately had my head on the chopping block each day. Romance and love could not be a part of my life," he said smoothly.

"Well, I have neither the time nor the inclination, *Snape*. Besides, it's none of your business. So, if you will excuse you," she said as she slammed her book shut on her desk and picked it up. "I have a great deal of work to finish."

He bowed gracefully and took his leave of her. He allowed himself a smile. Contact had been initiated. Now, it was time for Phase Two.

Please review!!

Circling

Chapter 13 of 24

Harry Potter and Severus Snape go over the days leading up to the Final Battle.

I trust everyone has caught up with my chapter snafu! So many thanks to karelia, Beth, and Maria. You gals rock! Please review!!!

Severus was quite pleased with himself. He had managed to get Hermione alone where they could talk as adults from one grown witch to another grown wizard. She was as delightful as she could be, and he felt a connection towards her that felt... right. He was in a glorious mood as he walked towards the castle; however, the buoyant, fuzzy feeling dissipated when he passed the gates. The memory of Hermione's voice in his brain nagged at him. That dimple. Hermione must be Alice's mother. But who was the father? He pushed it back into the corner of his mind. After all, if Hermione had a child, it didn't matter. She obviously didn't want it, so it would not affect a future relationship. His thoughts were broken as he observed Potter being chatted up by the bossy Miss Longbottom. As usual, his immediate sighting of Potter vanished all rational thought from his mind, and his mood soured.

He tried to ease by them undetected, but Alice halted him. "Professor! Look who came to visit my mum and dad!"

He stopped and stiffly turned around to answer the little baggage. "Yes, Miss Longbottom, I am acquainted with Mr. Potter, as I was Mr. Potter's teacher as well," he replied. "If you will excuse me." He turned on his heel, ready for a quick getaway.

"Professor *Snape*, I would like to have a word with you." Potter's voice rang in the older wizard's ears, and he could detect a migraine coming upon him.

Severus turned mid-way and looked at him, tired and wary. "I shall be in my office," he said as he swept away from them.

Not even five minutes later, there was a knock on the door.

"Blast!" he muttered. He took his wand and slashed through the air to open the door.

"Potter," he spat. "What could you possibly want with me?"

Harry walked in without fear or signs of looking intimidated. "Look, I know you and I aren't chummy, but we worked hard to find the missing during the last days of the war. I know it bothered you that Hermione was missing, and I know that you cared a great deal about her safety, just as you were for the others like Hannah and Cho."

Snape glared at him. "What has all of that have to do with anything? I know Miss Granger is living in wizarding Paris and owns her own shop. She is quite content."

Harry leaned towards him. "Y-You've been to see her?" he said, his eyes huge with disbelief.

"Of course!" he snapped impatiently as he sorted through his mail. "Miss Granger is a player in a very lucrative field that is a branch of a potion maker's life. I would hardly be on top of my game professionally if I did not ascertain the extent of her talents. Besides, at the Moscow Symposium this year, every Frenchman there was grumbling about a bossy, little witch who was trying to take over the field of procuring ingredients for that region. She's been quite the success too, much to their displeasure. There could only be *one* witch to fit their criteria."

Harry blinked a few times and shook his head before coming back to his purpose. "Professor, you and I had spoken about this before, and I would like to revisit it again. We

agreed that Hermione had lied to the Order about her disappearance. We knew how Greyback operated, and we knew how long she had been missing, and we both know her story didn't add up. Now, I know this sounds ludicrous, but when I was visiting Luna and Neville just now, I couldn't get Hermione out of my mind each time I looked at Alice. The way that little girl talks, walks, her mannerisms, her..."

Snape was still sorting his mail, trying to ignore his unwanted visitor as much as possible when he interrupted him. "...Potter, has it even occurred to you that the child just might be more like her great-grandmother than her parents?"

"Snape, look at me!" he said sharply.

Severus looked up slowly and narrowed his eyes. "You forget yourself, Potter," he warned.

Harry leaned heavily onto Snape's desk. "That little girl has Hermione's dimple. I saw it. It's on the bottom half of her left cheek. I think Alice is Hermione's daughter."

Severus placed his mail down slowly with a resigned sigh. "I know," he confessed. "I saw the dimple when the girl was four. I was aware of the fact when I saw her parents smiling; the Longbottoms do not have dimples, and this girl does. It is a fact of nature that she cannot be their biological child."

"Snape," Harry pressed, "I did the math. Hermione was gone for three days in January, and Alice was born on the fourth of October that same year. I know these types of calculations because I did it with Ginny when she was pregnant with our son. Alice had to have been conceived on either January the eighth, ninth, or the tenth...somewhere during that week. Luna had told Ginny she was due on October the second, so according to the St. Mungo's Due Date Chart, it had to have been one of those days! And coincidentally, it just so happens that Hermione was missing precisely during those three days."

Severus felt all the blood drain from his face as Potter continued.

"Hermione said the saddest thing to me when I tracked her down in Paris. She said all she needed was to succeed in business. She said that she didn't want a family or lovers. She told me that physical love was a 'pain-filled, humiliating experience that brought about another larger pain-filled humiliating experience called childbirth.' Now, tell me. How would she know that unless she had experienced it? I think someone hurt her, got her pregnant, and in fear or shame, Hermione gave the baby to Neville and Luna to raise."

Snape widened his eyes as he felt his temper rising dangerously. "You have a very active imagination, Potter," he snapped. "I dare you to repeat what you just said to Miss Granger and see where it gets you."

Harry matched Snape's glare, refusing to back down. "I will!" he replied. "What I want to know is *who* is the father? It must have been a Death Eater or someone in league with Voldemort. Otherwise, why keep it a secret? Can you tell me of anything that happened during those three days that stick out in your mind with the other Death Eaters?"

Snape turned from him. He was absolutely petrified the truth would show through his eyes. "Potter, you know as well as I that that particular week was the most dangerous time in all of my years as a spy. More people died that week than the past twenty years put together. Do you think I kept a damned itinerary of each day's activities?" he snarled.

"There is no call to get vicious," replied Harry. "I know you have the most organized mind in the universe, so I am sure if you tried, you could think of something useful!"

Snape gathered his composure and pulled his Occlumency walls up around him before turning back to the whelp.

Harry sat down in the chair opposite from Snape and waited for his reply.

Severus glared at him for what seemed hours before capitulating. He sighed and sat down behind his desk. "It was quite the week; as I had told you, each day was full of summons. I spent a great deal of time at the Dark Lord's side, advising him, trying to stop Lucius from getting killed, while many of us were being slaughtered by Aurors. Plans began on the fourth to attack Hogwarts. I was immersed in my work, going back and forth from the castle to Malfoy Manor constantly."

Harry sighed and folded his arms across his chest. "Snape," he said as he shook his head, "you are evading. I know you. Now why are you being so bloody difficult?"

"Perhaps," he replied softly, growing in agitation, "it might be because there are some things I would rather not discuss *with you*. In fact, I don't know if your delicate ears could stand to hear the things I would have to say." He glowered at the younger wizard as he sat frozen in his chair.

"Tell me about the girls," Harry whispered. "Cho Chang, Alicia Spinnet, Katie Bell, Romilda Vane...do *really* need to go on?"

"Fine," Snape conceded, his rage at Potter's interrogation getting the better of him. "There were many girls...you named some of the witches...but there were Muggles as well. We used Muggles to incite fear into the captured wizards and witches. Uncooperative witches were tortured for information, then branded for sport until deemed...*useless*. I never witnessed a branding, but you know as well as I the mark was a 'V' on their back, near the shoulder blade." He moved his left arm to place it on the spot.

"I was a part of the interrogation process. When certain potions needed to be administered or when *delicate Legilimency* needed to be performed, I was summoned. By the time I got to them, they would look at me and cry to me for help. I did what I could to minimize the pain."

Harry spoke low and gently as he continued to press him. "When we captured Wormtail, he spoke of a system to the tortures. Can you tell me the process?"

Severus sighed and closed his eyes. "Prisoners would be brought in and paraded in front of the Dark Lord. Usually, they would be bloodied and scraped up from the fight that had taken place during their capture." He slammed his fists on his desk as he shot out of his chair. "I begged Moody to give out poison so no one would have to be taken alive, damn fool!" he snapped.

He calmed down and continued. "We wore our masks, so no one would be identified. After the initial *introductions* had been made, I came forward at that point and healed those the Dark Lord ordered me to lengthen his *enjoyment*. The first part of the process was clear. The Dark Lord would say, 'Tell us what we need to know, and I will kill you without pain. Refuse me, and you will suffer greatly before your death.'"

He rubbed his forehead. "Those *children* knew nothing!" he continued. "I was sure even if they knew anything, they would have spat it out the minute the torture started. Only a handful had been Order members, like Miss Chang and Miss Bell. The rest were just eager *infants*, wanting to help the Order. I tried arguing my point, but I was not amongst the majority by any means. Besides, by this time, the Dark Lord was too vengeful and bloodthirsty to care."

"Once I had healed them, and the refusal for the choice of a quick death had been given, they would be taken down into the dungeons. It was required of me to stand by to check vitals, degree of consciousness, and monitor their blood pressure...I ensured the prisoners did not die during the interrogation. During this process, the list would be followed to the letter. First came the stripping of any warm clothing, followed by physical torture, beatings or lashings...all forms of physical humiliation. For the witches, the hair would also be cut...this is one reason I do not share your theory, Potter. If Miss Granger had been with them, her hair would have been hacked off! Then came the branding. I would administer salve and some potions for the victims. After that, the prisoners were herded again in front of the Dark Lord like dazed sheep." Snape grimaced as he stared into the distance. The disgust of those days would never leave him.

He snapped out of his memories and continued, "After another round with the Dark Lord...which was always varied...the psychological torture, the mind-*raping* took place which did not require my talents, unless someone had cracked. Then I would perform the *Legilimency* that dictated a calmer head and gentle prodding. Then, I would come to them, with my mask removed, and begin to heal certain parts of the body. Seeing my face would be enough to make most of them break down completely. I would caress their skin and touch their faces. I calmed them and made them relax. Some cried for their mothers, some for death and others pleaded for me to save them, to take

them back to Hogwarts. I promised I would take them away from all of this if they would tell me what they knew."

Snape shook his head sadly and clenched his fists in impotent rage. He looked up at Harry and said in frustration, "The problem was that they couldn't! They knew *nothing*."

Snape sank down into his chair, looking defeated. "I was not in charge when some information finally broke free. Miss Bell had been the one who had finally revealed the location of the remnants of Dumbledore's Army. Then it had been Dean Thomas who'd revealed the secret of the Protean Charm on the Galleons. That helped the Dark Lord to locate more of the students in the Army. Colin and Dennis Creevey, Ernie Macmillan, and Seamus Finnegan. It had been merciful that others, like Longbottom and Miss Lovegood, had been patrolling when we fell upon them."

"Hermione had been staying with them during the time of her capture!" Harry yelled.

Snape glared at him. "I assure you, Potter, if Miss Granger had been with the lot, I would have known about it. Every person captured in the end always came to me. Mr. Thomas said there were more, but out on *patrol*!" he hollered back.

"You never saw her?" Harry asked him pointedly.

"I did not," Severus whispered. "Now get out. I have indulged your curiosity enough. I do not relish in reliving these memories."

After Harry left, Snape cleared his desk with one clean sweep of his arm. Furious and sickened, he strained to recall...but he didn't want it to be true. Not Hermione. Anyone else but Hermione!

He collapsed in his chair, slumped and defeated. He couldn't be...it just was too horrific to think that he... that Hermione. *Alice!*

The Desolate Den of the Dragon

Chapter 14 of 24

Harry goes to visit an unlikely person.

Sorry about the long wait for the last chapter. RL, you know! I hope you enjoy this chapter; it answers more questions of how others are coping with the aftermath of the war. As always, my thanks to Karelia, Maria, and Beth for their beta skills and input! Please Review!

Harry was not through with his search for Alice's true parentage. He went to the one person left who could tell him anything before actually confronting Hermione. He nervously Apparated to Malfoy Manor where a shaky house-elf bid him entrance. Harry was directed into a darkened room where Draco sat looking into a picture frame.

"Harry Potter, sir," the creature said softly.

Draco's face looked haggard. He was dressed well, but in black. His face was pale and gaunt.

"Potter," his voice tired and shaken. "This must be a shock. The arrogant prat, Draco Malfoy, afraid of his own shadow."

Harry came closer towards him, careful not to frighten him. "It doesn't have to be this way, Draco," he whispered.

Draco laughed. "I spent one year being told what to do and another year being forced to do things I didn't want. Now you tell me 'it doesn't have to be this way.' Are you going to be the boss of me, too, Harry?"

The two former enemies sat in silence for quite a while with only the chiming of the clock in the background.

"I can't stop hearing the crying," Draco whispered. "The screaming is all one long scream... but the crying, the calling out for help, crying for mothers, God, for death...and knowing to whom the voices belonged. Knowing that they were people I went to school with. Knowing that most of the time it was me doing the torturing and couldn't stop."

Harry sat near him and whispered, "Draco, you were exonerated. We know you were forced, under the Imperius, and we know you were under extreme duress for a very long time. What that evil bastard made you do...it was horrible. He used your love for your family, exploited it for his own gain, and twisted revenge on your father. You don't need to carry that, Draco."

Draco lifted his face, and Harry saw the tears on his hollow cheeks. "My mum cries all the time. My dad is dying. His body is just giving out, and it's all my fault. If only I had been stronger. If only I had been able to do what the Dark Lord needed me to do. But I was so w-weak. I thought I knew what I was doing, and now I've lost it all."

Harry felt a sudden rush of compassion for the wizard. He hated to do what he knew needed doing, but it couldn't be helped.

"Draco," he said. "I came for a purpose."

He turned sharply to Harry, and Harry said, "No, don't worry. It's nothing bad...I mean you aren't in trouble. I just need to know if you can give me some answers about the last days before the war."

Draco's head hit the back of the neck rest. "I could go my entire life never revisiting those days again," he whispered.

Harry took a deep breath. "I would never ask you to do this if it weren't so very important."

Draco looked at Harry and asked, "What is it?"

"I need to know if you ever saw Hermione Granger among those you knew were our classmates."

Draco looked confused. "No, Potter," he whispered. "I would have recognized her. My mind was hazy; being under the Imperius makes things strange somehow. But if

Granger had been here, my father, Mulciber, anyone who had been there at the battle in the Department of Mysteries back in fifth year who knew who she was would have told the Dark Lord. Then, everyone would have known. She would have been paraded and questioned extensively. He would have made me and Snape hurt her, in order to break her will. No, Harry, I never saw or heard about her."

Harry sighed. "I want you to think about the last week, the last days before the war. Tell me what you remember, even if it seems insignificant."

Draco shivered. Harry called for the house-elf and told him, "Your master is cold. Please bring him a blanket or something."

When the elf returned, Draco wrapped the luxurious robe around him. Harry helped him; he seemed exerted by the effort. "It was terrible, Harry," he whispered as he looked into his green eyes. "There was a woman...a girl...but it had been Snape's birthday, you see."

"Snape's birthday?" Harry repeated, confused.

"The ninth of January, it had been his birthday. I knew by then he was frustrated. He wanted the war over just as much as my father and I did. There were balloons, wine, and lots of food...even a birthday cake! I was so bloody exhausted. I was just sitting on a chair, feeling drugged. My parents were huddled in a corner, tired and afraid. But it had been Snape's birthday, so Avery and someone went to get a *present*. There were many people, but only the select few Death Eaters were allowed to see the festivities of torturing the newly captured girl. I think they took me to see it happen so they could see the shock in my face. She was naked inside a cell room in the dungeons...branded...with a muslin bag tied around her head and neck. She was Snape's present."

Harry was shocked. "Was that normal procedure for prisoners?" he asked.

Draco looked confused. "No," he replied as he looked at Harry with large, solemn eyes.

"Why this time?" Harry asked.

A sound emerged from the blond wizard, but whether it was a laugh or a sound of derision, Harry couldn't tell.

"It was joke! They all liked to tease Snape about how no woman would want him unless they couldn't see his face, so it was a laugh for them," Draco replied angrily. "I hated it. It was all so disgusting."

"What happened then?" Harry asked. His voice was full of dread.

"I remember the woman crying when he started raping her, but the jeering was so loud it just drowned her out a bit. Then Snape said he couldn't get...I dunno, excited. She had been a virgin.

"Snape left the dungeons, and Merlin, was he furious! We all followed him back to the party. The next thing I knew, he had grabbed Avery's daughter, and he dragged her right into Avery's bedroom for all and sundry to see. It was disgusting...we could hear them shagging. It sounded like he was battering her...and she loved it. Neither Snape nor Idina...Avery's daughter...resurfaced until the alarm had sounded for the battle."

"What happened when the alarm sounded?"

"The wards came down. All was open for people to come in, out, whatever."

"Draco, this is very important," Harry's voice was sober. "What happened to the girl after Snape discarded her?"

Draco looked confused. He blinked his eyes and said, "She remained in the dungeons. Her body is probably there..."

"No, Draco," Harry interrupted. "Avery Manor was searched. I talked to Savage, one of the Aurors. He said that the dungeons were empty. The search was extensive."

"Buried? Transfigured?"

"There were no graves or disturbed land on Avery's property. The only grave we ever found was the shallow grave of Hannah Abbott's body...here...not at Avery manor."

"Oh, yes," Draco whispered as he looked away towards the half-shaded window across the room.

"Did you know that my parents are asking me to marry Astoria Greengrass?" he blurted out.

Harry furrowed his brow. "Uh, no. Isn't she Daphne's sister?"

"Yeah, that's right. Daphne's parents are forcing her marry some Russian pure-blood and making her move to Wizarding Leningrad with him. Astoria told me she's been in tears about it. She's getting married on Saturday at her parents' manor. I'll have to go with my parents and make a good show of being in love with a girl I never even knew in school. I mean, she was two years behind me in Slytherin."

"Your parents are making you marry, or are the Greengrasses putting the pressure on you?" pushed Harry.

Draco shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Astoria is a nice girl. She understands the way things have to be, and I know she'll support me. We've talked. She said she'll try hard to make sure she gives me an heir as soon as possible so I won't have to worry."

"Sounds like she wants you to take it easy and enjoy life a little," Harry whispered.

Draco shook his head. "No, Harry. I'll never be free. Did you know I was forced to perform the Cruciatus on my parents?" he asked. "What kind of father am I going to be? My father looks at me with fear in his eyes. He says he's fine, but it's there, behind something. I think it's Hannah's death that's killing him."

"What?"

Draco swallowed and cleared his throat as he swiped his eyes with his long, pale hand. "Hannah Abbott's body was only found after the Dark Lord left here, leaving my Aunt Bella and some of the others who were in his sacred circle in charge. Otherwise, Nagini would have...you know."

