

The Purple Passion Potion

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Hermione gets more than she bargained for whilst helping a friend in need. Written for the 'celebrate ss/hg' community on lj to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the ship.

one-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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N.B. Contains references to abortion.

THE PURPLE PASSION POTION

'I'm pregnant.'

'Oh.' A feeble response to an emotionally charged statement, she knew, but Hermione could never really find it in her to react to such news with much enthusiasm at the best of times...her usual M.O. being to plaster on a fake smile and follow the "Oh" with a forced, "congratulations," but judging by the pained expression on Ginny's face, she was not required to make any such comment. So, "Oh," it remained.

'Is that all you can say?' Ginny asked.

Shrugging, Hermione turned off the tap as the kettle overflowed. 'What would you like me to say? You don't look terribly pleased about it.' She lit the gas the old-fashioned way, glancing over her shoulder at Ginny before placing the kettle on the hob. 'Erm... How did Harry react?'

'He doesn't know, and you're not to tell him,' Ginny snapped and then more softly added, 'No one knows.'

'Except me...' Hermione shifted uncomfortably. 'Why? Why not your mother?'

'Because I don't want it, and I'm not going to have it!'

Ah. There it was. The patented Weasley Whine. Hermione half-expected a bit of foot stamping to go with it. So reminiscent of Ron when she wasn't in the mood for sex, or hadn't made his steak and kidney pie up to his mother's standard, or... well, when anything wasn't going the way he wanted it, really. 'And you don't have to, of course, but...' Hermione paused, teaspoon midway between the caddy and the teapot, thinking of Harry. 'I thought you'd be only too happy to get married and start a family.'

'I will be. One day.' Ginny sighed. 'Look, I've had an offer from the Holyhead Harpies and... Oh, this is such *amess*.'

It certainly was, but it was Ginny's mess, not hers. 'That's great...about the Harpies, I mean, but I still think you should tell Harry...'

'No,' Ginny said emphatically. 'He'd only try and persuade me to have it, and if I didn't, well... I can't see us lasting very long after that, can you?'

Hermione had to admit that she couldn't. She also couldn't blame Ginny for wanting a career, some independence. They'd not long fought in a war, after all, had no fun-filled adolescence to speak of, and now they were being chucked headlong into adulthood with all that entailed and expected to settle down and get on with it. Still... Harry. He'd be devastated if he found out.

'Anyway, you will help me, won't you?'

'What?' So that's why Ginny had chosen to confide in her. She should have known. 'Ginny, you can get a potion to terminate a pregnancy in any apothecary. Why on earth do you need my help?'

'I can hardly just waltz into a shop and ask for an abortion potion, can I?' Ginny scoffed. 'I'm bound to be recognised. It would be all over the ~~brophet~~ by morning.'

'And what if someone recognised me?'

'But you're not pregnant,' Ginny retorted. 'It doesn't matter.'

The kettle whistled in the background as Hermione stared at her friend in disbelief. Was she really that thick? 'Since when did the truth get in the way of a good story? Besides, if news got back to Ron, what could I say to him? They got it wrong; I bought it for your sister? How do you think he'd react to that?' Things were rocky enough between them as it was. That might just be the icing on the cake.

Ginny's bottom lip trembled. Here we go: if whining doesn't work, try the put-upon-why-are-you-being-so-horrible-to-me Weasley face. Hermione had never seen said face get to the dissolve-in-floods-of-tears-stage...though it had been a close run thing that time she'd shrunk Ron's prized, signed Cannons shirt in the wash, and the ink had run...but there was a first time for everything.

'You were my last hope,' Ginny wailed, tears streaming down her face. 'What am I going to do now?'

'Oh, here, don't cry,' said Hermione, conjuring a hankie. 'Now, let's have a cup of tea, and we'll think of something.'

Hermione ushered Ginny towards the kitchen table and placed a mug of hot, sweet tea in front of her. For a while, the tinkle of the spoon as Ginny stirred her tea, plus the odd sniff, were the only sounds to break the silence in the small kitchen. It seemed her plan had involved asking for help and expecting to get it; a refusal had not been part of the equation. There was no Plan B. Eventually, with the sound of continued snuffling grating on her nerves, Hermione caved in.

'All right, I'll help.' Hermione held her hand up as Ginny opened her mouth to speak. 'But you must see you've put me in an impossible situation, here: if Harry ever finds out, it could be the end of our friendship, and the rest of your family would probably disown me as well. So, I want a wand oath from you, Ginny, should you ever feel the need to confess, to never breathe a word of my part in this, or you can forget it.'

'Yes, anything,' Ginny said, looking pathetically grateful. 'So long as you get it...'

'Oh, no,' said Hermione. 'I'm not going to get it, I'm going to brew it. And you're going help me buy or collect the ingredients.'

'What?'

'Look, it's quite simple.' She took a swig of tea. 'All but about... three of the ingredients are used in all sorts of common potions. Getting the majority of those won't arouse any suspicion if we split the list and shop around. Of the other three, two are used in several medicinal potions...I'll tell you which so you can lie if anyone asks. The last one is a specially distilled oil of mistletoe. Its only uses are in easing menstrual cramps, aiding contractions in childbirth and abortion. It would probably be best to buy that on its own at some out of the way place where no questions will be asked.'

Ginny looked like she was about to be sick.

'Okay, okay, I'll see to that part. Finished?' Hermione swept up the mugs and sent them flying to the sink. 'You know, I don't want to give you a lecture on contraception, or anything, but if you'd been more careful...'

'Yes, well, it's all very well to say that now, isn't it,' said Ginny, 'but we were carried away by heat of the moment. You know how it is.'

Hermione snorted. 'No, I'm afraid I don't.'

'Don't tell me you've never been so overwhelmed with lust that stopping to cast a spell is the last thing on your mind?' Ginny looked at her quizzically. 'No... you haven't, have you?'

'No, never. I suppose I was just born sensible.' The idea was too ridiculous.

'Thought so. Then in that case, I feel very sorry for the both of you.'

~*~

Dusk was falling when Hermione left Dippett and Doodles, her beaded bag laden with a selection of parchments, two bottles of ink (one black, one red) and a bumper pack of quills in an assortment of sizes which had been on special offer. Stepping onto the pavement, she turned up the collar of her cloak to keep the chill wind off her neck and jammed her hat down firmly so that the brim further obscured her face. The shutters were already going up in some of the smaller shops, and she knew she'd have to rush to get the one remaining item on her list before closing time.

Trust Flourish & Blotts to have a book sale She'd lost all track of time rummaging through all the bargains. Ron would be going home to an empty flat again by the looks of it despite her promises; accusations would fly, and there would likely be another row.

