

On the Other Side of Hate

by linlawless

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all. Written for Musamihi for the 2011 SSHG Gift Exchange.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 20

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A/N: This was a gift for Musamihi in the 2011 SSHG Exchange at LiveJournal. As such, it is complete, and the 19 chapters will be uploaded regularly.

Thanks so much to my alpha reader, Atuliel, and to my Britpicker/beta reader, Ruth. They're both brilliant! Also thanks to the exchange mods for organising what I imagine to be a logistical nightmare. And finally, thanks to musamihi for the great prompt (which I'll put at the end of the story). This was a bit of a stretch for me, so I hope you like it.

The usual disclaimers apply, of course.

Severus stared suspiciously at the letter that had just been dropped through the Floo onto the hearth rug in his office. He was tempted to check it for Dark Magic – there were still quite a few people, after all, who thought he'd got away with murder, and Severus made a point of never underestimating how far they might go to achieve what they viewed as suitable revenge.

However, to his very great annoyance, he had recognised the hand that had delivered this particular letter, and he knew that as furious as she had ever been in her life, Hermione Granger had never been the type to actively attempt to harm anyone who wasn't imminently trying to kill her or one of her friends. With that in mind, and considering how tired he always felt these days, he almost decided to forego entirely his usual scan for hexes, jinxes, and the like.

In the end, of course, the habits of a lifetime won out, though he did manage to convince himself not to waste his increasingly limited energy looking for anything truly Dark. Several minutes later, when he was satisfied that the parchment contained nothing more potentially dangerous or annoying than its words, he stared at it for a few moments. This was the first letter she had sent him since the day he hired her for the Arithmancy post, so it was rather disconcerting that he had known immediately whose hand was dropping it on his rug. Still, he supposed there were few females of her approximate age at Hogwarts (or anywhere else, really) who would deliver him any sort of letter ...

In any event, the handwriting confirmed his identification of the source of the letter, and anyway, only someone who was physically within the castle or on the Board of Governors could access his Floo for any purpose without his express permission.

At last, he took a deep breath and cracked the wax seal on the parchment and read the surprisingly brief missive.

Dear Headmaster Snape,

Please accept my resignation from the post of Arithmancy Mistress at Hogwarts. I will, of course, fulfil the terms of my current contract.

I wish Hogwarts all the best in the future.

Sincerely,

Hermione J. Granger

For the first time since he had woken from that dreadful coma nearly eight years ago, Severus smiled.

Several of the portraits, who had been avidly watching the drama unfolding so silently before them, fled their frames when he began to laugh.

After all, if Headmaster Snape was that amused, the end of the world must be at hand.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2 of 20

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Chapter 1

With her letter delivered, Hermione quickly made her way to the Apparition point just past the Hogwarts gates. She needed to get away from here for a while. She Apparated to Godric's Hollow, where she hoped to find Harry or Luna at home. A distraction was just what she needed, and her friends could always be counted on to provide it. Besides, what could the headmaster do to her? Fire her? She smiled wryly. He'd have done that a long time ago if her contract had allowed it, she knew, but she had never given him grounds. Now, of course, to fire her would only create more headaches for him, as he'd have to figure out how to cover her lessons for the next three months instead of spending that time finding her replacement for next year.

"Harry? Luna?" she called as she knocked and then let herself in. Seconds later, Harry appeared from the direction of the kitchen.

"Hermione?" Harry replied, clearly surprised to see her there. "Won't Snape have your head for being off grounds in the middle of the week?" he asked curiously.

As she returned his welcoming hug, Hermione smiled at the way his thoughts mirrored hers. "Well, considering he has my letter of resignation, I'm not sure he has much to threaten me with." She paused for a moment, considering, before adding, "Though given half a chance, I'm sure he'll find something."

"You resigned?" Luna asked. "Are you sure you should have done that? You love teaching."

"I *do* love teaching," Hermione agreed. "But Hogwarts isn't the only school in the world, after all, and I finally realised today that not even my students are worth taking constant abuse and criticism. I'm tired of beating my head against a wall. He's never going to let the past go, he's never going to respect me. He just hates me too much, and he doesn't want a fresh start. If there's one thing I learned over the years, it's that some things simply are what they are, and no matter how I might wish it otherwise, I can't change them."

"This isn't like you, Hermione, to just give up," Harry said softly.

"It is now," Hermione said. "And it didn't even take three years this time. Look how long I tried to make Ron stop cheating on me, or how much I struggled to win house-elves rights they didn't even want." She shook her head. "I'm tired, Harry. When I was at Beauxbatons, people didn't care that I was Muggleborn. They didn't care who my friends were, or what house I was from. They liked my passion for learning, and for teaching. They liked *me*. Here, people refuse to look past my history."

"Not everyone is like that," Luna pointed out. "The rest of the staff adores you. Even the Board of Governors is thrilled with your performance. They aren't going to be happy you've resigned."

"She's right, Hermione," Harry said. "At the last meeting, even Lucius Malfoy admitted you've been a terrific addition to the staff. I probably shouldn't tell you this, but they were already debating how much of a pay rise you were likely to demand to sign a new contract. Lucius wanted to offer it before the NEWT and OWL scores are posted because he was confident they would only enhance your bargaining power."

"That's all very gratifying, Harry, but it's not enough anymore. He insulted me in front of a student today. He's never done that before - it's a new low, even for him. In front of staff, yes, but they're used to it by now, and he's not all that much nicer to them, is he? But today he swept into my office without even a knock while I was working with a student on her independent study project, and he told her to watch out I didn't steal credit for her work. What did I ever do to deserve that?" Hermione was near tears at the thought that anyone, even Professor Snape, would think she could be so dishonest.

"Nothing," Luna soothed.

"He's a git," Harry said, her staunchest ally as usual. "Always has been, always will be. I'm sure your student didn't take it seriously."

"She might have. She's Slytherin, and no matter how nasty he gets with everyone else, he still favours them, and they all think he's some sort of God. The Saviour of Slytherin, they call him." She sighed. "They've stuck with me despite all that because I was a good teacher and because he didn't actively discourage it, but now ... How can I teach in a school where the headmaster is actively trying to undermine my authority and ruin my reputation?"

After a short silence, Luna asked, "What will you do next?"

"Finish out the year, of course, and start networking to find another position as soon as possible. Madame Maxime will help, no doubt, as will Minerva and Filius as soon as I tell them. I probably ought to write to Septima, too. Even though she's retired, she still keeps her toe in, so she might hear of something."

"You're lucky you have the income from the matchmaking service to keep you going in case it takes a while," Harry mused aloud.

Hermione laughed. "Yeah, who knew *that* would turn out so well? I certainly didn't. I only agreed to do it because it was a challenge. I never expected her to make such a success of it." It was true. She had agreed to develop an algorithm for Lavender's business venture in exchange for a percentage of (then-hypothetical) profits. Within a year, as Lavender rode the post-war marriage boom to success, Hermione had realised she had seriously underestimated the other girl's business acumen. She had had a steady stream of income for the past seven years as a result.

"I hope you don't go too far from home," Luna said softly. She and Harry exchanged a glance before she continued. "We're finally pregnant, and we want you to be Godmother."

"Really?" Hermione was delighted. They had been trying for so long. "That's wonderful news! Don't worry, even if I wind up in Australia, you won't be able to stop me visiting constantly! I'm so thrilled for you both!" She took in their happy faces. "When are you due? What do the Healers say? Tell me everything!"

Severus allowed himself a private celebratory toast to his good fortune before turning his attention to the business responsibilities generated by the resignation of any professor. Normally, he hated paperwork of any kind, almost as much as he hated Board of Governors meetings and fundraising events, which he avoided as often as possible. The one good thing to come of that snakebite during the final battle was that he could frequently use his poor health as an excuse to avoid things he preferred not to do. He usually sent Minerva in his stead to at least half of the Board meetings, which had the added benefit for him of keeping him out of the company of the Boy Who Wouldn't Die (who had somehow wound up on the Board two years ago).

As for the fundraisers, Filius was far better at the ego-stroking that resulted in large donations to Hogwarts at such events, so Severus rarely made an appearance at any of those. He suspected the Board was rather more pleased than not with that particular arrangement. Even Lucius, the current Chairperson (and how he had managed *that* with his colourful history, Severus couldn't begin to guess), no longer made any effort to get him to show up for much of anything, really. He assumed this might be due to his having told Augusta Longbottom to her face that her grandson was the worst student ever to cross through Hogwarts' gates, and that he would certainly *not* recommend the boy for an apprentice post at Durmstrang.

How he had later regretted that decision if he had helped the boy go to Durmstrang, Sprout wouldn't have gone around Severus to hire him as her apprentice, and he wouldn't constantly be forced to see the boy in the Great Hall. Between Longbottom and Granger, it was hardly a surprise that Severus had no appetite.

Still, it might have taken him two years longer than he had hoped, but he was finally to be rid of Granger permanently, and without a subsequent trip to Azkaban. Perhaps now he would turn his attention to persuading Longbottom to move on, too.

Severus finished his drink after a final salute toward the letter that was still lying on his desk. He glanced at the clock and decided it wasn't so late that he couldn't Floo-call Lucius immediately.

When the other man answered, Severus said, "Might I have a word, Lucius? I have news."

"Certainly, Severus, why don't you come through and have a drink?"

Why not, indeed?

He stepped through, brushed his robes out of habit, even though Lucius had long ago charmed his Floo to automatically Scourgify the robes of his guests as they stepped into the room. Wouldn't do to have people tracking soot across the Aubusson carpets, after all.

Once they were settled with an excellent brandy, Lucius asked, "So? What news?"

Severus smirked and handed him the letter. "We need a new Arithmancy professor for next term."

Lucius didn't look at the letter. He stared at Severus, and he didn't look pleased. "Where is Professor Granger going?"

Severus shrugged. "I have no idea, nor do I particularly care, so long as I don't have to have her underfoot at Hogwarts."

Lucius scanned the letter before replying. "Good, she doesn't say she's accepted another position, so we may be able to persuade her to stay."

Severus stared. "Why on earth would we want to do that? I've just spent nearly three years persuading her to leave!"

"Severus, I know you don't like the woman, but really, where's your good sense?"

"My good sense is perfectly fine, thank you very much. Where is *yours*?"

"Severus, you really need to get over whatever she did to you when she was a student. She's one of the best assets Hogwarts has."

Annoyed at Lucius's patronising tone, Severus snapped, "You're either having me on, Polyjuiced, or insane, Lucius. She's a pain-in-the-arse insufferable know-it-all who had the gall to blackmail me into hiring her in the first place. I cannot believe you expect me to take that without retaliation."

"Blackmailed you? Granger?" Lucius looked extremely sceptical. "That doesn't sound at all like the Granger I know. I can see where you might find her an insufferable know-it-all, although frankly, she's no worse than you in that regard if you ask me. But blackmail?"

"Yes, blackmail," Severus said firmly.

"With what, for Merlin's sake? After the trial, everyone already knows your entire history. What's left?"

Severus flushed. "Never you mind, Lucius. I just got rid of one blackmailer; I'm not giving you the means to be another."

"Well, in any event, you better *not* have got rid of Professor Granger. Or rather, you'd better be able to get her back," Lucius insisted firmly.

"Why? What's so great about Granger that you're so determined to keep her after all the energy I expended to make her leave?" Severus couldn't believe they were arguing about this. He hadn't thought Lucius liked the woman any better than he did.

"If I had known you were trying to get rid of her, I'd have put a stop to it ages ago. Look at the facts: she's a war heroine, which increases Hogwarts's prestige and draws both students and donations; she's also an excellent instructor, which is obvious if you look at the trend in both Arithmancy scores on Ministry exams since she joined the faculty and in enrolment in her elective courses. She's published no less than two articles per year in her field for the past five years, several of which were considered groundbreaking." None of this was news to Severus; he had reasons for wanting her gone that outweighed all of this. Lucius seemed to recognise his unwavering resistance, because he continued, "In addition, she's Muggleborn, which can only be considered an asset in the current political climate, and she's well-connected personally and professionally. She wouldn't have had to blackmail *anyone* into hiring her, Severus every magical school in the world would have been clamouring to obtain her services! It was our good fortune that she nostalgically chose Hogwarts. And you decided to actively work to get rid of her? I ask again, Severus, where is your good sense?" he finished, rather more dramatically than necessary, in Severus's opinion.

"She's insufferable," he repeated stubbornly. "And whether she needed to blackmail me or not, she most certainly did so. I was there; you weren't."

"Be that as it may, have you considered your own self-interest in all this, or have you been so obsessed with your plan to make her leave that you've failed to see the big picture?"

"What big picture?" Severus asked reluctantly.

"When OWL and NEWT scores rise, how does the Board react?" Lucius asked with a long-suffering sigh.

Severus shrugged. "They give pay rises to the instructors responsible, probably."

"Well, obviously, and if you had been at the last Board meeting, you'd have realised we were discussing how much of an increase to offer Professor Granger for her contract renewal." Lucius paused, probably for dramatic effect, Severus thought. "But it's not just the instructor who gets a pay rise, Severus. It's also the headmaster."

Bugger.

Lucius continued. "And if the instructor perceived as largely responsible for both improvements in Ministry exam scores and increases in enrolment and funding leaves due to a petty campaign of vitriol by the headmaster just how pleased do you expect the Board will be with said headmaster?"

Bugger, bugger, bugger.

Still, it was done now. "So what do you expect me to do, Lucius? She's resigned. It's done. I'll come to the next Board meeting and make nice with the Governors."

Lucius shook his head. "It won't matter. If word gets out that you drove her away, as it certainly will considering her best friend is on the Board and isn't known for his discretion, you most likely won't be headmaster for long enough to get back on their good side."

"Are you sure she carries that much weight with the Board? She's a pain in the arse. Look at that whole SPEW mess when she was in school."

"Good gods, Severus, are you really stuck that far in the past? It's certainly true that she's stubborn and passionate about what she believes in, but she's learned a little more tact. People listen to her, and what's more, most of them *like* her. Can you say the same?"

"People listen to me," Severus grumbled.

"Yes, but they don't like you, because you make no effort to show them anything likeable," Lucius asserted. He paused before adding, "Look, I know you have it in you to be charming, but I haven't seen you make even a token effort in years. All else equal, most people side with those they like. And in this case, I'm not sure you have as much pull as she does to start with."

"I'm headmaster, she's a mere teacher." Severus was grasping at straws and he knew it, but he wasn't giving in on this unless he had no other choice.

"She's a war heroine with no hint of scandal in years and clear, unassailable allegiance to the winning side. You're an ex-Death Eater who killed a beloved wizard and who might or might not have been playing both sides to be sure he landed on his feet regardless. Or at least, that's how the public sees it."

"I can't change who I am, Lucius, and this has served me well so far."

"You've managed to succeed *despite* your attitude, not because of it." Privately, Severus supposed he agreed, but he wasn't about to admit it. Lucius added, "I take some responsibility for the fact that you haven't had to temper your sharp edges, because in my gratitude for everything you tried to do for Draco, I smoothed things over for you when necessary. But I'm telling you, between Granger's popularity and Potter's influence, I won't be able to fix this. The Board will have your job, and I won't be able to stop them. The only way I can see out of this is if you refuse to accept her notice and you persuade her to stay."

"I doubt there's anything I can do at this point. She's notoriously stubborn."

So was Lucius, apparently. "Perhaps, but if you tried, you could probably turn her around. She probably loves teaching play on her Gryffindor nature the idea of moulding young minds has to have appeal to her. Charm her. Apologise to her. Do whatever you have to, but get her to reconsider. Make it a long contract if you can. You can always go back to being a git once she's committed to her position."

"Are you sure there's no other way?" Severus rubbed his suddenly aching temples.

"Positive. Who knows? Maybe once you get to know her, you'll find she's not such a bad sort. I find her quite an interesting conversationalist, myself."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "You're not trying to get me to keep her at Hogwarts for your own reasons, are you Lucius?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Severus."

Chapter 2

Chapter 3 of 20

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Chapter 2

Hermione was feeling much better by the time she returned to Hogwarts. Harry and Luna's happiness was contagious, it seemed, and despite her sadness that she would be leaving the school she loved, she really felt it was time to accept that Professor Snape would never treat her with anything but contempt. Leaving was her only viable option. Maybe he would find some measure of happiness with her gone.

If she were honest, it still bothered her, just a little, that he hated her so much. She supposed part of her would always be the eleven-year-old girl he had first met, who was so desperate for approval and belonging in her new world that she obsessively memorised everything available to her and spouted her newfound knowledge to anyone who would listen. He had been the one teacher she could never please, and that would probably always grate.

But as she had said to Harry, she was tired of trying to win something that would never be forthcoming. It would be far better to cut her losses and find a place where people would appreciate her.

As she let herself into the Entrance Hall, she smiled slightly. It really was better to have the decision made at last.

"Professor Granger!"

Hermione jumped and almost groaned upon recognising the familiar voice. As she made him wait for her reply, however, she remembered that there was nothing much he could do to her now that she had tendered her resignation.

"Yes, Headmaster?"

"I do not recall giving you permission to leave the grounds this evening."

As usual, he sounded annoyed, but she did her best to ignore it and speak respectfully. "Perhaps that's because I didn't ask for permission. Considering I've already resigned, I felt it unnecessary."

"It was *not* unnecessary, I assure you. According to the terms of your contract, you are not permitted to leave the grounds during the week without my permission."

Hermione rolled her eyes, and for the first time ever, she didn't even bother to try to hide it from him. "Well, go ahead and fire me if you feel it's that important, because I have nothing to lose here."

"Oh? You expect a positive reference if you shirk your duties?" he sneered sarcastically.

"Not particularly, but that's irrelevant as I'm quite certain I wouldn't get a positive reference from you in any event. Anyway, I have enough contacts of my own and, frankly, everyone who knows both of us will quite understand that I could be the best teacher ever to grace the halls of Hogwarts and you would still badmouth me to anyone who would listen."

"When have I ever badmouthed you? I treat you exactly the same way I treat everyone else."

As usual, his answer ignored reality in favour of his preferred viewpoint, Hermione thought, but at least she didn't feel she had to rein in the urge to argue any longer. "Oh? You question Filius's integrity in front of students? You call Minerva insulting names every chance you get?" He didn't respond, which Hermione took as acknowledgement of her point. She took a breath and continued. "Look, can we just stop this? I'm leaving, which is exactly what you've wanted from the moment I arrived back here three years ago. Can't you just enjoy your victory and leave me be for the next three months? I'll stay out of your way, and I'll do my job to the best of my ability, and I'll make certain I'm packed and ready to leave with the Hogwarts Express. After that, we need never see one another again, and I'm sure we'll both be far happier for it."

"What makes you so certain I'll be happier?"

Well, he was consistently contrary she'd give him that, though she couldn't contain her snort. "With all due respect, Headmaster, you've been nothing if not clear that you wish me as far away from you as I can possibly be. For all I know, you might even wish me dead. Given that all your efforts are about to come to fruition, I imagine you'll be much happier. And if *you* didn't think so, too, why put all that effort into driving me away?"

"I have never wished a student dead in my life. Not even Potter," he spat, clearly offended.

"First, I'm not your bloody student anymore, and second, even if that goodwill extends to former students, how am I to know? You've hated me since I was eleven years old, and I've never really understood why. I know, I know," she held up a hand when he looked like he was about to speak, "I was in Gryffindor and you were a spy, but you didn't treat *everyone* in Gryffindor with such active nastiness some of them you just ignored. And my friendship with Harry doesn't explain it either. I had no friends at all until two months into first term, and you obviously despised me from my very first day in your class." She shook her head. "If it was something I did that offended you, I apologise, but I can't figure out what it was. And if it was just because of who I am well, I *won't* apologise for that. I know I'm not perfect, and not everyone likes me, but that's fine. I try to be a good person, and I try to treat everyone with respect. Nearly everyone else does me the same courtesy, even if I'm not their favourite person; *no one* else goes to the lengths you do to make me feel unwelcome and unwanted, like the dirt under their shoe. Not even Draco Malfoy, who has disliked me at least as long as you have." He didn't respond, and at last she sighed. "There's no point. You don't want to hear all this, and I'm tired of trying to get you to listen to it. I'll try to stay out of your way for the next three months. You do as you will. You always do, anyway."

She turned toward the stairway that led to her quarters. His voice stopped her in her tracks.

"I have not dismissed you, Professor Granger."

She turned to look at him. "I don't need your permission anymore, Professor Snape. I'm not your student, and I'm as good as gone from your employ, as well. Do as you will."

"You will do me the courtesy of allowing me to respond to your accusations." He sounded as though he had swallowed nails.

"Why would I do that? You've never done me any courtesy at all. I don't need to hear your justifications for your treatment of me over the years I've known you. I'm sure you have your reasons, and I'm sure they seem perfectly rational to you, but really, from my perspective, there is absolutely nothing you can say that will excuse the abuse you've heaped on my head. And now I've given notice, I don't have to listen to it anymore. Good night."

As she began climbing the stairs, feeling the delicious liberation of saying exactly what she thought without any attempt at censorship, his voice floated after her. "Ah, but who says I've *accepted* your resignation?"

Watching the girl leave in a huff before smirking and stalking away himself, Severus was forced to admit that had not gone quite as well as he might have hoped. He continued to ponder the problem as he glided down a silent corridor several minutes later. Why did the girl irritate him so? As if he would ever wish harm on a student, even a former student. She had to know better than that, didn't she?

He really needed to formulate a plan, he decided. She was, as he had told Lucius, nothing if not stubborn, and she had apparently decided he had nothing to say that she wanted to hear. Therefore, he would have to find a way around the walls she had erected around herself where he was concerned. Perhaps he could blackmail her, the way she had blackmailed him. No matter what Lucius said, he was quite certain she had fully intended to blackmail her way into her job ...

Three Years Earlier

He had recognised her handwriting on the parchment immediately it had brought up unpleasant memories of seemingly hundreds of essays, always two or three or even four times the assigned length. He was tempted to throw it in the fire without reading it, but the girl was damnably persistent. How long had it taken him to make her stop visiting him in St. Mungo's five years ago? Several months, at least, if he remembered correctly which he was quite sure he did.

Sighing, he forced himself to read:

Dear Headmaster Snape,

I hope this letter finds you well and fully recovered from your injuries after all this time. I was pleased to hear you had resumed your duties as Headmaster, and I look forward to seeing you continue in that position for many years to come.

I understand Professor Vector has announced her intention to retire at the end of the current academic year. As you may know, I have been apprenticing in Arithmancy with Professor Angolo at Beauxbatons. I am scheduled to complete my apprenticeship and receive my Mastery with distinction in June. In the course of my apprenticeship, I have published several well-received academic papers, and I have been student teaching for the past 2 years. Therefore, I wish to be considered for the position at Hogwarts.

I realise that, given our history, you might be reluctant to consider me for the post. However, I would be pleased to start afresh if only you are willing to give me this chance, and allow us both to leave the past behind us. I can provide a current Curriculum Vita and references if you require them.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

The nerve of the girl, bringing up the past after all this time! What could she be about? Did she think he *wanted* to remember his years of spying? His months of recovering? It had been five years since the final battle and nearly as long since he had finally convinced her to leave him alone and stop visiting him in hospital.

He had resumed his position as Headmaster four years ago; the humiliation was finally behind him, and now she wanted to bring it all back? He read the letter again, and then a third time. Could she be ... *blackmailing* him? Asking to be hired, without providing references or a CV? Why *wouldn't* he require such things if he was to consider hiring her?

Unless ... could she be holding their history over his head and expecting him to hire her regardless?

The gall of it! The utter temerity! He read the letter again, trying to decide what to do. His first impulse was to deliver a setdown so sharp she would never dare darken his door again, but what if she made good on her implied threat and told all and sundry about his embarrassing behaviour while in hospital?

He was tired of living with public humiliation. It had been bad enough that his unrequited attachment to Lily had been publicly dissected and bandied about throughout his trial. It had dominated the headlines for almost two months before he earned his acquittal. Then, just as public interest had seemed to be turning elsewhere, he had been awarded an Order of Merlin, and the whole mess had been brought up all over again.

He had checked himself out of St. Mungo's against medical advice a month before his trial was due to start, returning to Spinner's End to finish his recuperation. The Healers had started talking about experimental treatments to relieve the lingering damage Nagini had inflicted, and he had bolted. He had done enough for the Wizarding World he refused to subject himself to experimental procedures that for all he knew might kill him.

He wouldn't have minded dying, if only it had happened in the middle of the battle. Then he wouldn't have had to know that Potter had been sharing his private memories with the entire world, hoping, according to Severus's barrister, to gain him some public sympathy prior to his trial. Severus didn't think the boy's motives were so pure, however why would he suddenly try to help a man he had always hated and mistrusted? No, he was certain Potter just wanted to embarrass and humiliate him further.

Granger had certainly done her part, too, hadn't she? Hanging about his hospital room during the months he was comatose, hearing every delirious thought that came out of his mouth when they finally ended the coma in order to administer the anti-venin. Even his Pensieve memories weren't as embarrassing as all that had transpired while she had sat at his bedside and mocked him.

And now it seemed she was using her knowledge to blackmail him into hiring her. Well, he would see about that.

He composed a letter inviting Miss Granger to Hogwarts for an interview. He did, however, insist she must bring the CV and references she had offered.

Chapter 3

Chapter 4 of 20

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Chapter 3

Hermione sat before the fire in her chambers sipping a glass of wine and trying to make sense of the Headmaster's parting question. *Who says I've accepted your resignation?*

It wasn't up to him, was it? He couldn't force her to sign a new contract, so she didn't see where he had any choice but to accept her notice.

And why would he refuse, anyway? He had made it clear from her very first day on the job that he considered her appointment as temporary in nature and would do his best to hasten her departure. She had often wondered why he had hired her in the first place, if he was just going to maintain the animosity of years gone by. She had gone over and over their interview in her mind, trying to discern whether he had given any clue of his intended removal of her presence from Hogwarts, but she could find nothing unusual in the interaction.

Three Years Earlier

Hermione arrived at the Hogwarts Gate ten minutes ahead of schedule. She was so excited at the possibility of returning to her alma mater to teach that she had been unable to wait another minute. However, she forced herself to pace for several minutes before sending a Patronus to request admittance. It wouldn't do to be *too* early, would it?

Mr. Filch let her in soon enough, and walked her to the Headmaster's office, where Professor Snape greeted her cordially; well, as cordially as she thought possible for him. She assumed from his civility that he really did intend to start fresh, as colleagues, and she was delighted at the prospect. He was so very brilliant, and she thought how exciting it would be to work with him on a daily basis without the necessity of maintaining the pretences that had accompanied his role as a spy or the barrier of the student-teacher relationship that had existed between them before.

She dismissed any thought of his behaviour toward her when she had visited him in hospital. He had obviously been in pain and feeling unwell, and it had long been his habit to take out his frustrations on the nearest Gryffindor. Since she was the only person who had visited him with any regularity, that was her. She hadn't blamed him for it it would take time to recover from all he had seen and done during the two wars he had fought, and there was still the spectre of the trial hanging over his head, too.

She had stubbornly kept visiting him, despite his protests, for nearly two months after he woke from his coma. At last, she had decided that it probably wasn't helping his recovery that he kept getting so worked up and belligerent in his efforts to kick her out, so she had stopped visiting. Besides, it wasn't like she didn't have enough problems in her own life, without putting energy into visiting someone who didn't want visitors. When she finally caught Ron cheating one time too many (and *far* too publicly), she decided to leave Britain to continue her Arithmancy training at Beauxbatons.

When she had heard of Professor Vector's impending retirement, she had considered whether Professor Snape would have moved on from the past, and whether he would be willing and able to treat her as any other colleague. She hadn't wanted to be too presumptuous, so she had sent a letter of inquiry rather than a formal application, and had been pleasantly surprised by the courteous reply she had received.

Now, Headmaster Snape was his usual taciturn self, but since he wasn't actively insulting her, she felt quite comfortable doing most of the talking. She provided her CV and references, asked about the particulars of the position, and answered his perfunctory questions about her experience and qualifications. Eventually, he asked, "Are you certain this is the path you want to take, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, I'm very excited at the prospect of teaching Arithmancy. I've found my student teaching experiences to be very rewarding, although certainly challenging at times."

"And you think you will be able to cope with me as your supervisor and your former teachers as your colleagues? History can be difficult to overcome."

"I'm sure it will be fine, Headmaster. The past is the past. I'm interested in the future, so if you see fit to give me a chance, I can promise never to hold anything that's happened before against you."