Draco looked around the dark, opulent room with the ancient silver, sumptuous furniture, and heavy draperies surrounding them. "My father took Hannah from the group of girls that had been captured months before the end. Mother was just...insane about getting free; she was dogging the Dark Lord's footsteps, trying to do anything to get him to forgive us...gone constantly. Father was becoming unhinged. He stole Hannah away and kept her here upstairs, hidden in his bedroom. I had to keep him within earshot constantly. He was so...unstable. I remember sitting outside of the uppermost room, listening to my father beg her to having sex with him. At first she was terrified of him, but he kept telling her how pretty and lovely she was, and how he would love her and protect her. I mean, he was raving! He wanted to start over, start again after the war. She was his mistress after that, and he kept her in that room, safe from the others. Father said she had never... been with ..." His voice trailed off.

He cleared his throat and blinked his eyes rapidly. "Father was proud she came to him...*untouched*. He told me she would give him more children. He said he knew she would give him the daughter he never had.

"It was Bella who found them out," Draco whispered. "She hexed Hannah so badly she crushed her skull. She made me perform the Cruciatus Curse on my father while Hannah died."

Harry didn't know what to say. He felt bad for Draco, that life looked so bleak for him.

"I buried her," he sobbed. "My father was destroyed. He wouldn't stop crying over her. I never knew the meaning of anguish before that day. He must have truly loved her.

"Will the Aurors want to have me come in?" Draco's voice was calm once more.

"No," Harry replied. "We're all so tired. It just clears up the anomaly as to why Hannah was buried instead of...you know." Harry shifted in his seat. He didn't want to think about Nagini.

There was a silence then, and Harry was loath to push Draco. He seemed so psychologically damaged.

"Harry," Draco said, interrupting the silence. "Why did you ask me about Hermione Granger? The last I heard she was a smashing success in Paris with her new potions shop or something."

Harry sighed. "There just have been some things she's said that has made me think that something happened in the war. She was missing for three days: the eighth, ninth, and the tenth of January..."

Draco's head snapped up, and Harry paused. He realized that girl Snape had violated had been Hermione.

Harry continued. "I stumbled upon Hermione after the battle. Her robes weren't hers, and she looked disoriented. Then she was just *so different* afterward."

"I remember," said Draco softly as he gazed into the distance. "She was so pretty. Her hair was soft and curly; I touched a curl once when no one was looking. Her figure had changed, and she looked so grown-up. I couldn't stop staring at her when we were in class."

Harry sighed and rubbed his face with one hand. *If this didn't feel so damn pathetic with Draco just a hollow shell of himself and knowing Hermione had been used only to humiliate Snape, who didn't even know who she was...I'd kill Snape! How long does this have to go on? What am I going to do about Alice? Shit! What am I going to do about Hermione AND Snape?*

"I know," Harry replied as he lowered his head. "Now what do I do when I prove it was her?"

"Potter, if you want to know if Hermione was the girl in the mask...bag...whatever...you're just going to have to make her show you her back. Look at her right scapula. That was where they branded the captured, and it was always the same brand: a 'V.'"

"Then what?"

Draco shrugged. "So, get her help. Professor Snape violated her. You'll have to let them both know so they can deal with it."

"Draco," Harry said as he rubbed his eyes, "there is a child."

"WHAT?" Draco shouted, coming to life for the first time since Harry arrived.

Harry nodded. "A girl was born in October of 1998. Her *parents* are Neville and Luna Longbottom, but Draco, she has the same dimple as Hermione...not to mention her name is Alice *Hermione*. Hermione is the girl's godmother. She has dark brown curly hair and dark eyes, but her temper is just like Hermione's, and she has these intense eyes as if she is boring into your soul. She glares just like Snape. It is the strangest thing. And she quotes from *'Hogwarts, A History!'*"

"Proves nothing," Draco said as his voice shook. "Probably hangs out far too much with Granger, is all."

"Draco, Alice has never met her godmother. Hermione hasn't been back to England since we finished Hogwarts. Let's not forget the science behind this. That dimple is the exact replica of Hermione's. Neville and Luna don't have dimples. It is *genetically impossible* for that girl to be the Longbottoms' child."

The former enemies stared at each other.

"You know what you're going to have to do," whispered Draco.

"Yeah," whispered Harry, in return.

"Fucking war," Draco spat.

Harry went home, feeling low and depressed. Not only had Draco's mood jarred him, but the fact that he was ninety-nine percent sure Hermione and Snape were Alice's real parents made him literally sick to his stomach. He knew Snape had had to do terrible things in the war. Draco's account made it clear that Snape had been forced to violate that girl...had been disgusted by the act... but what choice would he have had? Did he have a choice at all? Hermione had been a virgin. When that realization hit Harry, he hung his head and cried.

He couldn't forget their first year together at Hogwarts. She had been so small and vulnerable, cried easily, out of place, lonely, and friendless, until he and Ron saved her from that damn troll. He thought of her bravery during their attempt to stop Snape from stealing that old stone, only to find out it had been Quirrell all along. The thought of how small she was that first day in Potions when Snape first insulted her, calling her a "silly girl." He was so angry with Snape; he could go to Hogwarts now and throttle him. But Snape didn't know, and Harry was old enough now to understand that if Snape did know, he was probably feeling like a worthless shit. There was no one alive now to blame...fucking war.

"Harry?" whispered Ginny.

Harry was at the bottom of the steps that led up to the house. He stood up quickly and tried to put himself together. "H-Hi, Ginny," he said in the happiest voice he could muster. "How are you? Is James in bed?"

Ginny stopped him when he reached the door. "Harry, James is fine. I just put him to bed. Now why don't you tell me why you've been crying?"

Harry placed a firm arm around his wife's shoulder and led them inside. He warmed himself by the fire, and Ginny poured them some tea.

Harry gulped his first cup down and as Ginny refilled it, he told her about his visit with the Longbottoms, his talk with Snape, and finally his talk with Draco.

Ginny was shaking after he finished. She took out a handkerchief from her apron pocket and said, "Poor Hannah. I can't even wrap my mind...you know that Hermione knows it was Snape, you realize," she said as she sniffed.

"How do you figure?" asked Harry, confused.

"She was Snape's birthday present. You know she heard those bastards talking or they told her. And she would've heard his voice. Women are partial to smell too, so she probably could also tell it was he by the... *proximity* of their bodies. Oh, Hermione!" she cried out.

"Shite!" hissed Harry. "What do we do?"

"Perhaps if I go and speak with her?" she asked.

"I don't know," replied Harry. "She might get suspicious and shut down."

"Maybe we need to talk to Neville and Luna?" she offered.

Harry ran his fingers through his hair. "It could be the same all over again! They would just shut down... or at least I know Neville would. When I tried to talk to him, he was like a stone wall...just like Hermione. I just don't know, Ginny. I just don't seem to know my friends anymore."

No Leaf Clover

Chapter 15 of 24

Snape thought the life he had waited for was finally coming true. Now, it's all gone smash.

A/N: Many thanks to karelia, Beth, and especially Maria, who really outdid herself helping me with this chapter. It is rather graphic and may be difficult to read for some. However, this is Snape at his most vulnerable and disgusted. Fifty house points for who can name where the title of this chapter comes from! Please review!

Severus had felt ill ever since Potter's visit. He slumped into his favorite brooding chair after pouring himself an enormous amount of firewhisky from his liquor cabinet. He stared into the fire and thought about that night.

Ten Years Ago

He looked at the cowering, naked girl on the floor; she was naked except for the sack that covered her head. His birthday gift. She was on her left side in fetal position, trembling uncontrollably. He was so angry, not just at the obvious innuendo of the sack that was covering her head but at the inescapable position he was in and for being thrust into the center of attention. He sneered as he felt the dozen of lusty eyes boring into the back of his robes. He threw off his cloak and outer robes and stood before the girl in his unbuttoned frock coat. At that moment, he hated Avery and everyone watching his humiliation...and hers...whoever she was.

He knelt and rolled the girl onto her back, and placed his hands on her knees, pushing her legs far apart. There was no resistance. Her body was warm and alive yet unresisting; perhaps, she had resigned herself to her fate? He took out his flaccid penis, unable to feel stirred to perform. Her unresponsiveness frustrated him, and he sighed to himself.

How the hell am I going to do this?

Knowing what he must do or face consequences, he grasped himself and thought of Lily...all the fantasies that had been etched into his mind like wooden wheel treads on a well-worn road. He imagined the silent, faceless girl underneath him was Lily. The crowd behind him was getting restless.

"Aww, Snape! Get on with it. Give it to her!"

"Oi! He's just not used to having a woman."

"Think he knows what to do?"

"Merlin, maybe he doesn't know what hole?"

Sniggers were filling the air. He closed his eyes, spat onto his hand, and stroked his penis until he had the perfect image of Lily in his mind, panting and squirming for him to plunge into her.

"Who bleedin' cares? She'll be howlin' one way or another!"

"C'mon, Severus! Is this the gratitude you give a friend who brings you a free fuck for your birthday? Give us a show! Tear into her!"

"Yeah!" a few voices said at once.

"We want to hear some screamin'!"

They want blood and pain. Damn them!

He grabbed hold of her arms tightly and forced himself into her unyielding flesh. The silent girl jerked to life, kicking and screaming underneath him. It was all he could do to continue with this farce. Her screams, oh, her screams! He had to block her screams or he'd never finish.

He thrust deeper.

She twisted and kicked; her screaming began to turn into weeping and pleading, like a frightened little kitten.

He thrust harder. It was getting difficult to ignore her.

She wouldn't stop whimpering. He tried to think of Lily screaming in orgasmic pleasure, but the crying, choking, and whimpering...it was making him ill. The laughing all around him angered him. He thrust once more, and a pure physiological response shuddered through him. He was going to orgasm, and there was no way on earth he was going to let it happen. His balls were clenched so tight it was painful, but he held still, buried inside her as he forced his body to withhold his orgasm. He groaned as he withdrew from her, cursed himself for hating the loss of her tightness around him, and stood to button his trousers with his back to the crowd. He watched in rage and shame as the girl lay with her legs spread open, blood sticky on her inner thighs.

She was a virgin!

He immediately lost his erection. It took every ounce of self-control not to kill Avery and each one of his brother Death Eaters. He had defiled an innocent. He watched her, his face emotionless as she curled slowly back into fetal position, her cries now only sobs of pain and brokenness. The urge to comfort and heal her overwhelmed him as it

did every time he had to inflict pain on the innocent. However, he could not. It would not be prudent to give himself away to tenderness in front of so many.

"Avery," he said icily as he turned to face his brothers. "If this is your idea of a present, I am sorely disappointed. I'm afraid I am not of the disposition to take sexual gratification from screaming virgins."

With that, he strode out of the dank cell and raced upstairs. When he emerged, all eyes were on him and saw the smirks on many. His eyes searched through the audience. If they wanted Severus Snape to take a woman for once, then by Merlin, he would do it on his own terms! His eyes froze on the ample curves of Idina, Avery's daughter.

How perfect and just! The minx had been after him for a hard fuck for quite some time.

He strode over to her and grabbed her by the back of her hair, dragging her to Avery's bedroom, right there next to where the revelers were, knowing that everyone in the house would be able to hear them. In one swoop, he picked her up and threw Idina on top of the bed. She was already panting and flushed with excitement. He tore the front of her dress robes apart, revealing her naked breasts, and he felt his cock hardening again quickly and painfully. He ignored the gasps emitting from her and continued to strip her. He ripped off her knickers and tore open the fly of his trousers, noting the blood that was smeared all around his cock and his hand. He gave her no warning...he just slammed into her body, hating her for being already wet and aroused. He smeared the blood of the girl on the witch's face, making her suck the remnants off of his thumb. He was sickened with the depravity around him and inside him. The Death Eater in him took over, and he was a machine, devouring her mouth, neck, and breasts. She was screaming over and over as she orgasmed under him. He was shocked she could tolerate the brutality he was forcing on her. Finally, out of sheer physical nature, he burst his seed into her with a growl as he bit her neck. He staggered off of her and stared into her lust-crazed face. She had loved it. He hated her, hated everything about her and what she represented to him. He loathed everyone in that ballroom...every single bloody person!

Severus spent the night trying his damndest to humiliate and break Idina as he'd been forced to break that faceless girl. The woman was a masochist of the foulest kind. So, he dominated her, punishing her with his cock, fist and belt.

In the morning, she looked battered and bruised. Two black eyes, a split lip, and lash marks on her back and legs from his belt showed raised, angry, red welts. She had smiled at him and healed herself the best she could. He was still sulking in bed when the alarm sounded...

Present Day

Snape felt the glass slip from his hand as he sobbed bitterly. *Why did I do it? Why did it have to be Hermione? I never should have done it! I should have protected her... I was her teacher!*

He hated himself for so many reasons, but this act was something different from the rest. It had nothing to do with the war. To those sick perverts at the revel, it had been just a bloody lark to break the boredom until the final battle began, and he had allowed himself to be used for their sick game. He just could not wrap his mind around the possibility that he had created a child that wretched night. Was it probable? Absolutely; however, it was highly unlikely. He was certain that he hadn't come while inside the girl...or had he? No. He'd forced himself to stop. He would have to find out to be sure.

He Apparated in front of *La Chasseresse* and was pleased it was open. He didn't see Hermione, but the servant, Thérèse, was about, so he entered and smiled at the young part-Veela.

After greeting one another, Thérèse brought tea out for them, and Severus decided to start asking for information.

"Thérèse, I wanted to know about Miss Granger. Has she ever talked to you about the war?"

"Yes," she replied uneasily, dropping her eyes onto the linen napkin in her lap. "But only after I saw something that was not for me to see. She swore me to secrecy. I cannot tell you anything."

Severus was beginning to get frustrated. He took his wand and pointed it at her.

"Legilimens!" he snarled.

Thérèse's mind spouted a fountain of useless information. He dug for the conversation between her and Hermione for quite some time before he found what he needed.

Thérèse was walking into her mistress' bedroom to place some clothes in the highboy. She turned to hang some clothes in the massive walk-in closet and saw her mistress naked from the waist up, dressing. Thérèse gasped in horror as she saw a hideous purplish 'V' grotesquely marring her creamy skin. Hermione turned, and her face was white with rage. She took her wand and made her swear never to tell a soul what she had seen.

Severus withdrew, shocked and trembling from the image he had seen. Thérèse was screaming at him, beating on his chest and arms. He barely heard her, hardly registered the blows she inflicted on him. All he could think of was the young woman in the muslin sack...faceless, nameless...her virginity stolen, the cries, and the blood... oh, God, the blood!

There had been a child. *His.*

He made his way back to Hogwarts, leaving Thérèse a sobbing heap on the floor of her mistress' shop. Hermione would still be gone for quite a while. In the meanwhile, he had to see his daughter and force the truth from her "parents."

To The Hunt!

Chapter 16 of 24

Severus Snape decides to take his chances with his daughter and Hermione, only to find out both are not within his reach.

Severus knocked impatiently on the Longbottoms' door. It opened slowly and Luna appeared, looking at him with wide eyes.

"Professor," she said serenely as she opened the door wider to give him entrance. He strode in, his rage near the boiling point.

"Mrs. Longbottom, I have no time for pretense or formality. You should know that I have discovered Alice is my child, and I demand that you release her to my care. Pack a bag of necessities, and we shall leave."

"Alice is not here, but visiting her great-grandmother. Perhaps you would like to talk now? She won't be back for another hour."

Snape sat down on one side of the couch with a flourish. "Fine," he snapped. "You can start with why after all these years, I never knew I had a child?"

Luna was unfazed. "I believe Hermione should answer that question, Professor," she replied as she poured herself some tea. "Tea, professor?"

"No," he growled. "And I don't give a damn about whose story it is to tell! You and your husband have been deceiving me for ten years, and I demand satisfaction!"

Luna sighed and began to talk. "I knew Hermione had been pregnant before she did. I confronted her, and she permitted me to perform a pregnancy test on her. She was terrified. By the time this happened, she had already been four months along. She was nearly six months along by the time school ended. So, when we left Hogwarts, she told Harry and Ron she was going to Australia to be with her parents. Hermione lived with us at Gran's until Alice was born. She gave her to us, and we all had agreed on her name. Hermione left to recuperate at my Dad's after that with Gran. She went to Australia, and then we heard about her coming back to Europe and her shop in Paris. But we've not seen her since the day she left us. That was three days after Alice's birth."

Snape sat while his ire grew to a proportion he felt was impossible for him and not have a stroke. "As fascinating as this all is, why in the hell was I not told? Why was I not informed?"

Luna looked at him innocently. "I would be interested to know how you are convinced you are the father?"

Snape's lips spread into a malicious smile. "I have known since days after your return to Hogwarts that she could not possibly be your child. The day she came to apologize to me when she had been four, she smiled as did you and your husband. She revealed a dimple that neither you nor your husband possess."

"Why did you keep your silence?" Luna asked as her brow furrowed.

"It was none of my affair; besides, I had no clue then as to who the parents might have been."

"What changed your mind?" Luna prodded. "How did you know Hermione was my daughter's real mother?"

"I hardly think you are a position to question me, Mrs. Longbottom. Suffice it to say some intuition on my part, coupled with Auror Potter's observations, brought me to a confession of sorts by Miss Granger's assistant in Paris. Now, what I would like to know is exactly why I was not told? Did she not know who the father had been? Was she too afraid to try and find out? No doubt she informed you the situation surrounding the conception."

"Yes," admitted Luna. She sat down with her tea and paused to blow on the hot liquid and take a long sip.

"Although Hermione knew, she was terrified as to your reaction, if you would call her a liar, due to the improbability of such a conception occurring. She also had a very difficult time hearing the others laugh about you taking another woman upstairs in such an enthusiastic manner while she lay crying and bleeding on a prison cell's dirt floor."

The earnestness in Luna's eyes took a great deal of starch out of Snape's indignation. He felt much of his anger dissipate from him. He lowered his head and let his hair hide the profile of his face from her.

"Many things were expected in the line of duty. It had been as much of a personal humiliation to me as it had been to Miss Granger."

Snape's voice grew quiet. "The girl was left in the dungeons after I took my leave. Later, I discovered by Avery's confession before he had been given the Dementor's Kiss that if we searched the manor house, we would find her body there. I went to his manor house and there had been nothing. Other pieces of information came to light, and I believed her to have been Hannah Abbott.

"Potter had more," he continued as he rubbed his weary eyes. "He had pieces of information that filled in the gaps...there can be no other conclusion."

He looked unblinkingly into Luna's eyes. "Will you deny it? Will you tell me she is not my daughter, that Hermione Granger did not give birth to my child?"

Luna remained calm and sedate. "I won't deny it. I knew we wouldn't be able to keep her forever. Either Hermione would return and assert her rights as the child's mother, or you would figure it out and take her away from us. Even if that never happened, we were sure Alice would find out. She's very intelligent, so curious, you see."

Severus continued to glare at his former student. "Why?" he raged. "Why would she not tell me? Why could she not come to me for help? Am I such a monster in your eyes...in all of my students' eyes...that I am truly such an evil person to reject my own flesh and blood?"