He'd been particularly tetchy and prone to fly off the handle ever since Ginny had announced to the Weasley clan at Sunday lunch that she was turning professional. Hermione couldn't resist rubbing it in while Harry had swung Ginny around the room in delight: 'Your little sister, eh? Who'd have thought she'd be the best Quidditch player in the family?' Ron had sulked for the rest of the day. And then there was her job, which she loved but was eating up so much of her time. Late nights, business lunches: Ron's resentment was palpable. She had yet to summon up the courage to tell him about the overseas conference she wanted to attend next month. Apart from the obvious objection to her being away from home for three nights, it also happened to overlap with their first anniversary together, and Hermione had the sneaking suspicion that Ron intended to propose. How she felt about that, she was no longer sure.

Diagon Alley was emptying...the few people still milling about were mostly heading for a post-work pint in the Leaky before going home, but there was no one around that she recognised. Luckily. Feeling self-conscious nevertheless, Hermione tucked her chin down, felt for the reassuring presence of her wand and quickly turned the corner into Knockturn Alley.

It always felt like stepping across an invisible barrier. Even now, in a Voldemort-free world, Knockturn Alley had lost none of its sinister atmosphere. It was still the den of iniquity it had always been; unlike its salubrious neighbour, the more acceptable, chocolate-boxy face of wizarding Britain, here was a vestige of an authentic mediaeval street...minus the open sewer running down the middle...with a rogues' gallery of family businesses that, with few exceptions, hadn't changed hands since the Dark Ages.

Magic at its rawest, darkest and somehow most seductive was imprinted in the air, and it was this that was making Hermione clutch her wand tighter and her heart beat faster.

There was little in the way of street lighting, just a few globes emitting a soft, yellowy glow, but enough for Hermione to make out the apothecary's sign above the entrance and that it was still open. Prince's Potions (est. 782) was squashed in between Muggins' Licensed Betting Office and a rather grubby-looking pawn shop. In spite of herself, Hermione glanced in the window of the latter only to wish she hadn't. A shrunken head winked back at her.

'It's closed, girlie.'

Hermione jumped and spun around, finding herself pressed up against the glass. 'I wasn't...I'm not interested.'

The old crone leaned in closer and cackled, peering at Hermione with her one good eye. 'Haven't seen you round 'ere before. Are you local?'

'I... No. No, I'm...'

A door opened a crack, and a hand reached out. Hermione's wand was raised in a flash.

'For Merlin's sake, Mother. Stop frightening the tourists.'

Hermione breathed again as the woman was unceremoniously dragged inside, but still rattled, she kept her back to the shop front, eyes on the alert for any more trouble as she edged towards the apothecary's door and fumbled for the handle.

And it was because her attention was focused on the street and not her footing that Hermione tripped over the step as she opened the door and went sprawling, banging her knees hard as she landed on the flagstone floor.

'Oww. Fu-uck.'

A pair of boots, partially covered by the hem of a black robe, appeared in her field of vision.

'Madam, are you injured?'

Pushing back her hat, Hermione looked up. 'Don't think...'

'Oh. It's you. To what do I owe this... dubious pleasure, Miss Granger?' Seemingly losing interest in the young woman currently on her knees before him, Severus Snape shut the door with a wave of his hand and returned to his place behind the counter. 'Do hurry up. I'm closing in five minutes.'

Hermione scrambled to her feet, trying not to wince while she gathered her wits and what was left of her dignity. 'Mr Prince not here?'

'My grandfather died five years ago,' Severus replied, scowling, 'making me the proprietor of these illustrious premises. Now, what can I do for you, Miss Granger?'

'Oh, I see... Sorry, I didn't realise...' Hermione approached the counter slowly, taking stock of her surroundings. The shop's antiquity was self-evident: the odd shape, the uneven floor, the wonky ceiling held up by oak beams, blackened by the ages. Nothing looked straight...even the shelves behind the counter. *An optical illusion, obviously*, Hermione thought, *otherwise the contents would fall over*. She scanned the shelves, expecting to find something nasty lurking there, but it was all fairly inoffensive. In fact, compared with the Potions storeroom Snape had kept at Hogwarts, the goods on display were pretty tame. Speaking of which... Hermione's eyes fell on the wizard standing, arms folded across his chest, behind the counter. Snape was watching her impassively. Waiting.

How was she going to do this? So much for finding an out of the way place where money would exchange hands without so much as a raised eyebrow. Snape could read her like a book; he'd put two and two together. But she'd come this far... She'd have to try and blag it.

'I think some bruise-healing paste wouldn't go amiss.'

Severus slowly turned around, took down a small, glass pot from the shelf and placed it on the counter. 'Will that be all?'

'Um... no.' Hermione thought fast. *Boil-cure potion*. 'Do you have any dried nettles?'

'Yes... Would a half-pound bag do you?'

'That would be fine,' Hermione replied. 'Um, and I'd better have an ounce of snake fangs and half-a-dozen horned slugs, too, if you've got fresh ones.'

'I have,' Severus said. 'You'll find them in that box over there.' He handed Hermione a small container so that she could help herself.

'Thanks.'

'Do you require any porcupine quills?' he asked, weighing out the snake fangs.

'I have some at home, thank you.'

'Then that will be four Galleons, seven and six.'

Hermione reached into her bag and paused. 'Oh... and I don't suppose you have any mistletoe oil, do you?'

Severus' eyes narrowed. 'Distilled or cold-pressed?'

'Distilled... if you've got it.' Hermione felt her colour rising as Severus' eyes dropped to her abdomen.

'Weasley's got something right at long last, has he?'

'How-how dare you,' Hermione spluttered. 'It's not...I'm not...' She raised her chin defiantly. 'If you must know, I suffer rather badly from pre-menstrual tension.'

To her astonishment, not to mention mortification, Severus let out a loud bark of laughter. 'What do you take me for, an imbecile? You venture into Knockturn Alley after dark, with your ridiculous, unmistakable hair hidden under a hat that's almost covering your eyes, and ask for a specialist oil to rid you of period pains...when there are at least six proprietary brands that could do the job equally well, and which would not require all this... cloak and dagger nonsense to obtain...and expect me not to smell a rat?' Placing his hands on the counter, Severus leaned towards her menacingly. 'I was not born yesterday, Miss Granger.'

Rather than back away, as he no doubt expected, Hermione took a deliberate step forward. 'Do you have any, or not?'

A look of surprise passed over Severus' features, but he recovered quickly. 'As a matter of fact, I do,' he said, drawing himself up to his full height, 'but unfortunately for you, a recent Ministerial decree has made distilled mistletoe oil a controlled substance. I am therefore only allowed to sell it on to licensed potioners. And you, to my knowledge, did not get past N.E.W.T. level.'

'What?' *Bugger*. 'Why would they do that?'

'Because an overdose can cause severe haemorrhaging,' Severus replied with a long-suffering sigh. 'And young women, who perhaps are not thinking at their clearest, have been known to make mistakes in their measuring and bleed to death. Does that answer your question, Miss Granger?'