His expression remained neutral as he studied her; after a moment, he said, "Very well, Miss Granger. I will hold you to your word, however. The past will be well and truly buried once you sign the contract. I don't want to hear anything about it again."

She thought his wording a little odd, but then, this was Professor Snape, and she had never known him when he wasn't playing some sort of life and death role. He said the past would be buried, so she would trust that they were starting anew.

Present

Three years later, Hermione couldn't help thinking she must have missed something important in that interview. He had seemed to say he was agreeable to putting the past behind him, but his behaviour once she had started the job made clear that she must have misunderstood him.

Or perhaps he had just immediately hated her all over again in the present every bit as much as he had in the past. Shaking her head, she muttered, "Stop worrying about it, Hermione. It doesn't matter anymore, does it? You're leaving in three months. If you haven't figured it out in three years, you won't manage it in three months."

She Scourged her wine glass and headed off to bed.

Severus stalked through the corridors for most of the night. Even though he was headmaster and could have delegated the late rounds to other members of the staff, he did many of them himself. The ones he *did* pawn off, naturally, went to the bane of his existence, as part of his campaign to make her want to leave. He'd have given her all of them, except for two considerations: first, Minerva would have his head he currently used the excuse that as the newest member of staff, she naturally got the least pleasant assignments, and anyway, he wasn't asking her to do anything he didn't do quite frequently himself.

Second, he wouldn't sleep regardless. Years of attempting to sleep with one eye open had left him a permanent insomniac, it seemed. Since there was nothing worse than lying awake in bed, waiting for sleep that wouldn't come, he chose to continue his rounds each night until exhaustion ensured two or three hours of rest.

He knew what people said about him, both behind his back and sometimes to his face. The students still called him a git and a bastard and a vampire or whatever other unpleasant names they could think of. And, as Lucius had pointed out earlier, people in the community still wondered where his loyalties had really been during the war, and still whispered that he had been the one to get away with killing the great Albus Dumbledore.

Minerva and Filius worried about him, he knew they took turns nagging at him, it seemed, about sleeping more, eating more, drinking less. He couldn't even find respite in his office, where Albus's portrait told him to take better care of himself or he'd find himself in his own portrait far too soon. Severus ignored him if he was in a good mood or threatened him with turpentine if he wasn't.

What none of them understood was that he *couldn't* eat better, or sleep more, or drink less. He was still, after all these years, in constant pain, and it only got worse when he stopped moving for any length of time. Alcohol was one of the few things that had any impact on it even his best pain potions didn't scratch the surface. He had no appetite, and much as he liked to blame his constant low level of queasiness on Granger and Longbottom, it had been his faithful companion since the day he had woken from his coma, long before any of them had returned to Hogwarts. As a consequence, he had lost weight he couldn't spare since the war had ended.

He didn't have the energy to be charming most of the time. Even this evening, when he had had every intention of starting the process of improving his relationship with Granger, he hadn't been able to do it. His neck had been aching and his feet felt like they were being pricked by a thousand miniature knives; standing still while she railed at him for his past behaviour didn't help. He had finally been forced to let her leave (though not with the last word) because if he hadn't moved soon, he'd have been unable to contain the pain any longer, and she'd have witnessed yet another weak moment in his life.

Now, though, he would have to find the energy to be pleasant if he wanted to keep his job. As much as he lacked patience for certain aspects of it the fundraising, the Board meetings, the hassles with the Ministry he *needed* it. It was his reason for forcing himself out of bed every morning, and it entitled him to continue to live in the only home he had ever known. He couldn't fathom finishing his life anywhere else.

Clearly, he would have to find a way to access the charming side of himself that Lucius was so sure was hidden within.

He continued to ponder the problem until he finally fell into bed and instantly into a restless sleep.

"Severus." He heard the voice, but he ignored it. He didn't want to talk to *her* not now, and maybe not ever again.

"Severus, stop ignoring me. This is important." He *would not* look, he decided. He could be more stubborn than she was.

"Severus Tobias Snape, if I ever meant anything to you, then turn your skinny arse around and talk to me!"

Sighing, he turned. She looked the same as ever long red hair, brilliant green eyes that looked so much better on her than on her irritating son. And annoyed. Distinctly annoyed, with hands on hips and foot tapping impatiently. He had been deluding himself, thinking he could out-stubborn Lily Evans Potter. He had never managed it before, had he? "What do you want, Lily? I'm sleeping."

"Yes, I know. When you're awake, you're too closed off to listen to me."

"Why do you want to talk to me, anyway? You're the one who told me I had to keep living after that snake debacle. For what? You said it would get better, but my life is just as miserable as it ever was. More, since I can't even get rid of the people I don't want around."

"Severus, you're being a stubborn git, as always. For one thing, you know perfectly well that wasn't me although I would have said the exact same thing if it *had* been. Not that it would have made any difference. I should have known you would refuse every reasonable effort to help you the minute you were well enough to get on your feet and walk away. When are you going to grow up and learn?"

"What are you on about now? No one wants to help me. Well, except Lucius, and that's just because he thinks he owes me."

"What about Minerva? Or Filius? Weren't you whinging earlier about how they nag you to take better care of yourself?"

"I never said that!"

"Not out loud. But since I'm a figment of your dream world, I don't even have to do Legilimency to know what you've been thinking."

"If this is a dream, I want to wake up."

"No! Not until you listen to me!"

"Fine, then. Get to the point, please. I'd like to get *some* rest tonight."

"You really need more sleep, Severus. Maybe then you wouldn't be so cranky."

"I *can't* sleep! You just said you know my thoughts, so how did you miss that I *can't* sleep?"

"No need to get snippy, Severus. I'm *trying* to help you, you know. Anyway, if you'd go back to St. Mungo's and take that treatment they've been trying to get you to agree to for the last seven and a half years, maybe you'd feel better, and you'd be able to eat and sleep."

"I'm not going to be a guinea pig in some dunderhead's experiment."

"What makes you think it's still experimental after all this time? If you had been paying attention instead of wallowing in self-pity, you'd realise that it's now considered standard treatment for all magical venom-related illnesses."

"Why haven't I heard of this?"

"Because whenever Professor Granger tried to talk to you about it, you insulted her until she went away."

Severus looked away. "When did she try to talk to me about it?"

A different, even more unwelcome voice answered. "Once a week for the first six months I was here." Severus whipped his head back toward where Lily was, only to discover Hermione Granger in her place and with the same annoyed expression. "Then I decided you must have already tried it, so I gave up trying to ask you about it."

"Why are *you* here?"

"I'm sure I don't know. It's *your* dream, isn't it?"

"Well, tell me about this treatment, then."

"No. If you want to know about it, you should ask me, politely, when you're awake. Now go to sleep. You don't get enough as it is you can't be having these long conversations all night long."

"That's what I /" Severus protested, but she disappeared before he could finish the thought.

"Night, Sev," Lily called, though she wasn't visible, either. "Sleep well!"

Severus managed to sleep an hour later than usual the next morning.

Chapter 4

Chapter 5 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all. Written for Musamihi for the 2011 SSHG Gift Exchange.

Author's Note: I should probably mention that the medical treatment regimen discussed in this and future chapters has no basis whatsoever in reality ... or if it does, that's purely accidental ...

Chapter 4

"Professor Granger, I'd like to speak with you during your free period before lunch."

Hermione, who had been gradually coming to life as the caffeine in her tea worked its way through her system, snapped fully awake at the polite request. She turned to glare at its source. "Must you sneak up on me at breakfast like that?"

"I apologise," Headmaster Snape said formally. "That was not my intention. I shall expect you in my office at quarter past eleven."

Hermione stared after him as he swept away. As he disappeared into the corridor, she murmured, "Who are you and what have you done with Headmaster Snape?"

"Did you say something, Hermione?"

"What?" She smiled at Neville, who was sliding into the seat beside her, before turning her attention back to her breakfast as she answered his question. "Oh, I was just talking to myself. Is there something wrong with the headmaster?"

"Not that I've noticed, or at least, nothing unusual, I don't think. Why do you ask?"

"He was just ... almost nice to me. Polite at the very least."

"Huh," Neville said. "Weird. Maybe he wants something."

"Yes, I suppose he must. He asked to see me in his office before lunch."

"You mean ordered," Neville said confidently. "Headmaster Snape doesn't ask, he orders."

"No, he didn't. That's what I mean," Hermione said. "He said, pretty as you please, 'Professor Granger, I'd like to speak with you during your free period before lunch.' And then when I snapped at him not to sneak up on me, he *apologised*."

"Headmaster Snape doesn't apologise. Ever."

"My point again, Neville. He *did*."

"Maybe it's not him. Maybe it's someone else, Polyjuiced."

Hermione considered it. "But then what did they do with the real Headmaster Snape? And to what purpose?"

Neville lowered his voice. "Maybe someone needed to do some undercover work or something. You don't suppose anything illicit is happening, do you?"

"Can you imagine the Headmaster agreeing to someone impersonating him? Especially someone who hadn't perfected sneering and glaring and being *condescending* to the people he hates. And if he *didn't* agree, I doubt he could be taken by force. Given the man's quick startle response, anyone who tried it would be Stupefied before they could finish an incantation, and he'd be sure to notice a potion."

"True." Neville considered this for a moment. "Well, if it *is* him, and he's being nice to *you*, he must really want something big. I'd be on my guard if I were you, Hermione."

Hermione sighed. "So you've noticed, too, that he's more awful to me than anyone?"

"Who could miss it? What did you do to him, anyway? I rather expected him to treat me that way after he refused to recommend me for Durmstrang, but he mostly just leaves me alone."

"If I had any idea what I did, I'd tell you. Unfortunately, I think he just hates me and he always will. Which makes this new polite behaviour downright suspicious, don't you think?"

"Well, all I can say is, I wouldn't accept any food or drink he might offer if I were you."

Hermione burst out laughing. "He's already managed to get my resignation. He has no reason to kill me now!"

"You're leaving?" Neville looked positively morose at the idea. "What if he starts tormenting *me* once you're gone?"

"Nice to know I'll be missed," Hermione said cheerfully. "Anyway, you'll be finished with your apprenticeship in June, won't you? Perhaps you ought to consider seeking a position elsewhere, just in case."

"Yeah, maybe I will."

Granger was, as usual, punctual for the meeting he had set. He was relieved she had come at all, to be honest she had made clear last night that she wouldn't be pushed around now that her notice had been given.

When she had seated herself, he offered, "Tea? Something else?"

Her eyes narrowed with what looked like suspicion, but all she said was, "No, thank you."

"I suppose you're wondering why I wanted to see you."

She muttered something under her breath. Other than a raised eyebrow, he ignored it and waited until she said more intelligibly, "Yes, I admit I'm curious. I thought we agreed I would avoid you as much as possible until the end of term."

"You stated that was your intention. I never agreed to it."

"Why are you being so polite?"

"It has recently come to my attention that I have been treating you disrespectfully. I am attempting to remedy that." Again, she muttered something; this time he said, "I didn't quite catch that."

She smiled sweetly. "I said, 'But it's worked so well for you.'"

Severus frowned. "Apparently not, if your attempted resignation is any indication."

She frowned back. "What do you mean, 'attempted' resignation? There's nothing attempted about it. It's done."

"Not if I don't accept it." She opened her mouth to argue, but he interrupted. "In any event, that's not what I wanted to discuss today."

"What else is there to discuss? You've never wanted to discuss anything with me before, except maybe all my perceived failings."

This was not going well, Severus realised. She was very much on the defensive. So much for getting her to relax enough to bring up the treatments on her own. He decided to take a more Gryffindor approach. "I want you to tell me about the available treatments for the aftereffects of snakebite."

"Excuse me?"

Severus tamped down his impatience and forced himself to repeat the request politely. "I want you to tell me about the available treatments for the aftereffects of snakebite."

Hermione stared at the headmaster. He had said it twice, but she was still having trouble wrapping her mind around the fact that he was asking her for actual information. Unless he was planning to mock her somehow ...

She frowned. "Why don't you ask Poppy? I'm not in the medical profession."

"You seemed to know something about it when you returned to Hogwarts three years ago. Poppy has never mentioned it."

"Of course not, she was probably afraid you'd bite her head off," Hermione muttered. He didn't react, so he probably hadn't heard her. "Fine, though if you expect to humiliate me, I can tell you I don't care anymore."

"Professor Granger," he said through clenched teeth, "I assure you that I actually want any information you can give me about treatments for snakebite. I have no intention of mocking or embarrassing you in any way. Would you please just tell me what I want to know?"

She glared at him. "No need to get annoyed, Headmaster. It's not as though you've given me any reason before to think you want to know anything I could tell you about snakebite treatments or anything else."

He took a breath and let it out. "Well, I'm asking you now. If you don't want to answer, just tell me so I can find another source of information."

She stared at him, trying to gauge his sincerity, before saying with as much grace as she could muster (which wasn't much, all things considered), "Fine. I understand they've successfully developed a treatment for the neuropathy, weakness, and pain that are often seen when one has sustained a bite from magical or non-magical venomous creatures, including snakes, lizards, and fish. It was experimental when you were bitten eight years ago, but over the next several years, they worked with it enough to make it the standard of care."

He seemed to be listening intently, but mindful of his past impatience with her for answering questions in minute detail, she stopped there. After a moment, he said, "That's it? That's all you know?"

"No, but I know you prefer succinct answers. I don't want to bore you with all the details."

He looked ready to strangle her, and his jaw clenched so tightly she was amazed he could even form words. "I won't be bored. If I wanted a succinct answer, I'd have asked someone else."

She had to admit (if only to herself) that she was rather pleased her baiting was getting to him. He deserved it, after all. Still, she kept her tone neutral as she said, "My understanding is it starts with muggle-style chelation therapy to draw out any remaining toxins that may be stored in the cells, followed by a combination of potions that target any nerve or tissue damage, along with healing charms to improve any other functions that may have been affected by the venom."

"Is there any time limit?"

Hermione knew, of course, what he meant, but she couldn't resist making him spell it out. "Time limit?"

To her delight, his eyes glinted, presumably with irritation. "Does it need to be done within a particular period after the bite?"

"Not as far as I know," Hermione said, deciding she had pushed him far enough for one day. She wanted to annoy him, not get herself hexed, after all. "I gather they've worked with people who had been bit years or even decades prior."

"How long does the course of treatment take? Does it have to be done in hospital?"

"I'm not sure. I suspect that might be determined on a case-by-case basis, wouldn't you think?"

He nodded thoughtfully, then stood. "Thank you for the information, Professor Granger. I believe it's time for lunch."

It took a real effort not to gape at him. First he apologised, and now he was thanking her? She murmured, "You're welcome."

He gestured toward the door. "Shall we?"

Hermione was too stunned to protest. He actually meant to walk with her? As though they were normal colleagues rather than mortal enemies?

"Of course," she said softly.

As he picked at his lunch, Severus considered the course of treatment she had described. As much as she had peppered her comments with disclaimers like "as I understand it," he was certain she had got her information correct. She was nothing if not thorough in her research habits. He wasn't thrilled at the idea of chelation therapy, which he had heard about once as a child, when the younger brother of a classmate in his muggle primary school had had to undergo that type of treatment after eating paint chips that apparently had too much lead in them. It had sounded so awful – needles full of medicine directly poked in one's veins and kept there for hours. He shuddered at the memory.

But if it could really improve his symptoms ... It wouldn't hurt to try it, he supposed. He would need to arrange for Minerva to take over his duties in case they wanted to hospitalise him. He ought to do it as soon as possible, he supposed, so he could get on with his campaign to convince Granger to stay at Hogwarts.

He decided to inquire of St. Mungo's right away. Meanwhile, he turned to Minerva. "I need to see you in my office this afternoon. You have a free period around three, I believe?"

"Yes, of course, Severus. Is something amiss?"

"We'll discuss it at three."

"All right," Minerva said, looking worried. "Aren't you going to eat a bit more?" she asked.

"I'm not hungry."

"You're wasting away, Severus. You can't survive on three or four bites of food three times a day."

"I'll be fine." He stood. "I'll see you at three."

Chapter 5

Chapter 6 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all. Written for Musamih for the 2011 SSHG Gift Exchange.

Chapter 5

When Minerva arrived, Severus had their usual tea service ready. He managed to eat a cucumber sandwich to keep her from haranguing him too much about his inadequate efforts at self-care. He nodded and hummed in all the right places as she made small talk, and he even occasionally spared an actual comment.

Eventually, she asked, "What's this all about, Severus? You never call me to meetings on such short notice."

"I've been speaking with St. Mungo's. It appears they may have a course of treatment they believe will eliminate most, if not all, of my lingering symptoms from the final battle."

Minerva look surprised. "You mean you're finally considering it?"

"What do you mean, finally?"

"Severus, I've been after you for years to see what the Healers could do for you, but you never let me even finish the thought before telling me to drop it. What changed your mind after all this time?"

Severus took the opportunity to execute another step in his plan to convince Granger to stay he had already asked her for advice; now he would let it be known that he listened to what she said. "Professor Granger explained the treatment; she assures me it's the current standard of care rather than experimental."

Minerva frowned. "Since when do you even hear anything Hermione says, never mind let it sway you?"

Severus frowned, too. "I haven't been *that* bad."

"You most certainly have! I'm surprised the girl has stood for it as long as she has. She could get a job anywhere, you know."

"So I'm told," Severus said dryly. "In any event, Professor Granger explained the treatment to my satisfaction, and I plan to go forward with it as soon as it can be arranged."

"How long will you be gone? Does the Board of Governors know?"

She seemed more excited than the situation warranted, Severus thought, but he didn't comment on it; instead, he simply answered her question. "I haven't informed them yet, but so long as you agree to cover anything urgent that comes up, I doubt they'll protest much."

Minerva leaned forward and patted his hand, which startled Severus into glaring at her until she subsided. "Well, of course, I'd be happy to do anything I can if it means you'll get well, Severus. How long will you be gone?"

"The Healer says I can expect to be hospitalised anywhere from a few days to no more than a week, depending on how quickly I respond to treatment."

"I'm sure we can muddle along without you for that long, Severus, especially if it means you'll return to us whole and healthy."

"You may not be so thrilled when I start delegating midnight rounds. Professor Granger cannot be expected to do *all* of them, can she?"

Minerva smiled. "Of course she can't, though I admit I'm surprised you realise that. If delegating meant you were actually sleeping, though, I daresay I'd be delighted."

Hermione was surprised when Minerva took Neville's usual seat beside her at dinner.

"Hermione, I must thank you for whatever you said that got Severus to listen to reason."

"Excuse me? Me? What did I do?" Hermione asked, feeling more than slightly bemused.

"I have no idea, but Severus tells me he's finally going to get the treatment we've all wanted him to get for years, and he says *you* convinced him. He's never even let us mention it, but apparently he was swayed by the information you gave him. You're such a dear girl with the way he's treated you all these years, anyone else would have wished him ill and in pain forever."

Hermione was stunned. First he asked her opinion, and now he was publicly crediting her with influencing his decision? Something was definitely strange. Maybe she shouldn't have dismissed Neville's Polyjuice theory so quickly, she mused. "Has Professor Snape been behaving strangely recently?"

"Strangely?" Minerva asked. "Other than his decision to accept help? I don't think so ... Why do you ask?"

"He's been as rude and condescending and verbally abusive toward me as anyone could possibly be for every single minute of the time I've been back here. But today, he apologised for startling me at breakfast, asked me for information about this treatment at lunch, and apparently told you I've influenced him before dinner. That doesn't seem strange to you?"

"Well, perhaps a bit, dear," Minerva admitted, though somewhat reluctantly, "but I like to think Severus is capable of showing good sense eventually. He's generally stubborn right up until his mistakes slap him in the face, and then, once he changes his view, he's just as committed to his new opinion as he was to his old one. Look at all he did to atone after he realised his mistake in taking the Dark Mark."

"I suppose. But I don't think you can compare the Potters getting killed to me giving notice."

Minerva paled. "You gave notice? You're leaving Hogwarts?"

"Yes, I'm surprised he didn't tell you. I formally notified him yesterday that I'll leave Hogwarts when my contract expires at the end of the term."

"What did he say?"

"Last night he tried to goad me into an argument when I got back from Harry's; when I told him I would do my job but I wouldn't take any more of his vitriol, he said something about not accepting my resignation. I didn't stay to argue. It's not like he can keep me prisoner and force me to teach, after all."

"You left grounds on a weeknight? Without permission, I gather?" Miverva asked, and Hermione gave a nod of her head in reply. "That's grounds for disciplinary action, you know."

Hermione laughed. "I'm already leaving, and he's already made my life here as miserable as he could possibly manage. What exactly do you think he's going to do to make it worse? And now, for reasons known only to him, he seems to have decided to be almost pleasant. I can only assume he's rewarding me for giving him his heart's dearest desire by removing myself from his presence permanently."

Eight o'clock that evening found Severus once again sipping some of Lucius's finest brandy as they discussed developments. "I'll be going to St. Mungo's for treatment as soon as it can be arranged. Minerva will handle anything urgent that might come up."

"Let me be sure I understand you. I tell you to devote your efforts to persuading Granger to sign a new contract, and you decide to leave for a week? How is that going to get you in her good graces?" Lucius asked, before taking another sip of brandy.

"Well, she's made it clear she's not going to trust a sudden about-face in my behaviour toward her unless I give her a reason that makes sense to her. Getting the treatment provides me with a believable excuse for my past behaviour I was sick and in pain. Given her penchant for championing the downtrodden, I suspect if I manage to treat her cordially henceforth, she'll be willing to accept the very sincere apology I intend to offer. Furthermore, I've let it slip to Minerva that it was Granger who persuaded me to accept the treatment in the first place. That will certainly stroke her ego. And I've also begun hinting that I might not accept her resignation as readily as she expects."

"Hmmm. That could work, I suppose. Are you sure it wouldn't be better to just let her think you've seen the light based on her having said she tendered her resignation because of your treatment of her?"

"Lucius, she almost provoked me into arguments last night and again today, even though I had every intention of charming her as you suggested. I've realised no one can be expected to be polite in the face of such provocation when exhausted and in pain. It's completely unreasonable to think she won't goad me into losing my temper with her if I try to charm her while I still feel lousy."

"All right," Lucius agreed. "But you'd better make sure your kinder, gentler image doesn't slip once you're back at Hogwarts. You won't have your ailments as an excuse anymore once they've cured you, you know."

"I'm well aware of that, Lucius. Thank Merlin it will only be until I convince her to sign the damned contract."

"Right, although you might want to consider whether it would be easier to remain cordial than to deal with the same situation again in a few years. She'll be even less trusting next time around."

"Don't remind me," Severus muttered, somewhat bitterly, before raising his glass to his lips once more.

The owl arrived just as Severus was getting ready to Floo back to Hogwarts. Lucius frowned. "Who could be writing so late?"

"That's a school owl," Severus observed. The parchment dropped in Lucius's lap, and Severus groaned. "That woman! Can I not find a moment's peace away from her?"

"What woman? How do you even know it's from a woman? I haven't opened it yet."

"I still have nightmares about the seemingly endless feet of parchment I was forced to read from her. I would probably know Granger's handwriting at a hundred paces."

"Granger? Excellent. Let's just see what she says." Lucius opened the parchment and began reading aloud. "Dear Lucius,"

"She calls you Lucius?" Severus interrupted.

"Well, naturally. That *is* my name."

"I can't believe you encourage such informality with a Muggleborn."

"Times have changed, my friend. I am nothing if not adaptable, and she is an excellent ally, as I've been trying to tell you for the last two days. Now, do you want to hear what she has to say or not?"

"Oh, I'm all aflutter with anticipation. I can barely restrain my excitement."

"No need to be sarcastic, though I suppose I ought to expect it from you by now."

"Just read the bloody letter, Lucius."

"No need to be crude, either." He cleared his throat for effect. "Dear Lucius, I'm not sure if Headmaster Snape informed you of my resignation, which I tendered last evening. He's made noises about not accepting it (though I don't see how he expects to force me to stay at Hogwarts once my contract expires), and has been behaving very strangely, indeed, for the last twenty-four hours. I confess I have no idea what to make of this sudden change in his behaviour, and I wondered if you might be able to shed some light on the situation. Could I persuade you to meet me in Hogsmeade this weekend to discuss my concerns? Very truly yours, Hermione Granger."

"The gall of that girl! Complaining about my behaviour to my oldest friend! And she obviously isn't worried about the trouble she'd be landing me in if I *hadn't* told you of her attempted resignation!"

"Severus," Lucius began.

"And just what does she mean, 'behaving very strangely'? I've been behaving perfectly, I'll have you know!"

"Severus "

"And what does she expect to learn from *you*? Why is she writing to you, anyway? Are you quite sure there's nothing going on between you that I ought to know about?"

"Severus, calm down," Lucius ordered. "I'm starting to see Granger's point. You're completely irrational where she's concerned. First of all, no, there is nothing between Granger and me beyond a cordial professional relationship. Second, she's writing to me because you've apparently been treating her so horribly for the past few years that even showing her the minimal level of courtesy you accord everyone else seems completely out of character to her. Third, she realises she doesn't think the way you or I do, and in her very Gryffindor way, she is forthrightly asking me to help her interpret something she doesn't understand. Honestly, Severus, the way you're carrying on, I'd

almost think you had a crush on the girl."

Stunned silence filled the room before Severus exploded. "A *crush*? Have you *completely* lost your mind?"

"Of course not. I'm pointing out that you haven't been this irrational about anyone since Lily Evans you've convinced yourself she blackmailed you, for Merlin's sake! Unless she came right out and said, 'Give me the job or I'll reveal your deepest, darkest secrets,' I promise you, she wasn't blackmailing you she's just not that subtle. It was your own paranoia that drove you to that conclusion." Severus wanted to argue, but Lucius didn't pause for breath. "Now, I'm telling you to pull yourself together and get to work convincing the woman you won't continue to make her miserable if she stays at Hogwarts. Meanwhile, I shall accept her invitation and help her understand that you've seen the light and want to make amends."

"This had better work, Lucius. And you had better be right about the blackmail. The last thing I need is to have her disclose everything I hired her to keep quiet."

Chapter 6

Chapter 7 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all. Written for Musamih for the 2011 SSHG Gift Exchange.

Chapter 6

Lucius pondered what he would say as he waited in the Three Broomsticks for Hermione. He didn't want to undermine Severus's efforts the man could be entertaining at times, and he did still owe him for his efforts on Draco's behalf. Far better to repay the debt in small ways of his own choosing than to leave the field open for Severus to demand something big. On the other hand, if he could figure out what exactly Severus thought Hermione was blackmailing him with well, information was never unwelcome, was it?

A few moments later, Hermione arrived. Lucius studied her dispassionately as she paused in the entryway, her eyes sweeping the room as she removed her cloak and ran a hand over her hair in a seemingly futile attempt to smooth it. The damp weather of Scotland certainly didn't do her any favours in that regard, he mused; he knew perfectly well from numerous fundraisers in the past three years that her hair could be quite lovely when she bothered with it. However, she apparently had forgotten (or simply not cared enough) to cast *Impervius*.

He wondered, not for the first time, whether Severus's animosity toward the woman was evidence of a suppressed crush. She wasn't his own type, but objectively speaking, she had grown into an attractive woman, and Merlin knew Severus had always liked outspoken Muggleborns.

He politely stood to greet her as she approached the table, waving his wand to pull out her chair for her. "It's good to see you, Hermione. How are you?"

"Fine, thank you, Lucius. It's good of you to meet me on such short notice I realise you're very busy."

"Never too busy for my friends," Lucius said smoothly. Tea arrived, and they busied themselves with preparing cups and plates for a moment before Lucius continued, "Your letter sounded concerned about Severus?"

"In the past few days, he's done a complete about-face in his behaviour toward me, and I don't know what to make of it. I thought perhaps you could help me decipher his motives."

"What sort of change? Suddenly rude and unpleasant?"

Hermione laughed, "No, not at all more the opposite. Suddenly polite and respectful."

Lucius frowned. "He should have been polite and respectful from the moment you joined the faculty. Are you telling me he hasn't been?"

"Well, no," Hermione said, flushing. "No more than he ever was, in any event."

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "He's always rude to the staff?"

"No, no, I wouldn't want you to think that," she said hastily. She seemed to consider her words carefully. "I meant his behaviour toward me was never anything but rude and unpleasant, except perhaps the day he interviewed me for my current position. I wouldn't have taken the job had I known that was a one-time thing rather than an indication of more cordial relations in the future."

