

# Transcendent Quality of Remembrance

*by Subversa*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

## Chapter 1

*Chapter 1 of 26*

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### Author's Note:

I am no more a fan of long Author's Notes than you are, dear Reader, but I feel strongly that this one is necessary. This story is Alternate Universe (A/U), but in a fairly unusual way. We follow canon right up until the end of Book 5, with one caveat: Before engaging Dumbledore in battle, the Dark Lord frees his minions from captivity. They do not go to Azkaban, Fudge does not admit to the return of Lord Voldemort, and open warfare does not ensue. Fudge remains the Minister for Magic, the Malfoys continue to buy influence within the Ministry, and through these machinations, the Death Eaters engage in a completely undercover battle for power in the magical world with the Order of the Phoenix. There are no Horcruxes, Dumbledore does not die, Lupin and Tonks do not rush to marry, and the people who died at the end of Book 7 remain alive. The war ends after one battle that takes place at Hogwarts but does *not* involve every magical person in the UK with the courage to fight. Only the Order and the DA are aware of the conflict, and only they fight for the Light.

I encourage you, every time you're confused by something in this story that brings on cognitive dissonance, please return to this Author's Note to clear your mind.

A second very important point is for you to carefully note the date headings on the various sections. This story follows more than one timeline, and the date headings are there to guide your way through the story.

This story is complete. It will be posted, one chapter per week, over the next several months. It was alpha read by sshg316 and DeeMichelle; it was Brit-picked by Magically and meticulously beta read by Lariope. I owe these ladies a debt of gratitude beyond words.

Lastly, dear Reader, I thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for embarking on this adventure with me.

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Transcendent Quality of Remembrance

Chapter 1

From the start

We swore that we'd never involve the heart

Show Me - by Default

25 December, 1997

Ten o'clock on Christmas night, and Harry Potter lounged in the Gryffindor common room with his two best friends. It had been a quiet Christmas holiday thus far for them, because they had remained at school over the break at the suggestion of Headmaster Dumbledore, but very few other students had made the same choice.

Hermione curled up on the sofa before the fire with Harry's gift in her hands...a book called *Transcendent Quality of Remembrance* by Professor Moneta Muninn. Unlike Ron, who gave gifts based upon his lack of imagination (the same 'interesting' perfume he gave her every year? Really?), Harry actually asked Hermione what she wanted for Christmas and provided something from her short list. She had particularly wanted this book because its author was the head of a project at a wizarding university, where the phenomenon of memory was under research. Hermione was fascinated by the subject...particularly since her two best friends had narrowly escaped having their memories wiped like a chalky blackboard by Gilderoy Lockhart when they were twelve years old.

Harry and Ron sat at a table nearby, playing a particularly violent game of wizard chess and gorging themselves on Mrs Weasley's homemade fudge from their Christmas packages. Hermione thought the behaviour of the chess pieces was barbaric, but it gave her a feeling of comfort to hear her friends' voices

That was how Professor Dumbledore found them when he came, quite unexpectedly, through the portrait hole and into the common room. It was an unprecedented act. The only teacher who ever entered Gryffindor Tower was their Head of House, Professor McGonagall.

Harry saw Dumbledore first. 'Headmaster!' he said, standing and going towards the old wizard, with Ron at his heels. 'Did you need us?'

'Good evening, Harry,' Dumbledore replied. 'Yes, I have news to share with all of you...it will be particularly of interest to Miss Granger.'

Hermione abandoned her book and moved to join the three wizards in the middle of the room, a feeling of dread forming like an icy rock in her tummy. She had a very bad feeling about this. There had been some particularly ominous articles in the *Daily Prophet* over the last couple of weeks.

It was Ron who asked the question in Hermione's mind. 'Why is it of interest to Hermione and not Harry or me?'

The headmaster's usually twinkling blue eyes were quite grave as he looked at them over his half-moon spectacles and answered. 'Because the Wizengamot met in a special, secret session today and passed a new decree. Only students of wizarding blood will be permitted to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Muggle-born students will be notified not to return to school for the winter term.'

Immediately, Harry and Ron each put an arm protectively around Hermione, but although she appreciated the gesture, she was far too angry to be in need of emotional support.