Hermione's shoulders slumped in defeat. 'I see...' Oh, well, may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb; he obviously *knew*, anyway. 'In that case, *Mr* Snape, do you happen to have a potion that would terminate a pregnancy?'

'I'm afraid I sold my last one this afternoon.' His lip curled into a sneer. 'It rather looks like Miss Weasley is out of luck, doesn't it.'

'How did you...?'

'Lucky guess. If it's not for you, then who else would you go through this charade for?' His self-congratulatory smirk made Hermione want to hex him. 'I'm also guessing Mr Potter is completely unaware of the situation. But you needn't worry yourself, Miss Granger,' he said, tapping the side of his nose with his forefinger. 'I am the soul of discretion.'

She was definitely going to hex the git. 'You're enjoying this, aren't you?'

'Enormously,' Severus admitted. 'However..., I am not entirely without sympathy for Miss Weasley's predicament, and should you happen upon an apothecary with less scruples than I and obtain the oil illegally, which I have no doubt is well within your capabilities, I would not like my conscience troubled in the event that a botched potion causes her demise. So, I have a proposition for you.'

'What do you want me to do?' Hermione had a sinking feeling that she was about to be manoeuvred into agreeing to do something unpalatable, but she could at least hear him out.

'For a fee,' Severus replied, 'I am prepared to let you brew the potion here. Now. Under my supervision, using my ingredients.'

That seemed reasonable, but now? Hermione looked at her watch. 'I'm sorry, but I can't. I'm really running late. Could I come back tomorrow?'

'Now or never, Miss Granger.'

Images of angry Weasleys flashed through her mind. This was the last time, the very last time she was going to be sucked into anything like this. They could all sort their own mess out in future. 'Oh, very well,' said Hermione. 'I agree... Unless you have some Polyjuice in stock?'

'Afraid not.' Severus drew his wand and cast a series of spells to ward the door and pull down the blinds. The sign in the window flipped to the 'Closed' position. 'Please come this way.'

Hermione followed Severus as he disappeared through a curtain behind the counter. 'You owe me for this, Ginny,' she muttered. 'Big time.'

~ * ~

The potion was coming on nicely, just the colour and consistency it was supposed to be after adding the Doxy spit: yellow, like custard. Hermione had almost forgotten how contemplative potion brewing could be...and how tiring it was on the arm muscles. She'd been stirring for what felt like hours with Snape's critical eye on her every step of the way, from the cutting and grinding of the ingredients to the sequence in which they were added to the cauldron, but he'd made little comment nor offered any help. Hermione took this as tacit approval of her proficiency and felt ridiculously proud. Why, after all this time, it still mattered what he thought of her was a mystery. Was she that conditioned to please? Was that insecure little Muggle-born, even now, lurking inside, desperate to prove her worth? Was she really that sad?

'Time to add the mistletoe.' His voice, inches from her ear, made Hermione jump. She reached for the pipette.

'Careful or you'll ruin it. Precisely three drops, now. No more, no less.'

She swallowed, willing her hand steady, and squeezed the rubber bulb gently.

'Satisfactory,' Severus said as the potion started frothing. 'Ten more stirs anticlockwise should do it.'

Frothing turned to a rolling boil as the mistletoe reacted with the mixture in the cauldron, sending up a cloud of steam. *There goes the hair*, Hermione thought as sweaty tendrils attached themselves to her face and neck, but as Snape had said, on the tenth stir, the potion stabilised, gave one last puff and turned pearly white.

'This looks just like...'

'That is the correct milky colour and texture,' Severus said hurriedly, extinguishing the flame under the cauldron. 'You may stop, now. I will attend to the cooling process.'

Wiping her face with her sleeve, Hermione gratefully stepped away from the heat. By the time she'd smartened herself up with some freshening charms and sorted out her unruly hair, Severus had brought a wooden rack full of standard-sized potion bottles, a funnel and a ladle to the workbench.

'Would you like me to bottle up for you?' asked Hermione.

'That will not be necessary,' Severus replied, picking up the ladle. He placed the funnel in the first bottle and scooped up a measured dose of the potion. 'You may have this one as agreed; the rest will go into my stockroom.'

If Hermione had had a tail, she'd have wagged it. She was grinning like an idiot, she knew, but didn't care. Gone were all thoughts of hexing him: Snape considered her potion good enough to sell in his shop! 'Thank you,' she said, taking the offered bottle, adding mentally, *I'm honoured*. It felt warm in her hand. 'You know, I haven't been anywhere near a cauldron in over a year... I'm glad I haven't lost the knack.' She held the bottle up to the light between thumb and forefinger to better examine its quality. 'Looks innocuous, doesn't it?'

'The moral implications bothering you?' he asked, filling yet another bottle.

'No, not... really,' Hermione sighed. 'I only brewed it. Ginny's the one who has to decide whether to take it or not...it's not like I'm going to force it down her throat, or anything. But it's just... I can't help feeling sorry for Harry. All he's ever wanted in his whole life is a family.'

Severus snorted, not looking up, his lank hair curtaining his face. 'I'm sure he'll make up for lost time. Eventually.'

Hermione decided to let that one go and silently watched Severus carry on ladling: methodically, precisely, never spilling a drop. It was really quite hypnotic...

'As a matter of interest, how many of these do you sell a month?' she asked.

'Four. On average.'

'And do you ever... I mean...' She blushed. 'Sorry, none of my business.'

Severus twisted a cork stopper into the last bottle and deftly sealed it with waxed paper. 'Do I ever ... feel any degree of guilt? Do I ever feel caught between the horns of a moral dilemma?' The bottle rattled as it rejoined its companions in the rack. 'The answer, Miss Granger, is no. As you yourself said, I am merely the brewer. And with my past history, I am hardly the person best qualified to judge the morality of others...I leave the navel-gazing to my customers and their own consciences. So, no. I merely

provide a service for those in need of it. Nothing more, nothing less.'

'Sure.' Embarrassed, Hermione fiddled with the cuffs of her robe and glanced at her watch. 'Gods, look at the time; I really must be going. Now, where did I put my bag...'

'On the chair.'

'Thanks... So... How much do I owe you for the potion?' she asked, opening her purse.

'I don't want your money, Miss Granger.' Severus examined his fingernails as Hermione gave him a searching look. 'By way of recompense, I only require... a few hours of your time to assist me in brewing a potion of my own.'

'What?' Why-oh-why hadn't she listened to her instincts, made him state his terms more clearly? 'Wh-what sort of potion? What do you need me for?'

'Nothing Dark, or illegal, if that's what you're worried about,' Severus assured her. 'But in order for this particular potion to be a hundred percent effective, the brewer needs to be the same sex as the client, in this case a witch, and you are adequate for the task.' He hesitated, but when Hermione didn't question him further, he continued. 'I have been commissioned to re-create a True Love potion, more fashionably called these days, a Soul Mate potion, which has been rescued in part from an ancient, Atlantean text... Am I boring you, Miss Granger?'