"I cannot help wondering, Hermione, whether you somehow offended him at some point?"

She laughed again. "I think he finds my very existence offensive, which makes it strange that he ever hired me in the first place, and perhaps even stranger that he's been so nice well, for him, anyway for the last few days."

"Perhaps he was more displeased than he anticipated when he learned you were thinking of leaving."

"I'm not *thinking* of leaving, Lucius. *I am* leaving. I assume he told you I had given my notice."

"Yes, although he didn't seem inclined to accept it."

"He said something like that, but I don't see how it's relevant whether he wants to accept it or not. And really, why wouldn't he accept it? I expected him to be dancing with joy figuratively speaking, of course, since I'm quite certain he's too serious to ever do anything as frivolous as dancing. He's made no secret of his feelings toward me disdain at best, hatred at worst. Actually, I considered whether this new pleasantness is his way of rewarding me for leaving, but then why not grab my resignation and run with it instead of hinting he won't take it? Is this some elaborate attempt to ensure he can keep me miserable longer? Was three years not enough?"

"I'm sure that's not it. Perhaps your resignation shed light on his own behaviour and he realised he'd been unfair. Perhaps he's trying to make amends," Lucius suggested carefully.

She snorted indelicately. "Unlikely. He's hated me since the moment he met me, and no matter how I tried to improve his opinion, it was set in stone. I hardly think he'd

suddenly change his mind after all these years."

Lucius frowned. "He can be unreasonable, certainly, but usually not forever. Unless you did something to him ..."

"What could I have done? I was eleven!"

"Perhaps it was later, then. When you were a pupil, he had a cover to maintain he had to be unpleasant toward you. Did you do something in the final battle, or soon afterward? Did something happen in that job interview?"

Hermione shook her head. "I've wracked my brain, Lucius, and I can't think of anything. I tried to be supportive while he was in hospital as far as I can tell, he had few visitors, so I used to read Potions journals to him when he was comatose. When he woke up, he did everything he could to get me to stop visiting, which I ignored at first, but eventually I realised getting so worked up couldn't be good for him and I stopped going. I had no contact at all with him when I was in France, and he seemed fine in response to my letter inquiring about the position as well as at the interview. I wouldn't have taken the job otherwise." She shrugged. "If I offended him in some way, I can't think how. Unless my very presence at his sickbed was so offensive that he's still holding a grudge."

Lucius sipped his tea thoughtfully. "Well, the workings of Severus's mind are often a mystery, even to me. I suppose you've tried apologising?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Many times I thought it couldn't hurt, although I never had any idea what I was apologising for. He didn't want to hear it. Which makes his current behaviour completely perplexing." She sighed. "I can only conclude he's so pleased to be shot of me for good that he can't contain his delight."

"But there's still the refusal to accept your notice, which seems to render that highly unlikely. No, I think Severus has decided he wants you to stay it's the only thing that makes sense."

"But why? Does he want to *actually* start afresh this time, like he said he did three years ago? Or does he feel I haven't suffered enough for whatever horrible transgression he thinks I've committed?"

Lucius shrugged. He clearly wasn't getting anywhere in convincing her of Severus's good intentions. He had only one more possibility to offer her, and he was quite certain Severus would have his head for even suggesting it. Still, if it would soften her even a little ... "You know, Hermione, all I can think is that his behaviour toward you over the past three years is rather reminiscent of Draco's attitude toward you when he was about twelve years old." He allowed a small smile to cross his lips fleetingly, as though the follies of his son's youth amused him.

"That's hardly a recommendation, Lucius. Draco hated me when he was twelve."

"No, he didn't. He had a completely inappropriate crush on you, and since he *knew* it was inappropriate, he ensured you would hate him enough to keep him from acting on it."

After a long shocked stare, Hermione burst out laughing. Lucius smiled slightly at her she really was attractive when she was amused like this, and he could see why Severus would want her. She finally brought herself under control. "Honestly, Lucius, I don't know what's funnier, the idea of Draco with a crush on me when he was twelve, or of Professor Snape with a crush on me now." She shook her head and stood. "Thanks for the laugh I really needed it." She made to pull out some Galleons, but he waved her away.

"I've got it. Good luck with Severus."

"Thanks," Hermione said, giving him one last smile before she left.

"Well?" Severus demanded as he stepped through Lucius's Floo that evening. "What did she have to say for herself?"

"Really, Severus, where are your manners? Not even a hello and a chance to pour the brandy before getting down to business?"

Severus rolled his eyes. Lucius could be such a pain in the arse sometimes. "Oh, excuse me. Hello, Lucius, how are you this evening?" he asked with mock sincerity.

"Fine, thank you, Severus." Lucius responded, but this time with complete sincerity. Severus glowered at him. Lucius's features remained smooth as he continued, "How are you? Shall we discuss what Professor Granger had to say over some brandy?"

Severus still glowered, but when Lucius didn't speak, he managed to bite out, "Yes, thank you. That would be very pleasant."

"Excellent. Have a seat."

Severus forced himself to wait until they had each taken a sip before continuing the game Lucius was amusing himself with this evening. "And how did you find Professor Granger today?"

Lucius shook his head mournfully. "Sadly, I'm afraid she seemed quite unable to remember to cast Impervious whilst walking in the rain."

"*Lucius!*"

Lucius looked pleased to have provoked him into an outburst; having done so, he got down to business immediately. "You have your work cut out for you, Severus. She can't decide if your current manners are a reward for announcing her imminent departure, or an attempt to get her to stay so you can torture her longer. And she's quite certain you wouldn't do anything so frivolous as dancing. Really, you've dug yourself quite a hole to wallow in."

Dancing? What the bloody hell does dancing have to do with anything? Severus decided he didn't really want to know. "What did you tell her?"

"I didn't comment on your propensity to dance, but pointed out that though you could be unreasonable for long periods of time, eventually you would recognise your mistake and try to make amends, which is apparently what you're doing now." He gave Severus a meaningful glare. "Aren't you?"

"Obviously," Severus agreed irritably. "I've been as polite and charming as I can possibly be. Thank Merlin I go into St. Mungo's Monday morning. I doubt I could maintain this charade longer than that without some sort of break."

"Don't be such an arse. You'll maintain this as long as you must to get her signed to a new and preferably long contract."

"Yes, yes." Severus agreed dismissively. "But it still irks me that she's getting everything she wanted from her little blackmail scheme."

"First, she definitely isn't getting *everything* she wants, and second, are you still on about that? She wasn't blackmailing you."

"You weren't there, Lucius. You didn't see her talking about 'fresh starts' if I hired her."

"Perhaps not, but I was there today when I asked her what she had done to offend you. The girl is a terrible liar, as you should know after all these years, and her bewilderment was completely genuine. I would stake my life and Draco's and my fortune, for that matter on it."

"She's got you fooled, Lucius." Severus shook his head in frustration, but he couldn't resist asking, "And what did you mean by 'she isn't getting everything she wants'? She's got the job she wanted, hasn't she? And now, despite my best efforts, she gets to keep it. It's not fair."

"You sound like a spoilt child. Since when have you expected life to be fair? And if you ask me, it's not the *job* she really wanted." Lucius's smug expression suggested he thought he was privy to inside information, which perhaps he was. The man was still better at ferreting out information than anyone Severus had ever known.

That wasn't the point now, however, so he asked, "Well, then, why did she blackmail me for it?"

"Gods, Severus, will you let that rest? She *didn't* blackmail you for the job or anything else. Is it so hard to believe she wants your good opinion?"

Severus was stunned. "Yes, frankly, it is. She hates me as much as I hate her."

"She said she visited you for months while you were in hospital. Who does that for someone they hate?" Severus's scepticism must have shown, because Lucius sighed. "This is pointless. Let's get my Pensieve out and I'll show you the memory. You'll see what I mean."

"I'm sure I won't, but if you insist on showing me ..."

Lucius smirked again. "This way."

Lucius was amused at Severus's stubborn insistence that Hermione *must* have been blackmailing him, even after they watched the Pensieve twice. He had, of course, carefully ended the memory before he began hinting to Hermione about Severus's 'crush'. It was, after all, fun to provoke him, but it would be much less fun to dodge hexes in his parlour. "Severus, it's as obvious as the nose on your face." (This earned him one of Severus's best glares). "She's completely perplexed. She has no idea why you hate her so much, and she never intended to blackmail you. If you watch carefully, she seems to be trying to protect you, at least at the beginning."

"Protect me?" Severus snorted. "From what?"

"Gryffindor that she is, she clearly has no idea that many Slytherins would be impressed by your ability to keep her under your thumb for nearly three years while treating her like something lower than a house-elf. She's obviously trying to make sure I don't think your treatment of her is as bad as I'm sure it was because she doesn't want you fired."

Severus frowned, then looked at the memory again. He was still frowning when he came out. "It doesn't make sense. I remember the interview very clearly. I still have her letter in my files. I'll grant you, it was subtle, but ..."

"Perhaps we ought to review *that* memory, along with the letter."

Severus glared at him, but Lucius suspected Severus would run to his files and his own Pensieve the very moment he got back to his office. He decided to add fuel to the fire. "In any event, if you watch closely, it's clear she doesn't hate you. In fact, it looks to me as though she likes you rather more than she's comfortable with."

Other than another glare, Severus didn't respond to that; instead, he took his leave moments later.

Chapter 7

Chapter 8 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 7

By the time he left for St. Mungo's on Monday morning, Severus had been forced to acknowledge, if only to himself, that he had apparently been punishing Granger for the past three years for something she hadn't actually done. After watching both his own memory of the job interview and Lucius's borrowed memory of tea dozens of times, re-reading her letter of inquiry about the Arithmancy post, and finally pulling out his memories of some of her (less embarrassing) visits to him in hospital, he just couldn't sustain a belief that she could possibly be as subtle as he had been giving her credit (or blame) for.

No, as much as he was loath to admit, it appeared he had been so distracted by his own feelings of humiliation and embarrassment and (perhaps) paranoia that he had seen a plot where none existed. Her every expression was so open and hopeful as she spoke with him about starting afresh that even the most suspicious person on the planet (which he clearly was) had to admit it couldn't have been a sly blackmail attempt.

Furthermore, Lucius was right she was terrible at dissembling. Certainly, the words in her letter could be construed as hinting at blackmail and had they come from a fellow Slytherin, they almost certainly *would* have meant exactly that. But Severus had been too sick and too depressed and in too much pain to recall that Hermione Granger, Gryffindor extraordinaire, would never have been that subtle. And really, her ever-present (and, in his opinion, over-active) sense of fair play and integrity would never allow her to blackmail him over unintentional behaviour at a time when he was too weak to know what he was doing.

Of course, this didn't negate his embarrassment about everything she had seen and heard when she had visited him in hospital, but really, if she hadn't revealed any of that to anyone in the past eight years, he had to assume she was unlikely to do so now.

And then there was the question of her feelings toward him. Lucius had hinted that Hermione might actually have ... *liked* him might even still. Once he removed the erstwhile blackmail from the equation, and looked at the way she had interacted with him over the years (particularly when he was in hospital and for the first few months she had been back at Hogwarts) well, it boggled the mind, really, but it certainly *looked* as though she had liked him at least a little bit back then. However, he had since worn her down with years of verbal abuse, and now he didn't know what to think.

Fortunately, he could distract himself with his treatments for the next several days. Perhaps his mind would be clearer when he was no longer so ... *frail*, he thought, despising the word even as he recognised its appropriateness.

On the second day of his treatment, Lucius came to see him. They had completed the chelation therapy the evening before, so now it was a matter of thrice daily potions and a rotating series of Healers casting diagnostic and healing charms until they determined he was cured or as cured as he was going to get. It was exhausting; Lucius took the brunt of his bad mood. "What do *you* want?"

"Is that any way to greet a friend come to see about your welfare?"

"Lucius, I am in no mood for your games. Why are you bothering me?"

Lucius sighed pitifully. "Here I am, worried about one of my oldest friends, and this is the thanks I get?" He shook his head. When Severus deepened his scowl, he said, "All right, fine, I'll get to the point. I think you should ask to see Hermione while you're in hospital."

"What? Why would I do that? This is the only respite I'm going to get from her company for the next three months at least more if your stupid plan works."

Lucius frowned. "It's not a stupid plan, and may I remind you that it's all in your best interest? You should invite her to visit you because, combined with an apology for your past behaviour, it will go further than anything else I can think of to persuade her you're sincerely trying to make amends rather than attempting to manipulate her. It will contrast nicely with your demands for her to leave you be when last you were in hospital."

"You want me to apologise to her *now*? I was planning to wait a few weeks to accustom her to my more charming self. And how do you know I made her leave last time?"

"Educated guess. Well, that and, as you should recall after watching the memory a thousand times, she told me at tea the other day." He shook his head. "See? No subtlety. Anyway, of course you should apologise as soon as possible. Why wait? Even *you* must have admitted by now that you've been wrong about her intentions toward you; nothing is served by putting it off."

"I admit nothing."

"To me? No, of course not. I wouldn't expect you to. But I refuse to believe you're too stubborn to admit your mistakes to *yourself*. Now, do you want to rehearse what you'll say to her? I'd advise looking as weak and pitiful as possible. If she thinks the treatment is unpleasant, she'll be more sympathetic."

"It *is* unpleasant!" Severus didn't point out that he had no intention of ever looking weak or pitiful in front of Granger or anyone else. Not if he could possibly help it, anyway.

"All the better. I'm sure, with the Dark Lord gone so long, you're out of practice with intrigues like this. Far better that you're actually feeling awful than that you're pretending. Honesty is the best policy," he added virtuously.

"Go away, Lucius."

"Of course. You need your rest. I'll wait another day before mentioning to Hermione that you'd like to see her, shall I? You'll probably need that much time to get into the right mindset."

Two evenings later, Hermione paused to take a steadying breath outside the door to Severus's room at St. Mungo's. Much as she liked to tell herself she had stopped visiting him all those years ago for his sake, the truth was it had been as much for hers as well. Even knowing everything he had sacrificed to ensure their victory, it was hard to keep returning to see a man who seemed to take malicious glee in terrorising her. Eventually, she couldn't face one more comment like "Get out, you bushy-haired demon from hell!" or "If only they had let me die, I wouldn't be forced to listen to your inane prattle!" or "Give me my wand, dammit, so I can end my torment at last!" She had never been quite sure if he had dreamt of killing himself or her, but either way, it stung.

Now, she told herself Lucius wouldn't have set her up for more abuse. They weren't friends, exactly, but they weren't enemies either, and Lucius liked having a war heroine as an ally. He also liked having her affiliated with Hogwarts.

But one never knew what Lucius was really about. He and Professor Snape seemed to have a weird sort of friendship, where they competed and provoked and annoyed one another, but supported one another when it was really important. It was downright bizarre, she had thought on the rare occasions when she saw them together. Last time, it had been at a Hogwarts Fundraising Ball that Lucius had somehow forced his friend to attend soon after Hermione had returned to England. She had found herself watching them together on and off throughout the event, completely baffled by their behaviour. Professor Snape was prickly and provoking, but there seemed to be no heat behind it. At one point, when she had been standing at the bar behind them, she had heard him complain that Lucius could force him to attend but couldn't seriously expect him to waste time conversing with idiots. Lucius, in turn, told the professor (not for the first time, by the sound of it) that finding a willing woman and getting himself laid would certainly improve his outlook. Hermione, who had been standing at the bar behind them, had found herself flushing with embarrassment (and perhaps a tiny bit of interest) as she wondered what sort of woman he would want, and what sort of lover he would be. As she had sneaked away, not wanting them to know she had been listening, she had heard the headmaster comment a bit snidely, "It's never done anything for *your* disposition, Lucius. Now, you appear to have a hair out of place you'd better fix it before your reputation is ruined permanently."

So it was possible Lucius was using her as some sort of pawn in his weird game with Professor Snape. But then again, given how strongly Snape seemed to dislike her, she suspected setting her up as a nasty surprise visitor for him while he was laid up in hospital might cross some sort of boundary, even for Lucius. Still, she found it hard to believe that a man who previously would have rather been dead or in Azkaban than suffer her company would suddenly be asking to see her. She braced herself for his hostility and knocked softly on the door.

"Enter."

"Headmaster?" she asked tentatively. Then, remembering she was leaving Hogwarts in three short months and she didn't have to stay if she didn't want to, she added more confidently, "Lucius said you asked to see me."

He looked up from the journal he was reading. "Yes, I did. Stop hovering in the doorway and come take a seat."

She forced down her anxiety and took the chair he indicated.

He watched her closely, and she felt her cheeks grow warm under his scrutiny. Finally, when she couldn't take another second of silence, she asked rather snappishly, "What? Do I have a spot or something? I know you're dying to insult me, so just go ahead and do it already."

He raised a brow. "You think I asked to see you in order to insult you?"

"Your day never seems complete until you've taken a shot or two at me. It's not as though you'd ever want to have a civil conversation with me."

"You accepted my invitation to visit, expecting that it would be unpleasant?"

"I'm here, aren't I? Now, would you like to insult me first, or would you like to skip straight to the part where you threaten to kill one of us if I don't leave immediately?"

He sighed. "Professor Granger Hermione" She started at his use of her given name for the first time ever. "I have no intention of insulting you or threatening anyone's life. In fact, I've had a lot of time to think in the past few days, and it occurred to me I've been extremely unfair to you since ... well, since I've known you, really, but especially since I hired you. I asked to see you because I want to apologise for my abominable past behaviour and ask if we can start afresh."

Although she was normally not a suspicious person, Hermione couldn't reconcile the man she knew with this one. "Are you really Severus Snape?" she blurted.

He frowned. "Who else would I be?"

"I don't know there's always Polyjuice but then, why would you be here for treatment if it wasn't you? So I suppose you must be ... well, *you*. Anyway, it's just a little hard for me to believe you actually mean it this time. We agreed to make a fresh start when you hired me, but your treatment of me got progressively worse until a week ago.

And it wasn't good to start with."

He flushed. "It's different this time."

"How? Why should I think you won't do another about-face as soon as I agree not to hold the past against you?"

He looked away and seemed to consider her question before answering. "For one thing, I expect I won't be in as much physical discomfort as I've been in for the last eight years."

Momentarily diverted, she asked, "So the treatment seems to be helping, then?"

"Yes. In addition to thinking, I've been sleeping a lot the past few days, and my appetite is returning."

"I'm glad to hear that. But I'm not sure how that relates to our fresh start."

Looking impatient, he asked, "How is *your* mood when you don't feel well?"

"Not good," Hermione acknowledged. "But that doesn't explain why you singled *me* out to be your favourite scapegoat. Nor does it say you'll stop when you're feeling better."

He was silent again. After a bit, she decided to leave him to his thoughts. When she stood, he snapped, "Where are you going? We're in the middle of a conversation."

"Since you haven't said anything in ten minutes, I assumed we were finished."

"I was trying to decide what to say." He sounded defensive.

"Have you decided, then?"

"Not really, but I'd rather you didn't leave just yet. Why don't you read this while I work it out?" He handed her the journal he had been reading when she walked in.

"All right," she said doubtfully, and began to read as he turned to look out the window.

After only two paragraphs, she felt his eyes on her again. Exasperated, she looked up. "Would you please stop staring at me?"

He merely raised an eyebrow before turning to gaze out the window. Hermione didn't know what to make of that, so she went back to her reading.

Severus struggled not to stare at Hermione. For once, he didn't want to make her uncomfortable, but he didn't know how to reassure her of his sincerity (which he wasn't even entirely sure was real) without airing everything he wished had never happened.

While she continued to read, he stared out the window, thinking back to the last time he had been in hospital.

Eight years ago

At first, he hadn't been aware of anything. They had put him in a magically-induced coma using a medical version of a stasis charm to prevent him dying before they could stabilise him. He had been comatose, he later learned, for nearly two months. At some point during that time, he had become half-aware of a voice that sometimes read to him from various academic journals. It was a female voice, and his semi-conscious mind had concluded it must be Lily, conveniently forgetting Lily was dead and couldn't possibly be reading to him.

When they had finally lifted the coma, he was weak and feverish, apparently to the point of delirium. He thought Lily was visiting him he was so sure it was her. Who else, after all, had ever cared enough for him to spend so much time at his sickbed, putting cool cloths on his brow and holding his hand to soothe him? Not even his mother had bothered with all that.

He talked to her, and she talked back. "Lily, do you forgive me at last? I never meant to hurt you I was just so humiliated. You know I didn't mean it, right?"

"Shhh, of course I forgive you. Of course you didn't mean it. You're a good person, and you love me. You would never hurt me."

"That's right. I love you I would never hurt you. I took care of your son for you. Have I made enough amends?"

"It's all right, Severus. You've done more than enough."

"Stay with me, Lily, please? Don't leave me."

"I'm here, Severus. Now sleep. You need rest to get well."

To please her, he slept.

When he woke, she was still there, reading another journal. He said, "Read to me, Lily. I love your voice." She smiled and began reading aloud, and he fell asleep again to the soothing sound of her voice.

The next time, it was dark; he could just make out her form curled in the chair beside him. He whispered, "Lily?"

She stirred and said, "Hmmm?"

"You're still dead, aren't you?" he asked mournfully.

"Yes, I am."

"How am I talking to you? Am I dead, too?"

"No, Severus, you aren't dead. It's not your time yet."

"It has to be. I can't be without you anymore. I have nothing else."

"You have a whole life ahead of you, Severus. You're free now. Voldemort is defeated. You've fulfilled your oath. You've done your duty. You can live for yourself now."

"I don't want to live for myself! I don't want to live at all! Nothing will ever be right for me not after what I did to you."

"It was a mistake, Severus, an accident. You never meant to hurt me, and I don't blame you for any of it. You tried to protect me. You would have if you could. You protected Harry and his friends."

"But everyone hates me!"

"You need to stop blaming yourself. Let the past go. Do it for me this one last thing."

"No! Don't leave me!" He was crying now, and he swiped angrily at the tears running down his face. "Let me come with you! Please!"

"No, Severus. You must live your life." Leaning forward, she reached out and gently wiped the tears from his face. He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet and then down to the edge of the bed with surprising strength. Throwing his arms around her, he sobbed into her chest.

"I can't be here alone! I can't!" Her arms came around him, stroking his hair and his back gently as she murmured soothing noises into his hair.

Eventually, she whispered, "You can, Severus. You must. You won't be alone for long. Everyone will know you're a good person. Everyone will understand what you had to do. You'll make friends, maybe have a family someday. You'll make a wonderful life for yourself."

Suddenly suspicious was that really how her voice sounded? Was that really how her hair felt? Had she always smelled like almonds? If she was a ghost, how could he hold her at all? Severus narrowed his eyes, trying to see her in the darkness, groping for the clarity of mind that was rapidly returning. "If I'm alive and you're dead, how am I talking to you?"

"You needed me." She sounded nervous.

He pulled back, trying to see her face.

She turned away, as though to make sure he couldn't. "I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow." With her back to him, she gathered her things in the darkness, not even casting a simple *Lumos* before turning toward the door. At the last second, she twisted back and kissed the top of his head, then fled out into the corridor.

Severus stared after her in the darkness. Since when did ghosts open doors?

Chapter 8

Chapter 9 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 8

While Professor Snape continued to stare out the window into the darkness, Hermione forced herself to continue reading. She wasn't really absorbing much of what she read, though. Her mind seemed inexorably pulled toward the last time they had been here.

Eight Years Ago

When she realised he no longer believed she was Lily, she fled from his room, heart pounding, hoping it had been too dark for him to recognise her. Until the very end of that conversation in the middle of the night, she hadn't recognised the signs that he was coming out of his delirium and would comprehend that Lily couldn't be talking to him or comforting him as she was.

She hadn't planned it, of course. Once the dust settled from the final battle, it had occurred to her that she hadn't heard anything of how he was recovering from his injuries. The *Prophet* hadn't reported his death, as she assumed it would, so she began asking those she was working with on the repairs to Hogwarts if they knew anything. No one seemed to have any idea what happened to him once he got to St. Mungo's, even though everyone seemed to know by now which side he had been working for. Eventually, Poppy asked after him during a Floo consultation with a Healer over one of her patients, and told Hermione, "They have him under medical stasis. They're trying to build up his blood volume, but the remaining venom in his system seems to be slowing things down. It appears the venom has evolved in some way since Arthur Weasley was bit. Probably some nasty bit of Dark Magic ..."

"May I visit him?"

"I should imagine so, dear, though I'm not sure there's any point. He won't know you're there."

"It doesn't matter, does it? He has no one else; someone should be there for him. Can you imagine how awful it would be to wake up alone?"

"You're such a kind girl, Hermione, always taking care of anyone who needs it."

So she had gone, and kept going, to visit him, taking along books and journals so she could read to him. The Healers thought she was crazy, but they weren't particularly strict about visiting hours since she wasn't disturbing his rest. She often dozed off in the chair beside his bed, only to wake up in the wee hours of the morning and return to Grimmauld Place, where she was staying with Harry until she figured out what to do next.

She reasoned if the Healers were right and *hecouldn't* hear her, then sitting with him, reading to him, would do no harm, while if he could, it might help. It seemed to her that after a few days, he looked more relaxed and breathed a bit easier when she read to him.

When the Stasis Charm was lifted at last, he was still very sick delirious with fever and pain, it seemed. He kept thrashing in his sleep, calling for Lily, begging for forgiveness. Hermione had found she couldn't refuse to answer when he stared at *her* as he pleaded with Lily to accept his apology. She reasoned that after everything he had done, *no one* could refuse his pleas certainly not a woman whose son he had done so much for. Soon, she was so used to answering him as Lily that it came naturally she didn't have to think about it as she told him yes, he was forgiven, and no, it wasn't his time to die. It hadn't occurred to her that he might realise in the middle of a conversation that she wasn't actually Lily.

When she returned a few days after fleeing his comprehension, word had apparently spread that he was awake. The mediwitch told her he had had a number of visitors since waking Poppy, Minerva, Hagrid, Flitwick. Even Luna had visited. With most of them, she said he had been terse but generally civil. He had been rude to just one visitor Rita Skeeter, who had had the temerity to approach him about a book she wanted to write about his double life.

When Hermione entered his room, she rather expected to be treated the way most of his other visitors had been, but she soon learned he had no intention of being even marginally civil to her. Initially, she put it down to his lingering symptoms, or to tiredness after a number of other visitors had paraded through his room. But after trying every few days for several weeks, long after other visitors got caught up in their own lives and stopped coming to see him, and soon after his insults and demands for her to

leave grew more insistent and less polite, she finally accepted he just didn't like her and didn't want her there. She sent him a note wishing him a speedy and full recovery and moved on with her life. She took notice when the *Prophet* announced his release from hospital, and when he was acquitted of any wrongdoing, and when he was reinstated at Hogwarts, but other than that, she gave him little thought until the Arithmancy post opened up.

Now, eight years later, here they were again, only he suddenly seemed to want her there, even though he didn't appear to have anything to say to her. She was jarred from her musings when he asked abruptly, "Why did you do it?"

Her eyes flew to his. "Do what? Come back to Hogwarts?"

"No, not that. Why did you pretend to be Lily?"

Severus watched the blood drain from Hermione's face as the question sank in. He had reluctantly concluded that the only way to convince her of his sincerity was to allow her to understand what he had been holding against her all these years, and why. After a moment, she asked, "You you knew? You recognised me? And didn't say anything?"

Severus hastily corrected her assumption. "I didn't know immediately. I knew *someone* must have pretended to be her that last night, my mind cleared enough to realise it wasn't a ghost or a dream. I didn't see who it was, though. But then, every time you came here after I woke up, I got even more irritated than usual something about you set me off every time. It wasn't until I got your letter when you stopped visiting that I realised. So tell me why?"

Looking away, Hermione sighed. "You were so weak, so ill, and so very depressed. You needed something to live for a reason to go on. In short, you needed Lily her forgiveness, her blessing and it seemed to me that after everything you'd done, she would have freely given it. So I gave it on her behalf. I never expected or wanted you to know. What gave me away?"

"Your scent." Hermione looked confused, so he clarified, "When you were comforting me that last night, you smelled of almonds. The scent lingered on the parchment of your letter, as well; it triggered my memory, and I knew it was you."

"I used to use almond-scented bath oil and lotion all the time," Hermione mused aloud. "Still do, occasionally."

"I know. It always puts me in a particularly foul mood."

"Is *this* what you've been angry about?" Sounding offended, she turned to glare at him. "I was trying to help you! Is that really so offensive that it would cause you to hold a grudge for *eight* years?"