'But Harry needs me, Headmaster!' she cried. 'There's got to be some way I can stay here, with him. We have plans to make!'

The headmaster took Hermione's arm and led her to the sofa where she had left her book, and the two of them sat down. 'I have an idea about that, Hermione, if you'd care to hear it,' Dumbledore said.

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2 January, 1998

The pounding upon the dungeon door was loud enough to startle Severus Snape into faltering in his anti-clockwise stirs of the potion in the cauldron, but the disturbance was marked by nothing more than the curl of his upper lip, lifted in a contemptuous sneer; doggedly, he continued stirring, counting as he went. After the Christmas holiday break, the student population was always rife with head colds, and a fresh batch of Pepper-Up was needed in the infirmary. The Potions master toiled over his cauldron, robes discarded, cuffs of his white lawn shirt rolled up his forearms, a heavy apron protecting his clothing from the ingredients

He never once glanced at the disfiguring mark on his left arm.

Septima Vector, seated upon a high stool at the work table across from him, marking papers, turned a startled look on Snape, but she wisely waited for her colleague to set down his crystal stirring rod before speaking.

'What the hell, Severus?' she inquired, gesturing behind her at the workroom's heavy wooden door.

'Who in the blue blazes is it?' Severus snarled, striding across the floor to fling the door open.

To his surprise, the headmaster stood without, his deputy headmistress at his side. Minerva McGonagall was anxiously casting glances over her shoulder.

'Good evening, Severus,' Albus Dumbledore said, his impulse to courtesy apparently unimpaired by the urgency Professor McGonagall betrayed with every movement of her swivelling head. If she had been in her Animagus form, Severus thought, her tail would have been twitching.

'What is it?' Severus demanded, senses heightened. 'What's happened?'

'Do hurry, Albus,' McGonagall implored. 'There's *no time*!'

Severus stepped to one side, motioning them to enter. Vector came forward, halting at Severus' side.

'Good evening, Professor,' Dumbledore said to her, inclining his upper body in an infinitesimal bow.

Vector nodded her head in response, even as McGonagall emitted an agonized moan. 'Albus!'

The old man turned to Severus, his blue eyes bright, an almost manic light in them. 'The Ministry has come to replace me,' he said chattily.

'They're at the gates!' McGonagall interposed, her tone little short of hysteria. 'Albus, you must away!'

'What is their reason?' Severus asked tersely. The Dark Lord, through the machinations and seemingly unlimited financial resources of the Malfoys, had shot the tendrils of his influence all through the fabric of the Ministry now. Cornelius Fudge, not the sharpest knife in the block, had proven himself to be quite susceptible to the twin influences of clandestine gold and insincere flattery.

'Gross incompetence,' the headmaster replied disdainfully. 'The file they've accumulated is large...and largely full of lies...but proving it false will take time. Meanwhile, they want me out of the castle. Voldemort seems to believe I will be less of a hindrance to him outside these walls.'

Severus flinched at the *Voldemort*, knowing the ugly Mark upon his arm informed his Master each time the name was spoken aloud in the presence of a Death Eater. Still, Riddle believed the Potions master to be *his* man at Hogwarts; he would not suspect Severus of perfidy. 'With whom do they replace you?' he asked.

For the first time, the old man looked thoroughly disgusted. 'Umbridge,' he spat, as if uttering the foulest of curse words.

Severus swore, and his three colleagues nodded as one person. *Everyone* at Hogwarts despised the toad-like Dolores. 'But whose man is she?' he wondered aloud. 'Fudge's or the Dark Lord's?'

McGonagall sniffed angrily. 'What does it matter?' she said stridently, her Scots burr more pronounced in her extremity. 'The witch is a sadistic tyrant. Either way, she will make our lives miserable, and it will be very hard to protect the students.'

Vector addressed herself to the headmaster. 'How can we help, sir?'

Dumbledore did not react to the question; his attention was focused on Severus like a magical laser beam. 'The matter we discussed before, Severus...can I count on you?'

Severus was jerked from his roiling thoughts as rudely as if some gigantic being had snatched him up like a child from a sandbox.

'Surely that is of little importance!' he blurted.