Luna shook her head. "She was terrified. Gran was adamant about how life would be for Alice. The war may be over, but the old prejudices remain. Alice's mother, a Muggle-born, her father, a Death Eater, spy, conceived outside of marriage in a terrible, tragic way. Hermione was so overwhelmed, so confused. It broke her heart to give her away. I think that is why she's never returned. She sends letters and gifts to Alice, but Hermione has never laid eyes upon her since she was a newborn," she confessed.

Severus stood up and took a deep breath. "I want you to know, to believe me," he began to say, "that I, ignorant of all of this, have been trying to court Miss Granger. Her reputation as a businesswitch in my field intrigued me and coming face to face..." Words failed him and he turned to face the witch with pride and dignity.

"I have worked hard to gain entrance into her life. I want to continue to do so. I need for you and your husband to start telling Alice that she was adopted but that she was given up reluctantly, and her true parents have grieved in silence for her own protection. Tell her it was for her safety, for her life, to hide her away. I want Alice to know she was wanted. Is that clear?"

Luna nodded slowly. "Yes, Professor Snape. And if questions are asked?"

"You tell her she will hear the answers when the time is right. Deny her now, but promise her she will know *everything* in due course."

He strode back to the door, wrenched it open and left. He was ill. This was a nightmare that he could not process. There was only one thing to do. He had to go see Potter.

After the two wizards told of their discoveries, eyewitness statements, the demise of Hannah Abbott and of Luna's confession, they sat silently as Ginny wept softly. Harry rubbed her back, and Severus was frozen, looking into the distance. Finally, he rose from the chair he had been sitting on and walked out the door.

He didn't have much hope for a happy future. Alice probably would not wish to be taken from the only parents she knew, and once Hermione came back from Kiev, Thérèse would not hesitate to tell her that he had mind-raped her. Hermione would never allow him in her presence again. It wouldn't matter that he had fallen for her before he knew...she wouldn't believe him...and he wouldn't be able to fault her. He could see her fading deeper into the darkness of loneliness. Perhaps she would come to England to see her child from a distance...but there would be no family...no future for him and Hermione.

Now, he was faced with having to tell Hermione the truth. He could see it now, the spark would die from her eyes and the shame, humiliation, and anger would erupt,

drowning them both in the despair of it all.

He returned to *La Chasseresse* to make peace with Thérèse. He walked into the shop and when she saw him, she hexed him with a Petrificus Totalus Spell and stood over him.

"You piece of shit!" she spat at him. "You think because I have Veela blood running in my veins that I don't have any brains in my head? I could kill you now, and no one would ever find your body. In fact, that sounds like a good idea!"

"*Accio wand!*" she shouted with a smile on her face. Severus' wand shot straight into her waiting palm. She placed each foot of her long legs on their sides of his thighs. Her use of her sexuality to impress her dominance over him was interesting. If Severus could, he would have smirked. It was so very... Bellatrix.

The part-Veela witch stood straight and tall with her purple eyes blazing like fire and her lovely teeth turned into sharp points like a vampire. Her face elongated slightly, just enough for her to look downright predatory. She pointed her wand at his head, grinning viciously as she gazed upon his frozen form. "Yes, I think I shall kill you, then transfigure your corpse into a beautiful necklace that I shall wear when I am walking down the promenade," she growled in a terrible, horrific voice, so unlike the lovely tone with which he was accustomed.

She crouched lower and whispered dangerously, "However, I shall give you one chance to explain why you violated me so ruthlessly. If your answer does not please me, you will die."

She rose and stepped away from him, keeping her wand trained on him and her fingers wrapped tightly around his.

"Sit!" she snarled as a chair from the side of the room skidded forward and banged against the backs of his knees, forcing him to sit.

She sat elegantly behind Hermione's desk, vanishing all paperwork from the impressive mahogany desk. "Speak!" she barked.

"Thérèse," he began deeply, "please allow me to express..."

She silenced him with a flick of her wand. "I do not wish to hear your feeble apologies! Just get to the reason why I should not kill you this minute!" she hissed.

Impressed with her ability to control a volatile situation, he went right into the crux of the matter.

"It has come to my attention that I fathered a child with Hermione. I needed to know without a doubt, so I came to you. When you said you could not speak of it, I knew there was only one way for me to gain the information and not risk harming your life. I know what I did was wrong. But this is my life...my daughter...that had been hidden from me. I must confront Hermione, but I cannot as long as she thinks she can slip out of the situation."

Thérèse narrowed her eyes. "So, you are the reason she never accepts the favors of men? What did you do to her?" she demanded.

Severus lowered his head and explained everything: his identity as a spy, the infamous birthday party, the girl with the muslin bag on her head, and a branding of a "V" on her back like all of the other victims of the Dark Lord. He even told her of the eventual discovery of Hannah Abbott's body in a shallow grave, and his grief, self-hatred, and inability to find the girl even after the confession from Avery, the wizard who had orchestrated the entire plot...it all came out.

Thérèse lowered her wand, but did not sheath it. "So, unknowingly, you came to Paris, looking for Miss Granger. Why?" she asked, looking at him with suspicion.

"I was at a Symposium for Potion makers in Moscow when I heard reports of a young, beautiful upstart who was taking over the clientele of Wizarding Paris. They called her 'The Huntress' or *La Chasseresse*. I knew it had to be Hermione Granger, and once her true name was spoken, I was infinitely curious. She had been my student and the talent, intelligence, and the brashness were just as I had recalled from her school days. *Tenacious*, some would call her. She was an insufferable know-it-all, and I had told her so more on one occasion," he admitted.

"But the idea that she was a woman now, taking on all the stuffed shirts and old guard of Paris was too intriguing to let go. I had to meet this 'Huntress' and see if she had been my old student. I never knew it had been Miss Granger I had violated all those years ago. If I had, I never would have tried to approach her, except only to discuss the welfare of our child."

Thérèse sighed. "Well, it would seem your story makes some things rather clear. Her sadness when she sees small children, the revulsion and obsessive need to keep herself distant from men...except for Monsieur Valois, of course."

"The old gentleman?" Severus mused. "Hermione told me he created her."

Thérèse smirked. "Mlle. Granger does not give herself enough credit. Philippe Valois is the wizard who orchestrated the coming together of the old and new, as it were, of the potions world here in Paris. He applauded Miss Granger's propriety in her dress and deportment, and he procured an elite dressmaker to fashion her signature look. Miss Granger told M. Valois that she would not try to compete in a man's world like a man. She was determined to do it as a woman. It is rather unsettling for most men to deal with her on a business level, especially when she refuses to deal on any other! She is a steel trap behind pearls, a shark in silk hosiery and a snare in garter belts. All Miss Granger needed was a sponsor, a strong financial backer who would vouch for her skills in the business world," she explained.

"I do know that she confides greatly in him. If she has ever told anyone about her having a child, M. Valois would know. He would also be able to aid you in a discussion about it. This is not something you talk about over dinner. This would have to be done respectfully, gently, with grace, and carefully approached. I know Miss Granger, Professor Snape. She is not a woman to fear leaving a situation that feels threatening or uncomfortable. I have seen her do it without reason or apology. And she never makes a scene."

She produced Monsieur Philippe Valois' card and Snape's wand. "His assistant is Jules. Do not ask to speak directly with M. Valois, rather ask for an appointment. It would not hurt to drop information about your intimate relationship with his cousin, Lucius Malfoy. Make sure you extend your sympathies to M. Valois for having such an ass for a cousin, or something to that regard."

"Madame," he replied as he sheathed his wand and pocketed the card, "I am a Slytherin. I know all about how to manipulate a conversation to my advantage. Good day."

A/N: Oh, Severus! Will he ever learn some humility? He'd better, or there will be nothing left to bury after Hermione rips into him. Many thanks to Karelia, Maria, and Beth who continue to help and advise me. Please review!!!

At The Precipice

Chapter 17 of 24

Severus confronts Luna, meets with Valois, and finally, alone at last with Hermione.

Severus stood in his office, pacing every once in a while as he periodically picked up a piece of parchment. It was heavy parchment of the finest quality. An ornate script of the sender's initials decorated the top of the missive.

My dear Professor Snape,

How delightful to hear from you. My manservant, Jules, was more than complimentary of your deportment and politeness. I especially enjoyed the comment about my cousin Lucius losing his house-elf because of a twelve-year-old boy. I do love a laugh at Lucius' expense!

Concerning a meeting, I do have my reservations. Mlle. Granger is an extraordinary young woman with impeccable taste and values her privacy. IF I were to speak about anything concerning her without her express permission, I would lose a friend and gain an enemy...and if you know her as well as I...a formidable one.

That being said, I shall arrange a meeting for us at my chateau outside of Anjou. My hawk, Gregor, shall come round to bring you a Portkey. It shall activate this Wednesday evening at nine o'clock. The terms of our conversation shall be set then.

Your servant,

M. Philippe Valois

Severus detested veiled insinuations. He could be as easily thrown out as soon as he arrived if Valois found his questions too personal. He would have to keep it to a basic level. No divulging of secrets, just a bit of wanting and needing advice on approaching Hermione with delicate matters.

The blasted hawk arrived with the Portkey, as promised, and Severus was sent reeling into the air and landing softly outside a lovely chateau that was immaculate and very old-fashioned. *Lucius may be a pompous ass, but Valois is a smug bastard!*

He was introduced to M. Valois after waiting in the foyer for a half an hour. His temper was already starting to rise, but he schooled his face to register no emotion as he entered the inner sanctum.

The sitting room was dark with its golden hues and earthy tones. However, it was drenched in muted light that made it very welcoming and relaxing. Valois was in a smoking jacket. He offered Severus a cigar, which he declined graciously with a lift of his hand.

God only knows what he has done to it.

Severus watched the older wizard as he carefully pierced the end of his cigar. "Ah, well then, may I tempt you with some scotch? Muggle, however, twenty-year-old...rather good, I say, for Muggle spirits," he said as he poured a glass for himself.

"Thank you, Monsieur," replied Severus. He held the snifter to his nose, inhaling its scent for potential poisons or paralytics. He would take it in hand, pretending to drink but only short of Hermione's love and of his daughter's would force him to imbibe it.

"Sit down, young man!" the older wizard said in a booming voice. Severus sat in a velvet-upholstered chair and observed him as he poured another drink.

Valois was rather fit for a wizard of his age and appetites. Severus had never met him before, but had always thought of him as more of a Horace Slughorn type. It was quite obvious the wizard enjoyed comfort and ease, but he was rather conscious about his looks and physical appearance. Severus could see the family resemblance to Lucius. There was the stubborn chin and sly smile that crept up one side of his face, yet never reached the eyes. Moreover, if his physique was an indicator, he was just as vain. He was rigid and exacting, from what Jules had told him. Philippe Valois only entertained the very best. In fact, it had only been for two reasons Valois even considered meeting with him: First, that he was an acclaimed Potions master and well-respected in his field, and secondly, that he knew from very reliable gossip he had been successful in luring Mlle. Granger out of her shop to take luncheon with him alone.

"Professer Snape, Monsieur Valois eez verry... territorial about Mlle. Granger. Only 'e 'as 'ad zee pleazure of 'er company alone. 'E eez intrigued by your association with 'er," Jules had mentioned during their meeting. Severus would use those tidbits to his advantage.

"So," began Valois, "what do you wish to speak with me regarding?"

Severus crossed his legs and spread his hands open in a gesture of complete disclosure. "Miss Granger was my student for all her years at Hogwarts. She was the most impressive student I had the pleasure of teaching. Unfortunately, my service to the Dark Lord prohibited me from expressing my true regard for her talents." He assumed a poise of relaxation, a façade to give the illusion of feeling at ease.

"Yes," Valois commented as he relit and puffed on his cigar. "Hermione was quite the find. I found her in a dingy corner shop, trying hard to set up a business that could belong on *La maison Guinevere*. The old men sneered at her attempts to make a place for herself. I kept watch on her and one day, I saw a lovely woman walking down the street with long curls flowing down her back and dressed in a gorgeous beige chiffon dress with a hat and gloves to match! She had her servant with her, and I recognized her. I introduced myself and watched her shrewd brown eyes flicker towards her assistant and with the slightest tilt of the head, her assistant gave her approval, and the goddess came to life!" His hands popped open to indicate an explosion, and he mirthfully laughed.

"I am glad you appreciate the talent that she possesses, Professor. Mlle. Granger is the future of the Potions world...not that I am interested in potions," he said off-handedly as he took a sip of his drink. "I am very interested in originals and people of talent. I have had the good fortune of hearing your name in many circles. You have quite the dubious reputation, Professor," he said as he stared in the dark wizard's eyes.

Severus carefully maintained a neutral expression during the wizard's speech, but took in every physical and verbal nuance the man made. "I would prefer, *notorious*, Monsieur." *Good Lord, he is like Slughorn!*

Valois laughed heartily. "Very well, Severus Snape. Let us cover our agreement."

Severus raised an eyebrow and crossed his hands behind his back, carefully taking a powerful stance that would not be moved. "That shan't be necessary, I assure you. I have no desire to know of Miss Granger's secrets. All I wish is for advice, as you are her confidant. I have some news that may be quite distressing for her to hear and accept. All I wish is to know the best way to approach her."

Valois sighed. "I always knew there was a secret behind all that satin and lace...a lingering sadness...a loneliness that has unfortunately made her so intriguing to so many men. So, you know the real face behind 'The Huntress?'" he asked.

"Somewhat." Severus kept his face as stone as he chose his words cautiously. "I was her teacher during her formative years. One gains a sense of *a basic temperament*. Of course, you know her volumes more." Snape began to walk along the bookcases that lined the room, taking care to memorize titles he felt important. "Where I knew the girl, you know the woman."

"Well," Valois said after he downed the remainder of his scotch. "I am afraid I cannot help you, my boy. You see, I know her business secrets, and as ruthless as she may be, I cannot help but feel a sense of obligation to protect her against those who would wish her utter ruin and financial calamity. I know absolutely nothing of her personal life. And from the tenor of your voice, this sounds rather personal."

Severus turned to face Valois. Keeping his voice quiet and smooth, he dared to risk going deeper. "While this is a personal matter, it is potentially devastating to her mind, I fear. She may not take the news well at all. I need to know how invested you are in Miss Granger's well being. Not, financially, but psychologically."

Valois narrowed his eyes. "You mean that she could potentially go mad over such information?" he whispered.

"Potentially; however, not absolute," Severus clarified. "I believe if she had the support of the people she trusts to rally around her, she may not react as terribly as I fear."

"Young man," Valois said as Severus watched his face turn red, "are you involved in this treachery against Hermione or are you just the messenger?"

Severus kept his back rigid and steady, "With respect, I must decline answering. I will tell you that any involvement I have had in this tragedy was not performed with malicious intent."

"For your sake, my dear boy, I pray you are being honest," Valois countered with a harsh retort. "I regret I can not help you."

Severus bowed before taking his leave. He was on his own.

A week later, Severus received a letter from Hermione with happy news. The ingredient had been found. Severus could see, in his mind, her sparkling eyes and bright smile as he read the tale of her discovery.

... I shall be back in Paris in two days. Please join me for a drink at my flat above the shop on Saturday around seven. Then we shall go for dinner and celebrate our good fortune!

Hermione

Severus felt physically ill. He went to see the Longbottoms and explained that Hermione was returning to Paris.

"I have to tell her," Snape urged Luna as they whispered in the doorway. Luna looked nervously towards the door where Neville was playing with Alice.

Luna squeezed out of the small opening of the door she allowed herself before continuing to speak with Snape.

She stood wringing her hands. "I just wish we had more time. Neville has not taken this well at all. He was rather scarred by watching Alice's birth. He refuses to have a child with me. I think he always thought there would never be a way she could be taken from us." She raised her face to reveal unshed tears threatening to fall.

Severus scowled at her. This was not the quirky, mysteriously calm person he'd always known to be talking to him. This was just another frightened wife and mother, letting her emotions and sentimentality run amok. He couldn't stand females like that; they were impossible to respond to reason.

Severus crossed his arms in front of him. "No one is taking Alice from anyone," he snapped. "I haven't even discussed this with Hermione, yet. She may not want her back."

"And you, Severus?" Luna asked softly as she looked up at him with her round blue eyes.

Severus lowered his head, hiding his face. "I can't answer that," he muttered. "I just know I want my daughter to know me."

Severus arrived at Hermione's shop exactly at seven. He looked at her thoughtfully as he watched her working at her desk when he rang the bell, noticing as she jumped up and dashed to let him inside.

"Hello, Professor!" she breathed. "I am just so excited to tell you all about my trip, and how I came about this rare ingredient. Follow me."

Severus followed her as she opened a secret panel on the corner wall of the shop, and a set of carpeted stairs led them upstairs. Severus was shocked to see how open and airy the room was. It was cozy and relaxed, so unlike the Mlle. Granger seen about town. It was all one huge room: kitchen, bedroom, sitting room, it was all open and free.

He was reeling from how different Hermione was acting. If the last time they had met was any indicator, the last place he would expect them to meet would be in her personal annex.

"Sit!" she insisted as she went into the kitchen. "I have let this decant for a while. I wanted very much to celebrate our success." She poured out the wine and handed him his glass. "I don't think I have ever felt so free as I did in Kiev. It was by far the most challenging search I had ever encountered, but the most rewarding. I found myself at times wishing you had been with me!"

Hermione laughed and said, "Honestly, I don't think I have ever met people so intrigued at Potion making and the excitement of thinking and dreaming up a new potion. It was such a hunt!"

She jumped up from her chair. "Excuse me, I've been in this dress all day, and I just want to change. I'll be right out."

She disappeared into the bathroom, and Severus swallowed his glass of wine in one gulp. Hermione had obviously overcome some hurdle emotionally, and he felt physically ill to destroy what she had accomplished. But, he had to tell her. He had to make it all plain and let whatever fallout happen. He poured for himself another glass of wine and downed that as well.

She came out in jeans and a jumper. "Oh, that is so much better!" she said as she placed her feet encased in thick wool socks on the coffee table. "So," she said, "where do you want to start first? Do we talk here, or go out to eat and talk. I have the worst craving for a hamburger! There is a Muggle restaurant not far from here, and they have

the most delicious chips and greasy burgers!"

Lowering his voice and leaning slightly forward, Severus said, "Hermione," cutting her off. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He looked down at his hands for a second, then back up at her, seeing her expectant expression and tried again. "First, let me say I am very excited to hear all about your trip and the work you completed for me. I am also intrigued to see it myself. However, there is something that has come up, and we need to talk."

Hermione's face turned pale. "Is everyone okay? Is Harry and Ron..."