Severus forced himself to be honest, even though it went against every natural instinct he had. *She's Gryffindor*, he reminded himself, *not Slytherin. She has an unnatural attachment to truth.* "That's not how I saw it at the time. Perhaps I wasn't thinking clearly keep in mind I was ... *ill*, and coming out of twenty years of trusting essentially no one."

"But it's been years in all that time, *it never* occurred to you that I was just trying to help you?"

"Why would you help me? You hated me, as far as I knew." He gestured impatiently. "If you must know, I found the whole episode so ... humiliating ... that I avoided thinking about it again."

"Then why hire me at all? Why not refuse me outright when I enquired about the Arithmancy post? Or why not bring it up then?"

Severus found himself reluctantly amused. *A perfect example of her Gryffindor tendencies* ... He decided to tell her so. "Hermione, you're thinking like a Gryffindor. I'm sure that's what any member of your house would have done. You're forgetting that when I got your letter, I was thinking like a Slytherin."

"So you ... what? Pretended to be interested in a fresh start so you could spend the next three years getting back at me?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Why is that ridiculous? You certainly didn't actually want civility between us."

Instead of answering her directly, Severus asked, "Tell me, Hermione, have you ever blackmailed anyone?"

She flushed, avoiding his eyes again. "N no, of course not."

He raised an eyebrow and waited until she returned her eyes to his. "Lucius is right. You're a terrible liar. Just tell me this: if you *had* blackmailed someone, hypothetically speaking, who would it have been, why, and what would you have said?"

She looked suspicious. "Hypothetically only?" He nodded. She spoke hesitantly at first. "Well, I suppose if I had ... say ... learnt something ... incriminating ... about a reporter ... perhaps one who liked to write exaggerations and lies that hurt people, I suppose I might have ... possibly used that information to persuade that person to write and publish an article that was more truthful." She finished in a rush, as though the words couldn't be contained any longer.

"See? Even your blackmail is done Gryffindor-style." Severus allowed his voice to reflect his ongoing amusement at her hypothetical confession (and her discomfort with it, if he were completely honest).

"What does *that* mean?" She looked mildly affronted. She really could be amusing to talk to, Severus mused.

"Before I answer that, tell me how you would have gotten the hypothetical reporter to publish what you wanted? What would you have said?"

"I suppose ... well ... I'd probably say something like 'I've written this article and if you don't publish it under your byline, I'll report you to the Ministry.' Why?"

"Because if I had been at all clear in the head in the past three years, I would have realised that what I took as blackmail was actually worded far too subtly to actually be that, unless it was from a fellow Slytherin."

Hermione paled again before she jumped up and started pacing. "You thought I was *blackmailing* you? When? And with what?"

"Would you please sit down? You're making me dizzy." She glared at him before complying. "It started with your letter about the Arithmancy post, and then some of the things you said during the interview seemed to me to confirm my belief."

She seemed to be having trouble processing this disclosure, asking again, "You thought *I* blackmailed you for my job? Why would I do that? I've never cheated on anything in my life. It would never occur to me to do that!" She looked deeply offended, and perhaps even hurt, at the implication.

"Yes, well, I finally realised that after discussing your attempted resignation with Lucius. That man is the master of plotting and manipulation, and he was most insistent that it wasn't your style to blackmail me in such a manner. He also pointed out that you'd have been able to get nearly any job you wanted you wouldn't need to leverage anything in your favour."

He watched her in silence for a moment, waiting to see if she would be mollified by his admission of his longstanding mistake about her character. Before she said anything more, though, the Healer bustled in. "I'm sorry, miss, you'll have to come back tomorrow. Visiting hours are over, and the headmaster needs his potions and then some rest."

"All right," Hermione said, sounding relieved as she hurried toward the door. "Good night, Headmaster."

"Hermione, wait!"

Turning, she asked, "What?"

Much as he hated the thought, if he was going to win her over, he would have to make some concessions. He snapped, "First, my name is Severus, and I expect you to use it. Second, I would be most grateful if you would return tomorrow."

She stared at him for a long moment before hesitantly agreeing. "All right. I suppose ... I'll see you tomorrow, then."

Hermione's head was aching by the time she reached Hogwarts. Upon reaching her quarters, she rummaged through the medicine cupboard until she found a Headache Potion. Then, as she began her bedtime ritual, she allowed herself to review their conversation.

She didn't know why she was so upset by the suspicion toward her he had just revealed. It shouldn't have surprised her, she supposed he had always been mistrustful of almost everyone he knew, hadn't he? And those he *had* trusted well, they had all let him down, hadn't they? Lucius, Dumbledore, Minerva, his parents ... Lily. *Especially* Lily. Hermione could almost hate the woman for refusing to forgive him when he was so obviously contrite. If she had, who knew how his life might have been different?

Then again, she supposed if his life had been different, they might not have won the war. She snorted aloud at the thought that Dumbledore's greater good really was served by Professor Snape's *no*, she thought, *must get used to calling him Severus* relationship failures all those years ago. It really wasn't fair. When would his past stop hurting him and anyone who tried to care for him? Hadn't he suffered enough? Hadn't they all? And how was his continued suffering serving anyone now?

It wasn't his general suspicion, but the depth of his distrust toward her in particular that really had caught her off guard. No wonder he had warned his student about her. If he thought she would stoop to blackmail to get a job, why shouldn't he believe she'd steal her students' work? If ambition outweighed integrity in one instance, why not in another? Why not in *every* instance?

Still, to realise his opinion of her was so very low when he had known her for more than fifteen years made her want to cry. Intellectually, she understood his history made him look for nefarious motives and plots everywhere, but emotionally ...

Why couldn't he see that *she* wasn't like that? Why couldn't he give her the benefit of the doubt, just once?

She got into bed and pondered the question for a long time before finally falling asleep.

Chapter 9

Chapter 10 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 9

The next evening, Severus waited rather more anxiously than he cared to admit for Hermione to arrive. He was quite certain she would have been analysing everything he had told her, and even more certain she would have questions. He just hoped he could answer them to her satisfaction without having to say too much.

At last, she knocked and let herself into the room. He forced himself to smile slightly as he greeted her. It certainly wouldn't do to scare her with a full grin, even had he been so inclined, would it? Very politely, he said, "Hello, Hermione. Thank you for coming back."

"Hello, s Severus. How are you feeling?"

He was amused at the way she stumbled over his name, but decided it wouldn't be smart to tease her about it. She'd probably take it the wrong way. "Much improved, all things considered."

Naturally, she had a question. "Have they said when you'll be released?"

"I'm told they expect the treatment will be complete the day after tomorrow."

"I imagine you'll be relieved to get back to Hogwarts."

Nodding, Severus said, "I admit, now my appetite has at last returned, I'm looking forward to the house-elves' cooking. Why is it the food at magical hospitals is no better than that at muggle ones?"

She smiled, though a bit uncomfortably. "The Department of Mysteries really ought to look into that question sometime."

An awkward silence followed. Eventually, Severus realised it would be up to him to break it. Considering she was here, he decided that a straightforward approach had worked well thus far. "I assume you have a thousand questions about our discussion last night."

She flushed and sounded defensive when she replied, "Not a thousand, no. A few, though."

"You may as well ask. I'll answer as truthfully as I can."

She studied him for a long moment. "Why now?"

"Now?"

"Why are you now suddenly interested in changing the dynamic of our relationship? If you can even call it a relationship, that is?"

Severus considered his words carefully. The truth was working well so far, so he decided to continue in that vein (though there was no need to be overly expansive, was there?). "Lucius persuaded me to reconsider whether my memory of your interview was accurate. I looked at it again in my Pensieve, mainly because I wanted to prove him wrong. However, when I did, I realised your body language was completely inconsistent with someone up to no good."

"How so?"

Severus fought back the sigh that wanted to escape at her question. He'd already given her one answer, but apparently that was not going to be enough. He reminded himself, however, that she'd been this way since he'd met her at age eleven; she was hardly going to change now. "You didn't look smug or even sure of yourself. You looked ... hopeful. Excited. Like someone seeking approval or validation rather than revenge." She looked away, seemingly embarrassed. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Come now, Hermione. We can't make a fresh start without being open with one another. Haven't I been forthright in acknowledging my misconceptions?"

She studied him again, so he kept his expression as open and neutral as he could manage. "Fine, but if you ever try to use this conversation against me, I *will* seek revenge, and I guarantee you won't like it." For a moment, watching her expression harden, he understood how she had mostly kept Potter and Weasley in check over the years. When he nodded acknowledgement, she continued, "I was thinking how pathetic it was that I was still looking for your approval and so obvious about it so many years after you made it clear I would never get it."

He digested that. "And now?"

She shrugged. "I like to think I've given up. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't have resigned."

Not wanting to admit that the tables had turned, he asked, "What else do you want to know?"

He studied her as the silence dragged on. Clearly there was some kind of internal conflict taking place - a battle between her desire to be polite and her insatiable curiosity. Finally, albeit quietly, she asked, "Do you still hate me?"

He was about to say he had never hated her, but stopped himself. Denial would get him nowhere. He *had* hated her. Or at least, he had hated who he thought she was. Now, he didn't know what to think of her, so that's what he told her. "I don't know how to answer that."

"It's not a difficult question," she replied with a huff. "Either you do or you don't."

Severus sighed. "In some ways, I don't think it was ever you I hated. If the last few days have taught me anything, it's that I've never had any idea who you are. So, I don't know."

Once again, there was silence as he waited for her to absorb what he had divulged. He wondered, briefly, if she would continue this line of questioning or move on to the next topic. Finally, she asked, "What do you expect to come of this if I agree to a fresh start?"

"I expect ... to finally lay the past to rest. Perhaps to persuade you to stay at Hogwarts, or if not, to part on mutually acceptable terms." She seemed to expect more, so he shrugged and added, "Perhaps even to form a friendship of some sort."

She considered that. "What if I say no?"

Severus wanted to say she couldn't refuse, but he realised she needed to feel she had a choice. Otherwise, things would be no different than before in any way that would matter to her. She would still feel disrespected, abused, and trapped, and the very minute her contract expired, she would leave. "Then I suppose ... I'll respect your wishes as best I can and avoid you as much as possible until the end of term. And you'll still leave with a strong reference."

"What would be in it for you in that case?" she asked, obviously still suspicious of his motives.

She wasn't as malleable as he had thought, he realised yet another way in which he had failed to see her clearly, he supposed. "Atonement, I think. Or perhaps just peace." Again, she seemed to be waiting for more, so he forced himself to add, "I've spent my entire life atoning for one mistake or another. I'm tired of always being one down on the karmic scale."

He watched her face. Her every thought was there on the surface he wouldn't have needed Legilimency even if he had been inclined to use it. He could see her struggling with whether she could trust him, wondering whether this was just another form of torture, a way to draw her back in by requesting peace and another chance just when she had finally managed to detach.

She seemed to realise he was waiting for her to say something. She stood suddenly. "I can't I have to go. I need to think about this. I'm too tired to figure this out right now. I have to go."

Severus forced himself not to argue. If he pushed, she would push back, and he would lose whatever ground he might have gained. So, he waited until she reached the door before saying quietly, "Good night, Hermione."

She didn't turn around, but he took it as a hopeful sign that she said, "Good night, Severus."

For the next two days, Hermione found she was unable to focus on much of anything other than her conversation with Severus. She considered returning to visit him on his last evening in hospital, but ultimately decided not to. After all, he hadn't said she should come back, and the memory of being thrown out of his room repeatedly was still fresh, even after all these years.

Furthermore, she still wasn't sure she believed his sudden epiphany had anything to do with karma or atonement or peace. Immediately after the war, and again immediately after she had taken up the Arithmancy post, she had given him the benefit of the doubt, had put the past behind her and hoped even expected he would do the same. And what had it got her? Kicked in the face repeatedly with every insult he could think of, and a clear message that she wasn't worthy of anything from him save contempt.

Plus, it was one thing to apologise prettily and behave civilly when one was far removed from the usual stressors of day-to-day life. It was another thing entirely to be cordial where you lived. Hermione decided she would wait and see how he behaved toward her when he was back at Hogwarts and faced with the petty demands and annoyances of students, faculty, board members and ministry officials.

So she went about her business and avoided mentioning anything about her visits with Severus to anyone at Hogwarts. On Saturday, she took advantage of her free day to visit Harry and Luna again.

When she arrived in time for lunch, she felt herself truly relax for the first time since her last visit here. They both greeted her warmly and soon the three were laughing and talking about everything from Luna's pregnancy to Harry's job. Hermione could only marvel at how happy her friends seemed. She wondered if she would ever be as happy.

Eventually, when Luna had gone to see about getting tea together, Harry asked, "Anything new on the job search?"

"No, not really."

Harry frowned. "That's odd. I thought they'd be fighting to get you as soon as the news got out. Want me to put in a good word anywhere?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Hermione replied with a laugh. "Actually, I haven't really done much to get the word out since last time we spoke. There have been ... developments ... at Hogwarts," she confessed, somewhat reluctantly. She couldn't lie to Harry, but she knew answering the questions that were sure to follow wouldn't be easy either. A lot of mistrust and dislike still lay between him and Professor Snape.

"What sort of developments? Don't tell me the git is finally leaving?"

"Now, Harry, he's not a git just because he doesn't like me."

"No, but he *is* a git for treating you so horribly."

"Well, that's the thing. He's suddenly ... *not*."

"Not what?"

"Treating me horribly."

Harry stared at her. "You're kidding."

"No, really. The day after I gave notice, he suddenly found his civility in his dealings with me."

"He's pleased you're leaving, then."

"He says not. He's been calling it my 'attempted' resignation, as though it's not final or something. He asked for my opinion about that treatment they've wanted him to get for years, and then he actually went and got it. He asked to see me when he was in hospital, and he apologised for his past behaviour and asked to make a fresh start."

"Are you sure we're talking about the same person, Hermione? Tall, pale, greasy hair, bad teeth, never has a word to say about anything unless it's unpleasant?"

"I wondered the same thing myself, but no, it's definitely him. I'm not stupid, you know," she added with an admonishing look.

"I know that, Hermione," Harry admitted, sounding suitably contrite, "but you have a blind spot where he's concerned always have. How many times have you given him the benefit of the doubt, only to have him throw it back in your face the second your guard is down?"

"I know, Harry, but he explained why he's been doing that."

"You actually think there's an acceptable excuse for the way he's treated you?"

"Not an excuse, no. But there are reasons, and I can sort of see why he thought they were valid." Harry waited silently. "He thought I was blackmailing him when I applied for my job, okay?"

"What?"

"He thought "

"I heard you the first time, Hermione. I just can't believe anyone who knew you would think such a thing."

"That's just it. He says he didn't know me, not really." Harry looked highly sceptical, so she continued in a rush, "He says he wasn't in his right mind, and he didn't trust anyone, and he forgot that I don't think like a Slytherin, but like a Gryffindor. And I made the same mistake with him."

"And he wants you to believe he's suddenly seen the light?" Harry's scepticism seemed to have grown, rather than decreased, with her explanation.

Hermione sighed. "That's where the whole thing breaks down for me. I don't really understand why now, after so much time, he's suddenly willing to consider I might not be the lying, cheating, blackmailing schemer he always thought I was. He said something about Lucius persuading him I wasn't blackmailing him, but ..."

"Well, it doesn't really matter, does it? You're leaving at the end of term, anyway."

"Right," Hermione agreed, but her voice sounded doubtful to her own ears.

Having received a dinner invitation from Lucius and Narcissa, Severus stopped at Malfoy Manor before returning to Hogwarts. For the first time in years, he was able to fully enjoy the delicacies they offered, from the appetisers (caviar and a lovely pâté) to the soup (an utterly divine seafood bisque) to the main course (Beef Wellington) to the pudding (the best dark chocolate mousse he had ever tasted).

He found that now he could actually enjoy the meal, the small talk was far less tedious than he had always found it in the past. It was actually rather amusing to watch Lucius wind Narcissa up as he generally delighted in doing, and he didn't even mind (much) when Lucius then distracted her from her annoyance by getting her started on the topic of Severus's love life or lack thereof.

Thus, he wasn't even annoyed when, over after-dinner drinks in the parlour, Narcissa asked, "Who do we know that might be suitable for Severus?"

"I appreciate the thought, Narcissa, but I am perfectly content alone."

"Nonsense. Now that you're healthy, there's nothing to prevent you finding someone and settling down. You need someone to look after you."

Unbidden, the thought of Hermione's efforts to care for him when he thought she was Lily flashed through his mind. He frowned. "I'm quite capable of looking after myself."

"But why should you have to?" Lucius tossed his two Knuts in. "I'm sure we can find you someone appropriate if we put our minds to it."

"Ah, but we aren't putting our minds to it. If you recall, I already have my hands full at your insistence, I might add with other things."

"Pffft," Lucius said inelegantly. "You could charm her with one eye closed and you know it. Although perhaps you ought to consider dating *her* it would certainly raise your profile."

"Dating who?" Narcissa asked eagerly. "Who are you trying to charm, Severus? And why is this the first I'm hearing of it?"

"Now you've done it, Lucius. Do you see the gleam in her eye?" he asked before taking a sip of his drink.

"Well, I still maintain you have a crush on her," Lucius insisted. He added for Narcissa's benefit, "Severus is trying to persuade Hermione Granger to rescind the resignation she tendered last week."

"Oh." Narcissa looked disappointed.

"As Lucius knows very well, I do *not* have a crush on Hermione Granger. I can barely tolerate the woman. I'm not dating her, nor am I looking to date *any* woman. Lucius insists it's in Hogwarts's best interest to keep her there, so I'm trying to mend fences with her, as she's made very clear I'm the primary reason she wants to leave."

Narcissa looked thoughtful. "You're protesting very strongly for someone who has no interest beyond what's best for Hogwarts."

"Oh, no," Severus groaned. "Not you, too, Narcissa. Don't tell me you've become her fan as well?"

"Well, I can't say she's my favourite person, and she really ought to make more of an effort with that hair, but she's acceptable enough for a Muggleborn. At least she's clever. You have to admit, Severus, you'd be bored within an hour with someone who wasn't intelligent."

There was no winning once Narcissa was fully in matchmaking mode, Severus knew, so he decided a strategic retreat was his best option. As soon as he could manage it, he took his leave and headed home to Hogwarts.

Chapter 10

Chapter 11 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 10

For the first week after his return to Hogwarts, Severus saw little of Hermione. True to his word, he made a point of treating her very courteously whenever their paths crossed, but this was usually only at meals and, unfortunately, their usual seats were far enough apart that more than perfunctory conversations were impossible. If he could have moved his chair, he would, but as Headmaster, his was the one seat that could not, under any circumstances, be changed.

That being the case, he decided to try a more indirect approach. On the theory that she'd be more likely to grant him the fresh start he had asked for if he tried to make her duties more pleasant, he called a staff meeting, where he took her off night-time patrols for the remainder of the term. Hermione looked surprised at his announcement. When some of the other teachers grumbled, he told them it was their turn to shoulder some of the burden; it was hardly Hermione's fault that turnover amongst the staff was so low that she remained at the bottom of the seniority heap after three years. She couldn't be expected to do the least pleasant duties forever, could she? Their grumbling didn't stop completely until he pointed out impatiently, "Professor Granger has informed me she's considering leaving Hogwarts. I'm sure you'll all agree we would prefer she remain, and even if she doesn't, a more equitable division of duties will be implemented next term, anyway. Given that, I thought you'd prefer I make the change now in hopes of making her feel more inclined to stay put. Was I wrong?"

Nearly everyone present assured him he wasn't, and Hermione, who had been staring at him in surprise and looking like she wanted to announce that she had already given her notice, subsided, saying only, "Thank you, everyone. It will be nice to have a few months of normal sleep."

He also took himself off the patrol schedule. Before anyone could complain, he pointed out that he had done more than his fair share of patrols over the past eight years, and now that sleeping was a possibility for him, he deserved a few months' respite. Just to ensure there would be no misunderstanding, he made clear that both he and Hermione would resume patrols along with everyone else next year.

Then he announced some other changes to Hogwarts policies—most of which had been initially designed to annoy Hermione and hence implemented three years ago in anticipation of her arrival. For example, no longer would professors be restricted to checking only five books at a time out of the library. Madam Pince turned to glare at Hermione, as the rest of the faculty were more than content with that limit. Hermione, on the other hand, would happily borrow twenty or a hundred books at a time, and swear she needed every last one at hand in order to complete her research. With the new policy, she would now be able to work in her office, and thus avoid dealing with the glares of Madam Pince and the giggles and intrigues of the students who ventured into her corner of the library.

Next, he announced that faculty attendance at all Quidditch matches would henceforth be optional rather than mandatory, so long as at least three staff members were present at all matches. Since Hermione barely tolerated Quidditch, and the rest of the staff loved it, he knew she would never have to go to another match if she preferred not to.

That done, he waited a few days to see if she would stop avoiding him, as he had concluded she must be doing. It seemed odd to him that she was avoiding him more pointedly now than she had when he had treated her like his worst enemy, but in a strange way, that gave him hope. If she was avoiding him so assiduously, he reasoned, she must feel at some risk of being unable to stick with her decision to leave if she were to spend time with him.

When neither the change to her duties nor the removal of impediments to her research had the desired effect, he decided to try another route. He gradually began orchestrating seemingly chance meetings in the corridors, taking full advantage of his knowledge (as headmaster) of her schedule. He tried as best he could to start innocuous conversations, asking her how her classes were going, and whether there was anything in particular she thought he should include in the end-of-term book order for the library. She always answered politely, but she never engaged him in conversation longer than necessary.

At last, he decided he would have to try something drastic. Lucius was checking in with him frequently to see how his campaign was going, and it was getting irritating to have nothing of import to tell him. He needed to think of something that would force her to spend time with him—something she wouldn't be able to resist, but would still feel was her choice.

As Hermione stepped out of her office to make her way to dinner, she mentally groaned at the sight of Severus sweeping toward her, artfully dodging the students who filled the corridor. "Professor Granger, how fortuitous to run into you. I wanted to speak with you about something. Would you be available after dinner for a short meeting?"

Fortuitous, my arse, Hermione thought, but forced herself to say, "Of course, Headmaster."

"Shall I escort you to the Great Hall?"

She couldn't politely refuse, so she fell into step beside him. An awkward silence threatened, until he asked, "How is Miss Parker's project coming along?"

She glanced sharply at him. Miss Parker was the student to whom he had questioned her integrity mere weeks earlier. "Fine, thank you."

"Excellent. I'm glad you've taken her under your wing. Has she discussed with you her desire to continue her studies?"

"No. I assumed she and Mr. Bulstrode would be announcing their engagement. I was led to believe they were promised from birth."

"Ah, well, they were, but of course, times are changing, and I recently pointed out to both families that it could only increase their standing if she were to apprentice with a renowned war heroine and establish herself in a prestigious career before she marries and starts procreating."

"She wants to apprentice with *me*?" Hermione asked, stunned.

"Well, naturally. You're the highest-regarded Arithmancer in Britain."

"But ... isn't she worried I might steal credit for her work?"

He looked a bit chagrined. "Not since I explained to her that I was merely taking my particularly foul mood that day out on you, and had no reason whatsoever to question your integrity."

"Really?" Hermione made no effort to hide her astonishment.

He seemed to take it in stride, answering nonchalantly, "Of course. I can't expect you to allow me to make amends if I don't ensure you suffer no ill effects from my past behaviour, can I?"

"N-no ... But you do understand I'm still not sure I want to ..." her voice trailed off.

"Yes, of course. That's no reason for me to stop attempting to correct things."

They arrived at the Great Hall just then and Hermione didn't have an opportunity to comment further. However, she was so stunned by his admission that she wasn't sure she could form coherent speech at that moment anyway. Instead of proceeding immediately to his chair, he walked her to hers before saying, "I shall see you after dinner, then. Enjoy your meal."

Watching him seat himself, she thought about his behaviour since he had returned from hospital. He really did seem to be making an effort to make her life more pleasant. She had always suspected some of the policies he had insisted were for everyone's benefit were really intended for her specific detriment, and the way he had called a staff meeting so soon after asking for a truce and then proceeded to lift the policies that she found most troublesome seemed to confirm it. Thinking of it now reminded her she would have to let George know she wouldn't need a Skiving Snackbox, after all, now she could just decide not to go to Quidditch without a reason beyond not wanting to go.

As Neville slipped into his usual seat beside her, she forced her gaze away from Severus and smiled a greeting.

"Hey, Hermione, what's new?"

Relieved for the distraction, she allowed herself to be drawn into conversation with her long-time friend.

As Severus ate his roast pork, he surreptitiously watched Hermione. He was finding it rather surprising that she was still stubbornly trying to avoid more contact with him than was necessary. If he recalled correctly (and he was sure he did), she had occasionally fallen out with one or another of her friends, yet they had always seemed to patch it up. She even appeared to be on good terms with her former paramour, and he had heard that break-up had been nasty enough to send her fleeing Britain for France.

No matter, he was certain he had now hit upon the perfect inducement one she wouldn't have been able to resist had he been the Dark Lord reincarnate. Yes, his new plan was flawless.

After dinner, he approached Hermione. She was laughing at something Neville had just said about a student's reaction to detention tending to the corpse flower that was the latest greenhouse acquisition. "Hermione, are you ready for our meeting?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," she replied, putting down her tea and standing. "See you later, Neville."

"See you, Hermione." The young man looked askance at Severus, who ignored it. It was quite clear to him, however, that his entire staff thought he was Up to Something as regarded Hermione. Which, he supposed, wasn't entirely surprising, considering his past behaviour toward her had been anything but subtle. He idly wondered why she seemed to so effortlessly make him forget himself.

Shaking the disturbing thought away as they walked toward his office in silence, Severus revisited his plan one last time. No, he hadn't missed anything. She would find it impossible to turn down his request.

By the time they reached Severus's office, Hermione had half-convinced herself that he was about to drop the other shoe or dragonhide boot most likely on her head. She was still finding it hard to reconcile the cordial, even charming, man he had been presenting for the past few weeks with the nasty git he had been for the entirety of their earlier acquaintance.

Gesturing toward a comfortable chair, he took the chair next to her rather than sitting behind his desk. Hermione was surprised he did nothing unintentionally, so apparently, at least for this meeting, he preferred to avoid emphasising the inequality of their relative positions.

When they were settled, he offered her a brandy, which she declined. Best to keep her wits about her when dealing with him, she was sure. He must have guessed her thoughts, because he summoned a house-elf and requested tea and biscuits. When she had begun nibbling on a chocolate biscuit, he said, "I'm sure you're wondering why I wanted to speak with you."

"I confess to a certain curiosity, yes," Hermione said carefully.

"I have a proposition for you," he began, watching her closely.

"What sort of proposition?"

"During my recent stay at St. Mungo's, a research question occurred to me that I haven't been able to put out of my mind. Unfortunately, I don't have all the necessary expertise to conduct the research without assistance."

Intrigued despite herself, Hermione asked cautiously, "What sort of research question?"

"You're aware the Dark Lord used some sort of Dark Magic on Nagini to ensure her venom would continually evolve, thus rendering impossible any single anti-venin for her bites?"

"I had heard that, yes. I understand they developed a method of taking a venom sample from the wound and developing an individualised anti-venin for each individual case?"

"Yes, that's true, but it occurred to me that much of my suffering in the last eight years would have been avoided if an antidote could have magically detected the properties of the venom upon administration, and automatically adjusted itself to maximise its effectiveness in countering those properties." He shrugged. "Now that I'm feeling more myself, I thought it might be worthwhile to see if it could be done. After all, the Dark Magic remains, just waiting for the next Dark Lord to come along and put it to use."

Hermione stared at him, fascinated. "That's brilliant, sir! Have you any idea how you would go about it?"

"Well, it would involve some potions work, obviously, for the base, and some Defence Against the Dark Arts research for the spellwork to imbue it with the sort of intelligence, if you will, that it would need. I have that expertise, obviously, but it would be far more efficient if you would help me with the Arithmancy component. I'm reasonably skilled in the field, but I have a feeling this calls for more complexity than I could manage."

Severus waited, keeping his face impassive, for Hermione's response to his request. It wouldn't do to let her know just how badly he wanted her to accept. For a moment, she looked too stunned to react, but then his patience was rewarded. He was slyly amused at her obvious effort to rein in her enthusiasm for the idea. She was clearly struggling to maintain her professional dignity as she said seriously, "Yes, I'd be happy to assist you in such a worthwhile endeavour."