The old man placed a hand upon Severus' left forearm, just below the partially turned-back cuffs, his spindly, clever fingers brushing against the Dark Mark. 'Nothing is more important,' Dumbledore replied, his voice firm and as always, irresistibly compelling. 'You must protect Harry and keep all his resources at hand...at any moment, we may be at all-out war, and the boy must be prepared. Hermione Granger is integral to his success, Severus. You *know* this, whether you wish to admit it or not.'

Severus saw the deadly snare and felt as helpless to evade it as the simplest of forest creatures. 'But Lupin is a better choice,' he argued, hearing the shrill edge to his voice and hating it. 'She likes him...trusts him!'

'Lupin would have to give up his mission amongst the werewolves, and *weneed* their support on our side if this should come to fighting.' These words were spoken as if they were an oft-repeated refrain. 'Besides, the man is in love with Nymphadora Tonks, Severus...why should he be required to sacrifice his life's happiness?'

Severus jerked away from his mentor, furious, his tone growing more violently strident with each new affront. 'What about me?' he demanded angrily. 'What about *my* life's happiness, you old bastard?'

Dumbledore watched him with cold, commanding certainty. 'Only you can answer that question, of course...but what of your pledge to me?'

Black eyes locked with blue, and Severus threw up his Occlumency shields with frantic speed. His lips peeled back from unattractive teeth as he battled to keep the old man out of his mind, until at last he yielded, as he always did, in the end.

Being a wizard of honour was a constant, waking nightmare.

After a moment, the headmaster withdrew from Severus' mind, his shrewd eyes knowing. 'You see, Severus?'

Argus Filch rushed into the workroom, Mrs Norris clutched protectively in his scrawny arms, where she purred, unperturbed by human drama.

'Headmaster!' the caretaker wheezed. 'They're in the Entrance Hall, asking for you!'

Dumbledore took Severus' hand in both of his own, his steady gaze never wavering. 'Thank you, dear boy.'

Severus pulled away from him. 'Piss off,' he advised nastily, 'or you'll be breakfasting in Azkaban.'

Solemnity was swiftly replaced by inappropriate glee, and Dumbledore's eyes began to twinkle again. 'Right you are!' he agreed, reaching for the ceiling with one bony old hand.

Fawkes appeared from nowhere, his brilliant scarlet plumage jarringly beautiful in the cold, dreary dungeon workroom. The phoenix sang one piercing note, which fell like a wash of calm and serenity upon its auditors, and then the old wizard and his familiar disappeared in a showy flash of golden light.

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2 July, 1998

Hermione laid her rucksack on the floor and stared around the room assigned to her. It was at the very top of the house...an attic that had been converted to a bedroom...and quite small, with oddly slanting ceilings. Ignoring the pieces of furniture, she studied the old-fashioned wallpaper and framed still life paintings. There were windows on opposite walls that faced each other; one looked out on the front garden and beyond to a broad stream; the other looked out into the forest in which the house was situated, from which its name was derived: Forest Haven. The view was quite lovely, really, and already she wanted to explore along the brook, where wildflowers grew in profusion.

But she wasn't here to relax and enjoy the scenery.

Footsteps thundered on the staircase, and Harry and Ron erupted into the room behind her. 'This is *loads* better than our room!' Ron complained. 'We're like sardines in a can ... and sharing with Percy and the twins.'

Hermione turned a tight-lipped glare on Ron, forcing herself to count to ten. She'd grown good at it in the last several months, learning to hold her peace and think before blurting out whatever was on the tip of her tongue. Harry, recognising the signs, elbowed Ron sharply in the ribs.

Ron flushed. 'Not that you aren't sharing too,' he muttered.

Harry gave her a rueful grin and changed the subject. 'Remus reckons we're far enough from the nearest cottage that we can play Quidditch, as long as we don't use our wands.'

Hermione went to the neatly made double bed and dumped her bag on the cheerful yellow counterpane. 'Well, that should make Ginny happy,' she said using the new, expressionless voice she'd been perfecting. 'She was afraid you lot would be terribly bored here.'

Ron shrugged. 'What's the difference between being here and being at home? Mum will cook, Fred and George will drive her nuts, and Dad will sleep in his chair and pretend to referee.'

'Well, for one thing, the Burrow isn't Secret Kept,' Hermione said, 'and for another thing, you don't have quite as many people staying there as we do here.'