Severus was nervous. His hands were quivering and his confidence was weakening. "...No, they are well, everyone is... well. I need to tell you something, and it is not going to be easy. All I ask is that you please let me have my say and when I am through, you can throw me out or hex me." He tried to relax a fraction and took out his wand, offering it to *her*, giving it over to *her*, allowing *her* to close the gap between them. His fingers slowly caressed hers as the wand slipped from his possession and into hers. Hermione blushed; the physical contact between them was not unnoticed. Severus' face remained expressionless, but his eyes burned into hers when they made contact.

Severus closed his eyes and drew in a breath. When he spoke, his voice was rich and tender with feeling. "I need for you to realize I am not here to hurt you or frighten you. But I've something to say you are not going to like." *That was a bloody understatement!*

"Okay," she said nervously as she held on tightly to his wand and her own, tucking her legs under her to brace herself for the story to come.

A/N: Sorry, Evil cliffee, I know! Much thanks and gratitude to karelia, Maria, and Beth, who help me so much with their time and talents. Please review!!! I am loving the reviews!!!

Taking Aim

Chapter 18 of 24

How will Hermione take Severus confession?

Severus' hands trembled as he cleared his throat to speak. Hermione looked at him with wide eyes. He lowered his head to avoid the new-found happiness he could feel radiating from her. He didn't want to crush her... but what he wanted had never mattered. He spoke in a whisper refusing to meet her large, open eyes again.

"Eight years ago, there was a surprise birthday party thrown in my honor at Avery Manor. Avery had procured a woman for me, and I saw her locked in a cell with her head covered in a muslin bag. Unbeknownst to her, she had been selected to be my present. I had no clue as to her identity, only that she had been branded. I violated her."

Severus swallowed his words that he wanted to desperately to say. *I was forced to use her...to rape her.* He covered his mouth and bowed his head. When he could find his voice, he continued, forcing out each word from his mouth.

"I knew what was required... but I could not finish. She was crying...I made excuses that I am sure humiliated the woman even more. I'd said, 'I could not get satisfaction from a virgin.'"

Severus stood up and paced slowly around to the back of the couch, not wanting to appear threatening to Hermione. He clasped his hands behind his back and took a deep breath. He didn't know how he was going to form the words, but he forced them out.

He stood ramrod straight and carried on, fixing his eyes on where the wall met the ceiling. "I was incensed, and I wanted revenge on Avery who had orchestrated this. His daughter, Idina, was there, and she had been after me to be her lover. I-I took her, spent the night *with* her, trying to forget the woman I had destroyed."

He forced his eyes to reach Hermione's. She was so still she looked as if she'd been petrified. He saw confusion, rage, humiliation, and fear all at once. He figured he had one minute left before she either hexed him or threw him out... or both.

He moved slowly to sit down and speak to her softly in a low, soothing tone. "When I saw you after the battle and noticed you had all your hair, I felt immense relief. Cutting the hair of the victims was customary for each branding victim." He bowed his head and felt the stabbing pain in his chest and bile rise in his throat. He thought of Hannah Abbott and how he had shed so many tears for her. He tried hard to not be weak, but he couldn't. The tears gathered in his eyes, and his voice faltered as he continued.

"I worked *obsessively* to find this unknown girl's body. Miss Abbott's body was discovered a year ago in a shallow grave at Malfoy Manor, but the bones indicated there had been no branding on any part of her body. I was devastated. Of course, this news came after her burial, which I attended, mourning the loss of such a brave witch."

He paused, waiting for Hermione to say something, anything, shooting quick glances at her, but not able to meet her eyes, but watching her all the same. He saw Hermione wipe a tear that had escaped from her eye onto her cheek, and he dropped his head to look down at his hands, but could still see her through the gap in his hair. She sat there, as if in a trance, unable to move further. Severus decided to slowly continue as he tried to voice the words that were so difficult to speak.

"I received an owl from Avery who was in Azkaban awaiting the Kiss. He wanted to confess his sins to me. He told me about the girl in the muslin hood. He claimed her skeleton would be found in his dungeons. I went to investigate with two Aurors, and we found nothing. I believed I would never know who that poor girl had been."

With that final remark, her face reanimated, and he felt a lump in his chest that threatened to strangle him. She opened her mouth to speak; her face was so pale...she looked faint. She tried harder to speak, and the inability to do so made her eyes look increasingly tortured. At last, she managed a broken whisper, "... Was me." Her hand clutched her chest, and she held onto herself tighter and tighter. She couldn't speak anymore, and Severus began again with more caution.

"The Longbottoms came to Hogwarts with their daughter. I noticed she had a dimple on her cheek, knew she could not be their biological child, but I hadn't an idea as to whom her real parents were. Potter came to me with some information about Alice's birthday. He told me Alice's conception would have been around the eight, ninth, or tenth of January. He also said he knew you had lied to him about Greyback. Lupin told us of Greyback's constant movements just before he died. We all knew you had lied, but no one wanted to push you. I certainly did not! You were alive...obviously you had not crossed the Dark Lord's path...or so I believed." He sighed and pressed on. "Potter came to me after you'd left for Kiev. He was convinced during those missing days you had been violated and impregnated with Alice."

Without warning, Hermione jumped up and screamed. Her body was shaking terribly as if she were having a fit. When she stopped, she dashed into her kitchen area and vomited into the sink. She stood there, hunched over the sink, shaking her head, her body trembling, but kept silent.

Severus felt his facial tick start. He wanted to go to her, but uncertain it was the right decision. He looked at his hands. They were trembling. That scream was more of a wail, something that sounded like she had trapped it inside her in order to keep her mind stitched together. Severus couldn't let it end like this; she might be unhinged. He spoke again, more fervently. "More information came my way, tidbits here and there, and I started putting the puzzle together. I know now it had been you that night."

He watched her as she wiped her mouth with a kitchen towel. She threw it down on the counter with force. Hermione began to pace back and forth, her breathing becoming more labored, and her posture increasingly hostile.

Severus raised his hands, itching to hold her to him, to prove he wasn't the monster she believed him to be. He tried to let his emotions show in his eyes, so she could see how he felt, but after years of being so carefully guarded, it was difficult to do. "I want to make one thing quite clear. I did **not** know who you were. When I sought you out, it was curiosity... a-an attraction for this young... *stunning* upstart. Half the Moscow Symposium were up in arms. I understand you want nothing... with me." His voice cracked and felt as if he was a small boy again, just wanting to be *something to someone*, knowing he would always come up wanting.

He held out a hand to reach her, to make her see him. "We are parents, and I feel she should know she is loved by us, and she was not just 'thrown away'. I've said my peace; now I am ready to face the consequences," he finished slowly, his hands falling helplessly to his sides, waiting for his sentence to be handed to him.

Hermione stood still and stared at him with unblinking eyes. Just when he was about to shout at her to say *something*, she cleared her throat and wrapped her arms around her body.

"I knew it was you," she spat at him with hostility in her tone as her breath quickened. "I knew it was you when you first came to my store! I knew when you took me to lunch!" Her tone was venomous, but she was shivering, and her body was one large tremor as she continued, half-mumbling to herself, the other half raising her voice to direct it at him, all the while pulling on her hair roughly. "The muslin was thin enough with these little holes... I saw your face all contorted, heard your gasps and your groan. I was repulsed and humiliated you could do... do *that* to me."

She raised her hands in admittance as tears began streaming down her face. "It was *my* fault for getting caught. I should have been more sensitive to the noises around me. I was on point...it had been *my* responsibility...*my* fault..."

Severus was becoming angrier as she spoke, trying to assume the blame. He finally had his fill and cut her off. "...Enough!" he roared. "You have *nothing* with which to blame yourself. You were inexperienced...not even *in* the Order! Why the Order allowed you D.A. *children* to go out and defend the castle from grown, ruthless fighters...I could *never* understand! Of course, I have never understood Albus' reasoning for half of the asinine things he did." He lowered his head to center his mind, covering his face with his hands.

Severus looked up to her. "Why did you not tell me? *Why?*" he whispered. "She is my child!"

Hermione's eyes blazed, and she began to shriek, "Your child? YOUR CHILD?" She stepped closer to him and continued. "I was the one who carried her inside my body and went through pain like you can't even fucking imagine, only to give her away so she wouldn't be labeled and ridiculed!"

She stepped back unevenly, faltered, and slumped back into her seat, crying as she hid her face. "You ruined me...you *destroyed* me...and then all I heard was about you fucking that woman, touching her, kissing her. I should have had my dream...to be loved and realize my first time with a man I loved and who loved me too!" She slammed her fists on the glass table in front of her and choked on her sobs. She looked up and all he saw was rage and self-loathing two emotions he knew very well. She bolted straight up from her chair and began to shake her fists at him in rage, advancing as she railed against him.

"I can't bear for a man to touch me! I can't even imagine *being* with a man! You just took me without a word and *shattered* me!" she continued to scream. "You left me on the floor bleeding and went off to fuck that bitch as if nothing had happened. What? Is that all you can stomach...whores and sluts? Because I know that *screaming virgins don't do it for you!*" She jumped up from her chair, picking it up and throwing it across the room in uncontrollable fury.

Severus had watched her as her fury grew stronger. She had forgotten the two wands, his and hers, while she unleashed her wrath on him. He knew he had to remain calm and diffuse the situation before she remembered she was a witch and blew him straight to hell.

Snape advanced on her and whispered sharply, "Correct, Miss Granger, because I do not care to force myself on women. Believe me, I hated myself more than you could imagine. You may have had to live with the consequences of that fateful night, but *I* alone bear the guilt!"

He made one error and turned his back to her. He didn't want her to see him cry, and he heard her scream! "*Stupefy!*" He crashed into a bookshelf across the room as she advanced on him. With a slash of her wand, she brought him to consciousness and forced him to look straight at her.

"YOU WILL NEVER TURN AWAY FROM ME AGAIN!" she howled in her anguish. "You could have made it better...you deliberately made it painful. You could have made it bearable, but no..." She stopped talking as she waved him away from her sight. She was sobbing violently now and clutching her head in pain. She looked so small and alone, Severus couldn't leave her in such a condition.

"Hermione," he said as he rose from the rubble of her books.

"SHUT UP!" she screamed, her face twisted in pain. She stood up and pointed her wand at him. She looked deranged as she spat in her disturbed condition. "You owe me! You have owed me for taking everything I was and what you stole from me. *I* should have been loved! *I* should have been cared for! *I* should have borne the child of a man *I* loved! YOU took it all away from me, and now you have nothing to say to me except shame on ME for not telling you I was carrying a baby **you** put inside **me** because *you raped me!* Then you go off with no emotion at all and have a bloody fine time with that...*that slag!*"

"Hermione," Severus whispered as he inched closer to her, "that is not it at all. What occurred between me and that witch was not what you think."

Hermione laughed bitterly at him as she scoffed. "From the way I heard it, it was highly enjoyable for you both!"

"Only if you get off on pain," he replied, revolted with what he had revealed about himself.

"What?" she whispered as she snapped her head towards him.

Severus brushed off his robes as he spoke. "*That witch was Avery's daughter.* She had been after me for ages to shag her. She loved pain; she needed abuse to enjoy sex. I don't care for that. I was just so angry with Avery for placing me in that position to hurt an innocent and for placing that bag on your head to humiliate me. After all, what witch would shag Severus Snape unless she couldn't see his hideous face, *right?*"

Hermione looked at him with tired, yet calm eyes. "So that whole thing was just a..."

"...Lark to make me feel even shittier than I normally feel on my birthday. So, I took his daughter and shagged her with all the rage and humiliation I felt because of what I'd done to *you* and humiliated him by *using* her...*in his own bed!* She loved it, the bitch, and it burned Avery to know his daughter was getting reamed by the wizard he thought was beneath him!" he seethed. "And what burned *me* was the next morning, after I had beaten her and whipped her bloody with my belt, she was happy!"

Hermione looked horror-struck at his revelation.

"I looked for her...the woman I violated...for *you*, Hermione," Snape continued, struggling to find the right words. "I thought I had found the girl when Hannah Abbott's body had been discovered. I never knew it had been you, and I never imagined I had fathered a child."

"You left me," she whispered as she sank onto her sofa. "They took me into the dungeons and left me there to die! I was there for three days until the doors swung open. I was half-starved and frightened. I saw your face when it was all over...the relief on your face. You thought it *might* have been me, right?"

"Yes," he admitted, his fear and terror finally bursting through that controlled wall of protection. "Any female Order or D.A. member that was missing, I thought could be the one. She haunted me; I couldn't forget her screams. I could hear them, I could hear her in my haunted dreams *and* in my waking hours. All I had to do was close my eyes, and I could hear her!" He closed his eyes, his face contorted in pain, gripping his arms wrapped around himself to force the pain in his chest to go away.

"I used to have nightmares," Hermione whispered. "I always thought, 'He owes me. He owes me for what he took from me.'"

"I just don't understand, Severus, why did you have to come into my life?" she asked while a haunted look gripped her face. "After all, you deserted me once before."

"I didn't know *she* was *you*," he ground out. Severus stood with his hands still clenched at his sides. "You were becoming something of a legend. I heard wizards talk about you as if you were a goddess while they derided you for beating them at their own game. I knew this *Huntress*...this beautiful witch...had to be you. I couldn't stop the images of you assailing my mind. The idea of what you looked like would not leave my mind. You've captivated me, utterly."

Severus sat down and ran his hands through his hair, sweeping it back from his face. "*had* to find the girl I had hurt, and then I could be free to live. I thought I had and then I set my mind to find you out...to see for myself the incredible witch you had become. The moment I saw you...the first day I walked into your shop...I knew I would never want another woman. I never knew, Hermione. *I swear, I never knew it had been you!*"

She recoiled from him. "My assets, for lack of a better word, set the tongues of decrepit old wizards wagging?" she asked in disgust. "Pregnancy hormones that never let me return to what I had been...plain, thin, scrawny Hermione...my body working to accommodate the baby *you* put inside me. What in the world made you think I would ever let the man who brutalized me touch me?"

"I am not asking you to." His tone more harsh than he'd intended, sounding ashamed and chastened. "I hope now we can have some sort of relationship for Alice's sake. It's not her fault. I just want my daughter to know me and for her to know her mother...her real mother...who, as you said so aptly, had been robbed of her dreams to live."

He stood to leave, and as he started to descend the stairs, Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder and handed him back his wand. He bowed his head as he sheathed it and made to turn again, then stilled. He balked, but finally intoned deeply, "For what it's worth, Hermione, I will always think highly of you as a businesswitch and as an honorable woman. Even if you can never forgive me, you gave birth to my child, and your pain and suffering deserves my everlasting admiration and respect."

He walked down the stairs, hoping she would stop, forgive him, and allow him to love her. He would work gladly the rest of his days proving himself to her of his love so that night would be just a distant memory. He loved her, but she had been right. He had deserted her. He'd left her to fend for herself. How could he ever make it right? Walking down the narrow stairs to the store, he realized he would love her for a *very*, long time. That thought alone devastated him.

A/N: Whew! That was a rough chapter! Kudos to Maria, Beth and karelia who helped this mangy chapter into something meaningful. Now, I'm not naming names, but to the reviewer who told me I couldn't have a biscuit for my evil cliffie last chapter, do I now deserve a biscuit? Please review! We all worked our collective keisters off for this one!

Falling Down

Chapter 19 of 24

Hermione tries to start a friendship with Severus, which leads to a disconcerting climax.

Thérèse was waiting at the bottom of the stairs when Severus came down. Her face was pallid and worried. She stepped in front of Severus to prevent him from leaving. "Please, Professor, you must tell me how my lady is!" she begged.

"She needs you now," Severus replied with difficulty. "I shan't be returning." He whisked by her towards the front door.

"NO!" she shouted. She pulled him by the arm into the backroom and sat him down. "There still may be hope."

Severus shook his head. "I cannot allow myself to hope. I care too much for her," he replied.

"Wait, I wish to talk to you; you owe me that at least," she said as she turned before allowing him to reply. He sat with his arms crossed, scowling as she went to work, getting down the tea set and turning around quickly in the small room, preparing the tea. "I was listening to your argument. I think you did as best as you could under the circumstances. You made a very good case for loving her before you knew she had been the one all those years ago."

Once she had the kettle on, she returned to the table and placed one hand on the table to brace herself as she sat down, looking wilted and battle weary.

"Let me speak with her," she said as she placed her hand heavily on his forearm. "Woman to woman, I can say and ask things that you cannot. You might be surprised." She stood up to get the kettle when it began to whistle. He waited patiently as she poured them a cup of tea.

Thérèse sat and looked dreamily into the distance while they both wrapped their hands around their cups. "She was so happy in her letters to me. She admitted she missed you. She was starting to feel something that she had not felt in years...if ever! From the tenor of her letters, she experienced something of a breakthrough. She knows you want to love her, and now she is thinking it may not be so impossible. I think she needs time, now that this terrible secret is out, and she has said what she needed to say to you. Trust me. She will send for you."

"Fine," he said curtly as he rose from the table to leave. "I am not as certain as you are. I will not anticipate her contacting me." He turned and went to the door.

"Professor?" she called after him.

"Yes?" he asked while keeping his back to her.

"Your little girl. What is she like?"

"She's just like her mother: infuriating, bossy, intelligent, and unforgettably beautiful all in one," he answered.

Severus walked out of the shop and thought of his daughter. *Alice Hermione*. How he longed to tell her she was his. How different life felt now that he knew a part of him was living in the world. He stood still and watched the children on the boulevard with their parents. A young pregnant witch with a little child in a stroller caught his eye. That would be his dream, to do it right by Hermione. He would lay her down on a bed they would share together and honor her body completely with his own. He wanted her, and she had said he owed her; therefore, who else should give her what she wanted? He decided he would not give up without a fight. It would be his pleasure to spend the rest of his days proving to her he could and would give her everything she had lost and more.

"Madame?"

Hermione was lying on her back upon her bed with one arm draped across her eyes. She was trying to rest and stop the gnawing inside her chest and the stabbing pain behind her eyes. *How had this all fallen apart? How did he know? Why did he have to tell me he knew?* She was going to tell him that she had been that young woman all those years ago. Now he had regained all of the control. Everything was ruined.

"Come in, Thérèse," Hermione called out as she remained supine on her bed.

A cool cloth replaced her arm over her eyes. Hermione let out a small sigh. "Oh, Madame!" she heard Thérèse say. "I shall get your headache potion. You must be suffering terribly."

Hermione frowned. Well, it wasn't as if they had been silent. "So, you heard?" she asked, knowing the answer already was 'yes.'

"Yes, Madame, and with all respect, it was I that encouraged his honesty with you."

Hermione sat upright in her bed and ripped the cloth from her eyes. "*You did what?*" she shrieked.

Thérèse was standing nervously as she explained in a soothing voice. "Madame, he came into the shop and forced himself into my mind. He saw the mark on your back. I was very angry with him...but...he knew so much already. He and your friend, Harry Potter, knew all about many things. I could see how sad and miserable he was. He loves you so much. He loved you before any of this came to his knowledge. Please do not remain angry. He did his best to be honest and forthright today."