'No... no, of course not.' It had all been a bit of a blur after "You are adequate for the task." 'Would Saturday afternoon be okay?'

'Be here promptly at two o'clock,' Severus replied. 'I shall close early. You may Apparate in. And do wear something light and cool; you'll be stirring for well over an hour.'

Gathering her cloak, Hermione nodded curtly. 'Fine. I should be able to manage that easily enough. Now, I really must be going. May I Disapparate from here?'

'Haven't you forgotten something?'

Hermione smiled sheepishly and pocketed the bottle. 'See you Saturday, then.'

'Wait. Don't let Miss Weasley take the potion on her own. If the bleeding doesn't stop within the hour, get her to St Mungos.' Severus dipped his head, obscuring his features as he rested his hands on the workbench. 'Arthur and Molly have already lost a son; I would hate them to lose their only daughter.'

'I give you my word,' Hermione said to his back. 'Goodbye, Mr Snape, and thank you again.'

With no response forthcoming, other than a dismissive wave, Hermione closed her eyes, determined her destination and prepared to Apparate home.

I'm so late. Ron is going to kill me.

~ * ~

Glass of wine in hand, Hermione eased herself onto the sofa, wriggling into the small space available between the arm and a snoozing Crookshanks. 'Looks like it's just you and me now, old thing,' she said, giving him a scratch behind the ear. The half-Kneazle shifted to allow his mistress better access, rewarding her with a contented purr as she continued petting him. 'And I can't say I'm sorry.'

'Ron? Hermione? Anybody there?'

'Come through, Ginny, if you like,' Hermione replied to the voice echoing around the fireplace, though she was in no mood for company. 'Ron's not here.'

'I'll Apparate, if you don't mind,' said Ginny. 'I don't want to get soot on my new robe.'

'No problem.'

A few seconds later, and an anxious Ginny was standing on the hearthrug. 'Where's Ron?' she asked before whispering, 'Did you get it?'

'No need to whisper.' Hermione shrugged. 'He's at the Burrow, probably; he didn't say. He just... left.' She took a sip of wine, rolling it around on her tongue before swallowing. 'I only mentioned the conference in passing...didn't even say I wanted to attend...he accused me of only ever thinking of myself, and then he just... left.'

'Oh, don't worry,' Ginny said, plonking herself down in the nearest armchair. 'He'll be back once he's cooled off a bit. He always used to do that when we were kids: he'd get mad and storm off in a huff. Never liked confrontation, my brother.'

'I'm not worried, Gin,' said Hermione. 'I'm tired of his tantrums to be honest...all we ever seem to do is argue over the most stupid things... Oh, sorry. Do you want a drink?'

'No thanks,' Ginny replied. 'I'd better not. Alcohol makes me feel queasy at the moment.'

'Okay.'

'He does love you, you know,' Ginny pressed on. 'I... overheard him talking to Harry the other day...he was asking his advice on engagement rings...'

Hermione groaned. 'I thought as much. Well, if you see him, tell him to save his money. I'm not interested.'

'You can't mean that!'

'I've never been so sure of anything in my life.' She smiled at Crookshanks, who'd put a sympathetic paw on her knee, and gave him a quick tickle under the chin. 'How can I even think of marrying someone who just walks out whenever there's some minor obstacle to overcome? If we can fall out over something so trivial, what hope is there for us?'

Ginny stared at her hands. 'Don't make me pick sides, Hermione.'

'Sorry, didn't mean to unload on you.' She drained her glass and Summoned the bottle from the kitchen. 'It's been a stressful day...oh, the shopping trip was a success, by the way.'

'Oh, thank Merlin for that. Shall I go and get my ingredients?'

'No need.' Hermione quickly brought her up to speed on the afternoon's events, leaving out the bit about Snape's fee. 'You'll find the bottle in my cloak pocket.'

Hermione poured herself another glass while Ginny went in search of her potion. At least now she wouldn't have to make excuses for her absence on Saturday afternoon, and in all honesty, she was really looking forward to helping Snape with his experiment. It would be challenging, no doubt about that. Maybe he'd let her have some for helping...?

'Hermione...'

She turned around to see an ashen-faced Ginny standing in the doorway, clutching an empty bottle.

'I don't feel very well.'

~ * ~

It was definitely not the weather for a thin, short-sleeved, muslin robe. The temperature had dropped several degrees in the space of twenty-four hours, making Hermione extremely grateful that Snape had given her permission to Apparate directly into his laboratory and that she wouldn't have to brave the bitterly cold, late Autumn wind dressed in something so flimsy. She still took the precaution of casting a warming charm before securing her hair in a loose ponytail and putting on her cloak, though; cutting and preparing ingredients wasn't going to bring her out in a sweat, after all.

With Ron out of the picture, the only male Hermione had to worry about feeding was Crookshanks, and he would be absolutely fine with some tuna and biscuits. She double-checked that his water bowl was full, grabbed her bag and Disapparated.

Snape didn't so much as flinch when Hermione appeared a few feet away from him at the appointed time.

'You are one minute late,' he said without looking up.

'Sorry, my watch must be slow.' Hermione smiled tightly as she took off her cloak and hung it up behind the door. 'Oh, you've started without me.'

'The preparation does not require your presence,' Severus said, pounding something red in the mortar and pestle. About half the workbench was covered in small dishes filled with brightly coloured ingredients. 'And as you can see, I have almost finished. But you may chop the hellebore roots now that you're here. With this...' He passed her a silver knife, handle first. 'I take it Miss Weasley is still with us?'

'Hmm?' Hermione's eyes scanned the table. She'd never known a potion with such a wide variety of components. This was going to take a lot of stirring. 'Oh, yes, she's fine. Very relieved it's all over...' That was one hour of her life she didn't want repeated. 'If you don't mind me saying so, you've got an awful lot of crushed minerals, here.'

Severus stopped pounding. 'Indeed. It would appear that each stage of the brewing process is stabilised by a semi-precious gem or mineral. Colour seems to be significant, which is why the ingredients are so arranged.' A handful more of the red stuff...some sort of beetle, Hermione noted...went into the mortar. 'The quantity required, fortunately, survives in the text.'

'It's like a rainbow,' Hermione murmured. 'Must be costing your client a fortune, though. What if the experiment's a failure? Will we try again?'

He snorted. 'Money is not a problem for my client...other than establishing whether or not her current ~~admirer~~ is more interested in it than her.'

'But the potion...' Hermione frowned, puzzled. 'That doesn't make sense. Even if it works, it won't tell her that, just that her current love interest is or isn't ~~the one~~. It's not going to tell her if he's after her money.'

'Quite.' The corner of his mouth quirked ever so slightly. 'But I was not about to tell her that.'

Was that a stab at humour? Surely not? Probably best to ignore it. 'I suppose we'd better get on with it, then.'