Honestly, why couldn't Ron just keep his mouth shut? She didn't want to thrash it all out again. Even though it had been over two months since the end of the war, here they were, in hiding again. Headmaster Dumbledore had called them to an emergency meeting of the Order of the Phoenix and told them there was a 'creditable threat' against all the Order members. Dumbledore had an excellent lead on the perpetrators, and the he would be working closely with Magical Law Enforcement. Already in the midst of packing up to leave school for the last time, the trio had grabbed a knapsack of necessities and moved straight from Hogwarts to this place. To Hermione, it meant only that she would be closed up in a house full to the bursting point with too many people, and that her other plans were to be ... delayed.

She wasn't sure how she felt about *that*.

'What's the good of finally finishing seventh year only to wind up here? Harry and I were going to *London*. We were going to have almost two months to be on the prowl before Auror training begins in September.' Looking miserable, Ron flopped down on the bed beside the pile of clothes Hermione was unpacking. 'I reckoned we'd be in the Leaky Cauldron by now, drinking Firewhisky and eyeing up the ladies.'

A fatuous expression crossed his freckled face, and Hermione felt a reluctant tug of affection. She still loved Ron and Harry...they were her dearest friends, and no one else could ever understand all they'd been through together...but she'd had to harden her heart of late. She couldn't spend as much time worrying about (and helping) them. She had important issues of her own that needed sorting out.

Harry came close and leant upon the old-fashioned brass bedstead. 'Look on it like a holiday,' he suggested to Ron. 'You've gone on holiday with your mates. This is loads better than being at Hogwarts. *Sna...*erm, *teachers* aren't giving us homework, we're not studying for NEWTs...we're recovering from all that.' He grinned. 'We can sleep late, eat your mum's cooking, play Exploding Snap and wizard chess and Quidditch...anything that doesn't require a wand.'

Ron poked at Hermione's neat stack of tee-shirts. 'Did you bring the Gobstones?' he asked her. 'The ones you got from...erm, well, the set you have is better than our old one.'

Hermione thrust her hand amongst the toiletries at the bottom of her rucksack and withdrew a soft velvet bag that clinked when she extended it to Ron. 'Here...now will you go away so I can unpack in peace?'

'I echo that sentiment,' a drawling voice said.

The three friends turned as one person, but Hermione supposed only *her* heart tripped into a faster rhythm at the sight of Professor Snape in the doorway. He wore dark trousers firmly belted at his narrow waist, topped by a black broadcloth shirt that emphasized the breadth of his shoulders, even if it did not give him the same imposing, physical *air* as his teaching robes did. His thin lips sneered, but Hermione saw that his eyes were watchful.

The professor moved into the room, crossing to the bed and depositing a plain dark valise beside Hermione's bag, in the spot Ron had just vacated.

'Do you mind?' he said with a sweep of his hand that moved the boys toward the stairs with a greater rapidity than any words of Hermione's had ever produced. 'I would like to be *alone* with my wife.'

Neither of the boys spoke before hurrying out of the room, but Hermione saw the expressions of disgust on their faces before they disappeared from sight. The bedroom door swung smartly closed behind them, the doorknob nearly gouging Ron in the seat of his jeans. She darted a glance at the professor, only to find him watching her with glittering black eyes.

'There,' he purred. 'What could be cosier?'

## Chapter 2

*Chapter 2 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.



## Chapter 2

If I'm helpless, help me glean some meaning

If I'm screening you out, let me in

*Waiting* - by Gunhill Road

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest, hiding the slight trembling of her hands. 'Why do you say things like that?' she asked quietly. 'You know it just ... bothers them.'

His eyes, now guarded, slid from hers to his valise, and he bent to open it, as if unpacking were imperative. 'Are you suggesting that I should pander to their preferences and ignore my own?' he responded, his tone carefully neutral.

Hermione felt the trapped, panicky sensation she had recently begun to experience when shut up in a room with ... her husband. It had been six months since the Ministry's new policy to exclude Muggle-born students from Hogwarts had been thwarted by Hermione's hastily arranged marriage. Ancient Hogwarts by-laws declared that the spouse of a fully-qualified wizard could not be denied an education at Hogwarts, even if that spouse were Muggle-born. In the middle of a tense, undeclared war, Dumbledore had been hard-put to find a fully qualified wizard who was both available (unmarried) and capable of countering anything the Death Eater-influenced Ministry might send her way (magically powerful). Professor Snape had been the best choice for her, if she wanted to remain at Hogwarts and continue to work with Harry and Ron...and the Order...towards Voldemort's demise. That did not, of course, mean that the professor was particularly graceful about it. And neither had she been, countering his snide nastiness with her shrill defensiveness.