Hermione fell back onto her bed. "I can't imagine being in the same room with him now! Do you know he has been the only man to touch me intimately? I don't even know if I am capable of that kind of experience anymore."

"Why not talk to him about your daughter? You have never met her, and they both live at Hogwarts. I am sure that could be something to ease the tension," Thérèse offered.

"I never should have lied to him," Hermione said ruefully. "I never should have given her up. I should have told him I was having his child. I have misjudged him. He wants to have her back. I gave her away when he had just as much right to know her. I don't know what to do."

"First, Madame," Thérèse said sternly, making Hermione take notice and focus, "you had been the one violated, not him. How were you to know what he would do? The things you know now, you didn't know then. Secondly, let him know he is welcome again back into the shop. Start talking about your child. Think of how much you had wanted to tell him but lost your nerve. Lastly, let things happen slowly, but naturally."

She handed Hermione a phial. Hermione swallowed it all and looked at Thérèse pleadingly. "I can't. I can't just casually ask him to return. Will you invite him for me?"

"Yes, Madame," replied Thérèse. "However, I will not do anymore explaining or involve myself in your discussion. You must face one another, learn to be comfortable in the same room with each other, and communicate about how are you both going to go forward concerning your child."

Hermione was a wreck. She was waiting silently in her flat, waiting for Severus to arrive. She walked around, fluffing pillows and making sure all the pictures on her walls weren't crooked. She went three times into the bathroom to make sure her dress was still smooth and crisp and that her hair and make-up was still flawless. She was wringing her hands and at the last minute decided she needed to change outfits. The soft-pink dress with its wide span skirt and sleeveless bodice was not right. She should be more professional...more businesslike. She went into her highboy and found a light cashmere cardigan that was cream-colored and hid her arms. She felt more comfortable and secure, more in control of herself. She slipped on her matching heels and walked by her vanity, pausing to think about perfume. *Should I?*

What is wrong with me? she thought, exasperated with herself. *Why on earth should I even care how I look?*

Because he was lied to and manipulated more than you ever were, and you feel like complete shite!

"Shut it!" she snarled to herself.

She heard the knock on the door, and she looked at her shoes. Should she even think about heels? Was it too much? Should she wear her sling backs?

Fuck it! she thought and took off her heels, threw them under her bed, and raced downstairs to let Severus inside.

"Hello," she said a bit breathlessly. Severus was dressed as usual, but sans teaching robes. He wore a traveling cloak over his black button-down frock coat and pants. She felt her heart was going to rip out of her chest, and her stomach felt it had sank down into her legs. Her legs felt like lead as she led him upstairs to her flat. "P...Please come in," she said shakily. "Would you care for tea?"

She looked at him when he didn't replay and saw him staring at her manicured feet *Why is he staring at my feet?* she thought nervously.

"Professor?" she asked.

"Tea?" he repeated. "Yes, that would be acceptable."

Severus was nervous when he knocked on Hermione's door. He could hear her running down the stairs at the same time he felt his heart rising in his throat. He couldn't help but notice her dainty ankles and her soft, tiny feet with a creamy pink polish on her elegant toes. *She is... comely.* With her hair cascading around her shoulders she was a vision in pink. He wanted to touch her, to hold her small feet in his large hands. He felt a wave of possession come over him. *What man has seen her like this? Probably none since the day I took her innocence... or the day she gave birth to our daughter.*

He loved her. It was just that simple, yet she could never love him. Not after what he had done to her. But, oh, how he wanted to erase that memory from her! The

possessiveness turned into a desperate need to care for and cherish her. Yes, he loved her, wanted her, and God help him, he wanted to try and see if she could ever see him as more than the Death Eater he had been.

He drew out of his thoughts once he noted her staring at him as he stared at her bare feet. He drew his eyes from her and sat down as Hermione turned to make them tea.

Once they were sitting, Hermione began to speak. "I want you to know that you are welcome here in my home. I hope that we can place aside the past and focus on Alice."

"Yes," he said bluntly. "I do want her to know me...us."

"What is she like?" she asked him as she sipped her tea.

Severus smirked, and a smile played around his lips. "She was a bold little spitfire when I first met her. She threw mud on me because I said something derogatory about her parents," he said without his usual sarcasm in his tone.

Hermione couldn't suppress the laugh that came out of her. She could picture her slinging mud at Severus, just as she had hit Draco as a third-year. "Sorry," she whispered.

He lifted a hand. "She has grown to be quite the bookworm. She is a chatterbox with the loveliest, curly black hair and dark chocolate eyes. She has your dimple on her left cheek and is already becoming a know-it-all. I found her rather tedious and bothersome as a small child; however, there was this pull there between us. She can't help but tell me about her adventures and things she's learnt. She's a brilliant child and a bit sneaky. I have wondered many times if she will be a Slytherin."

"So, you see yourself in her? Do you see me?" she asked quickly.

He paused and said, "I see my black hair and our tempers. She is quick-witted, however, which could come from either of us. Her eyes, though, when I look at them, I see the openness and freedom there that you had as a young girl in my classroom. She's eager, so desperate to learn everything. I would say she is her mother's daughter."

Hermione listened with rapt attention. How strange to know that the little bundle she'd given away, her small, sweet baby girl was now this young girl, just three years shy of starting Hogwarts herself. "Severus," she said softly as she toyed with her cup. "I want to apologize to you. I should have told you I was pregnant. I never should have hidden her from you. It was wrong."

"Don't," he said, looking pained. "You were frightened, having been violated, terrorized, branded, left to die, and afraid for your life. I think you did what you thought was best, and in retrospect, I can say that, yes, you did the right thing."

"You don't hate me for giving her away?" she asked.

"No!" he said sharply. His face softened as his voice, and he continued, "You entrusted her to good parents. She has known love all her life. She is *very* attached to her... father."

Hermione swallowed and said, "That must really hurt."

"It does," he answered softly.

"What are we going to do?" Hermione whispered. "Do we tell her? I am so confused!"

Severus was quiet for a while and finally said, "I think we both need to speak with Neville and Luna. I have already confronted Luna, and she actually was waiting or expecting that I would be taking Alice from her. It was as if she knew from the start she wouldn't have her forever."

"What do you and I do?" she whispered, looking down into her teacup.

Severus sighed at the question Hermione posed. What were they to do? He wanted to tell her he had fallen in love with her the day he first saw her in this very shop downstairs. He wanted her to know he had fantasized about making love to her and wanted desperately to tenderly make love to her now. He wanted to say that if she still felt he owed her, he would be willing to pay for a lifetime. He would be her slave if she asked it of him. She had borne his child knowingly and had not rid herself of it. She went through the pain of childbirth and lovingly considered the fate of their daughter above everything else. He loved her for keeping a part of him inside her, he loved her for loving Alice so much, and he loved her for being so strong and fiercely independent and successful as a business witch. He wanted to tell her she was the comeliest and most feminine witch he had ever met, and her body aroused him as well as her shrewd mind. He wanted, most of all, to tell her that he would never stop wanting her. But he couldn't. What would she think if she knew he ached to be inside her, to make love, to explore each curve and crevice on her body and drink the dew from between her legs?

"Severus?" she asked. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," he murmured. "Hermione, I would very much like to take you out for dinner. I believe we need to know one another if we are to ever be parents to our daughter."

He thought he saw a flush of yearning in her eyes. He would just have to ease into things and find the answer. He lifted an eyebrow and said, "It hasn't escaped my notice that you have never said if you would even like to be Alice's mother."

Hermione drew a ragged breath. She fidgeted with her cup and said, "I-I don't know if she would even want me."

He wanted to reassure her badly. "She talks about her Aunt Hermione a great deal. She wants to meet you. I believe she thinks of you as some sort of heroine, traveling the world, beautiful and elegant."

She blushed. "Honestly! She hasn't even seen me."

"All the better to conjure up images of your hero. I do believe she thinks of you, her godmother, as her heroine," he answered lowly.

"I don't know, Severus. I don't want to take her away from the only parents she's known. She might be hurt badly if she learns Neville and Luna aren't her real parents."

"There seems to be no easy solution, does there?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "I don't know where to even start."

"Hermione," he said as he leaned into the table where he sat. "Would you allow me not only to know you as the mother of my child, but might I also try to court you? Not just to show you my respect for giving life to Alice... I want you to know that I not only have the deepest respect for you..." He paused, uncertain, then remembered Thérèse's words. "But that I also want to experience with you the way a woman deserves to be treated and loved."

"Severus," she whispered. "Are you telling me that you honestly have a true feeling for me? That this is not only about Alice?"

"I am," he replied, his gaze flicking away nervously, then quickly back again, longingly at her face. "And I have, long before I ever knew about all of this. Can you believe me?"

Hermione was standing in her bra and matching knickers, trying to decide what to wear.

"Thérèse?" she asked. "What do you think? I adore the green, but I don't want to wear his colors! Then there is the blue, which is divine...but it is so low cut...I don't know!"

"What about the white and silver?" Thérèse asked.

Hermione gaped at her. "Are you mad? I only bought that thing because Philippe insisted I wear it for the gala last summer! It reeks of virginity, and I can't wear that around Severus!"

"Madame," Thérèse said soothingly. "You are a beautiful woman and should wear what you think is the most flattering and comfortable for you. Now what of the crimson?"

Hermione looked at her hopelessly. "The color of fallen women?" she said weakly.

"You are impossible! You are going to the Opera," Thérèse said, throwing up her hands.

"Why couldn't he just take me out for dinner?" Hermione whined. "Fine! I shall wear the crimson. It's the best one I have, and I adore it so."

Thérèse took out the stays she would need to wear with the dress. Hermione took a deep breath and held onto one of her bedposts as Thérèse pulled the strings taut. The bra came off and the garters went on. Thérèse powdered her mistresses' arms and slid the opera length gloves on her before helping Hermione into the dress. She looked at herself in the mirror as Thérèse put up her hair. The crystal design on the bodice gleamed in the low light.

After her make-up had been applied, she looked at her jewels. "No, this necklace is much too fussy. Let's try the filigree. However, I will need the rubies."

She placed the dangling, blood-red rubies on her ears and slipped on her shoes. "I shall take the silk cloak, Thérèse. Make sure my wand is in the correct pocket."

The bell rang downstairs and Hermione huffed. "Curse that man for always being on time!" she declared.

She took one last look into the mirror and cautiously made her way down the stairs.

Severus was elegantly dressed in silken black robes. He smiled at the beauty before him and said, "You are a vision, Hermione."

"Thank you, Severus," she replied nervously.

He offered her his arm and she suddenly thought a horrid thought, *What if the dress reminds him of the blood?* She found herself growing nervous and started to shake.

They were nearly at the Apparition point when Hermione started to breathe with difficulty.

"Hermione!" Severus said with concern. "What is wrong?"

"I-I can't do this," she gasped. "I'm wearing the wrong dress, it feels wrong. I knew I should have worn the blue!"

She burst into tears, and Severus Apparated them back outside of her shop. She wrenched the door open and flung off her shoes, running up to her flat.

"What happened?" Thérèse asked after materializing from the backroom.

"I don't know. Something about the wrong dress," Severus answered.

"Wait here," she told him.

Thérèse went upstairs, and saw Hermione clawing at her stays. The dress had been ripped from her, and she was crying.

"I feel so stupid!" she sobbed, her breathing labored.

"You need a Calming Draught," Thérèse informed her. She went into Hermione's highboy and found her potions.

"Take this, and I shall remove your stays," she whispered.

Hermione swallowed it and began to breathe easier. "Is he gone?" she asked sadly as she sniffed.

"Do you want him gone?" she replied.

"No, I just want to put on my jeans and a jumper," she admitted. "I need to be covered."

"Get dressed, and let him know when he can come upstairs," Thérèse replied as she descended the stairs.

Hermione tapped her wand to her face, removing all the make-up. She took down her hair and wrapped it in a bun at the base of her head. She hurriedly picked up her discarded clothes and shoved them into her tall bureau. She quickly slipped on her comfy socks and called for Severus to come upstairs.

He walked up soundlessly, and when he emerged, he looked at her with great concern. "Hermione, are you all right?"

"Yes, I took a Calming Draught, and I'm feeling relaxed. I just really got nervous," she said as she wrung her hands.

"Perhaps an evening at the Opera was not the wisest choice for a first date," he suggested. "Or is it that you are unsure of being out in public with me?"

"No!" she said. "I have these triggers that once they pop in my head, everything falls apart," she confessed. "Perhaps it was too much. Can we do something else?"

"How about that greasy burger and steak fries?" he asked her.

"Perfect!" she said as she beamed at him.

Thank you for all the lovely reviews! I really do appreciate it. My thanks again to Maria, Beth, and karelia for all their advice and hard work!

Safe

Chapter 20 of 24

Severus and Hermione spend three days together on the anniversary of the rape and conception of Alice.

As Severus sat with Hermione at her favorite bistro, he listened with rapt attention to her story about how she had achieved finding the elusive herb.

"I absolutely adored Kiev. Of course, my time there was limited since my purpose was to locate the herb; however, I met this wonderful older couple who lived in the countryside at their *Dacha*. It was just lovely, open-air and soft breezes came through this tiny house. They had their own garden with raspberries and blackberries. You could just walk along and pick them off the stems and pop them in your mouth. *Babka*, the grandmother, she was incredible. She didn't speak a lot of English, but her granddaughter did and helped translate. *Babka* told me the most incredible stories about Grindelwald's War. She had spent a year on the run because she was a Muggle-born. Her husband, we just called him *Dedushka*, was a pure-blood and refused to leave her. At one point, she was captured when her husband was away, trying to find food. She said they spent two years trying to find each other. She was such a strong woman. She told me she could see herself in my eyes. She said, 'There will come a time when the seed will sprout.' I was confused; I didn't know what she was trying to tell me. Her granddaughter said it was an Old Russian saying, 'Do not trouble yourself about future problems and difficulties, but wait till you have to deal with them.'

"She was a strong woman, who had gnarled hands and skin like leather. But her eyes were bright and focused. She told me I had to stop fearing so much, that my fear was potent...she could smell it...I wore it like a fragrance. They led me to the *levshan-zillia*. I spent two weeks there, just learning about the magical and non-magical plants, roots and herbs there. It was fascinating! Then in the evenings, I would sit in the candlelight and talk with *Babka*."

Severus remained quiet as she spoke. When she fell silent, he said, "She sounds as if she became an important person to you."

"Oh, yes," Hermione agreed. "She told me that she knew from my eyes that I survived something and that I never broke. She told me that so many lose heart and die inside long before their husks. She said that I had started well, but I had begun a detour that would hurt me if I did not allow myself to live."

Severus stared at his glass of beer. "I knew something important had happened to you while you were gone," he whispered. "You were happy and had a spark in your eyes that frankly, I hadn't seen there before."

He looked at Hermione. She was so relaxed and comfortable in this setting. Her face was clean and fresh with no make-up, and she wore casual clothes, but to him, she was just herself, and she was... *perfect*.

"Do you know this is the first time since I started the shop on the main boulevard that I haven't been dressed to the nines and looked just so?"

"And how does that make you feel?"

"It's not as scary as I once thought. I think I had forgotten who Hermione Granger was and instead focused on who 'The Huntress' could and should be."

She took a drink of her coke and continued, "Don't get me wrong! I love Philippe...he really rescued and saved me from myself. Now, there is nothing to run from! The worst thoughts I had were your finding me out and learning about Alice. But now, there are no more secrets, except what we'll have to tell her."

The corners of her smiling face fell, and sadness came over her. But then she shook her head and smiled again. "So, tell me all about the Symposium. Who hated me the most?"

Severus raised his glass and said, "I think that would have been Monsieur Roudett, from Beauxbatons Academie," he said with an evil smile before swallowing the last of his beer.

"Interesting," replied Hermione.

"Actually, all of the French in attendance were up in arms, except my own Potions master. He has a more open mind towards young people trying to succeed into their chosen field. However, the lack of an apprenticeship, no credentials in Potion making, coupled with the fact that you are now rivaling some of the oldest names in your business in Paris...it caused quite a stir."

"Did they ask you if you knew me?" she asked quietly.

"Oh, yes, of course. They knew you were English, so they figured you had been a student of mine. I told them I didn't know you...I was reluctant to get in the middle of their blustering and carrying on...and I was right to remain silent. They all had an opinion on everything from your age to your last name."

Hermione laughed. "You loved it, didn't you?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, I did!" he said with a smirk. "But then, not a second later, they were talking about your physical appearance with amazing clarity. You were the loveliest woman on the continent from how they described you. And I think, Hermione, if you had tried to beat them at their game by being anything other than totally feminine, they would have skewered you. I had a difficult time reconciling the young student of mine with the ravishing beauty described to me."

"Was I at least described correctly?" she asked wryly.

"Not even close," he replied.

Hermione looked crestfallen, and she lowered her eyes from him.

"You are more beautiful than I had imagined."

"Severus, you are going to turn my head with all these compliments!" she chastised him.

"Perhaps I should temper it with some of my more scathing remarks, laced with sarcasm and derision?" he asked.

"I suppose I am so used to just being 'Acceptable' in your eyes that I am finding it hard to believe this is truly you and not some Polyjuiced wizard," she confessed.

He laughed softly, and Hermione smiled. "I am glad you chose to be so patient with me," she said. "I appreciate it."

"Is it time for me to escort you home and say, "Good night?" His voice was low and husky.

"Yes," she replied. "I'm tired from all this emotional drama."

"Well, it was your first date since...?" he asked.

"Ever," she admitted.

"What?" he asked, not believing what he had heard.

Hermione made a slight shrug with her shoulders and said, "I have never been on a date in my life. Oh, I know, I went to the Yule Ball with Viktor Krum in my fourth year but I was just a girl, and we never left the school. I've never been 'taken out' by a man and officially dated. There was a man when I was studying in Australia and New Zealand. He was my teacher, mentor ... friend. Then came the day he wanted to become more, and I went spare," she admitted.

"What happened?"

"He couldn't believe that a woman would give away her child. He was the type of wizard who sees the world in black or white. There are some things you don't do...ever. That was one of those things."

"Bastard," he muttered.

"Umm," Hermione replied, keeping her face steady. "That's what he said about you."

Severus looked at Hermione and found he was without words. "I suppose we should leave now?"

They walked back to the shop, and Hermione shook his hand. "I had a good time. I think things went well for a first date."

"Would you care for another?" he asked.

"All right," she answered.

The fall passed into winter, and business was quite slow. January came, and Hermione couldn't believe how much time she had spent with Severus. He told her all of the little tricks and funny things Alice said and did. She wrote to Alice herself and asked for a picture. She was excited to receive a lovely picture of a lovely little Hermione, just with black curly hair, not at all bushy, and darker, brown eyes, yet just as large. The dimple was there as well, and Hermione looked at the picture for hours at a time, drinking in her face, remembering her birth and the day she let her go.