The hellebore roots were easy to spot, and soon Hermione was cutting them finely to Severus' exact specifications. She worked quickly, effortlessly falling into the rhythm of chopping and slicing as if it were something she did it every day for a living. Severus supervised for a while, but once he'd finished crushing the red beetles into a paste, he busied himself with fetching and preparing the cauldron: large, pewter with a copper bottom, it looked heavy, but he managed to lift it onto the workbench without any spellwork nor without so much as a grunt of exertion. Satisfied that everything was now in order, Severus lit the flame and declared they were ready to begin.

'The base will be formed by the red components,' he said, shuffling the appropriate dishes closer to the cauldron. 'I shall add while you stir.'

'Okay... Wood or glass?' Hermione nodded towards the stirring rods laid out with military precision on an adjacent bench.

'Wood.'

Hermione chose a sturdy looking piece of birch and approached the cauldron. 'So... you didn't really say why the brewer needs to be the same gender as the client.'

'Do you intend pestering me with your interminable questions all afternoon?' Severus grumbled. 'Or can we get on?'

'I only asked,' Hermione replied with a huff. 'I'm just interested, that's all.'

'Oh, very well.' Picking up the first dish, Severus emptied its contents into the cauldron. 'From what I can understand, there must be a degree of empathy if the person in need of the potion does not have the skill to brew it,' Severus began. 'The notes to the recipe stipulate that this potion, if brewed by a man for a woman to use, cannot be guaranteed to be totally effective, and the opposite is also true when the genders are reversed. And as you have already ascertained, this is an expensive experiment. There is no point in taking the risk; there are enough variables already. Now, unless you wish to waste any more precious time, I suggest we proceed...'

~ * ~

Twenty minutes and a lot of stirring (five clockwise, five anticlockwise, pause, repeat) later, the base had yet to coalesce. Most of the red ingredients had been added, yet Hermione found herself gazing into a cauldron with an inch or two of black slime at the bottom. Wisely, she bit back her opinion on the matter...Snape was pre-occupied checking his copious notes, but had yet to comment on why things weren't going as expected. She didn't think he'd appreciate her stating the obvious: it wasn't red, and despite what Snape had said about the minerals, it didn't seem very likely that a few ounces of jasper would make a great deal of difference.

'Let us see what happens,' Severus said at last. 'Keep stirring while I sprinkle it in.'

'Okay...'

The moment the first few grains landed on top of the black substance, the colour started to change. Hermione could hardly contain her surprise. 'It's working.'

'Indeed.' He sounded relieved. 'It would appear, Miss Granger, that we have a base.'

'Yes, it's...shit.' Hermione swore as a puff of smoke billowed up and hit her square in the face. 'Was it supposed to do that?'

'There is nothing in the notes, therefore I doubt it's anything to worry about.' Severus peered into the cauldron. 'Did you inhale any of it?'

'Not... much...' Oh, but what was that? There was this odd tingling sensation travelling down her spine, not unpleasant, but... Ooh, where was it heading? Oh, gods, not *there*... 'I'm... all right.'

'If you are ready to continue, I will begin adding the orange components.' He was looking at her with a mildly curious expression. Did he know something she didn't? The tingling had turned to a slow pulse: strange, warm, itchy, but due to its rather embarrassing location, scratching it in public was out of the question.

'Yes, ah, go ahead.' Hermione shifted her weight and surreptitiously squeezed her thighs together. It didn't help.

Not appearing to notice her discomfort, Severus gathered the orange ingredients together and added them in quick succession. Hermione recognised some of them: flower petals (marigolds?), pumpkin or some kind of squash, calcite and several feathers (species unknown). The potion, she noticed, remained stubbornly red. The pulsing sensation remained stubbornly... pulsing. *Concentrate on the stirring, Hermione.*

'What's the orange catalyst?' she asked in an attempt to distract herself.

'Carnelian,' Severus replied, selecting the appropriate dish. 'It may be wise for you to turn your head while I add it...in case it causes a similar reaction as the jasper.'

Hermione was only too happy to follow his instructions, leaning as far away as she could while keeping up the stirring. This time, as the carnelian interacted with the base, the potion gave a gentle pop, and a fine dust floated into the air, some of which inevitably made contact with Hermione's hands and lower arms. She inhaled sharply though her teeth, but her stirring didn't miss a beat.

'Are you burnt? Let me see?'

Before she had a chance to protest, Severus had wrung out a cloth and was wiping the residue from her skin. She wanted to say it wasn't hot, that she was fine and there was no need for him to fuss, but it was all she could do not to gasp at the prickly shiver that was running down her spine. This couldn't be a coincidence; it had to be the potion. She should say something, report on the effect it was having, but a second pulse had joined the first, just below the navel. How could she tell Snape that she was becoming strangely, infuriatingly, aroused? She nodded her thanks and prayed he wouldn't ask any awkward questions.

'Your skin is not even red... Hm. Most strange...' Rubbing his chin, Severus consulted his translation of the original text, but found nothing worth remarking upon. 'I think it safe to proceed, but with added precautions.'

Hermione remained silent as Severus collected the yellow ingredients. *Concentrate... hope that's not sulphur...it'll stink the place out...no, turmeric, perhaps? Egg yolk, lemon rind, amber...* The list went on, and Hermione kept on stirring. It was hot work, and it was going to get hotter...and harder...as the cauldron filled up. The pulsing was showing no sign of abating...if fact, it was alternating between the two points every few seconds...and she had to bite her lip to keep from squeaking at the sensation.

'Topaz,' said Severus, which was just as well as Hermione didn't think she could manage a coherent sentence at the moment to ask. But as she lifted her head to observe the addition of the next catalyst, Hermione was surprised to see that not only was he holding the essential mineral in his left hand, poised ready to tip it into the cauldron, but that he was gripping his wand in the right and had taken up a defensive stance...a gesture Hermione found rather touching. Would he really *Evanesco* the potion to protect her, ending the experiment and wasting all those expensive ingredients, if it proved to be a threat to her wellbeing?

'Ready,' said Hermione. *Good. That didn't sound too breathless.* She recoiled instinctively as the topaz went in, but Severus stood fast, ready to defend them both.

A cloud of yellow vapour erupted from the cauldron, big enough to engulf the two of them. Severus merely coughed and waved it away with his hand, but for Hermione it was like a punch in the gut or, more specifically, a punch in the solar plexus, and this time, it was impossible for her to hold back a groan.

Severus reacted immediately by casting a stasis charm on the cauldron. 'Enough,' he said. 'Something is causing you distress, and you will tell me what it is. Now.'

'I wasn't sure... before,' Hermione panted, clutching her stomach, 'but now, it's obvious. This potion... I think it's having some kind of effect on my... chakras.'

'Your... chakras.' A disbelieving eyebrow almost touched his hairline. 'Explain.'

'They are vortices of energy...'