"Excellent," Severus said smoothly. "Shall we agree on an initial schedule of meetings so we can plan our research?" He remembered catching sight occasionally over the years of a colour-coded appointment book on her person, so he assumed she would like a schedule, and a plan.

"Of course," Hermione said with barely suppressed eagerness. "When shall we start?" Suddenly, her face fell.

"What is it?" Severus asked as patiently as he could manage.

"It's just ... well ... I suspect this project is going to take months, perhaps even years. There's no guarantee I'll be here to complete it. Perhaps you should ..."

He interrupted as politely as he could manage; he didn't want her following that train of thought. "Even if you leave, we can still work together on this. That's what Floos and Portkeys are for."

"But what if "

"Hermione, if you'd rather not do it, just say so. I'd prefer it if you would, of course. I think you're the most qualified person to work on this with me but I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

That did the trick. "No, no, of course I want to do it. I just don't want your research to be delayed later if I leave."

Severus had to restrain a smirk. For the first time since giving her notice, she was speaking as though it wasn't entirely certain she would leave come end of term. He said, "Don't concern yourself with that at this point. If you leave, I'm sure we can work out a way to continue our research at a distance. Or, should you decide at some point you don't wish to continue, I assume I can count on your assistance in finding and updating a replacement?"

"If it proves necessary, I'm sure we can find someone appropriate. Thank you for the opportunity, Severus. Oh, this is so exciting!" Severus was amused to see she had apparently given up any attempt to contain her excitement.

"Very well, shall we meet for tea tomorrow and begin working out our research plan?"

Chapter 11

Chapter 12 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 11

At their next meeting, ostensibly for tea and planning, Severus discovered his otherwise flawless plan presented one minor problem: it was quite likely to drive him round the bend in short order. It seemed Hermione wasn't just excited about their research she was *obsessed* with it.

He had no idea where she had found the time to obtain or prepare them, but she had appeared at their very first meeting with three charmed scheduling parchments. She quickly demonstrated the proper incantation on the first one, and her schedule appeared on it, fully colour-coded and indexed and covering the two-and-a-half months remaining in the term.

She said, "I'd have done yours ahead of time, but it has to be done personally by the individual whose schedule it's to be." She waited while he mimicked the spell she had done, then took both parchments and cast a different series of spells over them, creating a common calendar.

It was the work of seconds to determine that their best bet was to meet after dinner on weekdays, and for tea on weekends. Severus frowned when he realised her schedule precluded after-dinner meetings on weekends. What was she doing with her Saturday nights? He hadn't heard of her dating anyone. Not that he cared, of course, but wasn't he supposed to know where his staff were at all times?

He forced his attention back to what she was doing now, as with a few taps of her wand, she filled in their appointments with each other on the common calendar; they immediately appeared in green on each of the individual schedules.

"Now, if something comes up and you need to cancel a meeting, all you have to do it tap your wand like this, and my calendar will show the cancelation," Hermione explained before adding, as though he might be concerned, "And don't worry, they've all been spelled against damage from the usual hazards spills, fires, that sort of thing."

Severus, who was still trying to see if she had some bloke pencilled in for Saturday nights, nevertheless nodded. He wouldn't be cancelling any of their appointments, anyway, he reasoned, so it mattered little if he hadn't quite caught the spell to do so. He could always owl her cancelations, or ask her to show him again later. Besides, short of the Dark Lord's second well, *third* coming, nothing was more important than having as much time as possible working Hermione around to rescinding her notice. Or so Lucius assured him most insistently.

She pulled out a fourth parchment and quickly copied the common schedule. Putting away her schedule and one of the common ones, she handed him the other along with his individual one before pulling a stack of journals from her latest beaded bag. She had had a number of such bags over the years, or maybe she was transfiguring the same one to suit changing fashion, Severus thought. He again forced himself to pay attention as she began showing him everything she had already managed to learn in less than twenty-four hours.

Mentally shaking his head, he wondered if he was in over his head. Then he thought wryly that if she finished the entire research project in the first week, he would need to find another way to keep her at his side and available to be charmed for the rest of the term.

Two weeks into their research, Hermione finally began to lose her determination to keep her guard up. After their first meeting, she had always seemed to arrive intent upon keeping things distant and professional between them. Fortunately, Severus had quickly discovered that if he ignored the awkward silences and engaged her in a discussion of their progress, her enthusiasm and excitement would soon override her best intentions. Only once had he tried telling her outright to "just relax"; she had taken that as criticism and grown even more distant than when she arrived. Nothing got her to let down her guard until finally, he had pretended not to understand an Arithmantic concept she mentioned. Halfway through her (very thorough) explanation, she was back to being so delighted with her topic that she forgot to keep her distance.

After that, he made a point of asking her a question related to their project the moment she arrived, resulting in more immediate relaxing of her guard. He was elated on the day she arrived with her walls already down, though, of course, Hermione would not have been able to tell as his expression gave nothing away.

"Hi, Severus," she said, smiling warmly. "How's it coming today?"

"Very well, I think. I believe I've discovered the combination of spells he must have used on Nagini."

"Really?" Her entire being seemed to light up. "That's wonderful! May I see?"

Severus had to mentally prod himself to respond appropriately. "Yes, of course. Look here."

By four weeks in, they had tested several theories of the magic involved in the venom modification on a few snakes Hagrid had provided once he felt sufficiently assured they wouldn't be harmed in the course of the research. The first few didn't work they either had no effect, or they reduced the potency of the venom (a useful discovery in itself, they agreed, and Hermione set about putting it together for publication even while they continued working on their original project).

Severus had by now concluded she couldn't possibly be dating anyone she was still keeping up with her teaching duties with nary a hiccup, even as she seemed to work increasingly long hours on the research. Eventually, he noticed she was skipping meals and losing weight as dark shadows became more and more pronounced beneath her eyes. When she arrived at teatime that Saturday, he forestalled her usual greeting. "When was the last time you slept?"

She looked at him oddly. "Last night. Why?"

"Let me rephrase that. How many hours are you sleeping each night, on average?" he asked sternly.

"I don't know. Four or five?" she answered, though she shifted somewhat uncomfortably from one foot to the other. Lucius was right, Gryffindors, and particularly *this* Gryffindor, couldn't lie well at all.

"I highly doubt that. When was your last proper meal?"

"I had an apple earlier."

"I asked about a *proper* meal. An apple does not qualify."

"What *is* all this, Severus? I'm perfectly fine," she snapped, which caught him off guard; he'd never thought she would speak to someone with authority over her in such a manner. "Now, let's get to work." She reached into her bag and pulled out a stack of parchment.

Taking it from her, he set it aside. "Hermione, have you even looked at yourself recently? You didn't look this ill after nearly a year of camping with your idiot friends during the war." She looked hurt, so he hastily added, "Look, I don't mean to insult you. I'm ... worried about you." He was only a little bit surprised to find it was true, and not as difficult to admit as he might have expected. "You're not eating or sleeping properly. Just how long do you think you can keep this pace up?"

Her expression softened, but she demurred, "I'm fine, Severus, really. You don't need to worry."

"When was the last time you took a day off? Had some fun?"

"I don't know ... not that long ago. Besides, *this* is fun." She gestured toward the stack of parchment, adding, "I don't need time away from it."

"When was the last time you saw the Potters? Or the Weasleys?" She looked away without answering. "Have you been outside in the past week?" Her mulish expression answered that question. He sighed. "Woman, you need a keeper. When you let yourself get this run down, you make mistakes or wind up too ill to work at all. Come with me." Looking at him uncertainly, she made to pick up her bag. "Leave the bag there," he ordered. "We're taking the rest of the day off."

"But you have to see what I "

"It will still be there tomorrow. You can show me then. And just to make sure you aren't tempted ..." He quickly Levitated the bag and the notes into his bottom desk drawer and executed a complicated series of wards. Then he called, "Winky?"

With a loud crack the small elf appeared in front of them. Bowing low, she asked, "Yes, Headmaster? What is Headmaster needing?"

"Please organise a picnic basket for us and have it delivered us by the lake. You know what Professor Granger's favourite foods are?"

"Severus, this is not necessary."

Glaring at Hermione, Severus was pleased when Winky ignored her and answered his question. "Oh, yes, Headmaster. Winky is knowing *all* the Professors' favourites. Winky is a good elf."

"Excellent. Include two servings of each of her five favourite foods, along with whatever else it takes to round out the nutrition."

"Yes, Headmaster. I is bringing Professor Granger's favourite foods to the lake."

"But Severus "

"Let's go," he interrupted. Grasping Hermione gently, but firmly, by the elbow, he began pulling her toward the door, ignoring her continued protests.

Two hours later, Severus sat quietly on a picnic blanket beside Hermione, who was curled up on her side, sound asleep. He found himself looking at her with an odd mixture of fondness and exasperation (thank Merlin no one was around to see it). Once presented with a surfeit of food and fresh air, she had succumbed to her

exhaustion quickly enough. Turning his attention to the remnants of their picnic, he was amused to see that Winky had taken him quite literally. The basket had contained Hermione's five favourite foods, all right, and who knew the daughter of a pair of muggle dentists secretly craved Turkish delight, toffee, and cheesecake along with her chocolate mousse and caramel-fudge biscuits? He was glad he had thought to ask Winky to round out the nutrition; otherwise, Hermione would probably be in a sugar-induced coma by now. Instead, he had insisted she sample the thick roast beef sandwiches, salads, and strawberries with clotted cream Winky had also included.

He had, begrudgingly, gained a whole new respect for Potter and Weasley today, since he could only assume it was through their intervention she hadn't worked herself into a nervous breakdown or an early grave while studying for her NEWTs. He hadn't been kidding when he told her she needed a keeper. What surprised (and, if he were completely honest, *troubled*) him more than anything, though, was his distinct lack of aversion to taking on the job himself.

As that thought occurred to him, he mentally groaned. In a few short weeks, he had gone from hating all three of them to almost respecting the two boys, and actually *liking* Hermione. *Damn Lucius.*

She stirred beside him, and he schooled his features into a pleasant expression. Her eyes opened slightly and she murmured, "Severus?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

But she just smiled sweetly as her eyes slid closed; soon enough, she was once again deeply asleep. Severus returned to his earlier thoughts. His whole plan was at risk of getting sidetracked. He was supposed to persuade the girl to stay at Hogwarts as a means to an end his continued employment, hopefully with a pay rise. He was not supposed to actually like her. He could just imagine Lucius gloating if that got out.

An hour later, he was still sitting there and she was still sleeping, although it was growing quite dark. He had already cast *Lumos*, then changed his mind and summoned Winky to bring candles and clear away the remnants of their picnic. Now he was debating whether to wake Hermione to get her moving back toward the castle. Scotland still got chilly at night, and with the amount of sleep she had skipped in the past few weeks, Hermione could very easily sleep through until morning. Upon further consideration, he cast a warming charm over her just to be safe.

At least he had the necessary peace to analyse his situation with Hermione. He eventually concluded it was all right to like her. It wasn't anything more than that, after all. As long as they kept things light and uncomplicated, a friendship of sorts would be acceptable. It didn't mean anything more than that.

Sighing, he called Winky once more. Keeping his voice low, he asked, "Winky, would you please Apparate Professor Granger to her quarters and put her to bed? Try not to wake her, please."

"Yes, Headmaster. Winky will not be waking Professor Granger."

"Thank you, Winky." When the elf had disappeared with her charge, Severus gathered the blanket and began a leisurely walk up to the castle. If he felt oddly wistful now he was alone, he refused to worry over it at least there was no one to notice.

By the time the sixth week had passed, Severus had developed a whole new set of rules for Hermione. Honestly, how a woman who couldn't manage to remember basic self-care activities like sleeping and eating could be so effective at everything else was quite beyond him. Unfortunately, he was the only one in a position to make her remember and to actually do something about it. Most of the other professors had tried at one time or another, but none of them had any leverage, so when she waved them off with barely a glance, saying, "You go on ahead. I'll be there shortly," they did. And if she never quite managed to follow, there wasn't much they could do about it.

He, on the other hand, wasn't opposed to telling her he'd stop the research altogether if she didn't put down what she was doing and *come now*. She would grumble and sometimes even whine about his insistence, but she did as he asked, too afraid he would follow through on his threat to risk refusing. Now that he was making a point of stopping by to fetch her from her office on his way to meals as well as before retiring for the night, and walking her to the Great Hall or her quarters (whichever was appropriate), she was starting to look healthy again.

Of course, they had now reached a stage in their research where nothing seemed to be going according to plan. They both knew this was typical of complex research, but they frequently had different ideas about how to progress, as well as about why things weren't working.

"Are you sure you calculated that equation correctly?" Severus asked grumpily after the potion had exploded for the fourth time in as many days.

"Yes, of course I'm sure. I checked it three times."

"It has to be wrong, though. There's no way to combine the habaneros with the aconite without generating too much heat to be contained once the spell is cast."

"Well, maybe you're casting the spell wrong," Hermione dared to say.

"I'm not casting the spell wrong," he replied, through gritted teeth.

"Then maybe you measured the ingredients inaccurately."

"You watched me do it this time! We agreed it was right!" he insisted indignantly.

"Well, all I know is the equations balance. There must be something else."

Frustrated, Severus said, "Bollocks. Anyway, sniping at each other isn't going to help us find it, is it?"

Hermione glared at him for a moment before she unexpectedly burst out laughing.

"I don't see what's so funny about it." Hermione laughed harder. "Really, can we have some decorum around here?"

She kept laughing. He decided to ignore her and clear away the mess. It was too late to start again tonight, anyway.

When she finally got herself under control, the lab space was once more pristine. He said, "If you're finished with your little outburst, I shall escort you to your quarters."

Hermione grinned, unrepentant. "Oh, Severus, don't be mad. It just suddenly struck me as funny that you, of all people, should complain about people sniping at each other. You are, after all, the past king of the verbal *Avada*."

Severus frowned. He didn't like the implication that he was going... *soft*. "What do you mean, *past* king? I'll have you know I can still trade barbs with the best of them. Just because I choose not to let loose on you doesn't mean I couldn't if I wanted to."

Hermione patted his hand consolingly. "Well, don't worry. I'm sure you could still set Neville quaking if you really tried. It'll be our little secret that you're a kinder, gentler Severus now."

"I am not kinder or gentler. I'm ... more judicious."

"Really, Severus, it's not an insult. I actually quite like you this way, sniping and all." They had reached her door by now, and she gave the password before turning back to smile at him. "Sleep well, Severus." Unexpectedly, she stretched up and pecked his cheek. "See you tomorrow."

Severus frowned at the closed door for a long moment before heading back to his own quarters.

What was she about, kissing his cheek and telling him she liked him?

Chapter 12

Chapter 13 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 12

"What's this on your calendar Saturday night?" Severus asked abruptly, pointing at the parchment as Hermione stirred their latest brew one Wednesday in mid-May.

Hermione frowned softly. "Nothing unusual. Why?" She finished the requisite number of stirs, set the rod aside, and lowered the flame. It would have to simmer for two days, according to her calculations. She turned her full attention to Severus.

"You have it blocked, and I need you."

Hermione ignored the delicious little shiver his words evoked. "Oh, I always block my Saturday nights. It's a habit from when I was at Beauxbatons. Harry used to visit pretty regularly, usually without any prior notice, to have dinner with me, and it was just easier on every level if work wasn't on my calendar then." Spying his enquiring look, she clarified. "I didn't resent the interruption, and *he* didn't tease me mercilessly about my obsessive work habits." She frowned again. "What do you need me for?"

"Lucius is making me go to the Anniversary Ball now that I don't have poor health as an excuse."

Hermione repressed a smile at the slightly petulant tone in his voice. "What does that have to do with me? And anyway, the Anniversary was last week. Isn't the ball over already?"

"The Anniversary was last week, but the ball is this week. The Ministry, in its infinite idiocy, feels the weather is more reliable in mid-May. Didn't you get your invitation?"

"I never bother to open it. I know I don't want to go, no matter when it is, so I usually just bin it as soon as it arrives."

"Then you'll have to attend as my date. They're very strict about only admitting people who have an invitation."

"But Lucius isn't demanding *my* presence," Hermione pointed out as calmly as she could manage. She couldn't believe he would expect her to go to that particular event. It was impossible.

"No, he's demanding mine, and he expects me to 'behave properly,' as he put it. I need someone to come along who can diplomatically extricate me from tedious conversations before I resort to verbal evisceration, or worse. That's you."

Hermione's anxiety began to grow as she tried a different tack. "I can't go. I don't have anything to wear."

Either he didn't realise or he didn't care how strongly she didn't want to go, because he insisted, "Well, then, get something. Owl Madam Malkin. I'm sure she'll have something suitable."

"Severus, you can't expect me to go on such short notice! I'd have had to order from Madam Malkin *weeks* ago. It's completely out of the question!" She hoped she didn't sound as desperate as she felt.

Unfortunately, Severus remained determined. "Didn't one of your classmates open a competing shop? One of the Patils, wasn't it?"

"Parvati, but that's not the point."

His expression barely changed, but Hermione knew him well enough by now to know he was mentally rolling his eyes. "Of course it's not the point. The point is, she'd probably welcome the chance to dress you. It would give her an edge in what's, apparently, a very difficult market to break into."

"What do *you* know about the fashion market?"

"Whatever Narcissa rattles on about when I have dinner with the Malfoys. In this case, she mentioned Patil was having difficulty cracking the market, which Narcissa thought was because the designs were too trendy."

"I can't believe you paid any attention to that," Hermione muttered, annoyed that he wasn't giving up this ridiculous idea.

"Information, no matter how dull, is never entirely worthless. Now, stop procrastinating and go owl your friend."

"If she says she can't, will you drop this?"

"She won't."

As it turned out, Severus was correct. Much to Hermione's dismay, Parvati was thrilled to have the opportunity to outfit a war heroine for such a public event.

The night of the ball came far too swiftly for Hermione's comfort. She found herself unable to talk Severus out of his insistence that if he must attend, so must she.

For once, the worst part wasn't the time it was taking away from her beloved research, which was really saying something, since she had spent half the afternoon taming her hair, and the other half on makeup and, if she was honest, mental preparation. This time, the worst of it was the event itself. The memories it brought back were anything but pleasant, and not just because of all the wonderful people who had had their lives cut short on that awful day.

No, the ball itself was the worst of it, from her perspective. She had only gone to one Anniversary Ball up to now, and she had never intended to see another one. The first

one had been so completely traumatic that she couldn't imagine ever going back. She wasn't sure if Severus had ever heard about that debacle she was trying to give him the benefit of the doubt, but it was difficult. It had been so very public, after all. Still, he had been caught up in his own problems, then barely out of hospital, defending his life and his actions in what had been billed the "Trial of the Millennium" by Rita Skeeter and her ilk, so it wasn't *completely* out of the question that he hadn't heard of her humiliation.

She wondered if Ron still went to these things. Although they had eventually managed to reclaim some semblance of their former friendship, the Anniversary Ball was, by unspoken but firm agreement, never to be mentioned in front of Hermione by any of her friends; Ron might have attended all of them or none of them, for all she knew. She hoped he wouldn't be there. It would cut too close to see him in that setting.

Refusing to think about it any further, she finished her preparations and went into her sitting room to have a drink as she awaited Severus.

Moments later, he arrived just as she polished off the Cosmopolitan she had requested from Winky. He declined her offer of a drink; then, to her surprise, he complimented her suavely on her appearance as he handed her a lovely black and white corsage. Smiling for the first time all day, she magically attached it to the gorgeous royal blue dress robes Parvati had somehow managed to whip together on just a few days' notice. "How's that?" she asked, turning to show him.

"Lovely," he assured her, before offering her his arm. "Shall we?"

Mentally steeling herself, she carefully laid her fingers on the rich black silk and allowed him to lead her to the Apparition point.

When they arrived at the Ball, Severus glanced around to see if he could spot Lucius. He was hoping to find the man early, play nice with whomever Lucius was determined he should see, and then get out of there before his temper got the best of him. Although he could acknowledge it had improved now he was physically well, he had discovered at the last Board meeting that the company of sycophants and dunderheads still set him off it just took a few minutes longer.

He had tried every argument he could think of to convince Lucius he shouldn't come here. The event commemorated the events of some of his worst nightmares and memories and considering the life he led, that was saying something. Unfortunately, Lucius would not be swayed. When, in desperation, Severus had pointed out that this would be a distraction from his campaign to keep Hermione at Hogwarts, Lucius had said, "Bring her with you, then. It's time she started showing her face at these events, too."

Severus had been surprised to hear she didn't go every year, as he would have expected of any good little Gryffindor war heroine. Perhaps she just didn't like to remember the battle any more than he did she had lost a number of people she considered friends there, after all.

In any event, when he finally realised he wasn't going to get out of attending, he decided he would drag Hermione along with him, for two reasons: first, it was (indirectly at least) her fault he could no longer use ill health as an excuse and he wasn't entirely sure he wouldn't have preferred ongoing ill health to attendance at a big, loud, Ministry self-congratulation for something they hadn't even done. He chose not to share that reason with her, however. Instead, he had shared the equally true second reason: he would need someone to help him avoid hexing anyone who got on his nerves. He had expected her to be pleased with the implied compliment and agree immediately, so he was surprised when she argued so strongly, and persistently, against going.

Still, she had eventually agreed, and that was all that mattered. It occurred to him suddenly now that they had both been silent for too long not all that surprising from him, as he still didn't like small talk, but quite unusual for her. Glancing at her, he saw she was looking anxiously around her, as though fearing a rogue Death Eater would appear from behind the drapery. "Stop fidgeting," he ordered, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. "What's with you? You can't be *that* anxious all your friends are sure to be here."

"Yes, but they know why I don't come to these things," she snapped. He raised an eyebrow. Surely his comment didn't merit such a strong response. She flushed as she seemed to realise it. "Sorry. It's not your fault this is bringing up bad memories. Though given you dragged me here, you're just going to have to put up with my displeasure at being here."

Severus frowned. "Is it really that bad? I could tell Lucius you're ill and we could leave ..." He looked at her hopefully. She laughed, as he had intended, and he felt his lip twitch in response.

"Ah, there you are, Severus. Come and say hello to Augusta Longbottom and do try to be more circumspect than you were last time, will you? Hello, Hermione, you look lovely." Watching Lucius lean down to kiss Hermione's cheek, Severus mentally acknowledged that Lucius was at his urbane best in dark grey silk robes, even as he squelched the urge to yank Hermione away from his long-time friend.

"Hello, Lucius," Hermione smiled, though her smile had an edge Severus hadn't seen recently. "I suppose I have you to thank for my presence here."

"Surely you're not still intent on avoiding these things," Lucius replied smoothly. "It's been seven years you must have put it behind you by now. Everyone's friends again, yes?"

Severus frowned. Seven years? The final battle was eight years ago. And who exactly was 'everyone' and why had they not been friends? Suddenly certain he had missed something important, Severus glared at Lucius.

When he turned to Hermione, he discovered she was also glaring at Lucius. "Just because I no longer want to kill him doesn't mean I want to revisit it all, does it? And if I see *her*, I won't be responsible for my actions, so if she's here, you'd do well to keep her away from me."

Uh oh. This didn't sound good. There were, after all, only so many things that would make Hermione want to kill someone, and probably even fewer that would have her holding a grudge this long. After all, she had forgiven *him*, hadn't she? And his transgressions had been extended over a period of years, not a single night. Glancing between Lucius and Hermione, Severus realised she looked ready to explode. He decided it was time for a strategic retreat. "Hermione, allow me to escort you to the bar. You must be parched. Lucius, we'll see you at dinner."

"What about Mrs Longbottom?"

"I promise I'll charm her in a little while. Hermione needs a drink right now." Without waiting for a response, Severus steered her in the direction of the bar.

He waited until she had taken a sip of champagne before speaking again. "I hesitate to ask this, Hermione, but given I suddenly find myself playing *your* designated role in this evening's festivities, it appears I'm lacking critical information. Who, exactly, do I need to keep away from you?"

She flushed a (rather fetching, if he cared to admit it, though of course he didn't) shade of pink. "So, you really don't know? I'm glad, you know. I thought you probably didn't you wouldn't have made me come here if you had, would you? I mean, I didn't *think* you would, but ..."

"Hermione, you're not answering my question."

She took another sip of her drink before answering. "Pansy Parkinson. And I'd be just as happy not to see Ron here, too."

Oh. Even Weasley couldn't have been that stupid, could he? "I thought you and Mr. Weasley were on good terms these days."

"We are, to a point. But not *here*, I don't think. It's too much to expect me to forget what he did last time. Not to mention the reporters will have a field day if they spot us together. I don't want to go through that again."

"You should have told me. Had I known ..." Severus said irritably, then stopped. He hadn't asked, and it wasn't really a surprise she wouldn't volunteer the information. Huffing, he continued, "Well, I'm not sure what I'd have done, to be honest. I'm not unsympathetic, but for one thing, I still need you here, and for another, it's probably better you get this over with. You don't want people thinking Pansy scared you away permanently, do you?"

"No, I suppose not," Hermione sighed. "It was so humiliating, though, and I don't want to be an object of anyone's pity or the subject of a scandal ever again."

Severus took a sip of his drink. "I'm sorry to say you can't control whether people gossip about you." At her disgruntled look, he sighed.

As he looked at her, a plan began to form in his mind - one that would help her make it through the evening, while at the same time advancing his own plan to get her to stay at Hogwarts. However, even just the idea of it made him mentally groan. He also wasn't sure if she would agree to it, but thought that perhaps she was just about vulnerable enough that she would. He looked at her again. Was he really going to volunteer to be the object of gossip? *Well, Lucius has been after me to make a grand gesture, hasn't he?* Severus reminded himself silently.

As she looked at him curiously, he decided this was too good an opportunity to pass up. He said carefully, "However, you can, to some degree at least, influence what they say." She didn't immediately respond, so he continued softly, "If you like, we can endeavour to keep them focused on wondering whether something is going on with us, instead of on past scandals and heartbreaks."

Hermione straightened, looking intrigued even as she protested with quiet certainty, "*You hate* attention like that, Severus."

"Yes, well, I offered anyway, didn't I?" His Slytherin dignity demanded that he at least request something in return, though, grand gesture or no. Besides, she'd probably be suspicious if he didn't ask for some sort of *quid pro quo*. "You can pay me back later, if you want."

"How?" she asked warily.

There was really only one thing he wanted from her at the moment. Fortunately, she was a Gryffindor rather than a Slytherin if she agreed, she would be as fair and reasonable as she could in return for his assistance. "Would you at least seriously reconsider your resignation?" Her surprise showed on her face. They had avoided the topic of her notice for weeks. He hurried to assure her, "Not that you have to stay, but that you'll at least consider staying?"

"Er ... all right. If you're sure."

Severus felt as though a hard knot in his chest loosened, but there was no time to examine that just now. He had gossip to create at the moment. "I'm sure," he murmured, bringing her hand to his lips.

As the evening progressed, Hermione found herself feeling as though she were caught in a spell of Severus's making. He was unfailingly witty, charming, and attentive. She found she didn't have to rescue him from very many conversations, after all, though he frequently used her as an excuse to rescue himself so she supposed her presence was making it easier for him. "Excuse me," he would say with a small smile, "but I really must dance with Hermione." (No one was more surprised than Hermione to find him an accomplished dancer). Or (usually when Hermione could see he felt about to expire from boredom himself), "I'm sorry, Hermione, we must be boring you. Shall we find you another drink?" Then he would ever so lightly touch her elbow or the small of her back and guide her away.

It was as though having a role to play kept him entertained enough that he didn't have any problem being polite to everyone he spoke with - even the dunderheads and sycophants, Hermione thought, amused at the term he had used earlier when he had seen Lucius approaching with a couple of Ministry officials. And he was so very good at playing the role - when taken as a whole, his behaviour gave a distinct impression of romance, but he did it in the way only a very subtle Slytherin could, so that later, no one would be able to pinpoint any particular touch or comment as conclusive proof of their relationship. She could see why he had been such a good spy - he'd probably have made a great actor, had he been so inclined. Actually, now she thought of it, his teaching had been full of drama, too - he had always used his wardrobe, as well as his speech and body language, to full effect, so in a sense, he *had* been an actor, just not on the stage.

Now she was having a hard time remembering this was an act, designed to steer gossip in a direction of their choosing. They had been caught a few times by various photographers, and one or two reporters had tried to corner them, but there were advantages to being with someone who was known for both his desire for privacy and his general ... well, *scariness*. When Hermione had literally bumped into Ron, Severus had glared at a nearby photographer, who had promptly lowered his camera and backed away without snapping a single shot. Then he had given Ron a perfunctory nod before whisking her away to the other side of the ballroom.