Hermione and Severus had grown closer over the next few months. Next thing she knew it was the anniversary of their daughter's conception, that three-day period which Hermione had always spent alone, or with Thérèse, crying and mourning the loss of her innocence. On Severus' birthday, Hermione decided to answer the questions he had waited for so long. Severus had asked her many times as they sat over a cup of tea about her pregnancy and Alice Hermione's birth. She had always said she wasn't ready. Now, Hermione realized she was.

Severus was bringing his own pallet, and Thérèse had been so happy that Hermione and Severus were going to spend the three days alone together that she kissed and hugged her as she squealed in delight. Hermione laughed at her assistant's exuberance.

"You know what this will mean, yes?" she asked her mistress.

Hermione was unsure. "I know that our relationship will change forever. We shall grow closer emotionally and hopefully, the trust that has started will strengthen..."

"Miss Granger," Thérèse said. "You could end up falling in love! He loves you...he tells you all the time, yes?"

"Well, yes..." Hermione answered thoughtfully.

"It could a romantic time for you both," she cooed.

"I will not have sex on the anniversary of my rape!" Hermione shrieked. "That's disgusting and filthy...I-I!"

"Please," Thérèse scoffed. "To have romance doesn't mean *making love*. It could be two people in love holding hands and looking into the other's eyes, seeing what is there inside. It could be holding one another as you cry over your losses. Opening your heart finally to him and letting him inside there...not your body."

Hermione calmed down. "Yes, well... you will be all right?" she asked her.

"Yes, Madame. Louis and I will be making our own romance," she said with a wink.

Hermione turned and went upstairs. She was nervous, not in a way that made her feel threatened but a tension in her stomach that she had never felt before. Her heart was racing, her pulse was quickening, and she felt all warm and tingly inside. It was all because Severus was arriving soon.

Later that evening, Severus and Hermione sat in front of the fire, talking about nothing in particular, when he asked abruptly, "Will you tell me, Hermione? Will you tell me all that happened those days?"

Hermione took a deep breath and jumped a little when Severus tentatively brushed her fingers with his own. He snatched his hand away before she could explain. She liked the way his gentleness felt on her skin. She had only been caught off-guard. His scowl made it apparent that he was berating himself for touching her. She cleared her throat and said, "I fought so hard that day, and when I saw you, I wanted to run far away, but everyone was so happy to see me that I just let them care for me and hid away in Gryffindor Tower. I noticed many things; my body was changing, and I was getting sick. Luna was actually the one who pointed out that I was pregnant; she said she could feel it in my 'aura,' and there was something different about me."

She stopped and looked at Severus and asked, "Did you ever think something was strange about my appearance after classes started after the war?"

Severus cleared his throat as well. "I had noticed what every other male at Hogwarts thought: that you had made a final growth spurt into womanhood. I admit I found you quite lovely. However, I was your teacher and refused to entertain inappropriate thoughts," he replied uncomfortably. "Nonetheless, I did notice a change in temperament. You were sad, so sad, but I couldn't place my finger on it. There were no tears, no upsetting outbursts of emotions. It was as if you had resigned yourself to something. Your speech at the Leaving Ceremony had been odd, but then you were gone, and I just slowly let you slip away from my mind. I was too focused on finding the girl I had hurt."

They turned as if to meet the other face to face, and Severus ached to take both her hands into his own. "What did you think when you saw I was the wizard who... who

was the one... forcing himself on you, the one who hurt you so horribly," he asked, staring at his hands as if afraid to make eye contact. He couldn't bear to look at her face.

"I was horrified and shocked. That is all I can remember," she whispered as she kept her head down. "The pain was too much for me to think of anything else."

Severus forced himself to lean closer to her. Although their bodies did not touch, he could feel her tension flowing from her in waves. He kissed the top of her head gently and said, "I am truly sorry for what I did to you."

She looked up at him, and she felt tears falling from her eyes. "It was hard being pregnant, knowing I had your baby inside of me. I knew it was a girl, and I stayed up in that attic, hiding, pretending that I didn't exist. It hurt," she whispered quietly. "I cried the whole time I was in labor. I never thought anything could hurt that much. I remember hearing her crying, but I wasn't given a chance to see her. She was taken away as I slept."

She felt so tired; she lay down on the floor and placed her head on Severus' leg. He stiffened, not knowing what to do. Finally, he decided to stroke her hair as she told him about the emptiness inside of her. "For years, I felt a hole that couldn't be filled. I was scared and ashamed of what I had done. Then the nightmares came. That was worse than giving birth."

"Nightmares?" Severus asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," she whispered. "I'm tired, I would like to sleep."

"Allow me," he offered as he lifted her up and laid her on her bed. He withdrew his arms from her as her arm glided up one of his.

"Will you hold me?" she pleaded weakly as she looked up to him. "Just for a while."

Without responding, Severus took off his shoes and got into bed. He spooned her against him and held her around her waist. He snapped his fingers, and a blanket covered the both of them. Soon, they were asleep.

Morning came, and Hermione felt more peaceful than she had in a long time. She felt a warm and strong body next to her and felt the hand that was resting against her stomach.

Severus.

She relaxed into his embrace and heard his murmur of satisfaction. They slept on until the sun shone in their face and forced them awake.

"I apologize, Hermione," he said slowly as he rose. "I didn't mean to take advantage. I fell asleep." Hermione analyzed his body language. There was confusion, shock, embarrassment, and guilt in each movement.

"It's all right, Severus," she whispered as she rose from the bed. "Actually... I haven't slept so well in ages."

Severus eyed Hermione as she rose from the bed. The shirt she had been wearing last night hadn't been so sheer in the firelight, but this morning, he could see the clear fullness of her bosom. He stayed in bed, waiting for his erection to go down. He continued to watch her, and he grew harder and harder. Finally, he excused himself to take a shower and took himself in hand.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," he whispered to himself. He felt like an animal, wanking in her shower after all he had done to her. But he loved her! He wanted her. He wondered if they would make love during the next two days if she'd allow him to touch her in any intimate manner, let alone what he really craved to be inside her...

Again.

But that was the problem. The first time had been so horrible...it shouldn't even count...it was against everything he wanted to do! It was frustrating, but he knew that he had to show restraint and it was killing him to do so.

It was his birthday, and Hermione cooked a wonderful breakfast for them. She served him up a plate and dashed into the bathroom to take her own shower. Severus groaned as he tucked into his eggs. He thought what she must look like under her clothes. She was older, far more curvaceous and soft. He wondered how he was going to survive the next two days without her noticing his desire for her?

Hermione was feeling desperate in a way she had never experienced. She felt cautiously between her legs and teased herself until she was gasping out an orgasm. She thought of Severus kissing her, kissing her breasts, and his mouth between her legs, licking her with long strokes and making her come with his tongue. She couldn't imagine wanting him inside her... but to kiss her and taste her would be wonderful. Afterwards, she washed and dressed. She felt light and free. It would be just her little secret; he never needed to know how much she was beginning to desire him.

Hermione entered the kitchen and hurried over to the sink to pour herself some of the coffee. When she turned to walk to the table to join him, she had a sly little smile as if she had a little secret, but Severus also saw the glow on her face and the lazy, sated look lingering in her eyes. He hid a smug smile from her as he drank his coffee, but he was positive she had thought of him, satisfying herself whilst fantasizing about them being together during her bath. That thought alone was a perfect birthday gift all in its own.

That evening, Hermione surprised him with a small cake for his birthday.

"Now don't get any ideas!" she teased him. "I bought this at the bakery. If I had made it, it would have been all lopsided."

"I don't mind lop-sided cake," he replied as he sneaked a look at her blushing face.

She pulled something out of her pocket. "I didn't know what to get you, so I got you a certificate to Flourish and Blotts. You can find a book you like, or special parchment and quills."

He watched her nervousness and was touched.

"Thank you, Hermione," he whispered as he reached for her hand and softly kissed her palm.

Hermione felt his desire radiate through her by the sheer contact of his lips on her soft skin. It was frightening, but it also was endearing, how caring and tender he treated her.

"You're welcome," she murmured as she withdrew her hand to begin cutting the cake.

Later, as they sat around the dirty plates, Hermione talked to him about the day she had spent alone in the dungeons of Avery Manor. She fiddled with her hair, her collar, and pulled at her fingers as she spoke.

"I was in a great deal of pain, and it was so cold and I was so hungry. I was scared about the brand on my back...I didn't have anything to treat it. I wanted badly to sit and wrap my arms around my legs, but I was so sore...down there...it hurt too much. I just cried a lot. I wanted Harry to find me. I was so scared I was going to die in that horrid place. No one was there, but I felt positive someone had been there once. I thought constantly about what you had done to me, and I couldn't believe you had ra...hurt me. I thought, 'Why didn't I tell him who I was? Why didn't I say anything to him?' over and over in my mind. I just lay on my side and tried to think of something else besides the pain. I was bleeding, and I thought perhaps I had been torn.

"When I came to Paris, I saw a Muggle doctor, and she told me that I had been torn in different places. She said some had healed properly, some had not. I had to have some of the flesh burned off so I could be stitched properly. So I figured that must have been from the rape. Severus, does this make you uncomfortable?" she asked quietly.

"Of course," he replied. "I don't know what to say...I wish it had never happened. I wish I hadn't been so angry...there are so many things I wish I could take back, but I can't."

Hermione reached across the table and touched his fingers with her own. "You know, Severus," she said, "I don't believe I would have ever thought of you being so open emotionally. I suppose being your student, I wouldn't have known that you could."

Severus smirked. "I am not an open person, Hermione. When I was a boy, I had a hard time putting my feelings into words. By the time I was able to verbalize my thoughts, all I cared about was expressing the angry ones. I kept my vulnerable feelings and thoughts locked away. I didn't want to be exposed and vulnerable ever again. The Dark Lord taught me that power and control was all that mattered; only weak people felt soft emotions, like love, for example, or compassion," he whispered. "However, there is a place inside me that remains gentle and loving. I want you to know this part of me."

His eyes searched out for hers, and she gave in. "I understand about all that. Philippe helped me to construct my own wall to keep people out. No one was ever allowed to come inside until now." She pulled her hand back. "I need to sleep," she said abruptly. "I know I must be a bore, but I sleep a great deal during these days. You can read or do whatever you wish. I just need to lie down."

Severus watched her as she crawled under the covers and fell asleep almost immediately. He drew up a chair next to her bedside so he could be by her side. He watched her as she dreamt. He saw tears streaming down her cheeks.

*She cries in her sleep!*he thought. He rubbed his forehead and started to think this might not have been such a good idea. He started to feel sleepy, and he stroked her hair as he closed his eyes.

Her eyes opened slowly. "Sleep with me," she murmured. "Lie with me."

Her voice was breathless, and it called to him. He rose from his seat and again fit his body next to her. He carefully placed an arm across her belly and inhaled the scent of her hair. She was so soft and yielding to his delicate touch. He felt himself growing hard against her, but he didn't care. He loved her, loved her so much that he would gladly be with her this way than nothing at all.

A/N: Thanks to all who have been reading and reviewing! For karelia, Maria, and Beth, love and chocolates for working so hard on each chapter!

Wounding

Chapter 21 of 24

Things turn, but not for the better for Severus and Hermione.

Hermione watched Severus as he ate his sandwich. She was leaning on her left hand, propped up by her elbow. She had been pleasantly surprised when she had found Severus sleeping next to her. She continued to be amazed by how comfortable she felt with him. However, that was the trouble. She couldn't rid herself of the nagging worry that it wasn't real ... it seemed calculated.

"Hermione?" his voice rumbled. "You're staring."

"Sorry," she whispered.

"Anything you wish to tell me?" he asked as he placed his sandwich down.

"I was just so surprised when I found you next to me. Comfortable, sweet... Why are you being so nice to me?"

"Haven't I been nice to you all along?"

"No," she replied as she began to pick up the dirty dishes off the table.

"First, you were scheming, then you were pleading, but now...now it's like you are trying to prove something to me. How do I know you are not a liar and just want to see how far you can get with me?"

Severus narrowed his eyes. "Is that what you truly believe?"

Hermione walked close to him, towering over him as she whispered, *"I will never forget what you did to me."*

Severus' face was frozen. He folded his hands in his lap and said, "I realize that, Hermione. I am not asking you to."

She watched his face, the pale skin, the sharp features, and lanky hair. "So what do you want from me?" she demanded. "What could you possibly think I could give you?"

He stood up so that he now towered over her. He gathered her in his arms, enveloping her. Her hands were pressed against his sweater, and he was so close she could smell his unique scent, sharp and clean. When she looked up at his face, his mouth pressed gently down on hers, and he kissed her softly and cautiously. His grip on her

was strong, but his lips were tender and giving. He drew a ragged breath, and she could feel him inhaling the scent from her hair.

She wanted to speak, to say something, but she couldn't. She just looked at him, confused, and he lowered his mouth again onto hers, kissing her languidly with purpose. He slowly released her and said, "I love you, Hermione."

She nodded dumbly as she sat down, weak-kneed and confused. She shook her head with her brows furrowed and rose slowly. She forced herself to stand, her thoughts awhirl and her emotions conflicted, as she walked to her favorite chair. She tucked her feet under her and covered herself with the blanket. She was facing away from Severus, but she knew he was there, somewhere, behind her.

"What were you thinking when you raped me?" It was something she'd wanted the answer to for years, wondered about, and yet dreaded the answer. It pained her to say the words, but she needed to know.

She cringed when she heard the pained voice from across the room.

"Do you actually want to know this?" he snapped. "Will it give a shred of insight into who I am? Or are you wanting to slum around the mind of someone you used to know?"

He came to her side and looked down at her. She turned her head to him, staring at his buttons, unable to meet his eyes. "I can't share that with you. It will only make you want to know more about the morbidity of my mind. I can say that it destroyed me, and all my despicable, crazed dreams that I had are long dead...died that day, in fact. You have carried enough pain. Please, don't force me to burden you with this. It will not help you knowing, and I think this should be my load to bear. You told me I owed you. I do owe you so much...b-but this won't help..."

She turned her face sharply to his, surprised to see that his eyes were full of tears. "...You don't owe me anything," she interrupted, gripping the arms of the chair tightly, ready to spring, but remaining seated. "Would you please leave me? I-I can't do this right now."

"You don't have to do anything!" Severus hissed at her. "Do you think I secretly wanted it to be you?"

Hermione clenched her arms around her legs, holding them desperately to her chest. "No! I just want to find some connection. Could we have thought the same things? Did it even once cross your mind, even for a moment, that I was her?"

"Do you actually think we can change what occurred that night?" Severus ran his hands through his hair and paced back and forth. "Do you want to turn this into something romantic? Don't be pathetic! It was... it was...defilement."

Hermione stood to walk over and stand up to him. She raised her head and hissed, "Don't you ever call me pathetic. I know who you have been, and I know your deeds. But this Severus Snape is not one with which I am familiar."

He towered over her, sneering, "And you actually believe that you will discover all that you are looking for in those short minutes? Do you need me to say that the act I committed revealed every horrific part of the wizard I once was? Truly, can knowing that be the key to making everything make sense?"

They stood in awkward silence until Severus' eyes glittered and he asked, "That one moment when I was close to you in a way you have never experienced before or since; you need it to mean something? Otherwise, everything would have been for nothing?"

A penetrating stare and a sly smile spread over his face. "Do you wish I had known it was you? Do you need to think that I knew... that I couldn't bring myself to finish because it was you? Do you want me to tell you that even as wretched a bastard as I was, that I couldn't finish because I thought it was you?"

Hermione backed away and her eyes refused to meet him. "I have to think about all of this, Severus. Everything has changed."

"Why?" he demanded.

"Fine!" she shouted. "Was I just one of many, Severus? How many women did you rape? Is that how you like it? I mean, just as long as she's not a virgin?"

She raised her arms in mock sacrifice. "Is this your game? You've broken me in, and you know there hasn't been anyone else. I've given birth to your child. So, are you my friend to gain my trust and tell me you love me, get me all relaxed and compliant so you can hurt me again? You see, I just can't figure you out, Snape. Is it the fact you got a baby out of your screaming virgin that turns on your possessive side? Or is it that because I am no longer a delicate flower, you can get me in your bed and finally get all the rutting you want out of me with no distractions or guilt because the first time, you didn't get a proper 'happening ending?'"

Severus stood pale as his eyes slowly began to deaden. Hermione knew she'd gone to far, and immediately regret and pain washed over her.

"You have cut me, Miss Granger," he intoned deeply. "Touché. I'm no violator of women. I've never raped anyone before or since. If your intention was to make me question the deepest parts of my sordid mind, bravo. You have made every gesture of kindness, each touch, each kiss... even the innocence of our sleep on your bed seem false and dirty. Perhaps that is all I shall ever be. You would not be the first woman to reject me outright in the face of the gift of my pride."

She felt a stab at his words, a dagger into her chest. How she regretted her words!

"Just so you realize," he continued as he packed his things and started to leave, "and don't feel misled, I shall answer your question. I conjured every erotic thought I held for the first witch I loved. I had hoped to marry her. Even after her death, I could not shake her memory. My heart was still wrapped in her cold, dead hands. I imagined her alive and wanting me, so I blocked you out...whoever you were. I really didn't care to know at the time. However, since I was not a man disposed towards violating women, even the thoughts of her, my first love, could not make me what I had never been, nor what I believed I could ever be. Perhaps I was mistaken, and the true man I am is a debaucher. I've never entertained the thought until now. However, don't worry, Hermione. *Your* virtue was never at risk."

Hermione watched him walk down the stairs and out the front door. She locked the door of the shop behind him and turned to go upstairs. Her eyes fell on the large picture of Diana, *La Chasserresse*. She covered her face as she cried.

A month had passed since Severus had last seen Hermione. He started to seek out his daughter and talk with her. She was a very curious child. She seemed to highly enjoy his attentions and chattered constantly about everything under the sun during their walks together. One day in late February, they went into the Forbidden Forest, but only the area he was allowed by the centaurs.

Alice pounced upon a fallen tree and carefully walked it with her arms outstretched, careful to keep her balance. Her winter coat hung on her thin frame like a bell, going back and forth, and she teetered then tottered her way across. Not that she was in any danger; Severus was always within a whisper's breath to catch her if she might fall. It never ceased to amaze him how accepting she was of his company. He thought there might have been all sorts of questions to sate her mind. However, she took it as great fun and acted in a manner oddly resembling her adopted mother.

She finished the length of the tree and jumped back down. "Mum and Dad told me that in just TWO years, I'm going to be a first-year! I can't wait until I get a wand. You know, I take my daddy's wand and do magic with it sometimes," she confided in him.

He listened as she nattered on about her little stories, and her crush on her Uncle Harry. He quirked an eyebrow.

"You think your Uncle Harry is handsome?" he asked.

She blushed, so much like her mother, and said, "He has such beautiful eyes, and he's nice to me, too. I figure he can do anything!"

"Hmm," he replied.

"I didn't realize girls of nine thought about love," he mused.