'Yes, yes,' Severus interrupted. 'Explain the effect.'

'Every time you added a catalyst, there was a... pulsing sensation,' Hermione said, clenching and opening her fist. 'Like this. Along my spine, and... er.' There was no way she was telling him about the Salsa going on down below or the fact that her knickers were now soaking wet.

Severus turned his back on her in order to consult his notes. 'I'm listening. Pray continue.'

'The latest one is the strongest,' Hermione felt safe to add. Clenching her buttocks, she followed him to where he'd laid out his papers. 'Though it's abated somewhat. The other two pulsed strongly when the third activated, but...are you sure there's nothing about this in the text?'

'Nothing in the translation,' Severus replied, 'but let me check my copy of the original. There's a small fragment which I discounted as it made little sense. Ah, here it is. You may examine it yourself.' The translation spell dutifully rearranged the ancient glyphs into English as he touched his wand to the parchment.

'Something... "wheels of colour"... something... "potion... must peak"?' Hermione read at his elbow. 'That must be it.'

'It is a distinct possibility, yes,' Severus agreed. 'But the outcome for you is unclear. If you are concerned for your safety and wish to terminate the experiment, I will quite understand.'

She shook her head. Who knew how long she'd be stuck like this if she stopped, now? 'No, I... If it's all the same to you, I'd like to carry on.'

'Very well,' said Severus. 'But if it should cause you pain, at any point, then we stop. Immediately.'

~ * ~

The yellow stage was tougher than the others that had gone before, taking all of Hermione's energy to keep the stirring going smoothly. She'd lost count of the green ingredients and was past caring. Her skin was glistening with sweat in the heat and steam rising off the potion, her hair frizzing alarmingly. The prospect of a long, hot soak in a bath full of scented water when she got home had never seemed so appealing. But that was still a long way off; they had only just about reached the half-way point in the process.

After what seemed like an age later, Severus announced that he was ready to add the green catalyst; Hermione took this as a warning to brace herself, barely registering the word "malachite" before wisps of green smoke began rising from the cauldron. She closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable.

A warm, achy tingling started up in Hermione's chest: familiar, yet foreign, similar to the first stirrings of love and longing she had experienced as a teenager, only stronger. Smiling, she sighed in delight as this new addition to the dance imposed order on the other three pulses. Though no less intense, together they were less chaotic, more rhythmic, purposeful. Mmm... this is bliss...

Hermione's eyes flew open as a cough to her right reminded her that she was not alone. Had she been moaning aloud? Had she said something inappropriate? Snape was staring at her, his normally sallow cheeks looking distinctly on the pink side.

'I-um...'

'Let us press on.' He looked away, hurriedly assembling the dishes containing the blue ingredients.

Good God. She'd managed to embarrass Snape. 'The, uh, potion has thickened up quite a bit,' Hermione said, gazing into the green depths of the cauldron. It was just as well she was hot, otherwise she'd be red as a beetroot from embarrassment herself.

'That is to be expected at this stage,' said Severus, adding some mashed forget-me-nots to the mix. 'But we are progressing faster than I thought.'

Hermione dabbed the back of her hand against her brow, realising that stirring one-handed would soon be beyond her capability. 'Glad to hear it. Gods, this is hard work.'

'Stop complaining. I shall be as quick as I can.'

The blue ingredients were mineral rich...apart from the flowers, a handful of mermaid scales and some crushed dragon eggshell...and Hermione began to wonder who had been desperate enough to commission such a costly experiment. Blue lace agate, tourmaline, aquamarine, lapis lazuli were all heaped into the cauldron. She needed both hands now to move the heavy mass the potion had become. With her forehead dripping, she vainly tried wiping her face on her sleeve, but it was useless, the muslin dress being already damp with sweat.

'Turquoise,' said Severus, adding the last of the blue minerals.

Blue fumes snaked towards Hermione's nostrils, hot and metallic, teasing and tickling her senses, making her feel light headed. Along with the heat came the expected pulse, manifesting at the base of Hermione's throat and rapidly harmonising with the other four. 'Oh, this is just too... hot.'

'Allow me.'

A cold cloth was pressed to her forehead, cheeks and throat, gentle fingers lifting her hair out of the way so that it might be better applied to the back of her neck. The pulsing increased, sending a cascade of shivers down her spine: 'Th-that's much better, thank you.'

'You were about to drip sweat into the cauldron,' Severus said gruffly. 'All our efforts would have been for naught.'

'Can't help it, sorry,' said Hermione. 'But, um, thanks, anyway.'

Severus said nothing as he went about his work, separating the indigo components for the penultimate stage from the dwindling collection of dishes on the table. Unlike the previous times that silence had fallen between them, Hermione could not help but notice there was a certain awkward tension to this one. 'The next chakra is the third eye,' she said lightly. 'Some Muggles believe that when it opens, dreams and reality become as one...that it's impossible to tell the difference.'

'Really,' Severus said, tipping in the first ingredient. 'Then it is fortunate that you are a witch and not prone to such flights of fancy.'

Hermione laughed. 'I hope that's the case. If I imagine I'm doing anything other than stirring a potion in your workroom, you'll be the first to know...oh, is that *Lactarius indigo*?'

'Yes, it is,' said Severus, scattering the blue cap mushroom over the bubbling surface of the potion. 'Well observed. This is a rare, European, magical variety, however, whose milk, unlike its non-magical cousin, remains indigo on exposure to air.'

Had she just managed to impress him? The pulsing sped up again at the thought. How peculiar... Why would that be...? As an experiment, Hermione thought about the other instances when Snape had made her feel pleased with herself these past few days, all with the same result. *Stop that. Stop it now!*

'Miss Granger?

'Hmm...? Sorry, did you say something?'

'I am ready to introduce the catalyst,' Severus repeated icily. 'I would appreciate it if you would pay attention to the task in hand and do your daydreaming on your own time. Now, concentrate while I add the sodalite.'

Suitably chastened, Hermione took a deep breath. Despite making light of it earlier, she was nervous about the effect the potion would have on her third eye, but as it turned out, she needn't have been so concerned. Apart from the indigo smoke and the sixth pulse taking up residence in the centre of her forehead, nothing happened. No visions, no insights, no nothing. How disappointing.

'Still here, or are you floating on a cloud somewhere?'

Hermione scowled at him. 'Huh. No such luck.' Actually, it would be bloody fantastic to be floating around somewhere cool and breezy right now, rather than having to continuously stir something smelling of fuck knows what with the consistency of quick-drying cement. She could only thank the gods that it would soon be over.

As soon as the first of the violet components entered the cauldron, however, Hermione noticed an unusual effect: the stirring rod had begun moving with much less effort on her part through the gunky liquid.

'The potion is thinning,' she told Severus, once she was sure. 'Look.'