The most interesting moment came when Hermione, on her way back from the ladies room, was unfortunate enough to find Pansy Parkinson blocking her path. She felt her temper flare, as she had feared it would, and it was all she could do not to hex the other woman. When she had caught the cow with Ron in the cloakroom seven years ago, she had been too devastated and too shocked to form a coherent thought, never mind an appropriate insult. All these years, that had been her one great regret about the whole mess - she had never been able to tell her nemesis exactly what she thought of her. Now, reining in her temper with a supreme effort, she said coldly, "Get out of my way."

Pansy smiled ferally, apparently not recognising her peril. "Or you'll do what, Mudblood? Stand there gawping like a fish?"

Hermione smiled, palming her wand but not raising it just yet. "You can call me all the names you want, but if we really consider, I'm not the one who shagged another woman's man in a public cloakroom, am I? I wonder if your mother did the same thing - it would certainly explain why your behaviour is so low class, wouldn't it?"

Pansy's face turned a very unattractive shade of mottled purple. "You - you cow!" she exploded, pulling her wand and pointing it at Hermione. "I'll teach you to insult your betters!"

Before Pansy could utter the curse she no doubt planned, Severus's voice joined the fray from behind. His tone was almost bored as he said, "*Finite Incantatem*."

Hermione was stunned when Pansy's perfect appearance underwent a sudden transformation - she had apparently used a series of Glamours on everything from her hair to her dress robes to her shoes. Severus's use of that single, very simple spell, therefore, left her looking rather bedraggled and extremely humiliated.

She whirled, opening her mouth to berate her new tormentor, just as a series of flashbulbs went off like strobe lights. "How dare you?" she shouted. "This is none of your business, so just stay out of it! That Mudblood bitch has humiliated me for the last time."

"Nonsense," Severus said, stepping past her and taking Hermione's hand as he smiled at her briefly before turning back to the other woman. When Pansy's eyes widened, Hermione realised the slut hadn't registered just who she was screaming at - perhaps all those flashes had blinded her, but how anyone could mistake that voice, she had no idea. Severus continued, his voice dripping with disdain, "You've humiliated yourself, and probably not for the first or last time. Hermione had nothing to do with it." Turning his attention to Hermione, he asked softly, "Are you all right?"

She grinned, delighted with him. "I'm perfectly fine, Severus. Thank you." As though from a distance, she heard Pansy's impotent scream before the woman rushed past her into the ladies room. Seconds later, they distinctly heard a crack of Apparition.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur, with Hermione riding a wave of triumph at having faced down Pansy at last, combined with a hazy feeling of pleasure at how staunchly Severus had stood up for her. Later, she couldn't recall the content of conversations she remembered having with quite a few friends and acquaintances, including Harry and Luna, Lavender and Dean, Parvati and Seamus, Neville and Hannah, and any number of Weasleys and their assorted spouses or significant others. In fact, the only one that penetrated her fuzzy mind was when Ginny and Draco, who had been dating since last year's Anniversary Ball, announced they were engaged.

At the end of the evening, Severus left her at her door with a smile and a kiss on the cheek. As she cleaned her teeth and removed the pins from her hair, all the warm feelings she had been experiencing through their charade all evening seemed to coalesce in the spot on her cheek his lips had touched.

She fell asleep cradling her cheek, with a smile on her face.

Chapter 13

Chapter 14 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 13

The day after the ball dawned sunny and warm. Severus woke early with an uncomfortable feeling that something dreadful was about to happen. He tried to tell himself he was being paranoid, that this certainty of impending doom was just a remnant of the life he had led before. It certainly wasn't the first time in the years since the war that he had felt this way, and usually, nothing much had come of it.

Forcing himself to behave as though nothing were amiss, he got up and went about his morning routine. By the time he got to the Great Hall, he had successfully pushed his anxiety to the back of his mind. Taking his place at the head table, he conversed idly with Minerva over bacon, eggs, toast, and tea, as his eyes scanned the students for any trouble that might be brewing. If his eyes wandered to Hermione more often than strictly reasonable, he could only hope no one would notice.

The owl post arrived, and he turned his attention to the *Daily Prophet* with some trepidation. As he examined the photos from the event, he reminded himself he was the one who had suggested the ruse of the night before. He smirked when he saw the front page photo of Pansy in the moments just after he had hit her with *Finite*, then frowned as he read the caption: "War hero Severus Snape defended the honour of his new lady love, Hermione Granger, from the insults of Pansy Parkinson. Parkinson, readers will remember, led Granger's former lover, Ronald Weasley, astray at the first Anniversary Ball, resulting in a very messy breakup." Pushing the paper away as he reminded himself yet again that this had been his idea, Severus glared at the students who were now murmuring amongst themselves as they looked from Hermione, to him, and back again. Apparently uncomfortable under such close scrutiny, Hermione abruptly hurried from the Hall without looking at Severus. He found himself unaccountably annoyed that she didn't at least smile at him.

He was just about to leave himself when Filius exclaimed, "Severus, you sly dog, I had no idea you and Hermione were together!" Severus decided to ignore him. It was none of his business, anyway.

"Together?" Minerva asked sharply. "Severus and Hermione aren't together. They're working on a research project." How, Severus wondered, had this pair of busybodies managed to avoid attending the Ball?

"That's not what it looks like here," Filius said, frowning. He Levitated his copy of the *Prophet*, which was open to page six, past Severus. Severus caught a glimpse of himself, looking completely absorbed in Hermione as he danced with her. He grabbed the paper out of the air and watched as the photo version of himself smiled *smiled*, not smirked! warmly (though certainly not *lovingly*) at his partner. He felt himself flush with embarrassment as he abruptly left the table, crumpling the paper and taking it with him.

Not that it mattered, he realised moments later, as he let himself into his private lab. He had taken Filius's copy, but had left his own, and anyway, Minerva also subscribed she just preferred to catch up on the news in her chambers on Sunday afternoons, rather than at breakfast like the rest of them. This realisation completely negated the improvement in mood he had managed along the way by taking thirty points from a pair of Gryffindor third years who were lurking suspiciously in the corridor and then giving detention (with Argus no need to ruin his own evening) to a trio of Hufflepuffs who had the temerity to wish him good morning as he passed.

As he began preparing ingredients for a Headache Potion (which he felt certain he would need very shortly), he wondered why it hadn't occurred to him last night that their ruse was certain to cause fallout at Hogwarts. He very determinedly refused to consider how ridiculously besotted he had looked in that second photograph.

As the afternoon wore on, he consoled himself by deciding Lucius had been right *he could* be charming when it suited his purpose. And of course, his purpose at the moment was to convince Hermione to stay at Hogwarts. That was *all* it was.

Two hours later, Hermione was trying to focus on her marking, but her eyes kept straying to the *Prophet*. She had felt a tiny bit guilty at the thrill that had gone through her when she saw that humiliating picture of Pansy on the front page, but she consoled herself with the certainty that Pansy would have been thrilled without any guilt at all had their positions been reversed. She knew, because when she had finally let Ron apologise for his betrayal, he had told her, "I don't know what I was thinking, Hermione. She had seemed so much nicer than she was at school, and I got caught up in the moment. But I think she was just out to get you from the start, because after you left, she wouldn't stop crowing about how she humiliated you in front of everyone."

Breakfast had been very awkward once the post arrived this morning, with everyone staring at her and Severus. She suspected Severus wouldn't be happy about all the attention, despite his assurances of the night before, so she had hurried from the Great Hall without looking at him in hopes that her absence would allow the gossip to die down more quickly. Now she was waiting impatiently for it to be time to go meet him to continue their research. That was no reason not to do the marking she had planned to do this afternoon, however, she kept reminding herself. She glanced at the clock and then her schedule for what seemed the hundredth time that day. Still two more hours to ... *Wait a minute! Where's the green?*

Hermione was stunned to notice for the first time that their regular Sunday afternoon meeting which should have showed up for four o'clock in its usual emerald green had disappeared from her schedule. In fact, another glance showed a distinct lack of green on her calendar for the entire week!

Eyes narrowed, Hermione stared at the schedule for several minutes, trying to decide what to do. Clearly, Severus must have cancelled all their meetings in a fit of pique over the *Prophet* headlines from this morning. She supposed she shouldn't be surprised she had known he wouldn't like them, hadn't she? But she hadn't expected him to avoid her altogether. And if she had thought being the subject of media attention was going to interfere in any way with their research, she wouldn't have agreed to the ruse *he* had suggested!

She frowned at it for another moment before a wicked smile crossed her face as she decided what to do. Picking up the parchment, she tapped it several times with her wand, then relaxed as she resumed her marking with significantly better attention than she had managed earlier.

Severus paced his office, where he had retreated once the Headache Potion had been completed and consumed. He had decided it would be fruitless to meet with

Hermione for at least the next several days, since he was too irritated about the fiasco in the newspaper to concentrate, anyway. Especially since said fiasco was entirely Hermione's fault, in his estimation. If she hadn't been so rattled at the prospect of seeing her former lover and his one night stand, Severus would never have got caught in the trap of doing something so ridiculous to protect her from speculation and gossip about the old scandal.

What was I thinking? He couldn't imagine, really. And now that he had cancelled all their usual meetings for the week (thank goodness he had made her re-teach him that spell several weeks earlier), she'd probably be mad at him. He'd have to avoid the Great Hall for a few days, and it was good he knew her schedule as well as his own. He'd simply reverse his use of that knowledge, avoiding her instead of ensuring frequent encounters in the corridors.

And what had she been doing, looking so gorgeous all of a sudden? She wasn't supposed to be beautiful; she was supposed to be clever but nothing special to look at. And then smiling and laughing and seeming perfectly content to be in his company all evening? And worst yet, making him keep forgetting that their behaviour last night was all a ruse! How *dare* she?

Severus continued pacing, working himself inexorably up into a full head of steam. He realised he needed to calm himself, but was at a loss as to how.

Just then, Lucius's head popped into the Floo. "Severus, good work last night. You managed to charm everyone well, I suppose the Parkinsons weren't pleased, but they've never recovered their standing or their fortune since the war, anyway, so that's all right." He paused, seeming to recognise at last that Severus looked agitated and displeased. "All right. Let's have it. What's got your wand in such a knot?"

"Have you *seen* the headlines, Lucius? The photographs?"

"Well, of course I have. I'm not an ill-informed cretin," he responded, sounding mildly offended. "I thought they were very flattering, if you really want to know. You can certainly see how much your health has improved."

"They're humiliating!"

"How are they humiliating?" Lucius sounded genuinely confused. He stepped through the Floo without awaiting an invitation. Brushing the soot from his robes, he continued, "The dress robes suited you admirably, your hair was less of a disaster than usual, and no one could mistake you for a vampire anymore, now you have the bloom of health in your cheeks."

"Lucius! You know what I'm talking about!"

"Sorry, old chap, but I really don't. You and Hermione made quite the dashing pair. Everyone said so."

"Which is exactly my point. The *Prophet* took excessive delight in highlighting my alleged designs on Hermione. They made me look like a besotted old fool!" Flopping into his chair, Severus let his hair fall into his face. "How am I ever going to face her again?"

"I don't see what you're whinging about, Severus," Lucius replied smoothly. "Stop being such a drama queen. People were bound to find out about you and Hermione eventually. If you wanted to hide it, you should have been more circumspect."

"Hermione and I are not together!" Severus protested emphatically. "That was a ruse to keep the press from hounding her about the events of the last Anniversary Ball she attended."

Lucius looked sceptical. "Really? You certainly *seemed* enamoured of one another. And if your whole purpose was to have people thinking you were together, I don't see why you're so upset that your ruse worked."

"What must she be thinking?" Severus moaned. "She didn't even look at me at breakfast this morning." He fell silent for a moment before an idea occurred to him. "Invite me to dinner, Lucius!" he demanded.

"Why should I invite you to dinner? I'm not inflicting you on Narcissa when you're like this."

"Yes, you are. You owe me!"

"You're being ridiculous, Severus. Go talk to Hermione. I'm sure everything will be fine. She looked just as besotted as you did. Besides, didn't you tell me your research had reached a critical stage?"

Severus glared at him, to no discernable effect. "I can't meet with her today!"

"I thought you had a standing tea time appointment on Sundays?"

"I cancelled it," Severus muttered.

"Really?" Lucius frowned at the parchment he had picked up from Severus's desk. "Then what's this on your schedule?"

"What? Give me that!" Yanking the parchment from Lucius's hand, he saw the appointments he had removed not even an hour earlier were all back in place. "How ..." he muttered under his breath. He tried the incantation to cancel them again, but this time, they flickered but didn't disappear as they had earlier. "What the bloody hell?" He tried it again; it didn't even flicker now. "What did that woman do?" He swept toward the door, so determined to confront her about locking his schedule that he forgot he was avoiding her.

"Where are you going?" Lucius's voice halted him in his tracks, and he turned to glower at the other man, whose presence had temporarily slipped his mind. "Don't you think you ought to calm down before you toss away the ground you've gained in the past two months? Anyway, I thought your big plan was to avoid her. How are you going to do that if you're off to yell at her? For something that isn't even her fault, I might add."

"How is it not her fault? She didn't have to show up looking like that. She didn't have to agree to pretend we were ... together."

"What was she supposed to do? Put on her usual teaching robes and leave her hair a bushy mess? And unless I miss my guess, she agreed to *your* suggestion, did she not?"

"That's neither here nor there. The point is she got so caught up in the role that everyone believed it."

"If people weren't supposed to believe it, what would be the point of doing it?" Lucius observed, sounding far too reasonable for Severus's taste. "And anyway, if you ask me, you're more upset that she didn't talk to you at breakfast than you are that people believed your little ruse."

"What? No. I just told you "

"Yes, yes, you're upset that everyone seemed to believe you were besotted with each other. But if you ask me, the only reason you're upset about that is because you actually *are* besotted with her and you fear she's *not* besotted with you."

"Don't be ridiculous," Severus snapped. "I don't have to fear she's not besotted with me. I know she's not."

"How do you know?" Lucius asked patiently.

"What would possibly induce her to feel anything like that toward me? I've treated her like shite from the moment I met her."

"Not lately, though. Did you actually look at the pictures or were you so offended by the idea of them that you didn't really see them?"

"I looked at them," Severus mumbled.

"Well, then, look again. She looked just as besotted as you did last night, and she's always tended to show her every thought and feeling on her face, hasn't she?"

Severus ruthlessly suppressed the surge of hope that seemed determined to rear its ugly head. "I can't look again. I burned the bloody thing."

Lucius shook his head. "Really, Severus. Wasn't that just a bit childish?"

Feeling his cheeks grow warm, Severus muttered, "It seemed a good idea at the time." Drawing himself up, he added, "If you aren't going to be helpful and invite me to dinner, then at least do me the courtesy of leaving me in peace."

"How's this? You are more than welcome to join Narcissa and me for dinner, *if* you bring Hermione with you."

Before Severus could recover himself enough to respond, Lucius had Flooed home.

Chapter 14

Chapter 15 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 14

Hermione was a bit surprised she didn't hear from Severus immediately after she had spelled the calendar not to allow deletion of their appointments. She supposed he must not have looked at it again, but she had also charmed it to ring ten minutes before their appointment this afternoon and to keep ringing until someone turned it off. Hermione hadn't taught Severus the schedule's alarm charms, so she suspected he'd have to show up to have her do it for him. She just hoped he wouldn't be too angry with her.

Shrugging the thought away, she noted that it was finally time to leave to meet him. Picking up her beaded bag, she made her way down to Severus's potions lab in the dungeons, where he had long since set the wards to admit her whenever she liked. Pulling out her latest calculations, she reviewed them quickly before heading to the storeroom to gather the ingredients they would need for today's variation.

Twenty minutes later, she had all the ingredients laid out in a neat row. She had already finished skinning the shrivelfigs and had begun cubing them, when Severus swept in carrying a ringing parchment between two fingers, holding it away from his body as though it were something particularly foul. Hermione stifled a laugh at the very disgruntled look on his face, but she couldn't quite keep the mirth out of her voice when she greeted him. "Hello, Severus. How are you this afternoon?"

He glared at her. "Will you stop this infernal ringing?"

"Now, Severus, where are your manners?"

His glare became a glower as he said mock patiently, "Hermione, would you please shut this thing off before I hex something?"

"Why, certainly, Severus, I'd be happy to." Hermione ignored his tone and kept her voice light. He was here, which was the point of the exercise, after all. As she had planned, she behaved as though everything was completely normal. "Perhaps you'd like to take over the shrivelfigs whilst I do that?"

He muttered something under his breath that she decided it was just as well she had missed, but he picked up the knife she had put down to take the schedule from him and started working. With a quick flick and swish of her wand, the ringing ceased.

"What did you hope to accomplish by that little display?" Severus asked.

"You're here, aren't you?" She began sorting the scarab beetles according to size. "I know you can't be thrilled at what was in the *Prophet* today, but I thought stopping our research over it was just silly."

"I am not silly," Severus ground out. Though he said it under his breath, Hermione still managed to just hear it.

"I didn't say you were silly. I said stopping our research because of a bit of gossip would be silly. Obviously, you're here and we're continuing, so you must agree with me," she concluded logically, silently challenging him to disagree with her.

Severus huffed, but didn't say anything. Fortunately, he kept working. Hermione smiled to herself as she, too, continued her work.

Silly, indeed, Severus thought irritably. I'll show her just how serious I am, given half a chance. And how dare she look so fresh and pretty in her work robes? Stop it, Severus! Focus on the shrivelfigs ...

Lost in thought, he responded automatically to numerous attempts at conversation as he prepared ingredients for the potion by rote. He hadn't mentioned the dinner invitation Lucius had tossed at him on the way out of his office, and he was trying to convince himself not to bother. Surely she would think it was too much like a ... *date*, he thought, sneering mentally at the word.

Part of him wanted to keep alive whatever minute hope there might be that Lucius was right and she might be interested in him, but it was at war with the other, larger, part of him that was certain his hopes would be crushed the moment she realised the track his thoughts were taking. Of course, it would be smarter to get the thing over with, deal with his disappointment and hurt feelings and move on.

Disappointment? Hurt feelings? No, anger. I meant anger. Nothing so weak as disappointment or hurt feelings. I am a battle-hardened, heartless bastard. My feelings don't

get hurt ... Actually, I don't even **have** feelings ...

There, that was better. Smirking to himself, Severus returned his attention to what he was doing, only to discover that he had shredded the Boomslang skin rather than slicing it. *Damn.*

Scowling, he said abruptly, "Lucius has invited us to dinner this evening. We probably ought to stop for the evening if we're to go. It's formal."

Hermione looked at him oddly, and he realised he must have interrupted her. She didn't scold him, though. Instead, she said mildly, "Are you sure you want to go? You don't seem to be feeling very social this evening."

"I'm fine," he said tersely. "Do you want to go or not?" *Really, is it such a difficult question to answer?*

She looked at him sceptically. "Do you want me to go? You might be more comfortable without me there."

I knew Lucius was mistaken. She's trying to politely wriggle her way out of coming! "I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want you to go," he replied, only just managing to bite back the sharpness in his voice. "If you don't want to, just say so, please, and I'll leave you to it." He certainly wasn't going to tell her he was only invited if she came, too he didn't want her pity, after all.

She studied him for a moment, and he avoided her gaze by picking up the aconite and beginning to grind it into a fine powder. Not that it would matter, of course, without the sliced Boomslang skin, but at least he didn't have to see the discomfort she must be feeling when she turned him down. Really, she was much too soft-hearted for her own good. He had always found it far kinder in the long run to just yank the plaster off the wound all at once, rather than peeling it bit by bit as she seemed wont to do. He was so lost in thought that he jumped and nearly sliced his finger when she said, "All right. Dinner sounds lovely. I'll just let you put all this in stasis whilst I go get myself together. Shall I meet you in your office in an hour?"

Severus intended to agree, he really did it wouldn't do to make this seem even more like a date, would it? So, he was rather surprised and not entirely pleased to hear himself say, "In an hour, yes, but I shall fetch you in your quarters."

"All right," Hermione said, giving him one last considering look before disappearing into the corridor.

As Hermione got herself together, she puzzled over Severus's odd behaviour. He had definitely seemed ... well, cranky was the most fitting word she could come up with. She had actually been half-anticipating a reversion to the nasty behaviour he had exhibited toward her for most of their acquaintance. In fact, that was one of the reasons she had been so determined to see him today she had agreed last night to consider staying on, so she needed to see for herself how he would handle himself around her when he was in a temper. If he even approached the maliciousness he had always displayed in the past, she'd have said good-bye to Hogwarts and to him as she had previously planned, without a single qualm this time. After all, if he couldn't treat her with respect when he was trying to persuade her to stay, she could be certain he would abuse her mercilessly once she was under contract again.

But although he had clearly been in a bad mood, and had displayed irritability and impatience, he hadn't once raised his voice, nor had he said anything even slightly insulting. Instead, he had asked her on what seemed an awful lot like a date, if such a term could ever be associated with Severus Snape. He might have done it with rather less graciousness than one could hope, she supposed, but she had never expected him to turn into a happy-go-lucky sort of man, had she? She could even admit to herself that she probably wouldn't like him half so much if he did.

Still, she wondered why he was suddenly so keen on having her dine with him and his friends. Certainly, she had formed a comfortable professional relationship with Lucius, and a friendly sort of acquaintance with Narcissa, in the past few years, but she didn't really socialise with them much, and she'd have thought Severus would have preferred not to have her intruding on his longstanding relationships.

She wondered if maybe he had actually come to like her, after all ... It was so hard to tell with him, really. She was fairly certain he no longer hated her otherwise, she couldn't imagine he would be able to suppress continuing contempt toward her for so long. And she had thought more than once in recent weeks that they seemed to have found mutual respect and formed a solid working relationship. But she hadn't allowed herself to really consider the possibility that they might actually be forming a friendship.

And she *especially* hadn't allowed herself to think of him as a man. She had been very certain he would never be truly interested in her as a woman, and not just because she was his former student and nearly twenty years his junior. No, whenever she caught her thoughts straying in that direction, she reminded herself that he had loved, perhaps even worshipped, Lily Evans Potter for decades. Hermione was entirely certain it would be impossible to compete with a dead woman on a pedestal.

Last night, though, as they had danced and talked and even laughed at the Anniversary Ball, she had found herself forgetting her resolve not to see him in any light other than colleague, boss, and work friend. He had been so attentive and charming, and she had discovered how enticing he could be when he turned the full force of all that on her. She had even allowed herself to recognise his attractiveness and to imagine for a moment that, perhaps, something more might be possible between them.

She had, of course, been brought sharply back to earth when she had seen his reaction to the *Prophet* coverage this morning. He was clearly embarrassed and unhappy with it. She probably ought not to have agreed when he had suggested they pretend to be involved, she realised now. It had been a chivalrous impulse, no more, that he likely would have thought better of had she given him the opportunity. That realisation had stung, but thinking rationally and logically about it, his reaction wasn't completely unexpected. So, she'd disciplined her thoughts again, putting all her emotions from the night before into a little box, before turning her attention towards the damage control that was clearly required so they would retain their fledgling friendship.

Now, though, she was more perplexed than ever. How should she interpret his invitation to dinner?

She was forced from her musings when he knocked at the door. Glancing at the mirror, she was relieved to see she had actually made herself presentable, though she had been too distracted to notice what she was doing. Sighing in either relief or frustration she really couldn't tell which she went to let him in.

Lucius greeted Hermione and Severus graciously in the front hall when they arrived promptly at seven. "Severus, Hermione, so glad you could join us this evening!" he exclaimed. "Narcissa will be along shortly she's just checking on dinner."

"Thank you for having us," Hermione replied. She was here, and seemed none the worse for wear, so Lucius assumed Severus had managed not to alienate her after his departure earlier. He hadn't been the least bit surprised when Severus had Flooed an hour ago to accept the dinner invitation if for no other reason than Severus would want to prove he wasn't so besotted with Hermione that he lost all his nerve around her.

Now, he was pleased to see they appeared to be on good terms. Perhaps his little chat with Severus earlier hadn't been a waste of time after all. He called for Tilly to take their wraps before showing them into the library for pre-dinner cocktails. Narcissa joined them just as he popped the cork on a bottle of champagne. "So sorry to keep you waiting," she said as she accepted her glass. "I'm delighted to see you both. What shall we drink to?"

"To good food and better company," Lucius answered promptly. When the toasts were done, he asked, "Hermione, did you enjoy the ball?"

She smiled. "Yes, thanks, I did. I probably ought to be sorry for that scene with Pansy, but I confess I'm really not."

Narcissa laughed. "Nor should you be, dear. That girl has no sense of decorum. Do you know she once tried to blackmail Draco into marrying her?" She gave a delicate shudder. "Lucius put a quick stop to that, of course."

"I had no idea, but I'm glad her scheme didn't work," Hermione replied honestly. She and Draco might not have always seen eye-to-eye (to put it mildly), but she certainly

wouldn't wish *that* cow on him.

"Now, now," Lucius said, "let's not speak of unpleasant things. No sense ruining our appetites with such a lovely meal awaiting us. Severus, I trust you've had a pleasant day?"

"Of course," Severus said smoothly, though he didn't look entirely pleased with the direction Lucius was taking the discussion. "The students managed to get through the entire weekend without causing any major disasters, Hermione and I got a bit of work done on our research, and now we're here. What more could one want?"

Lucius ignored the wry undertone, saying only, "Indeed."

Just then, Tilly arrived to announce dinner, so Lucius offered Hermione his arm, leaving Severus to escort Narcissa. "So, tell me, Hermione, how is the research coming along?"

"Well, you know how these things are one step forward, two steps back, with a lot of pauses and detours along the way. But I think we're on the right track now," she said with a smile.

"Excellent. Of course, it will be so much easier to continue working on it if you stay on at Hogwarts next year," he said smoothly as he pulled out the chair for her, seating her to his right.

"Lucius, stop pressuring Hermione," Severus interjected as he seated Narcissa at the foot of the table. "She's agreed to consider staying on, and I have no doubt she'll decide for the best."

The talk became more general, and Lucius took the opportunity to watch Severus and Hermione interact. He hadn't had a chance to really observe them last night he had been too busy networking with all the right people, ensuring Hogwarts would get the maximum donations from them. He had caught a glimpse here and there, of course, and who hadn't seen the humiliation of Pansy? So, he had wondered if anything was going on between the two beyond Severus's efforts to keep Hermione at Hogwarts.

But after their conversation this afternoon, Lucius had wanted a chance to observe them when they weren't allegedly 'pretending' to like one another. As dinner progressed, he decided he had actually been demonstrating his usual perspicacity when he had hinted to each that the other might just have a crush. They were both trying to be discreet, but their attraction was impossible to miss, really. It practically crackled in the air around them as they alternately stole glances at one another and avoided each other's eyes.

By the time the pudding had been consumed, Lucius no longer had any doubt that the two of them would eventually wind up in bed, one way or another. The only question was how rocky the path to get them there would be.

Well, and exactly how much of a push he should give them ...

Chapter 15

Chapter 16 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 15

As they arrived back at Hogwarts, Severus started to feel anxious. The evening had felt somewhat like a date *two couples* having dinner wasn't the same at all as *four people* having dinner, in his estimation. For example, if he and Hermione had had dinner with Filius and Minerva, he wouldn't have such qualms about whether to call it a date or not.

But it wasn't *exactly* like a date, was it? There hadn't been any private moments, really, except when he had collected her from her quarters. Of course, he *had* told her she looked nice ...

And now they were approaching her quarters, and Severus didn't know what to do. Last night it had seemed perfectly natural to kiss her cheek, but tonight it just wasn't so clear. If she thought it was a date, she'd probably be expecting a real kiss, not a peck on the cheek, and she might be offended if he offered the latter rather than the former. But if she *didn't* think it was a date, and he *did* kiss her, she might think him too forward.

The dilemma was fast giving him a headache, and then suddenly, he was out of time.

An awkward silence descended as they paused outside her quarters. He watched her face for some clue of what she expected, but for once, as only his luck would have it, she was inscrutable.

After a moment, she said, "I enjoyed the evening, Severus. Thank you for including me."

He was annoyed to find he couldn't think what to say to that, because he was preoccupied with the realisation that his palms were sweaty. He managed a nod and what he was certain was a tepid smile.