"Nine and a half!" she corrected him, then lowered her voice as she pleaded, "Please don't tell my Uncle Harry. I would ~~die~~ if I knew that he knew!"

"Your secret is safe with me," he promised, carefully hiding his revulsion at her pronouncement.

"Come down!" she commanded imperiously.

He lowered his hooded eyes, scrutinizing her with a scowl. "Have you forgotten your manners, young lady, or are you just normally this rude?" he asked dryly.

"Please?"

"That's better." He bent down so they could look eye-to-eye.

Alice took some of her long, curly hair and some of his and then put them together. "Our hair color is the same!" she squealed. "I think that must be special."

"Ah. I think I could agree with that statement," he declared.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed tightly. "You know," she said as she pulled back enough to look at him. "No one calls me young lady but you, sir."

"Really?" he asked as he looked into her dark, brown eyes. "Then I think that is special."

He watched in fascination as she fixed her eyes on a tree. She jumped away from Severus and hastily climbed to the ledge that suited her for sitting and allowed her legs to dangle from the bough. His mouth twitched almost into a smile as she looked down at him proudly. Oh, she was Hermione Granger's daughter all right! Not only did she firmly set her mind on a task with deliberation, the task itself was a feat. Then, when she knew she'd done it (and done very well) a smile of smug satisfaction was blatant on her face. *Cheeky girl! She expects a 'well done' and a pat on the head!*

Her voice rang out in the silvery air. "You can call me Lady Alice, and I can call you Lord Snape!" she declared. "I always wanted to be a princess...oh! You can call me Princess Alice and I can call you Prince Snape! You just *must* have a special name of your own!"

"Ah, but there is no nobility in our world!" he corrected her.

"Catch me!" she shouted as she jumped from the tree.

He caught her deftly and frowned. "You didn't say please," he reminded her. "If you want to be a lady, or a princess, you have to remember your manners."

"Yes, sir," she said as she hugged him. "We've had so much fun these weeks. Do you want to meet my dolls? My favorite doll is named Charlotte. I think you two should be introduced."

"Now that, my lady, is a brilliant idea. Introductions! Every young lady should practice her introductions. And who better to practice with than the most sour, old wizard in the world?"

She laughed as she threw her head back. "May I call you Prince Severus, please?"

"No," he said with a small smile.

"What should I call you? I don't like calling you sir and Professor all the time. If we're going to be friends, we have to have special names!"

Severus' heart was breaking. He wanted to tell her to call *him* 'Daddy,' not Longbottom!

"Fine, Princess Alice, but Prince Severus? That is much too familiar. You must never say it in front of others!" he warned her as he carried her back inside.

"Okay, Prince Severus," she whispered in his ear as Severus carried her to her room, awaiting his formal introduction to his daughter's favorite doll, Charlotte. Inside his chest, Severus was near to bursting with love for this little girl who had him wrapped around her finger. An introduction to a doll would have been laughable in the past, but he couldn't think of anything more important to do with his time or a grander acquaintance he'd be more pleased to meet. Actually, Severus Snape would rather be put out to think of anything more delightful than being the center of his little Alice's attention.

Oh, dear. This has gone wrong. At least Severus is determined to have his own relationship with Alice. Hermione is obviously still too wounded. Please review!

His Virgin Huntress - Part I

Chapter 22 of 24

Severus decides he can't take the distance between him and Hermione.

A/N: Sorry it took so long getting this up! Huge thanks to Maria for all her help straightening out this chapter.

Another month had passed, and Severus could not handle the distance between him and Hermione for another day. He Apparated to her shop on his free weekend and found her hard at work in her trademark elegance. Today, it was a soft, lightweight white blouse and black skirt with a lovely pair of shiny, high-heeled shoes that showed off her calves nicely, and her hair up in a twist. She wore pearl and diamond earrings, flattering to her face and complementing her hairstyle, and a roped pearl necklace that nested teasingly on the exposed skin above her cleavage. He waited in silence until the wizard she was helping left.

She stood at the door, having escorted the man outside. "Severus," she began, looking uneasy as she gripped the door handle tightly with both hands. One hand went to her pearls, and she shook as she kept her eyes downcast. "I apologize, Severus. Things have been confusing, and I needed time."

He raised one eyebrow and said, "I have a Pensieve for you."

Hermione looked up and studied his face for a moment. Without a word, she closed the shop. "Would you like some tea?" she asked him when she turned back to face him.

"Thank you."

Hermione came out of the Pensieve crying.

"She's so beautiful!" she said as she sobbed on Severus' chest. She looked up at him as she wiped her face. "You are so close to her. How did you do it?"

"I'm her new friend. I attend numerous tea parties, answer a thousand questions, deal with her frivolous chattering, and love every bit of it. She is beautiful, just like her mother, and I love them both very much." He added, "Hermione," in a soft whisper as he held her by her shoulders, "I miss you...respect you...just as I have from the first moment I saw you when I walked into this store. I am in love with you. I can't change or heal your pain. I wish I could."

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him passionately on the lips. He eagerly responded.

"Severus," she breathed as she broke away for air. "This was why I had to keep you away. I knew if I didn't push you away, the next step would be... uh..." She closed her eyes, and her face turned ghostly white. She removed her hands from him as if he burned to the touch.

"I just *can't!*" she blurted out. "I can't! I think of it, but when my mind reaches that point, I feel so sick. I'm sorry I hurt you. It was on purpose, too! I wouldn't be able to handle it, and what would happen to me if I freaked out? What would it say about me if I *liked* it? I mean, it's not like I haven't thought of it before. I-I don't know what to do."

Severus watched as new tears and fear gathered in her eyes. "Don't worry," he whispered as he cradled the side her face with his hand.

He rested his eyes on her and looked deep into them. "So that you know, being with me, however you want it, or how far you wish for us to go... it would make you a woman. Just a normal woman who wants to feel safe in the hands of the man to whom she is giving herself. How can it be wrong to be who you are? Can you allow your mind to rest and give your body permission to be made love to in whichever way you wish?"

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but Severus brushed her lips with his thumb.

"You are a beautifully made woman, Hermione. Don't force yourself not to feel. You were made to feel so much pleasure." He kissed her, lightly touching her lips with his own before taking possession of them.

"I don't know. I don't know anything," she said as her lips trembled.

"We'll take it slow. However you want it, Hermione," he whispered. "For however long..."

Severus picked Hermione up and carried her over to her bed, setting her down gently on her feet. He stood in front of her, and they kissed, slowly at first, but then more passionately.

"How do we do this?" Hermione asked as she timidly felt up and down the contours of his toned arms.

"No," Severus told her. "This is not about what you do for me. I just want you to feel me close to you, enjoying my kiss and my touch."

He ran a warm hand along the side of her leg, dragging the material slightly along with it from thigh to hip and whispered, "You are a very desirable woman."

She was trembling as she turned her back to him, unbuttoning her blouse. She tugged it out of the skirt's waistband and removed it. She was about to remove her bra when a hand stilled her.

She turned her head sharply around, and Severus was there, his eyes were full of tears. He edged closer to her and traced the branded "V" with his finger.

"Some days I forget it's even there, but then I'll rub it against something or aggravate it, and it will start to hurt. That's one of the reasons I wear such silky soft clothes. It's very sensitive."

"That would account for the satin sheets," he concluded. His voice was deep and thick with emotion.

"Yes," she replied.

He lowered his mouth and kissed it softly. She felt odd...all of this was strange and new. She removed her skirt and heard Severus' throaty moan of approval of her just in her matching bra, knickers, and garter belt set. She concentrated on slowly removing her stocking from the buttons of her garters, innocently unaware that her technique was making Severus crave her even more. Severus gazed hungrily at her bountiful breasts contained in elaborate lace. Afterwards, she stood frozen, scared of what was to happen next.

Severus picked her up and lowered her tenderly on the coverlet and gently sat on the side of the bed. He carefully removed his robe and boots. Hermione looked him over and saw the thick bulge in his pants and closed her eyes. Severus saw her reaction and doubled his resolve to keep her at ease.

Hermione was greeted with soft lips that lightly nipped at her skin. A pair of hands grazed her skin as they descended to cup her covered breasts. Hermione kept still on her back, focusing on just breathing, and was rewarded with sensuous lips around her left nipple, suckling gently through the material. She gasped in pleasure and ran a hand through Severus' hair.

"That feels wonderful," she murmured. "Please don't stop."

"May I?" he asked as he gestured towards removing her bra.

Hermione's eyes widened as she experienced the dark wizard cradle her frame and gently release her from her constraint. He laid her back down, and as he rose, he brought her brassiere away from her chest, revealing her creamy breasts. He caressed her lightly with his fingertips, as if committing the feel of her to memory. She grasped his shoulders and silently urged him to take her again into his mouth.

"When I awoke from the birth, my breasts had been bound to stop my milk from coming in," she whispered as cradled his head to her breast. "I could hear her crying, and I wanted her. I needed her, but she was already gone from me."

Severus looked up into her face and caressed her cheek. "You should have been able to nurse our child, Hermione. That was a normal response," he murmured.

Her eyes blurred with fresh tears. "I've felt bound ever since. Now I'm feeling quite unraveled," she confessed with a shy smile.

"I can make you come undone, if you trust me, Hermione," he replied.

Hermione watched his eyes as he spoke, and she followed them down back to the dark rose of her nipple. She watched as he bathed her breasts with his tongue. He sucked hard on one, making her nearly mad with desire, and massaged the other, milking it to a hard tip, which shot electric pulses right through her body to her core. He rewarded her trust with a generous suckling which only intensified the sensations shooting through her, ending his teasing play with an audible pop as he released her nipple from the warmth of his mouth that just about made her jump out of her skin.

Smiling, he closed the gap between them and drew her other breast into his mouth, suckling softly and lightly scraping her skin with his teeth. She was whimpering and gasping now. A pulse was beating heavily between her legs, and each squeeze of her thighs together to relieve the pressure only gave her more sensation and need. She felt her inner thighs become slippery with her wetness. She desperately wanted him to touch her there, between her thighs, deep inside, but just as she was forming the words, Severus pushed her breasts together and sucked on both nipples simultaneously. Her head flung back onto her pillow as her back arched, thrusting herself into his mouth even further, and screamed out an orgasm that ripped out of her from somewhere she didn't know existed inside her. She could hardly think, panting and sweating profusely as her vision went in and out of focus as her heart beat erratically in its attempt to slow down.

Hermione felt every bone in her body relax. This was a completely new experience. She was wet and open...so open...that she knew her body would accept him with no problem. In fact, she wanted him to make love to her. He had turned her inside out without using one finger...only his marvelous, talented tongue. God Almighty! If he could do that to her with his mouth, she would be only a blithering mess after he had ridden her through numerous orgasms.

Severus was aching for relief. When...she had climaxed from his suckling, he nearly came in his pants. Her breasts were made for loving, and the taste of her skin and the softness there made him want to make up for all the wasted years she had gone without knowing a man's tender touch.

When he could at last form a sentence, he said, "I want you to feel pleasure. You, of all women, deserve that. Do you know how you like to be touched?"

She dropped her forehead to his shoulder to hide her face and gathered the courage to whisper in his ear what she had fantasized about for years.

*Good God! I could spend a lifetime doing just that!*he thought.

He eased her down across her satin sheets and carefully removed her knickers. She was shaking and shivering as she allowed him to spread her legs. She felt his large hands glide up and around her legs, massaging and warming them, easing her nerves.

"Don't you know how desirable you are?" he asked quietly.

She felt her face grow warm, and she said lowly, "My stomach isn't...right. I have stretch marks." She tried to hide them from his eyes and hands, but he nipped and kissed her lightly on her mouth.

"Shh," he whispered. "You are perfect."

He traveled down to her breasts and made her whimper with excitement before lowering further to lightly touch and run the tip of his tongue along the long streaks around her belly.

Hermione felt tears again prick her eyes as he continued to kiss her around her center and made his way between her legs. She was trying to thank him, to say something coherent, but he was already busying himself kissing and tasting her juices on her thighs. Hermione barely got up on one elbow to see what he was doing before plopping back down in a jumbled combination of exhaustion and a building intensity of what was to happen. Dear God! He was going to taste her, post orgasm, and her newly fresh arousal. She felt the floodgates had opened for the first time. But what really blew her mind was that she couldn't care less what he did...just as long as he never stopped.

When he lowered his mouth onto her moist center, she moaned with abandon. He ran his tongue up and down the length of her, finally settling to concentrate on her tiny bud. A few swipes with his tongue sent her over the edge, gasping and moaning. He felt her small hand on the wide expanse of his back, fisting his shirt, and she pushed him down into her warmth. There was a flurry of tongue, teeth, and fingers massaging, teasing, and nipping until she nearly jackknifed off the bed, screeching in helplessness at the overwhelming deliciousness of her climax.

She was mindless and free. For the first time... she was free... "Severus!" she cried out as she exploded inside, feeling her body quiver and fall into complete relaxation.

He rose over her, and she reflexively closed her eyes painfully as she waited for his intrusion.

"Open your eyes, Hermione," he whispered as he continued to stroke her body and kiss her delicately. He kissed along her neck, and she felt herself melting away under his attention to her body. She felt the openness deep inside of her and wanted him to fill her.

He lay beside her and caressed her face and smoothed her hair. "We don't need to rush. Let me love you this way."

Hermione was blushing beet red. She lowered her eyes and said, "What about you? I mean, don't you want me?"

Her voice was so full of fear and of certain disappointment, he wanted nothing more than to thrust himself into her to the hilt and show her how much he desired her. But he didn't want to frighten his sweet virgin. To him, that was how she was. Her innocence moved him and created a protectiveness over her that felt... right.

He brushed her lips with his own and nuzzled her ear while her answered her. "I don't want to rush things. You are very enticing, and I am in considerable discomfort, but I am willing to suffer for you."

Hermione pulled back and tentatively searched out his manhood through his trousers. Sensing her curiosity, he took her hand and placed it against his erection.

She gasped, and Severus' eyes closed in ecstasy as she rubbed her hand along his shaft. He blessed heaven that she was still addicted to learning.

"Does this feel good?" she whispered as she continued to massage his length through the rough material of his trousers.

"God, yes," he panted. He clung to her body as she heightened his state of arousal.

"I want to see it," she told him.

In his haze, he wasn't sure he was hearing clearly or if he was imagining what she had said.

"I want to touch it," she pleaded as she kissed him languidly on his half open mouth. He froze as she fumbled to release him. Her innocent attempt at seduction only fueled his lust. When her hand touched his skin, he hissed. It was excruciatingly erotic. He thrust into her hand out of sheer reflex and mumbled his apology. When he weakly opened his eyes, he saw her awe-struck face. Her eyes glittered, and her face was positively gleeful.

"I think I like this," she informed him.

"What?" he asked, stupidly.

"You are nearly out of your mind with want, and I'm *doing* this to you. I have *control*."

He covered her mouth hungrily with his own and savagely kissed her. Her high-pitched squeaks of approval along with her own greedy kisses sent him into a fury of desperation. She slid her hand up and down his arousal, and he bucked and thrust in a frenzy of lust. He ripped his mouth from hers and roared her name as his orgasm ripped through his balls and out his length onto her hand and stomach. Afterwards, he gasped through a haze of darkness. He was shaking, sweating and panting as Hermione wrapped her free hand on his back and urged him to lie on her with shushing noises that lulled him quickly to sleep.

His Virgin Huntress - Part II

Chapter 23 of 24

Severus and Hermione finally consummate their relationship.

A/N: I hope you all enjoy this chapter. I put a lot of thought into this moment for Severus and Hermione. I hope it answers some questions about where Hermione is at this point and the meaning of Severus' new-found confidence and sensitivity. I truly believe that there are two sides to a man. There is an outer and inner side which can be as different as night and day. When I read the scene in DH where Snape was weeping over Lily's letter and photo, I knew this was the private and inner part of Severus Snape that only he would reveal to the woman he loved.

The two lovers lay in Hermione's bed. Severus was stroking her hair, and she was playing with the hair on his chest.

"When do you have to leave?" she whispered.

Severus kissed her forehead. "I have to be back for classes on Monday," he murmured.

She sighed. "This is going to become complicated, isn't it?"

He lay on his back, pulling her close to him. "You on one continent, I on an island...I don't see how we can avoid it."

"What are we going to do?" she whispered.

"Come back with me?" he proposed with a raised eyebrow.

"What...for keeps?" she quipped as she laughed, rolling away from him onto her side.

She felt him snuggle against her. "At least for a visit, so Alice can meet you. She talks about it so much."

"I'm afraid," she whispered as she stared off into the distance of her flat.

Severus kissed her neck and shoulder. "Afraid of what?"

"Afraid I'll cry, afraid I'll blurt out that she's mine, and I want her back with me, therefore, scaring the life out of her, her hating me, you, Neville and Luna," she replied, unsure of how Severus would take her meaning.

Severus' eyes roamed over her. "You're trembling," he whispered.

"I am so angry," she whispered quietly. "I never should have let her go. I never should have let Augusta talk me into letting her go."

"It had been Augusta's idea?" he said sharply as he sat up.

Hermione turned and faced him, pulling the sheet closer to her. "Maybe not at first, but when I started to change my mind, she told me that I had to think about what was best for Alice Hermione...that I was doing the best thing I could do by giving her to Neville and Luna, two pure-bloods who would save her from of lifetime of shame."

"Shame?" he spat.

"The rape child of an ex-Death Eater and a Muggle-born," she explained.

"You were Potter's best friend! He alone would have assured your standing in society..."

Hermione held her head with one hand. "But I couldn't do that. I couldn't keep her and have her know she existed only because of what her father did to her mother."

"At least that was what Augusta told you," he snapped.

Hermione moved away from Severus. "Perhaps I shouldn't have listened to her. But she was so compelling! She told me about the choice she had to make between her son and grandson...that it killed her to put Frank and Alice into St. Mungo's!"

Severus raged at her. "Hermione, that woman took a situation that was a choice between two people and formed it to fit yours...which was a choice between *nothing*! She used your weakened state to bully you and told you it was for your own good...for Alice's own good! Damn her!"

He flipped back the covers and put his trousers on. He turned around to see Hermione clutching her coverlet as tears ran down her face.

He sat back on the bed and reached for her. "No!" she shouted as she sat up and set her back to him. He watched her bowed head and the branded mark on her back. She summoned her silk robe and pulled it on quickly.

"I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough," she said as she wiped her eyes with a handkerchief she found in her pocket. "How was I to know you would even care? You hated me! You hated everything about me, and for one moment I thought I saw relief on your face when I returned, but the rest of the year, you were the same: cold, snide, sarcastic...you were such a bastard! What was I to do? Go up to you and say, 'Hey remember me? I was the girl in the muslin sack that you raped on your birthday. And guess what? I'm pregnant with your baby!'"

She dropped the false excitement and shook her head. "It. Was. Impossible!" she hissed through gritted teeth.