'So it would seem... Hmm...' Severus tapped his forefinger against his lip as he regarded the potential problem. 'However, it still appears to be stable, and there are only half-a-dozen more ingredients to go before the final catalyst. I believe it will hold.'

Even though Hermione would have normally trusted Severus' judgement implicitly, this time, she had her doubts. *Lavender, African violets, purple sea snails, purple starfish, lepidolite, Purple Emperor butterfly wings...* she counted each addition with bated breath. The potion became thinner and thinner. Was it still viable? Would all their hard work be in vain?

Snape was standing at her shoulder with the last catalyst. 'The moment of truth, Miss Granger,' he said softly. 'Ready?'

'As I'll ever be.'

The finely ground amethyst slid off the dish and into the cauldron. With Severus standing at her side, Hermione blended in the crystal material and waited for some sort of reaction.

'Nothing's happening,' she said, after some minutes had passed. 'Is that it?'

'I do not believe so. Ah, no. Observe.'

Warily, they looked on as a bubble ominously broke through the surface of the simmering liquid and grew and grew until it almost reached the lip of the cauldron. Hermione tensed. 'I don't like the look of...' Like a gigantic boil, the bubble erupted with an almighty *crack*, sending jets of sparks high into the air and showering them both with tiny, golden stars. '...that.'

Hermione heard Severus swear under his breath at about the same time the dull throb began in the top of her head. Instinctively, she went to rub it, only to find she couldn't.

'I can't let go. I can't take my hands off.'

Panicked, Hermione struggled to tear her hands away, but they were well and truly stuck. It seemed like the birch stick had taken on a life of its own, decided to take over the brewing process and drag her along for the ride. Hermione had no choice but to hang on for dear life.

'Don't just stand there. Do something!'

Hermione glared at Severus, but he was staring, transfixed, at his hands. She tried to arrest the rod's manic course by brute force, only to very nearly succeed in dislocating her shoulder in the attempt.

'Snape, help me!' she screamed in his ear. 'I can't stop it.' That shook him out of his trance. He peered into the whirlpool swirling around in the cauldron and then at

Hermione.

His nostrils flared. 'The potion... must peak...' Without another word, he walked over to his notes.

'Snake! Ohh...' *Now what.* An icy current was trickling down her back, igniting each chakra in its path as it went. Reaching the base of her spine, it ricocheted back up to her crown before commencing the cycle again. She bit back the moan before it had a chance to escape.

'Doesn't make...' Severus turned his head in Hermione's direction and frowned. 'You're lit up like a Christmas tree.'

She followed his gaze, and indeed there were discs of colour swirling at regular intervals down her body, glowing through her sweat soaked-robe. Another surge of energy, intensifying the throbbing, almost took her breath away. 'Oh, *Gods.*'

'Wheels of colour...' Severus muttered, flicking through the parchments. 'Potion... No, not potion. It's...*potioneer.*' He tried the translation spell again and froze. 'The *potioneer* must... climax.'

'Wha...? No. Not in a million years...'

'I swear to you, I didn't know.' Severus held out his palms in a conciliatory gesture as he moved across the room to stand beside her once more. Black eyes bored into hers, the intensity of desire she saw there unmistakable. He inhaled deeply. 'You smell of citrus with the underlying scent of something... heady, something essentially... female. You are aroused, Miss Granger, and have been for some time. Do not try to deny it.'

'I-I...' He was much too close, yet she felt no repulsion. In fact, the hairs on the back of her neck were prickling with anticipation. 'You've been... affected by... the potion,' she ground out. 'L-like me.'

'Perhaps.'

Hermione shivered as his breath ghosted on her skin. This wasn't happening...couldn't be happening. But there was no denying her body had no objections to the idea.

'I am not prepared to let the potion fail at this late stage for want of one, simple, ingredient,' Severus whispered. 'You agreed to brew it for me and, seeing as your hands are otherwise... occupied, it would appear you require my... help to complete it.'

The quarter-inch gap between them was an eternity of space, yet Hermione answered by leaning back against his hard, lean frame to bridge it, despite all rational thought that she really, *really*, shouldn't be doing this.

Severus, however, made no move to touch her. 'Do you want my... help, Miss Granger?'

'Yes, God help me, yes.'

Strong arms encircled her waist, drawing her closer, but this wasn't the time for tenderness. The potion was demanding completion, the top of her head felt like it was going to explode and the throbbing that had begun deep in the core of her being was now becoming concentrated in one very specific place.

Neither seeming to care for her plight, nor having anything like the same sense of urgency, Severus dragged his left hand up slowly to cup her breast in his palm. 'This robe has been clinging most delightfully to your curves for some time,' he murmured, 'and has become so transparent, it leaves very little to the imagination.' Hermione drew in a sharp breath as his tongue darted out and licked the juncture of her shoulder and neck. 'May I remove it for ease of... access?'

'Yes, all right. Just hurry up and get on with it.'

Chuckling softly, Severus unbuttoned her robe to the waist, then reached for the silver knife Hermione had been using earlier. Two deft cuts slit the tops of the sleeves, allowing the garment to fall to the floor. His hands were quickly on her breasts again, squeezing a bit too hard for comfort. Hermione squealed in surprise and tried to wriggle away, but he held fast.

'Are you sure you want me to stop?'

'N-no. Everything's just so... intense, that's all.'

His nimble fingers insinuated their way under the front of her bra; rough thumbs began teasing her already erect nipples. 'Better?'

'Hmm... Why have you stopped?'

'It would be more comfortable if we dispensed with this, also,' Severus said, running a finger under one of the straps. The knife sliced through it easily; its companion quickly suffered the same fate. Unhooked and discarded, the bra joined Hermione's robe on the floor.

'So you know,' said Severus, taking up his former position, 'I would very much like to take my time with you...' He pressed his lips to her shoulder... 'However, your needs are greater.' He trailed one hand down her body, eased it inside her knickers and groaned at the wetness he found there.

As soon as his fingers touched her clit, the throbbing became even more insistent. She forgot about her arms, aching from the stirring, and how uncomfortably sweaty she was. Her head lolled on his shoulder, her body sagging against him, as the blood pounded in her ears, pleasure coursing through her, forgetting it was Snape who was making all the right motions with just the right amount of pressure in that most sensitive of places. 'Dontstopdontstop.'

'Just let go... Hermione.'

'Yess. Oh, yes.'

White light flooded her vision as her body went into spasms, sending wave after wave of energy down her arms and out of her hands to meld with the potion. Having had the final component torn out of her, Hermione was set free at last.

She collapsed against Severus, knees buckling from exhaustion, but he kept her upright, gently manoeuvring her to an uncluttered part of the workbench where she fell forward, letting her forehead rest on folded arms while she got her breath back and tried to get her head around the fact that there was still a throbbing between her legs that had nothing to do with the potion. Apart from tweaking her nipples, Snape had done the bare minimum to get her off; he hadn't even tried to stick his fingers in her...even though, when she thought about it, she wouldn't have put up a struggle if he had. He was moving about the room, now, tidying up, extinguishing the flame and letting in some much needed fresh air, but she couldn't bring herself to look at him. There was something she had to say first while she still had the courage.