Hermione didn't say anything else, just continued to watch him for a long moment. It was only when her expression started to change to something like disappointment that he realised it had, perhaps, been hopeful. Without giving himself a chance to reconsider, he leaned down and kissed her quickly, tentatively, on the mouth. As he started to draw back, she reached a hand up to hold his head in place, then proceeded to snog him properly.

When at last they drew apart, her cheeks were flushed, her eyes alight, and her breathing rapid and slightly unsteady. She smiled slowly and said, "Good night, Severus." Then she stretched up to kiss him once more, chastely this time, before disappearing into her sitting room.

Severus found himself fighting an unaccountable urge to smile as he headed off to find his own bed.

When the owl post arrived the next morning, Hermione was happily engaged in reliving the pleasure of kissing Severus last night. She was starting to think maybe he really

did like her, and maybe he could actually be ready to move on from his feelings for Lily.

So she wasn't paying enough attention to notice Hedwig the Second until the eagle owl had already dropped a letter from Luna into her porridge. Sighing, she nevertheless offered the bird a piece of bacon before fishing the parchment out. Scourging it quickly, she perused it as she sipped her tea.

Dear Hermione,

How are you? Harry and I hardly saw you at the Ball the other night, so we thought it would be nice if you'd come for dinner Saturday. Harry wants me to tell you to bring Professor Snape.

I probably ought to warn you that Harry was rather unhappy when he saw yesterday's *Prophet*. I had to persuade him not to run haring off to confront the headmaster about his intentions toward you. He seems to feel the recent change in Professor Snape's attitude is suspicious, and he says he wants to make sure you aren't being set up in some way. I tried to convince him you could look out for yourself, but you know how Harry gets, especially when the Nargles are as plentiful as they've been these last few months. Anyway, the only way I could calm him down was to promise we'd have you both to dinner sooner than not. Given all that, if you'd rather not bring the professor with you this time, I'm sure between us we can make Harry see reason.

Either way, do come yourself, all right? We miss you!

Love,

Luna

Hermione smiled wryly. She should have known Harry would be worried at the prospect of her suddenly 'dating' Severus or even seeming chummy with him after all the years of unpleasant relations, especially since she hadn't told him much about the changes in Severus's behaviour in the last couple of months.

She debated internally whether to even ask Severus if he wanted to go. She was fairly certain he wouldn't. He and Harry generally behaved civilly toward one another when forced into each other's company, but so far as Hermione knew, they hadn't progressed so far that a friendly dinner was likely.

On the other hand, Severus probably wouldn't like her making decisions on his behalf. He would say no, most likely, but he would want to do so himself. She supposed it wouldn't hurt to ask him. She hoped.

Regardless, she knew for sure he'd be displeased if she asked him now, in such a public setting. She would ask him about it when she saw him after dinner for their usual meeting, she decided, as she noticed he was finishing his breakfast and preparing to leave the Great Hall. She suppressed a little shiver of attraction as she watched him leave.

She set the letter aside just as Minerva, who had been sitting further down the table, took the seat Neville had vacated next to her ten minutes earlier. "Good morning, Hermione."

"Good morning. How are you today?"

"Fine, thank you, dear. How are *you*?"

"Great," Hermione said, smiling.

Minerva paused to sip her tea before she asked rather tentatively, "I assume you saw yesterday's *Daily Prophet*?"

"Yes, I did. I suppose it would have been better to avoid Pansy altogether, but I promise, I tried. Unfortunately, when we met, she started out by trying to provoke me, and only got worse from there."

"Oh ... er ... that wasn't the part I was concerned about, Hermione. Everyone understands why there's bad blood between you and Pansy; nobody expects you wouldn't defend yourself when she insults you." She paused. "I was more concerned about ... well, are you certain you know what you're doing where Severus is concerned?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, dear, it's just ... it's not so long ago that he was quite nasty toward you. He's ... well, *complicated*."

Hermione chuckled, unconcerned. "I realise that, Minerva. He apologised for his past behaviour weeks ago, and we've become friends since we've been working together on our project. You don't need to worry. Everything is fine."

"If you say so, dear," Minerva said, sounding doubtful. "Severus can be a wonderful friend. I just ... if you're hoping for more than that ... Please be careful, Hermione. I'm not sure he ever really got past his history with Lily Potter, and I'd hate to see you hurt."

"I'll be fine. There's no need to worry," she said again. "Severus is a good man. He wouldn't start something with me if he weren't over her."

"I agree he's a good man, and I even agree he wouldn't purposely hurt you, now that you seem to be friends. But he's never dealt with emotions all that well. It can hurt just as much if it's unintentional even more, sometimes."

"Don't worry, Minerva. I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine. Really." The older woman looked like she wanted to continue arguing the point, but Hermione forestalled her. "I have an early meeting with a student, so if you'll excuse me?"

At Minerva's reluctant nod, Hermione hurried out of the Great Hall.

Severus was methodically working his way through the stack of parchments on his desk when the portraits told him Minerva was on her way to see him. Phineas added, "Looks like she's on a mission, too, Severus."

Great. Severus could just imagine what she wanted to discuss. He was rather surprised it had taken her this long to come and scold him about his purported relationship with her pet lioness. *Well*, he admitted silently, *after that kiss last night, it's starting to seem like an actual relationship, isn't it?*

He considered for a moment whether there would be any benefit to escaping through one of the hidden corridors, but quickly gave it up as a bad idea. For one thing, it smacked of cowardice, and for another, Minerva could be more stubborn than practically anyone he knew (with the possible exception of Hermione). Since he couldn't avoid her forever, he concluded it would be better to let her get it out of her system immediately.

That decided, he opened the door with a negligent wave of his wand and then continued with the latest budget projections until she arrived.

"Oh, good, you're here, Severus," Minerva began moments later. Severus made her wait several seconds as he made a note on the parchment, put it aside, and removed his glasses.

"Where else would I be? It's the middle of a Monday afternoon, and I work here."

"Yes, well, I wanted to talk to you about Hermione."

"What about her?" Severus reasoned that just because he knew what she was going to say didn't mean he had to make it easy for her.

She glared at him. "You know exactly what, Severus. What on earth are you thinking, messing around with Hermione, of all people? Two months ago you hated her! I hope this isn't some plot to get her hopes up and then crush her for good."

Severus glared back, beginning to get irritated. "Nice to know what you really think of me, Minerva. And here I thought we were friends."

"We *are* friends, and if it were anyone else, it would never have occurred to me to think that, but you've always been completely irrational where she's concerned. The change in your behaviour toward her is rather sudden, especially for you."

"What does *that* mean, 'especially for me'? Do you think I can't change?" Severus was fast becoming truly affronted. Did she really think so poorly of him?

"Really, Severus, must you take offence at *everything* I say? It's not that I don't think you *can* change it's that you've never shown any *inclination* to change in all the years I've known you. Now suddenly you appear to be dating someone you've hated for the fifteen years you've known her? If you must know, I'm worried about you."

"Really? Because thus far, you've sounded remarkably worried about Hermione, but I haven't heard any evidence that you're worried about *me*." Hearing himself, Severus hoped that didn't sound as pathetic to her as it did to him.

"Have you considered that you're her supervisor? How do you think that looks for either one of you? She doesn't need another scandal after what Ronald Weasley did to her, and *you* don't need one with *your* history, either. Not everyone understands and loves you the way your friends do, you know."

Softening slightly, Severus said, "I don't really care for the opinions of strangers, Minerva. My behaviour has changed because once I gave her a chance, I discovered I actually *like* Hermione. Believe me, no one could be more surprised than I am, but there it is. I'm not going to let the uninformed masses dictate who I attach myself to. It's not as though I have so many friends that I can afford to give up any of them, is it?"

"I suppose not," Minerva allowed. "But Severus, her feelings for you appear to go deeper than friendship. Are you sure you can handle that?"

Severus opened his mouth to deny it was anything more than friendship, but what came out instead was, "Is anyone sure they can handle that? As far as I know, the only way to answer that is to try it."

"Yes, but do you really want to try that? I hate to bring up ancient history, but you've had no room for anyone but Lily Potter for more than thirty years."

"That's not true," Severus replied in quick defence, regretting it when he saw Minerva's surprised look. Taking a deep breath, he confessed a truth he'd kept secret for the last eight years. "I let go of Lily soon after I realised I had survived the war. She was never mine, anyway, and when everything else was finished, that was finished, too. I've had little enough energy for the past eight years I couldn't afford to waste any of it pining for a dead woman who was never mine to begin with."

"So, that's it?" Minerva sounded sceptical. "Twenty-odd years in which practically everything you did was for her, and suddenly she doesn't matter anymore?"

"It's not that she doesn't matter anymore, exactly. It's more that she's part of my past, not my future. But Hermione could be, if people will let us give it a chance."

Minerva sighed, her features softening. "All right, Severus. I hope you know what you're doing. Relationships between co-workers can get complicated, even without the sort of uncomfortable past you have, both with her and with everything else. And considering your relative positions, and both of your personalities, I shudder to think what would happen if it didn't work out between you."

"As of this moment, she hasn't rescinded her resignation, so that point may be moot, although I've asked her to reconsider. I hope she decides to stay, but our personal relationship does not depend upon that. Nor, for that matter, does her professional standing have anything to do with any personal relationship we might be developing. Now, I believe it's time for dinner. Shall I escort you to the Great Hall?"

Minerva didn't look happy, but she seemed to recognise that he would refuse to discuss the topic any further. Instead, as they left his office, she asked, "Will there be money in the budget next year to add the new greenhouse Pomona and Neville want, do you think?"

When Hermione arrived at Severus's lab that evening, she wasn't sure what to expect. She had hardly caught a glimpse of Severus all day just at meals, really, and someone else had always seemed to be commanding his attention. Or maybe he had reverted to avoiding her? It certainly seemed so, as he wasn't there waiting for her like he usually did. Reminding herself that he might have been detained by other duties, she mechanically began getting out the ingredients they would need tonight. As she did, she mulled over what might or might not be happening between them.

The truth was, despite her confident words to Minerva earlier, she really wasn't entirely sure Severus was looking for more than friendship with her. Or maybe friendship with a little sex thrown in. After all, *she* had snogged *him* last night he had really just given her a tiny kiss, and he hadn't seemed sure he wanted to do that much. Then she had practically attacked him ... though his response to her kiss had seemed plenty enthusiastic, she mused. But that could just be the normal male response to being thoroughly snogged by a seemingly willing female ...

Minerva's comments about Severus's long-lasting feelings for Lily had suddenly reawakened her memories of how desperate he had seemed for Lily's forgiveness when he was in hospital eight years ago, and how certain he had been that he had nothing to live for without her. What if he just figured he could at least have a passable shag, even if he could never love anyone besides Lily?

By the time Severus arrived twenty minutes late, Hermione had herself almost convinced that whereas she was starting to fall for him, he probably was just passing time with her because Lily wasn't available. She examined his face carefully for any sign that she was wrong, but as usual, his expression gave nothing away. He didn't say anything right away, which seemed to confirm her fears. Eventually, he asked, "How's the potion coming along?"

Deciding he apparently wanted to forget the whole thing, she forced herself to keep her tone even as she responded, "Fine. You're late."

He seemed wary at her tone, so maybe it wasn't quite as even as she had hoped. Still, he said calmly, "I was arranging a Portkey for James Lichtmann to Germany. His grandmother in Berlin is ill, and his parents requested his presence." Lichtmann was a third-year Hufflepuff, a sweet boy who reminded Hermione a bit of Neville when she first knew him.

"Oh, I hope she'll be all right," Hermione said, distracted from her own worries by concern for her student. "The ingredients are almost ready. Just the asphodel left."

Taking the hint, Severus began separating the dried flowers from their stems. They worked in silence for a few minutes, until it started to feel awkward again. Eventually, Hermione couldn't stand the silence any longer. "If you want to pretend last night didn't happen, just say so."

Severus's hands stilled for a moment before he resumed crushing the petals, looking uncomfortable. After a seemingly endless silence, he said, "That would probably be best."

Hermione busied herself rearranging the ingredients until she could swallow the lump in her throat and reply. "Fine." It came out as a squeak she wasn't even sure Severus heard her, since he didn't respond. Realising she was either going vomit, or worse, *cry* in front of him if she kept trying to swallow her hurt and disappointment, she managed, "I have to ... I feel ..." Her knife clattered to the table and she ran for the relative sanctuary of the corridor.

Chapter 16

Chapter 17 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 16

Severus stared after Hermione for a moment, debating whether he should go after her. He wasn't really sure why she was so upset he had agreed with her, hadn't he? He had spent the afternoon stewing about Minerva's concerns, and had concluded that perhaps it would be best to keep things platonic with Hermione. Although he wasn't really concerned about what people might think of him, he'd hate to see Hermione's reputation damaged.

And wasn't *that* a strange circumstance, to be more concerned with her status than his?

And of course, there was also the small matter of his real reasons for developing a friendlier attitude toward her in the first place. Somehow, he didn't think Hermione would be happy if she ever learnt his original motives had been selfish, even if he had eventually come to like her for her own sake. The likelihood that she would actually find out about that was remote, he thought; the only two people who knew were himself and Lucius. Since Lucius wanted her to stay at Hogwarts, Severus assumed the secret was safe. Still, look at all he himself had inadvertently disclosed to her in the past. There was no guarantee he would never get ill again, was there?

No, far better to end it before it began, for both of them, he was sure. Still, when she didn't immediately return he decided even platonic friends tried to comfort one another when there was obvious upset. Or so he had heard, anyway. Ignoring the fact that his friends generally avoided him if they suspected he might be even slightly displeased, he dusted the remnants of dried asphodel dust off his fingers and went to find her.

She wasn't in the corridor, nor in the nearby girls' lavatory, so he pulled out his wand and cast a locator spell before setting off at a determined pace. Ten minutes later, he found her sitting under a tree staring at the lake. "Are you going to tell me why you're so upset, or just sit here when there's work to be done?" Even as he spoke, he cringed mentally at his pathetic attempt to be comforting.

She gave a short, bitter laugh and replied without looking at him, "I'm fine. Why would I possibly be upset?"

Sighing, Severus realised this was probably going to take a while. He cast a cushioning charm before gathering his robes neatly around himself and sitting next to her. "I don't know. That's why I asked."

She kept her gaze focused forwards. "It's nothing. Apparently, I misread the situation." She turned to glare at him then. "Don't worry, I won't impose myself on you again." To his chagrin, he could see traces of dried tears on her cheeks before she turned her gaze back out to the lake.

Severus frowned. "Who said anything about imposing?" He should probably just leave things be, he knew, but he couldn't seem to make himself do it. "You're the one who said we should forget it."

"No, I said you should tell me if that's what you wanted, and you said it was. Fine, I get it. You don't want me. I shouldn't have kissed you last night. I won't do it again."

"For the record, I didn't say any of that. What I said was it would probably be best to forget it, and it probably would. I said nothing about my preferences." Part of Severus was horrified to hear himself quibbling in a way that would make it harder, not easier, to keep things light, friendly, and non-relationship-like, but he hated to see her looking so vulnerable. In all the years he had been his nastiest self with her, she had always seemed impervious to his insults. But apparently, his well-intentioned effort to protect both of them from scorn and pain down the road had hurt her more than he ever would have thought possible.

She snorted. "Your meaning was clear. I may have a terrible record in relationships, but I certainly know when I'm getting the brush-off. I've gotten it often enough, haven't I?"

"I wasn't trying to give you the brush-off," Severus argued, conveniently ignoring the fact that he had been doing exactly that. "I was ... well ... that is ... Damn it, Hermione, I was trying to do the right thing! Have you even considered what people might think if you got involved with me? Have you thought about that fact that my record in relationships is significantly worse than yours? Why should you subject yourself to that?"

Severus watched, fascinated, as Hermione jumped up and began pacing in front of him. She sounded annoyed when she finally spoke. "Why should I care what people think? The people who matter will know the truth, and the rest of the world can go hang for all I care. Your opinion and mine are the only ones that matter. Anyway, in what way is your record worse than mine? As far as I know, you've mostly avoided romantic entanglements altogether. I, on the other hand, have had at least one spectacular explosion."

Severus couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Oh, right. It's so much healthier to obsess over a dead woman for more than two decades."

"Look, if it's because you're not over her, that's fine. I understand, really. I mean, who can compete with the perfect Lily Potter, anyway?"

Severus was not as happy as he might have expected that she didn't sound upset anymore. Instead, she sounded resigned, and Severus found himself hastening to reassure her.

"Lily was hardly perfect," he admitted. It was still hard for him to acknowledge this fact - he'd loved her since he was eleven years old - but since the end of the war, he had allowed himself to remove the rose-tinted spectacles. "She was quick to anger and slow to forgive, and she was rather spoilt and shallow, if you want the truth. I'm sure if she had lived, and if I had had even one other real friend, I'd have got over her years earlier than I did."

"If she was so awful, why did you love her?"

"She *wasn't* awful. She was vivacious and fun and smart, and she was the first person who ever seemed to like me. She was all I had. Is it any wonder I clung to that in the face of later evidence of her faults?"

Hermione dropped down beside him. "If you're really over her, then I don't understand why you haven't found someone else before now."

"When and where would I find anyone? I spend all my time here, I can't abide idiots, and I'm not only ugly, I'm a pariah." Hermione seemed surprised. "You don't really think of yourself that way, do you?" To Severus, she sounded slightly worried and upset by the prospect that perhaps he really did. "I mean, I can see your first two points

you don't get off the grounds much and you really don't tolerate inanities well, but ..." She paused, turning pink, then seemed to steel herself to continue. "You aren't ugly, Severus, though I'm sure you aren't to *everyone's* taste, but I bet you'd be surprised how many women find you attractive. Sexy, even." The pink hue to her cheeks deepened slightly at that. "And most people know by now that you were always on the right side of the war, that you did what had to be done and what few people could have managed to do, even though it was necessary." She broke off, her blush deepening. "Sorry, I'm babbling." She laughed self-consciously and looked away, her fingers nervously raking through the grass next to her.

Severus stared at her for a long moment. He couldn't think what to say. She thought he was *sexy*? Certainly, there had been evidence recently that she might find him attractive, at least a little, but *sexy*? People didn't find him *sexy*. They found him ugly and nasty and greasy and mean, not *sexy*. Suddenly, all his reasons for thinking they should keep things platonic flew out of his head and all he could focus on was how badly he wanted to keep her for his own.

When the silence had dragged on too long, Hermione said awkwardly, "I suppose we ought to go either brew or clean up." She began to get to her feet, and Severus panicked at the thought she might really give up if he let her leave. He took her hand and pulled her back down beside him, and without giving her a chance to protest, he kissed her.

The hour had grown quite late by the time they stopped snogging long enough to return to the lab and clean up. Even while they bottled and cast stasis charms on everything, they kept pausing for more snogging. Hermione felt like she was in a dream. He really did seem to want her, and he had said he was over Lily, so maybe there was hope for them ...

While she was wiping clean the work surface of the bench, she suddenly remembered Harry and Luna's invitation. "Severus?"

He looked back on his way to the storeroom. "Yes?"

"I have to ask you something, but I want to be clear that it's fine if you don't want to go," she began as she unconsciously twisted the cloth in her hands. "I can go alone it really wouldn't be a problem but the invitation *did* include you, so I wanted to give you the choice ..." She trailed off when Severus held up a hand. "Sorry, babbling again."

He smirked, looking amused rather than annoyed. "Why don't you just tell me who invited us where, and then I can decide whether I want to go or not?"

"Oh ... er ... right ... Well, Harry apparently saw the pictures of us in the *Prophet*, and Luna says he's worried about the sudden shift in our relationship, so ... they invited us to dinner." Severus didn't answer right away, so she plunged on. "If you don't want to go, though, it's fine. Luna and I can keep him under control."

"And have him spend the entire evening turning you against me? I don't think so. If you're going, I'm going," Severus said firmly. "I shall even do my best to restrain any impulse to strangle him," he added teasingly.

"I'd appreciate that greatly," Hermione said dryly.

His eyes taking on a speculative gleam, Severus purred, "How greatly?"

Hermione felt her cheeks grow warm. "Very greatly," she murmured, then sighed and added repressively, "But I don't want to rush things, so I won't be expressing it in the way you might hope."

Surprisingly, that didn't appear to faze Severus. His lip twitched with good humour, and all he said was, "Pity." He disappeared into the storeroom for a moment. When he returned he paused to kiss her briefly. "There's really no rush, you know. I like to think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Hermione was startled. "You've seen *Casablanca*?" she blurted, momentarily diverted.

"Of course," Severus replied. "My mum was quite hopelessly determined that I should fit in to the Muggle world as well as the magical one. We had a telly, and when Tobias was out at the pub, we'd watch old movies."

"You call your father 'Tobias'?" Hermione asked, intrigued.

"He was hardly a father. More like a jailer, really, so I decided when I was fifteen that he didn't deserve any sort of honorific." He shrugged. "It's habit now."

"Oh," Hermione said, surprised he was willing to say even that much, though it saddened her greatly to hear him talk about his father in such a way. She decided not to press him. "Well, anyway, dinner with the Potters is generally at seven. I can Apparate us there if you're comfortable with that, or I'll request a Portkey, if you prefer."

"I believe I can safely trust you not to splinch us. You're rumoured to be the brightest witch of her age, you know," he said with a smirk.

Hermione smiled and rewarded him for his faith with another kiss.

Saturday arrived much sooner than Severus would have liked. In fact, he wouldn't have minded all that much if some natural disaster had befallen England or Scotland around teatime. Unfortunately, it didn't, so he found himself preparing to knock on Hermione's door when the appointed time came. She had told him to dress casually, and that she would be wearing Muggle attire, so he was feeling rather exposed in black linen trousers and a long-sleeved black linen shirt. He tugged at the cuffs to make sure the remnants of his Dark Mark were covered. This was as casual as he got, he thought irritably, and if Potter didn't like it, that was too bad.

He recognised his irritation was really due to nerves, and he was a little bit pleased to realise he had learnt something since his younger days, when he would have blamed the nearest Gryffindor and behaved toward that unfortunate person accordingly. He knew if he had met someone like Hermione in those days, he would certainly have ruined his chances almost immediately. He had half-expected that even with his newly acquired self-awareness, their budding relationship would implode as soon as they acknowledged it.

Much to his surprise, though, the days since their talk by the lake had gone rather well. Better than well, actually, he amended, as he thought about long evenings working on their potion interspersed with stimulating academic discussions and increasingly heated snogging sessions. Though part of him wanted to hurry up and get her into bed for a long weekend of uninterrupted sex, another part was actually glad they were taking it slow. It felt almost as though he was making up for something he'd never really known he'd missed by being so lonely and unpopular and so focused on a woman who didn't even want him when he was younger.

So all in all, he was thoroughly enjoying this relatively innocent time. *Who would have ever thought anything related to me would be even close to innocent?* he wondered, bemused.

Sighing, he realised he had been out here in the corridor woolgathering for several minutes already, and he glanced around uneasily to be sure no one had seen him behaving in such a ridiculous fashion. He tugged once more at the collar of his shirt, hoping it covered the scars from that accursed snake, and then forced himself to knock.

Hermione opened the door almost immediately, and Severus found he had to swallow and start reciting the twelve uses of Dragon's Blood to prevent a very obvious physical reaction to the sight of her in a sleeveless blue tee shirt and a snug denim skirt that stopped above her knee. He really wished he was wearing his robes.

Hermione kissed him in greeting, then smiled warmly. "I'm so glad you're here," she said before frowning in concern. "Are you all right? You look pale."

Severus almost pointed out that all the blood in his upper body had clearly moved south, but forced himself to say instead, "I'm fine. Just a little worried that I won't be able to keep from hexing Mr Potter. Shall we get this over with?"

Hermione grinned and took his proffered arm. "It won't be that bad, I promise. I won't let him badger you too much, and if he gets too difficult, we'll leave."

Severus brightened. "Really?"

"Yes, but please try not to provoke him, all right? I realise it will be taxing for you, but you will try, won't you?"

"Only for you," he grumbled, though it was meant as a joke... mostly, anyway.

She patted his arm and changed the topic. "Perhaps next weekend we could sneak away for dinner out somewhere, just the two of us."

"Yes, let's do that," Severus said. "We've been spending far too much time with sycophants and dunderheads recently."

She laughed, and Severus found he felt significantly more at ease by the time they reached the Apparition point. Of course, when she wrapped her arms around him to Apparate them to Godric's Hollow (since he decided not to point out that he had been there before under rather unfortunate circumstances), all the blood rushed south again, but Severus was by then feeling happy enough to take it in stride.

They arrived on the porch a moment later, and Severus stole a kiss before releasing her and again mentally reciting the twelve uses of Dragon's Blood. Hermione smiled at him, and he found himself smiling back. She said softly, "Thank you for doing this for me."

Severus couldn't think of anything sarcastic to say, so he simply said, "You're welcome."

Hermione stepped back and rapped sharply on the door before pushing it open. "Harry? Luna?" she called. "We're here!"

Footsteps announced their hosts' approach from the rear of the house. "Hermione! Severus!" Luna exclaimed, and hugged them both, despite the bump in her abdomen that clearly announced she was expecting. Severus swallowed both a caustic comment about a new generation of Potters (he hoped to Merlin he would not still be headmaster by the time this one reached eleven years old), and his discomfort at the unfamiliar contact with a woman in her condition.

He turned to greet Potter though he supposed he'd have to call the man by his given name from now on, wouldn't he? Hermione probably wouldn't be pleased if he kept calling her best friend by his surname ...

"Headmaster," Harry said formally, apparently having no such concerns. Hermione and Luna were already moving off into the sitting room, chattering about Luna's pregnancy.

"Mr Potter," Severus replied, "it seems to me you've been on the Board of Governors long enough to dispense with the formalities."

Harry flushed and grinned self-consciously. "All right. Severus, then, and you can call me Harry."

Severus thought he deserved an Order of Merlin for not rolling his eyes at that. Really, did the boy think he didn't know he was called Harry? But he supposed it was just the polite thing to say, so he didn't comment.

His restraint was clearly for the best, he decided, because the boy was still speaking. "When you say 'Mr Potter', I have flashbacks to Potions lessons, which I'm sure we'd probably both rather forget." He gestured toward the sofa. "Come in and have a seat. What can I get you? Some Firewhisky? Or some wine, maybe?"

"Wine would be nice," Severus said, deciding he'd best keep his wits about him.

Harry held up a bottle for Severus's inspection before pouring them both a glass. "Cheers," he said.

Severus clinked glasses, thinking for a moment how surreal this all seemed. After an awkward silence, he asked, "How's work?"

"Fine, fine," Harry said. Another pause, then, "How're things at Hogwarts?"

"Same as ever."

They sipped in silence for a few moments, and Severus watched Hermione and Luna, who were across the room cooing over something baby-related. He made a mental note to talk with Hermione about contraception before they took their physical relationship any further. He was barely ready to attempt a relationship he had no desire whatsoever to attempt fatherhood any time soon.

Harry said, "Look, I don't want to start trouble, but I have to ask about your intentions toward Hermione."

"Do you?" Severus asked under his breath, wishing Hermione was paying attention, so she could put a stop to this discussion.

"You know I do," Harry said firmly. Clearly, Severus's question hadn't been quiet enough. "Until very recently, you hated Hermione's guts, and now suddenly you're dating her? You'll forgive me if I'm sceptical about the abrupt change of heart."

Severus glanced at Hermione, who was still wrapped up in her conversation with Luna, before saying quietly, "My prior opinion of her was unfairly coloured by history and misunderstanding. We've moved past that and discovered we have a great deal in common. My interest in her is sincere. Beyond that, our relationship is none of your business, and we will both thank you to stay out of it."

Harry stared at Severus for a long moment before nodding slowly. "Fair enough. But if you hurt her ..."

He didn't finish the threat, and Severus wondered idly what the younger man thought would scare him. *Probably a snake*, he thought irreverently before answering as patiently as he could manage. "That is not my intention, though such things cannot always be controlled."

Fortunately, Hermione joined them as he spoke, seating herself beside him and taking his hand and squeezing it gently. She smiled at him before turning to her friend. "Harry, stop badgering Severus. There's nothing for you to worry about. Everything is fine, I promise."

Harry looked doubtful, but he swallowed whatever further protest he might have made, and the talk turned to more pleasant (if odd) topics when Luna joined them a moment later.