Severus sighed and let his hands fall on the bed. "It is not your fault. I've never blamed you; I never will. I'm angry with that wretched woman for manipulating you!" he snarled.

He started pacing around like a caged animal as he spoke, "A part of me wants to go there and take Alice away from all of them and bring her here, safe and sound where we can be together as a real family!"

"Is that what you want?" Hermione asked softly as she curled up on her bed again.

He stopped pacing, walked to her, and straddled her. "The first thought that came into my mind when I realized you and I were Alice's parents was to make us a family...just the three of us," he said as he caressed her face and hair. "I planned to court you and see if I could persuade you to fall in love with an evil bastard...such as I am...and then together we would get our daughter and be together."

Hermione snorted as they both laughed. "And then?" she whispered.

"Well, I wanted us to marry before we brought her home...wherever we decided that would be... and I thought, well, perhaps, you would want to have another baby with me," he whispered. "Do it right this time?"

Hermione felt strange. "I don't know if I would ever want to go through that again," she whispered.

Severus lifted her head with one finger under her chin. "It could be different. At St. Mungo's, I could give you potions to ease the pain, to even take most of it away. I would invent a new potion to give you to make you as comfortable as magically possible, and the hell to any Healer who stands in my way!"

Hermione giggled. He held her, careful not to touch the branded area on her back.

She grasped onto him tightly. "I've wanted this for so long!"

Severus broke their hold. "What?" he asked her as his eyes drank in her face.

"A wizard who would see how special I still could be...that I wasn't ruined because of what happened to me...what I did...I-I have so much guilt for giving her up. I feel like I gave up *on* her. As if she weren't enough to fight for...or *worth* fighting for. I don't want her to think my decision was easy or without pain because it was *shard!*"

Severus kissed her soundly on her lips. "She will understand one day. Perhaps not now. Children are so bloody-minded about things. If they can't understand a situation, they blame themselves."

He kissed her passionately, consuming her mouth, pulling off his trousers, and untying her robe. His eyes roved around her exposed body, and he kissed her again as his hands roamed free to touch every part of her skin. "Hermione," he whispered.

She arched her back and let her head fall back as she gave herself over to him. *Please,*" she whispered. *"Take me with you."*

He rose over her and took his time to pleasure her, to awaken her body, every nerve, to what would come. She looked up at him, gazing into his face, and nodded. He wrapped her legs around his waist. He continued to kiss and tease her all the while slowly sinking a finger inside her. Hermione jumped at the foreignness of the sensation.

He removed his hand and stroked her hair. "It's okay, Hermione," he whispered. "I need to make sure you are ready." He stroked inside her, concentrating on her face while going a bit deeper with each thrust. He lifted her slightly as he pressed in further.

He silently withdrew. He pressed a couple of fingers inside her and began to move them around in a swirling pattern.

"I-oh-that's good," she breathed.

"That's right," he whispered in her ear. "I want you to feel good. Gratification and satisfaction."

His words swam in her head, and her mind went blank, focusing only on the decadent feeling that he was giving her, making her body shift and move in ways she had never imagined. Soon she was straining and arching, trying to get the contact with his hand to match that which was building up inside of her. "Faster!" she gasped. She felt her body instinctively take over as she ground her clitoris against the palm of his hand. The sensation grew more intense and then exploded, shooting outward, rolling through her even down to her toes. She shuddered against his shoulder, holding him tightly, then collapsed onto the bed, perspiring and spent.

Severus mounted her and ran the length of him across her sex. Severus hooked her legs over his forearms and slowly sank into her, moaning her name as he filled her completely.

Hermione pressed her knees to her chest, and Severus groaned loudly. He looked down into Hermione's large eyes. They were full of wonder and excitement. He kept his eyes focused on her, boring into her eyes to find if he could make them soft with desire. He rose over her and possessed her, filling all of her, completing so much that had been left barren inside. He worshipped her with his whole being, with words, his body, his soul, and with all he had within him, for he truly loved her. He took her with him to the height and breadth of passion, desire, and yearning.

"I-I," Hermione tried to talk as he drew her closer into his arms.

"Shh," he whispered as he traced her flushed cheek with his hand. "Don't talk, just *feel*."

Hermione relinquished herself to the spiraling and swirling feeling around her. She had never felt anything so amazing in her life. She gripped his back as he moved inside her. After a while, a keening sound came from deep inside her, and Severus was panting and calling her name. She felt a deep tremor within her that frightened her with its intensity. She felt a warm gush inside of her as Severus cried out sharply, and half-collapsed, spent and breathing on top of her.

He lazily scooped her into his embrace and took her with him as he fell onto his back and kissed her forehead. "Thank you, Hermione," he panted. "Thank you."

Hermione began to cry softly.

Severus leaned up quickly and started down at her. "What's wrong?" He asked in confusion, still breathing hard, but clearly alarmed that something was wrong.

"I've never felt that way. I feel I've shattered into pieces. I've never been so close to anyone before," she confessed through her sobs, "or so out of control of myself. I'm frightened how you make me feel."

He held her firmly to him. She looked so lost and broken, afraid and unsure of the intensity of what she had experienced. "I've got you," he assured her. "Don't worry, you're safe with me."

Her body was trembling and shaking. She looked up into his eyes. "Y-Your v-v-voice w-was s-s-so... h-hypnotic. When you told me to 'feel,' I-I felt so connected to you." She hung her head as she sobbed. "I-I don't want to lose that, now that I've found it!" she cried aloud. She broke down completely then, and allowed Severus to hold her as she wept.

After most of her sobbing subsided, Severus tipped her chin up and kissed her sweetly. "That's the way it should be. That's the way I always want you to feel in my arms."

Forever."

Hermione looked at Severus with new eyes, and she loved him. It was time now to meet their daughter.

Alice Hermione

Chapter 24 of 24

Alice Longbottom finally meets her Aunt Hermione.

A/N: My apologies for getting this up so late. I hope you enjoy how I decided to write Hermione's first meeting with Alice. Thanks to Maria for her excellent beta work, as always. Reviews are always appreciated!

Alice Hermione was racing around her room, making sure everything was put away properly. She was finally going to meet Aunt Hermione, her godmother and the witch she had been named after. For Alice, this was momentous. She had longed to meet her aunt for years. Listening to the letters she had sent to her mum were like listening to adventure stories. The places she had been, the people she had met, and the things she did made her larger-than-life in her little girl's mind. She couldn't wait to meet her.

Professor Snape came into the sitting room of the Longbottoms' with Hermione Granger on his arm. Alice was confused. Why was Professor Snape with her? She drank in the vision of her aunt. She had very curly hair and the warmest brown eyes, except for her daddy, of course.

Alice fidgeted a bit in her chair, waiting to talk with Aunt Hermione. When she approached her, her lovely aunt knelt down to see her eye to eye. She was beautiful, just as Alice had always dreamt she'd be. Her aunt touched her face and hair, looking at her as if she were drinking *her* in.

"Alice, you are so lovely," her aunt whispered. She placed a warm hand on her small knee. The contact went straight to Alice's heart. "I can't believe how big you are!" her aunt continued. "I've been far away too long. The last time I saw you, you were just a tiny baby all wrapped up in a blanket."

Unable to stop her overwhelming love, Alice threw her arms around her aunt. It felt like ages until she felt Aunt Hermione's arms circle around her, but she eventually did.

"I want to hear all about you," her aunt informed her.

Alice watched as her aunt wiped away some tears from her face. *Why is she crying?* she wondered to herself.

"I like to read," Alice said without hesitation. "I like so many subjects, and I know I will love being a student at Hogwarts!" Alice started to become more animated as she spoke. "My mum teaches me now, but I am in charge of my schedule."

She dragged her aunt into her bedroom. The adults followed. "See?" she announced pointedly at a large poster board which covered half her wall. "This is my chart. I color code everything, so I will have enough time to do what I want." Alice looked smug at her revelation, but she couldn't help herself.

Aunt Hermione peered in closer to examine it. "This is impressive, Alice," she informed her with approval. "You remembered to add in your study time and playtime. It is important to discipline yourself."

"Hermione used to make the most beautiful colored charts for your Uncles Harry and Ron," her mum said in her usual dreamy voice. "They always tried to look exasperated by it, but they were always grateful at the end of the year."

Alice looked at her aunt with wide eyes. "You made charts like these?" she prodded.

"I did," Hermione answered with pride. "And I still do. It helps me keep track of my day. When you run a business, it is important to manage your time wisely."

Alice beamed at her aunt. For the rest of the day, she stuck to her side like Spellotape, listening, watching, and breathing her in. At dinner, she discovered her aunt's hatred for tomatoes.

"I hate tomatoes, too!" she burst out. "I wonder what else we have in common?"

Alice couldn't place her finger on it, but her dad seemed edgy. "Well, lots of people don't like tomatoes," he said with a hint of nervousness in his tone. "Just a coincidence, is all."

Alice frowned. Something was wrong. Daddy was never like this. And he and mum were always so... loving with each other. Now, they were distant like strangers. Instead, Professor Snape was continuously touching her aunt. He treated her like a delicate flower. He was always making sure she was comfortable by pulling out chairs, opening doors, and lightly touching her as if she were something breakable. Aunt Hermione looked at him with such adoring eyes, she wondered if Professor Snape and her Aunt Hermione were going to get married.

At bedtime, Alice put her foot down and told her father she wanted Aunt Hermione to tuck her into bed. "Please, Auntie Hermione!" she begged as she pulled on her aunt's arm whilst ignoring the hurt look on her daddy's face.

Her aunt was reluctant, but agreed. Alice raced to her room and took out her favorite books, especially her dog-eared copy of *Hogwarts, A History*. That was the first one she thrust into her aunt's hands before bouncing onto her bed and diving under the covers.

"Oh, my," her aunt declared as she ran her hand across the front of the old book. She sat on Alice's bed and confessed, "I used to annoy your Uncles Harry and Ron with tidbits from this book. It was my favorite."

"It's mine, too!" Alice said happily. She stared at her aunt and felt so much love for her, she thought she would burst. Without warning, she flung herself into her aunt's arms

and hugged her tight. "I love you, Auntie Hermione! I'm so glad you are back."

Hermione smiled, and Alice reached out to place her little index finger into the indentation in her aunt's cheek. The little girl gasped, and her eyes widened. "You and I have matching dimples!" she breathed. "Isn't that amazing? I want to be just like you when I grow up."

Alice watched her aunt as she crossed her legs. Alice looked at her hair. It was so long and lovely, her clothes were so soft, and she smelled so yummy. She felt like crawling into her aunt's lap and resting her head on her shoulder. She had the warmest brown eyes, and her make-up was perfect.

Alice expected for her pretty aunt to hug her and tell her she was glad for her mentioning the dimple, but instead, her face went pale and she grew quiet.

Alice was hurt. She released her, looking into her eyes. "You aren't leaving, are you?" she asked nervously.

"No," her aunt's voice was soft and quiet. "I'm going to stay on for a while. Professor Snape and I have a special relationship."

"Are you getting married like my mum and dad?" she asked hopefully.

"We'll see," she replied. She pulled the covers back and added, "Now is the time for little girls to be a-bed." She smiled sweetly. Alice snuggled down the covers and sighed in pure joy and contentment.

"Will you read to me from *Hogwarts: A History*?" Alice asked.

"Of course," her aunt murmured.

Alice watched drowsily as her aunt read. Alice figured her aunt had to be the smartest witch in the world, besides her mum, of course. She watched her aunt's hands as she absent-mindedly rubbed the edge on the top of each page, curling it a bit. Alice thought it was strange how her aunt did that as well. All of the pages in Alice's books were slightly curled from doing the same thing. Alice liked how the parchment felt in her hands...perhaps her Aunt Hermione did as well. Alice thought a great deal about it more as she listened to the lovely voice of her aunt lull her to sleep.

"... not going to have this... can't have her finding out," a voice hissed.

Alice woke up to the sound of her parents rowing. It was strange; they never rowed. She got out of bed and padded to the door, opening it just a crack. They were trying to keep their voices low, but she could hear snippets of words.

"... just had to point it out!" she heard her father say angrily.

"... the truth, Neville!" said her mother.

"... wish... came back. I know... must tell the truth," her father was saying. "Alice is too young to know."

Alice gasped and closed the door. What didn't they want her knowing? Why had her daddy been so nervous throughout Aunt Hermione's visit? Her parents had looked afraid, even. Well, not mum so much, but her daddy had been.

She would have to find out for herself.

"Well, Auntie," Severus voice rumbled softly as he led Hermione into their quarters. "How did you enjoy your first visit with our Miss Alice?"

"She's not an idiot, Severus," she started to say.

"She had better not be!" he snapped. "No child of mine would dare be dim-witted."

Hermione shook her head as she continued. "Severus, she is an intuitive and observant child. She noticed that we have the same dimples. She told me she wants to be just like me when she grows up!" she said in desperation.

Severus had already begun to undress for bed as she spoke. At those words, he stopped unbuttoning his white shirt and leaned over Hermione to capture her lips in a searing kiss. He lifted himself back up and resumed undressing, without concern or worry.

"Of course she wants to be like you, Hermione. You are her mother. She probably senses a closeness, yet cannot explain it, so she passes it off as finding a kindred spirit. It was plain as plain she idolizes you."

Hermione dug her stocking feet into the carpet. "She'll find out. Then she will hate me. How do you tell a child the truth when the truth is too much for the child to comprehend?"

Severus climbed into bed next to her and said, "Let me worry about that. Miss Longbottom and I have an understanding of sorts."

Hermione smiled as she looked at him and the proud expression on his face. "Really?" she asked. "What understanding?"

"I cannot divulge," he whispered solemnly. "But I will speak with her." His countenance grew serious as he continued to speak. "Hermione. I don't want you to worry. Just focus on enjoying her in your life. Leave the explaining and worrying to me."

He leaned her back onto the bed slowly and straddled her. "Someone is severely overdressed," he observed with an upturned eyebrow.

"You still have your trousers on," Hermione whispered shyly in return.

"Not for long," he informed her as he ran his hands down the length of her body. He leaned downward and whispered in her ear, *Relax.*

Hermione took a deep, cleansing breath and exhaled. He hovered his hand just above her skin as he moved down her face, close, but never touching her as she closed her eyes, releasing herself into his care. She felt her body growing limp as he slowly undressed her, one button at a time. He opened her satin blouse and unfastened the clasp on her bra. She felt her skin cooling with each unveiling. At the moment she shuddered a tension-released breath, he whispered in her ear, "I love you, my lady. I love you so very much."

She continued to sigh as he ran the tip of his tongue from her collarbone down past her cleavage, causing her to arch upwards as he traveled down to her belly button. He swiftly unhooked her skirt and unzipped it. He slipped his hands underneath her bottom and dragged the skirt down and with it her nylons and knickers off of her. She could feel his breath warm on her pubic hair, and she felt her legs involuntarily open for him. She could hear his voice humming in his throat, sending slight vibrations that licked fire up and down her thighs.

Her breath was becoming shallow as he continued to hover over her body, so close to her skin yet not touching. She felt goose bumps rise all over her flesh, and she whimpered for him to touch her, kiss her... something.

She felt his hands splayed on her inner thighs. Her thighs were damp with excitement and anticipation, and the contact of his firm thighs against her soft limbs made her moan aloud. She felt pulsating heat from her nether regions, and she felt an ache in her lower belly.

She felt on fire as he traversed up her side with his tongue, blowing air on each wet strip he left. She arched again and heard his murmur of approval. She lifted her hips and ground her swollen sex against his hardened flesh, feeling her arousal coating each ridge.

She was rewarded with his lips making contact with her right nipple, causing her to moan louder. She was lifted upright, by her arms, as he gently slid her shirt and bra off her body. He wrapped an arm protectively around her waist as he nipped and tasted the salty skin of her neck and breasts. Soon, she was squirming desperately in his lap, wanting to make that perfect contact where she could slide him inside her and begin thrusting against him. His teasing nearness and yet, not allowing her fulfillment drove her senses mad.

She opened her eyes, and his were open and dark as pitch-blackness. "You are so desirable," he whispered as he kissed her chin and jawbone.

"Tell me what you want, my lady," he added quietly in his baritone voice against her ear.

"I..." she gasped. "Don't make me say it."

"Why?" he asked lovingly.

"I can't say...those words. Don't make me," she said as the familiar feeling of humiliation washed over her.

"It's all right, Hermione," Severus soothed her with his husky tremor. "You don't have to speak if you don't want to."

She began to reciprocate the passion he had shown her. She explored him with tiny kisses and nips around his nipples.

He hissed. "My little huntress has tiny sharp teeth and nails," he murmured against her ear.

"Do you like it?" she inquired. "Because there is so much more I want to do to you."

He jerked his eyes to hers and searched her face. Hermione felt naked when he looked at her that way. It seemed there was nothing she could hide or nowhere she could shield herself from his gaze. Hunger, potent hunger was there that could not be hidden in his haunting eyes.

Without answering, he crushed his lips against hers and threw them onto the bed. He ran a hand expertly along her opening and felt her arousal. His nostrils flared. She was fairly dripping. He needed to bury himself into her without hesitation.

But she was his sweet virgin. She still needed him to control his lust for now. He eased his way inside her, and Hermione closed her eyes and smiled, feeling his fullness stretching her past the burn to where it was just right. The ache in her pelvis grew needy for... something she couldn't understand, just that she needed him to empty his seed into her. She couldn't explain why; she just *craved* it.

He thrust into her over and over as she shrieked his name and begged for more. He kissed and suckled her breasts as he continued to plunge into her searing, hot depths.

"Please, come inside me," she breathed after she had convulsed again around him.

"I will," he grunted as he kissed her lips one more time.

"Hermione," he panted. "Right or wrong, I loved seeing you with her, knowing I was her father...that I had placed a part of myself into you...god*Hermione!*"

He shuddered and emptied his seed into her womb. His breath hitched as he raised himself over her. "I'm sorry. I know it's wrong... but still it feels so right. If there ever had been a woman whom I wanted create life with," he choked for only a moment before finishing his thought. "Only you, Hermione," he gasped. "Only you."

Hermione felt sated and bone-weary. She understood the sentiment. She just wished it had been in another place under different circumstances. She could forgive him that feeling. He didn't mean that he had been happy about the rape...just that he loved her and the fact Alice was theirs. She curled up on her side with Severus spooning her, caressing her hair as she slipped into slumber.

Just as she was falling asleep, she heard Severus whispering in her ear, "She is so much like you. She is perfect...such a little lady. I wanted to take you both into my arms...steal you both somewhere...where we could be a family.

"You looked so right with her, Hermione. You were beaming, and your face was shining at just being with her. You had never looked lovelier. My girls, my little women..."

Admins' Note: We report with great sadness that shortly after submitting this chapter, Livvy died suddenly (February 22, 2012). She leaves behind her husband, six-year-old daughter, and the many stories she so loved to write. Requiescat in pace, Livvy.