'What about you?' His footsteps halted abruptly.

'I beg your pardon?'

'You were hard. I felt it.' There. Definitely a sharp intake of breath. The clicking of boots on flagstones echoed loudly in the stretching silence.

'Just what are you suggesting, so that we're clear.'

Hermione sighed. He would make her spell it out, wouldn't he? 'I'm lying over your desk, in rather a compromising position, virtually naked after having had the best orgasm

of my life...I'm suggesting that you might like to take advantage of it.'

'You want me to fuck you?'

'Yes.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'Well... In that case...' In one swift movement, he yanked her knickers down to her knees and let them fall to her ankles. 'Step out of your knickers and spread your legs wide for me.'

Hermione heard the rustle of clothing being cast aside in a hurry, and then those calloused fingers were on her bum, lifting and kneading the cheeks, pulling them apart. And still she kept her eyes screwed shut, fearing that glimpsing any part of a naked Snape would somehow break the spell.

'You are a feast for the senses,' Severus said at last. 'Utterly intoxicating.' He dipped one long finger into her wetness, making her gasp, and slowly extracted it. She heard him sigh. 'Delicious.'

'Please...'

His lips on her tailbone, followed by a trail of kisses up her spine had Hermione quivering expectantly. She could feel the warm skin of his belly on her back, his hair tickling her shoulders as he nibbled that spot on her neck again. 'Very well. Seeing as you ask so nicely.'

Severus pulled away suddenly, grabbed her hips and dragged her towards him. Finding herself on tip-toe with the crown of his cock probing her entrance, Hermione sucked in her breath and didn't let it out again until she had been slowly and exquisitely filled to the hilt.

Snape made surprisingly little sound as he started to fuck her, apart from the odd grunt, but he was breathing heavily through his teeth, she was sure of it...and his fingers were digging into her flesh so hard, she'd surely be in need of that bruise-healing paste by morning.

Oh, but exhaustion was really setting in now; her calves were starting to go numb from the position he'd put her in, and then *Oh, fuck*, he pressed the pad of his thumb against her anus, angled his thrusting downwards, hitting that almost-impossible-to-find spot... and she was gone. Her hand flew to her clit.

'Can't last... much...longer.'

'Harder... coming...'

Fair play, this was a man who could take instructions, Hermione would remember later, but for now, she was too busy clawing at the desk with her one available hand, heading for second-best orgasm of her life. That wicked thumb pushed in all the way as the convulsions ripped through her, leaving her limp and totally spent. Breathing hard, she was only vaguely aware of Severus uttering some garbled profanity before he gave in to his own little death and spilled inside her.

Hermione expected Severus to collapse on top of her, but he did not. He withdrew slowly, first his cock and then his thumb, before carefully pressing the length of his body along her back. Hermione felt his still ragged breathing, hot against her neck. She wasn't sure if she should say something...but what the hell could she say in these circumstances? Snape's tongue was licking the shell of her ear, sucking the lobe between his teeth. Did he want to go again, already?

'You should never grant such liberties to one such as me, Miss Granger,' he breathed. 'Come back for more, and I promise it'll be my cock in your arse next time, not my thumb.'

Leaving Hermione with that thought to mull over, Severus stood up and moved away, and this time she did turn her head to look long and hard at him. How could she have let such an old, scarred scarecrow of a man do that to her? How could she want him to do it again? What would it be like to kiss that thin-lipped mouth? He bent to pick up her robe, giving Hermione the opportunity to scramble into her knickers. Snape, however, seemed totally unconcerned about his nakedness as he leisurely went about fixing her clothing. Hermione watched on, leaning against the bench, arms firmly clamped across her chest, hands under her armpits, while Severus cast cleansing spells and Reparo on her bra and robe before attending to his personal cleanliness.

Smirking, he held out her bra for her by the newly-repaired straps. 'A little late for modesty, don't you think?'

He was probably right, but it didn't stop her from blushing as she slipped her arms through the loops.

'I really could do with a bath.' She turned around, adjusting the cups while he fastened the back. 'But a cleansing charm would do.'

'I'm not sure which view of you I prefer,' Severus murmured, picking up his wand. 'May I?'

Hermione nodded. 'Thank you.' The charm trickled over her, and in a trice she felt clean and fresh again. 'That's much better...'

~ * ~

'So, this is the end result,' Hermione said, picking up a ladleful of the now cooled potion. 'I hope your client will be satisfied with it.'

'I'm sure she will be.' Severus took the ladle off her, poured the liquid into a small phial and wiped off the spillage with his thumb. 'For you,' he said, pressing it into her hand.

'I don't know what to say...'

'Just one drop on Weasley's skin...when he's sleeping will do...should suffice.' He folded his fingers around hers. 'If a purple aura appears around his head, he's the one.'

'But...'

'Do not come back, Miss Granger, if that is the case.'

Nodding, Hermione extracted her hands and quietly gathered her things. Her head was still reeling from all that had happened; no doubt it would take a while for it all to sink in.

'I'll go out through the shop, if you don't mind,' she said. 'I need a walk.'

'Of course.'

Severus led the way out of his workroom and into the apothecary, holding up the curtain for Hermione to walk under. 'Do you need some of this?' he asked, reaching for a single-dose phial from the bottom shelf.

Contraceptive potion. The thought hadn't even crossed her mind... 'It's okay, I'm protected, but thanks, anyway.'

Inclining his head, Severus moved to the door and took down the wards. 'It will soon be dark,' he said. 'Be careful.' He reached for the door handle, but Hermione placed a

hand on his arm.

'Thank you again... Severus.' Smiling, Hermione rose up on her toes and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek. 'For everything.'

She didn't so much as glance back as she left the shop, missing the look of utter disbelief on Severus' face and the way he touched his cheek as soon as she'd crossed the threshold.

From behind the blind of the closed door, Severus watched the familiar cloaked figure making her progress down the street, the purple aura surrounding the hood only confirming what he'd long suspected. There had been no client, of course, only her. Just so she'd see that idiot boy wasn't a suitable match, that she was worthy of someone better...not that there were many who would ever be good enough for her, but still... Distractedly, he rubbed the purple stain on his thumb, hoping he'd done enough to convince her never to darken his door again, enough to keep her safe... And yet that little voice in the back of his head was insisting that, someday, she'd be back.

Pressing his cheek against the glass, Severus strained to catch one last glimpse before she reached the safety of the junction with Diagon Alley.

'Keep walking, Hermione. Don't look back...'

Hermione stopped, and for a second, hope lurched in his chest that she would do just that. But she merely glanced once to her right, then disappeared around the corner, stepping back into the light. Back where she belonged.

~ * ~ END ~ * ~