Chapter 17

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 17

The next several weeks flew by, Hermione found, and before she knew it the Leaving Feast was upon them. She and Severus had been forced to curtail their research, at least temporarily, as she had been besieged at every possible moment by panicking students who were positive they were going to fail their OWLs or NEWTs, no matter how often she reassured them otherwise. She was really looking forward to the departure of the Hogwarts Express tomorrow, when things could get back to normal.

She still hadn't announced a decision about whether to stay or go, though she supposed the fact that she hadn't inquired or applied anywhere else rather spoke for itself. She considered the question again as she donned her favourite navy blue robes for the feast. She was running out of time, she knew, and she suspected Severus's patience was wearing thin, since she also had avoided taking any further steps forward in their relationship. She wasn't sure what was holding her back. No matter how much they snogged and argued and laughed and talked and snogged some more, she seemed to have one last remnant of doubt that wouldn't go away. She wondered if it ever would.

Since they had begun dating, he had been alternately charming and challenging, sweet and sarcastic, fun and frustrating. In short, he had been her perfect research partner, and she had on occasion caught herself thinking he also seemed like her ideal mate. He continued to look after her when she forgot to eat, and he made sure she slept, and she'd discovered that one of his sly comments was the perfect antidote when she began to take everything just a little too seriously. For someone who was more used to looking after people than to being looked after, it was surprisingly pleasant.

And she'd found herself supporting him in return, in other ways. As he'd gone without decent sleep or having much of an appetite for so many years, he would never forget to eat or go without sleep if he could possibly help it, so she never had to drag him out of his office for such things which, all things considered, was probably good, she thought as she charmed her hair into a French braid. If she couldn't be arsed about her own meals, surely it was best that she wasn't tasked with tracking his?

However, his newfound patience and tolerance toward her didn't extend to everyone, and the one downside to being cured, it seemed, was that he now found himself without an acceptable excuse to avoid the board meetings and fundraisers he still hated. This gave Hermione ample opportunities to support him by ensuring he didn't irrevocably alienate anyone who might be able to negatively influence his career path.

In short, they were *good* for each other. Hermione had been, and frequently still was, surprised that a man who had made no secret of his contempt for her up until a few short months ago could be such a wonderful companion not to mention a great kisser and sexy, too. If only she could figure out what was holding her back ...

Sighing, she finished getting ready with a quick swipe of mascara and some lip gloss, then went to answer his knock at the door. They had made no attempt to keep their relationship quiet, reasoning that since the *Prophet* had reported they were a couple even before they *were* one, secrecy was a lost cause, anyway. Thus, they generally arrived together to meals and meetings and whatever else they both had to attend, unless their schedules prohibited it. Still, they didn't talk about it, nor did they engage in any sort of public handholding or anything like that.

Now, as she greeted him warmly, her doubts and fears fled. She realised suddenly that they rarely stayed with her when she was actually in Severus's presence. It was only when she was alone with time to think that her fears rose up. Was this really all too good to be true? Or was she just holding on to the past a little too tightly? She didn't know, and once again, she pushed the questions aside as she walked with him to the Great Hall.

The next day, as they watched the Hogwarts Express disappear into the distance, Severus said, "Shall we resume our research?"

Hermione smiled. "Indeed, we shall. Is there anything you need to do first, or can we get started right away?"

"I believe anything else can wait. I'm not sure you won't explode if I force you to exercise any more patience," he teased with mock seriousness, delighting in the laugh that elicited as she slid her hand into his. He still couldn't believe his good fortune, after all their history, to discover that a woman who was so perfect for him actually seemed to want him. She seemed to find his dry humour hilarious, and she was sharp enough to engage in a battle of wits with him when the occasion warranted. It didn't even bother him that she liked to touch him constantly when they were alone, which surprised him since he had always, until now, believed he hated being touched.

In fact, the only thing that marred his otherwise perfect contentment was that she still seemed to be holding something back. Not just the sex, either he viewed that as a symptom that she still didn't fully trust him.

Nor should she, a voice in his head (which sounded suspiciously like Lily) whispered. *You haven't told her the truth about what drew you together in the first instance, have you?*

Shut up, he told the voice sternly. *She'll never forgive me if I tell her now, after all this time.*

She'll never fully trust you unless you tell her.

I'm not telling her. Shut up and go away.

He forced his attention back to Hermione, who was looking at him oddly. "Where do you go, Severus?"

"Go?"

"Mentally, I mean. You get this faraway look on your face, sometimes, and you look very unhappy. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No," he said tersely, feeling guilty at her concern for him. Then, realising she wouldn't believe a complete denial, he added more gently, "I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind. It's nothing important."

She looked sceptical, and perhaps slightly hurt, but let the matter drop. "All right, but you can tell me anything, you know. If you change your mind, I mean. Now, where shall we begin?" she asked as they arrived at the lab.

He let his relief show in a slight smile before leaning over to kiss her briefly. "Thank you. Now, I believe we were going to try adding a few drops of Dragon's Blood, weren't we?"

Two days later, Severus was in his office catching up on some paperwork when Lucius popped into the Floo. "Good morning, Severus."

"I don't see what's good about it," Severus grumbled, but without heat. It wasn't Lucius's fault that he had spent the last two hours working on the yet another revision of the budget projections. Not directly, anyway.

"Now, now, Severus, let's not be gloomy. May I come through?"

"If you feel you must."

When Lucius had brushed himself off and they had settled in with tea (it was morning, after all, and Hogwarts's brandy selection wasn't as good as Lucius's anyway),

Lucius asked smoothly, "I suppose you know why I'm here?"

"Other than to bother me? I have no idea," Severus replied just as smoothly.

Lucius smirked. "Oh, come, now, Severus, you can't think of *anything* that would be on my mind that would cause me to interrupt my summer holiday?"

Severus sighed dramatically. "Nothing comes to mind," he answered before taking a sip of his tea.

"You don't think I might want to know what progress you're making with Granger?"

Severus bristled, and if his cup made a slightly louder *clink* against his saucer than was strictly necessary, he hoped Lucius didn't notice. "Granger is none of your business, Lucius. Leave it be."

"Severus, I'm not asking about your personal feelings toward her, assuming you actually have any. I want to know if you've convinced her to rescind her resignation yet."

"She hasn't decided yet, or if she has, she hasn't informed me," Severus said defensively.

"Well, what did she say the last time you asked her? Is she leaning one way or the other? Because if she's going, we need to start working immediately on finding her replacement." Lucius sounded annoyed.

"I haven't asked her, all right? I promised I wouldn't pressure her, and she promised to consider staying."

"Asking isn't pressuring, Severus. We need to know, and soon. Otherwise, anyone we might want will already be committed elsewhere."

"I'm sure she'll tell me one way or the other as soon as she decides."

"Well, what's the impediment? Is she *still* not sure she can trust you?" he asked incredulously. "You've had *four months* to charm her, and you still haven't won her over? I *told* you this needed to be your top priority. You're losing your touch, Severus."

"I'm not losing anything, Lucius," Severus spat. "Except my patience with you. *I told you* I would convince her to stay, and she will. She's just not ready to admit it yet. We'd have heard something if she were looking elsewhere at a minimum, she'd have had to leave for interviews, and she *hasn't*. She has nowhere else to go at this point," he finished, feeling vindicated that his point was well made.

"She doesn't need anywhere else to go, and if she did, someone would make a place for her."

Severus snorted. "What, she's going to live on her Ministry pension? It's not particularly generous it probably wouldn't even cover her book budget."

Lucius looked at him, surprised. "That paltry sum? Pfft. She doesn't need that, either. Her income from the matchmaking service will keep her in all the books and anything else she might want for the rest of her life."

Caught off guard, Severus suddenly felt ill. "*What* income from *what* matchmaking service?"

"Arithmatically Yours." Lucius shook his head, then shrugged. "She gets royalties from writing the algorithm. You didn't *seriously* think Lavender Brown wrote it herself, did you?"

"I never gave it much thought at all. And if I had, I wouldn't have attached Hermione to it. She and Miss Brown were never close, so far as I know," he reasoned. He didn't appreciate Lucius's insinuation that he had stupidly overlooked something that, frankly, he couldn't have cared less about in the first place.

"Apparently, if rumour is to be believed, they bonded over their mutual displeasure with young Weasley after he treated them both poorly."

"Ah," Severus said. "Well, that's neither here nor there. Hermione would never be content without a career. She needs to be busy it's almost pathological. She's got a colour-coded schedule for the *summer*, for Merlin's sake."

Outside the door, which apparently wasn't as thick as it had always seemed, Hermione stood frozen, unable to move away from a discussion she most definitely didn't want to hear wished she *hadn't* heard. If only she had got sidetracked on her way here. Or taken time to put on some makeup. Or written a note to Harry and Luna ...

She was no longer listening to their conversation. She couldn't hear it past what they had already said, which was echoing in her mind, like an old phonograph record with a scratch in it. "*Charm her ... top priority ... nowhere else to go ... pathological ... charm her ... top priority ... nowhere else to go ... pathological ... charm her ...*"

She shook her head, whispering softly, "Stop it, stop it, stop it, *stop* it, Hermione. You *knew* something wasn't right ... you *knew* ..."

Slowly, painfully, she drew herself up and turned away from the door. The need to get away from those awful voices, to be alone with her broken heart, was all she could process at the moment. Very quietly, she left.

A/N: Don't kill me! (Be honest, you knew it had to be coming, one way or another ...)

Chapter 18

Chapter 19 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 18

Hermione spent the next two hours in a daze. When she reached her quarters, she lay down on her bed, wanting a good cry. The hurt was so deep, cutting through the

core of her very soul, that she couldn't manage a single tear. All she could do was curl into a foetal position, hugging her pillow and staring at the wall.

This was worse than anything she had ever experienced before. Nothing came close, really. Not Ron cheating on her so publicly; not Bellatrix gleefully torturing her; not the losses they had sustained in the Final Battle; not the loss of her parents when she had taken their memories and sent them to Australia.

How could she have been so stupid? She should have realised it was all a ruse, a game that Severus and Lucius had played for their own hidden purposes. It felt as though her heart had been ripped from her chest, thrown to the floor, and crushed under someone's boot. She could only imagine the hatred Severus must still hold toward her to have schemed in such a way. Everything else he had said or done to her over the years paled in comparison to this. She could, to some degree, understand, accept, and forgive everything that had gone before. It had been awful, of course, but her defences had always been raised, like a mental *Protego* that had deflected the most malicious and vindictive of his comments and behaviours towards her, so that at worst, it gave her superficial cuts.

But this time this time he had really outdone himself. He had seemed so sincere and apologetic about his past behaviour that she had been persuaded to lower her defences and let him in. She had handed over her heart into his hands, trusting that he would keep it safe, and he had betrayed her trust, so now she had nothing left, not even the strength that had seen her through the worst of what had gone before.

She felt more alone and tired and ...*sad* than she could ever remember feeling before.

It was the thought of how alone she was that finally freed her tears. She couldn't talk to anyone about this she would never get the words past the lump in the throat, even if there had been anyone to tell. Normally, she'd have talked to Harry and Luna, but not about this, and she just didn't have that kind of friendship with anyone else.

She would have to find a way to muster her defences and find some previously unknown strength, she supposed.

But for now, she decided, she would just cry.

When Severus went to fetch Hermione from her office for lunch, as had become his habit, she didn't answer his knock. He let himself in anyway, thinking perhaps she was caught up in her work and simply hadn't heard him. But her office looked deserted.

Deciding that perhaps she had gone to the library, he set off briskly in that direction, but he didn't find her there, either. Neither was she in the lab working on their research, nor in the staff room chatting with one of the other staff members. He was fast running out of places she could be, so he cast a locator spell, and was surprised when it directed him toward her quarters.

A feeling of uneasiness crept over him when he knocked and received no answer. Hermione never retreated to her quarters during the workday. Could she be sick? He recast the locator spell, thinking perhaps she had gone ahead to the Great Hall on her own, but his wand stubbornly insisted she was behind her door. He knocked again, and when she still didn't answer, he spent a moment deciding what to do. Eventually, his fear for her safety overrode his care for her privacy, and he used his privilege as headmaster to let himself in.

His eyes swept the sitting room, finding nothing out of the ordinary, and with an increasing sense of trepidation, he let himself into her bedroom. He was momentarily relieved when he spied her, curled up on her side in her bed, hugging her pillow close, until he got closer and saw evidence that she had been crying. Protectiveness surged through him, urging him to find and hex whoever had upset her so.

Even as he had the thought, her eyes drifted open, and she started to smile at him. He started to smile back, but then she seemed to awaken fully. Her smile disappeared and she looked frightened as she scuttled back across the bed away from him. "Hermione?" he asked, frowning. "Are you ill?"

She stared at him without speaking for an eternity before laughing bitterly. "Why should you care? Afraid I'll die and you'll have to fill my post? Or maybe that would be the coup de grace." She shook her head. "Go away, Severus. I don't want to talk to you. Except to say that my resignation stands. I'll be leaving here within a day or two, and I won't be coming back."

Severus couldn't have been more shocked had she told him the war had all been a bad dream. Her voice was all wrong cold and hard and mean and her words made no sense to him. *Leaving? She can't be leaving. What are you talking about? Where are you going?*

"Shocking as you may find it, Severus, I don't have to clear my plans with you. Rest assured, I *do* have somewhere else to go, and I can do just fine without a career for a while. In fact, before I go, I plan to *destroy* my pathologically colour-coded schedule. Would you like to watch?"

Severus felt the blood drain from his face. In fact, he wasn't sure if he wanted to faint or vomit. "Hermione," he began, but she cut him off.

"Oh, do you want to tell me I didn't hear what I thought I heard? That you didn't plan to trick me into thinking we were friends, or even *more* than friends, so that I would stay at Hogwarts? That you and Lucius didn't hatch some plot to keep me here for reasons known only to you? That you *didn't* scheme to gain my trust and my heart in a callous plot to break me once and for all?"

"No! Hermione, it wasn't like that!"

She laughed again. "Right. Just how *stupid* do you think I am? How many times do you think I'm going to believe your protestations that you really mean it this time?" She shook her head. "I'm done, Severus. I will never believe another word you say to me." Standing, she walked to the bedroom door before turning to look back at him. "You know the funny thing? You didn't have to pretend to like me. You didn't have to break my heart. All you had to do was say you thought it would be better for Hogwarts if I stayed, and that you would endeavour to treat me the same as everyone else you don't particularly like, and I probably would have stayed. It's not like I ever expected you to like me, and I certainly never wanted to love you." Another short, bitter laugh. "But I guess breaking my heart is just a bonus for you. Congratulations. You really had me fooled. Now, I'm going out. Please be gone when I come back."

After she left, Severus stared at the empty doorway for several minutes, willing her to return and let him explain, but she didn't come. At last, he decided he could at least honour her wishes and leave her quarters. He didn't go to the Great Hall, though. He felt too sick to eat, and what would be the point, anyway? His primary reason for wanting to live had just told him she never wanted to see him again, and who could blame her?

He went to his office and dug around in the cupboard until he found a bottle of Firewhisky. Opening it, he started to search for a tumbler, before realising he may as well drink from the bottle he was planning to finish it, anyway. He took a long drink as he sat in his chair; easily a quarter of the bottle was gone by the time he paused for breath. After a moment, he sighed in relief as the drink began to take effect.

Sighing again, he stared at the light playing off the liquor and wondered whether there was any point in writing her a letter. She'd probably burn it anyway, he thought fondly, remembering her facility with fire from the time she had been a first year.

An unwelcome voice intruded on his thoughts. "Severus, my boy, is something wrong?" He ignored it, but Albus was just as annoyingly persistent in portrait form as he had been in life. "Severus, why are you drinking at this hour?"

"None of your business," Severus said flatly. He heard the portraits murmuring amongst themselves, but he didn't care. He took another long swallow and pulled out a piece of parchment.

"Dear Hermione," he muttered as he began to write. "No, better make that 'Dearest Hermione.' If she bothers to read it, it has to be perfect." He made the correction. "'I know you're hurt and angry.' No, better not start by reminding her she hates me ... well, not sure how to start it then ... 'I know you said you won't believe my words.' Great, so much better to remind her she doesn't trust me ..." Crumpling the page, he took another long drink and a fresh sheet of parchment. "Dearest Hermione, I never meant

to cause you pain.' No, she won't believe that. I did, before, and she knows it. 'Dearest Hermione, I know I went about things all wrong, and it started because Lucius persuaded me it would be better if you stayed, but I really do love you now.' That's just pathetic. She'll never believe that, even if it's true." Severus was so wrapped up in his drinking and his somewhat drunken efforts at letter-writing that he didn't even hear the portraits conferring about his behaviour, nor did he hear them decide they were duty-bound to assist him in his hour of need.

Had he looked up, he'd have noticed that most of the former headmasters and headmistresses had disappeared. Only Phineas Nigellus remained, watching disapprovingly as Severus tried to get his increasingly incoherent and now, tearful ramblings onto parchment.

When Hermione returned to her quarters, she half-expected to find Severus stubbornly waiting for her. She refused to acknowledge that her relief felt very similar to disappointment when she found him gone. She had taken a long walk around the lake, and the fresh air and sunshine had calmed her somewhat. She stubbornly ignored the little voice that whispered she should have given him a chance to explain himself, and that she was no better than Lily had been as a teenager if she didn't. She wouldn't believe him, anyway, she told herself, so what was the point of listening to him?

A familiar voice interrupted her musings, startling her. "Hermione, my dear, what have you done to Severus?"

Turning, she discovered that Albus had managed to wriggle his way into a pastoral scene of what looked like Derbyshire that hung on her wall. "Don't you mean, 'what has Severus done to you, Hermione?'" she asked with some asperity.

Dumbledore frowned and glanced around. "I don't see you drinking yourself into a stupor and writing drunken love letters to him."

"He's " Hermione cut off the surge of hope that attempted to break through her defences. "I don't care what he's doing. After what he did to me, he deserves to suffer," she said as she turned her back to the former headmaster.

Looking very disappointed, Albus shook his head. "That's not very charitable of you, Hermione."

"Why do I always have to be charitable?" she demanded, turning again to face him with a glare. "Why can't he just not hurt me for once?"

"I'm quite certain he didn't mean to."

"Do you even know what he did?" Hermione asked, exasperated. "In case you don't, let me tell you. He *pretended* to like me to be my friend and maybe even to possibly love me, all in the service of getting me to rescind my resignation."

"Are you sure he was pretending?" Albus shook his head. "Because the man seems incapable of pretending at the moment, and he seems rather brokenhearted to me."

"Right. He just wants me to think that. He probably told you to come and tell me all this shite in hopes of changing my mind again."

"Actually, he told me it was none of my business. Would you like to hear for yourself?"

"No," Hermione said stubbornly. However, the little flame of hope that had sparked into being continued to flicker and she found herself unable to ignore it. She sighed. "Do you swear he didn't put you up to this?"

"If he had told me anything, it would have been to stay out of it. Fortunately, he's not coherent enough for that to have occurred to him, so we concluded that without clear instructions, we were duty bound to act in his best interests." Dumbledore's eyes sparkled like they used when he had been alive. "Now, would you like to hear?"

"All right, fine. But it's not going to change anything," she warned.

Dumbledore just smiled. She heard him call over his shoulder, "She's agreed!"

A moment later, she heard the rasp of a quill against parchment and Severus's voice muttering. It took her a moment to make out the words, because they were rather slurred, and when she did, she was stunned. "Dearest Hermione, ... well, at least the salutation is set ... 'Dearest Hermione, I know I should have told you earlier that my intentions at the start weren't so pure, but by the time I realised I should have, I knew you'd never forgive me, and I thought if you never knew, maybe you would ...' That's ridiculous, Severus. You knew she'd eventually realise she could do far better than you, didn't you? Or that you would do something to fuck the whole thing up ... You just figured you'd keep her as long as you could. If only I had told her, maybe she would have forgiven me. Oh, that's good, I should write that ... 'If I had told you that I started out plotting, but very soon found myself truly in love, would you have forgiven me?' Oh, it's hopeless. She'll never even read this stupid thing." Hermione heard what sounded suspiciously like a snuffle. Was he *crying*?

"You don't expect me to believe he's actually crying, do you?" she whispered to Albus.

"He turns out to be a melancholy drunk," Albus responded. "If you don't believe me, go and see for yourself."

She glared at him. "I know what you're trying to do," she said sternly. Albus said nothing; he simply smiled at her. Finally she huffed. "Fine. I'll see him."

"Might I suggest some Sober Up if you want to actually get anything coherent out of him?"

Glaring at him again, she nevertheless decided she would take a detour to Severus's private stores on her way to his office.

Chapter 19

Chapter 20 of 20

Severus has spent three years making Hermione's life as difficult as possible, in hopes that she'll resign her post and leave Hogwarts. When she does, however, he discovers that it's not in his best interest if she leaves, after all.

Chapter 19

"Here, drink this," a voice said as a feminine hand placed a vial on the desk in front of him. Bleary-eyed, Severus tried to decipher what it was.

"What is it?" he asked suspiciously.

"It will make you feel better," the voice said.

Severus turned his attention to the owner of the voice, who had seated herself across from him. "Hermione!" he exclaimed happily, then frowned. "It's not really you, though. You're mad at me. Maybe you're Lily, pretending to be Hermione, like Hermione pretended to be Lily." Confused, he deepened his frown. "But Lily's dead. Maybe I'm dead."

"You're not dead, Severus, though perhaps you will be if you don't drink this." She leaned forward and pushed the vial a bit closer to him.

"All right," he agreed, a bit sulkily, before adding under his breath, "Doesn't really matter if you poison me. Hermione hates me, anyway." He drank the vial.

"I do not hate you, Severus. I'm mad at you. There's a big difference."

Sobering up as the potion took effect, Severus frowned again, only this time he was more lucid. "You said you never wanted to see me again. Come to gloat?" he asked tiredly.

"No, I came to ask you to tell me the truth. I mean it, Severus, I want the absolute, complete, unvarnished truth."

"Did you put Veritaserum in the Sober Up? Because if you did, it won't have taken effect yet."

"No, I didn't."

"Do you want me to take some? You said you'd never believe another word I say."

"I want you to answer my questions with absolute honesty *without* Veritaserum."

"Why does that matter?"

"Because I need to decide if I can trust you, and Veritaserum really won't help with that, unless I plan to dose you with it in perpetuity. Which I don't," she added when he just stared at her.

"What do you want to know?"

She shrugged. "Everything." Severus didn't know where to start. She must have realised this, because she said, "Why did you befriend me? Was it because Lucius told you to?"

"Yes," Severus said. "And no." She raised an eyebrow and waited. "Initially, it was Lucius's suggestion that I apologise and ... well, be charming, I suppose, to get you to rescind your resignation. I don't know what he expected, but I certainly thought I'd be a bit nicer for a few days or weeks, and you'd sign a new contract, and then we'd ignore each other as much as possible." He paused.

"What changed?" she asked after a moment.

"You weren't around enough for me to charm. You were avoiding me." Another pause.

Eventually, she said, "Severus, this will only work if I don't have to drag every detail out of you."

"I know," Severus replied. "I'm just ... I'm not good at this, Hermione, and if I say the wrong thing, you'll leave and you really *won't* come back."

She watched him thoughtfully. "What aren't you good at?"

He gestured. "This. Us. Communication. Relationships. Friendships. I'm not good at any of it. I always drive away the people who matter the most to me."

Digesting that, she said, "Would it be easier if I promise not to decide anything until you've said everything you want to say?"

Shrugging, he said, "I suppose. Though if I don't ruin things today, I'll probably do so tomorrow, or the next day. I always do, in the end."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Tell me, as clearly and fully as you can, what happened with Lucius and you and me."

So, seeing no other option if he had any hope of salvaging some sort of relationship with her, Severus told her everything that had happened from the time Lucius pointed out the folly of driving her out of Hogwarts until the moment she overheard him and Lucius earlier that day. He concluded with, "And now I presume you'll leave, and I'll never hear from you again. I knew it would have been smarter to keep things platonic."

"Why would you presume that?"

"It's what I always knew would happen. It's why I didn't tell you all this weeks ago."

"Severus, from what you just said, most of what passed between us was due to real feelings. You stopped pretending by sometime in late March or early April."

"Well, yes, but that doesn't make my reasons at the beginning any more palatable."

"Good Lord, I would hate to be you! It must be awful to feel that mistakes are unforgivable no matter what else one does afterward."

Severus was surprised there was any question it could be otherwise. "In my experience, they are."

"Well, I'm here to tell you, they're *not*. Look at it this way: if you hadn't started trying to charm me with your imperfect motives, we'd never have become friends. Is that really something you'd rather have missed?" she asked, raising a challenging eyebrow at him.

"I suppose it depends."

"On what?" she asked, sounding a little offended but as though she was trying hard to cover it.

"Whether you're leaving or not."

She stared at him for a long moment, and he shifted uncomfortably under her scrutiny. At last, she said, "Before I answer that, answer one more question for me. And remember, complete honesty."

"All right," he agreed reluctantly.

"How do you feel about me now?"

Severus wished he could take a shot of Firewhisky. She had said complete honesty, but did she really know what that meant? If he told her the complete truth, she'd either run away from Hogwarts as fast and as far as she could, or at best, she'd try to let him down gently. Realising she was waiting, he decided he had nothing to lose, really, since deception had got him into this mess and she was probably going to leave anyway. "I'm in love with you," he mumbled at last, and could only hope she'd heard him, because he didn't think he had the nerve to say it again, or any clearer than that.

"Good," she said briskly, standing and straightening her robes. He expected her to leave him to nurse his broken heart, but instead she came around the desk, pulled his chair back, and seated herself on his lap. "I love you, too. Now, promise me you won't lie or omit anything important in the future so we can get on with the make-up snog."

Startled, Severus stammered, "I I promise. No more deception of any kind."

"Good," she said again, and kissed him. True to her word, they had a very long and satisfying make-up snog.

Eventually, something occurred to Hermione that she had forgotten to ask him about. She reluctantly pulled back and asked, "Severus?"

"Yes?"

"Do you *really* think my colour-coded schedule is pathological?"

Smirking, he said, "First of all, I said *almost* pathological. Secondly, I find it to be a charming idiosyncrasy, and third, don't *you* think it's almost pathological to have a colour-coded schedule for the *summer*?"

"Organisation is very important, you know," she argued. He raised an eyebrow and waited. "But I suppose, if you put it like that, some people might find it a bit much."

He kissed her briefly. "It's ... adequate."

She grinned and kissed him again.

Fortunately, they were still almost fully clothed a short while later when Lucius popped his head into the Floo. "Severus, did you ask?" Spying them, he paused. "Does this mean you've rescinded your resignation, Hermione?"

Feeling her cheeks flush, Hermione said, "We haven't really discussed it, Lucius. We're busy. Perhaps you could come for tea tomorrow?"

"Of course, of course," Lucius agreed, sounding smug. "I'm sure you have better things to do than talk business this evening, eh, Severus?"

"Go away, Lucius."

"I'm going, don't worry. Narcissa will be so pleased to hear of this development. She never really believed that whole 'publicity stunt' story you tried to sell us, you know. And to think, I made the match myself!"

"What?" Severus sputtered. "You did not! You almost ruined everything, you meddling fool! I swear you've been taking lessons from Albus." But Lucius had already disappeared. "Are you sure you want to take tea with him?" he asked, turning to Hermione.

"Of course," she said sweetly. "We have my pay rise to discuss, after all, since it would be a conflict of interest for *you* to negotiate with me now we're together."

Seeing the glint in her eye, Severus began to laugh. "May I watch?" he asked, still smirking. "I have a feeling Lucius has *seriously* underestimated you."

Hermione just grinned. "Indeed he has, Severus, my love. He really, really has."

A/N: That's all, folks! Thanks to everyone who has stuck with me for the story, especially if you had issues with parts of it. A huge thank you to everyone who left a review along the way (I'll try to catch up on answering them individually in the next few days). Thanks again to my alpha reader Atuliel, and to my Britpicker, Ruth, for their help with this story.

Finally, as promised, here's the prompt that started it all: "Headmaster Snape is becoming increasingly frail after his brush with death in the Shrieking Shack, and - though such a thing hardly seems possible - increasingly unpleasant. Everyone's suffering under his escalating nastiness, but no one bears the brunt of it like Hermione Granger (who's returned to take her NEWTS or, if you'd prefer to write her older, has come back years later as a professor). No one knows what's behind the hostility - and if Hermione does, she's not telling - but it's clearly about to come to a head. (Romance preferred.)"

I'd love to hear your thoughts on how I did with it!