She was better at managing herself around him now. Or had been, before this unaccountable nervousness when she was alone with him had begun to crop up.

She began to back away from him towards the door through which Harry and Ron had departed. His head swivelled, and he watched her go, an incalculable expression upon his sharp features.

'A rendezvous with your little friends?' he inquired silkily.

'No,' she answered. 'M-Molly needs someone to help with dinner.'

His eyes narrowed. 'I must insist that you honour our agreement.'

Hermione fumbled with the doorknob, unable to prevent her flash of defiance. 'You don't have to remind me every time I walk out the door!'

He crossed the room in two strides, reaching past her to push the door closed, the aroma of his aftershave...sandalwood and musk, indelibly *him*...enveloping her. He glared down at her, his thin lips pressed into a straight, angry line. She wanted to push him away...he was standing much too close...but she didn't dare to touch him. Desperately, she turned her face away, trying not to breathe in his confusing, emotion-roiling scent.

'Do you think I like this any better than you do?' he demanded. 'I have far more pleasant ways to spend my time than to be cooped up in this place with these people...and *you*.'

Hermione felt as if she'd been slapped. Sliding sideways along the wall, she didn't stop until she was in the corner of the room beside the antique writing desk, breathing deeply of the untainted air. Forcing herself to speak past the painful lump in her throat, she whispered bitterly, 'I know you do.'

His eyes tracked her skittering progress, but he did not pursue her. 'Will you abide by our agreement, then?'

'Yes.'

He opened the door. 'Then please, don't permit me to foil your escape.'

Hermione recognised the tone of acerbic irony, but it gave her no pause. She rushed past him and down the stairs, mentally berating herself for her failure to stand up to the bully she had married.

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The ground floor of the house was deserted...everyone was getting settled in their rooms, no doubt...so Hermione fled the building altogether, crossing the clearing that passed for the front garden to the stream. Scrambling up onto a boulder that looked as if it had been designed for sitting, she wrapped her arms about her bent knees and stared at the water, working to calm herself.

Remus Lupin had been Hermione's other choice of husband, to keep her safely at Hogwarts. Hermione knew Lupin well. They were both part of Harry's inner circle, so they were quite familiar with and fond of one another. But Lupin had been on assignment, working for the Order amongst the werewolves, seeking to form an alliance. While marriage to him would have given her the protection of his fully-qualified status, going to live with him amongst the werewolves was impossible. Some days she thought that marrying Lupin would have been much easier to bear than dealing with Severus Snape's prickly personality.

It might even have been more like a real marriage.

Warm hands closed over her shoulders, and she glanced back to see Lupin smiling at her. Seated upon her perch, her eyes were on level with his.

'How are you, Hermione?' he asked kindly in his rather hoarse voice.

Hermione smiled at him. 'I'm very well,' she answered. 'I wish we didn't have to be here, though.'

He nodded gravely. 'I know it isn't what you had planned for. Have you discussed your ... decision with Severus?'

Hermione glanced about nervously for her irritable husband. 'No, not yet. I was waiting until the NEWTs results are done. I'll know more about my options, then.'

Lupin chuckled. 'I have no doubt you'll receive a page full of O's.'

Hermione privately thought he was correct, but she had no desire to boast about it to him.

'Did you have any trouble getting off work to come here?' she asked. Lupin's position as Special Assistant to the Minister for Werewolf Affairs was something he was very proud of, she knew.

Lupin lifted himself up to sit beside her on the boulder. 'Not at all. The Minister and Dumbledore are in contact. He insisted that Arthur, Percy and I come along, and Tonks will join us when she returns from her assignment in Ireland.'

Hermione sighed and allowed her forehead to rest upon her upraised knees. 'I hope we're not stuck here for very long,' she muttered miserably.

Lupin patted her gently between the shoulder blades, leaning close to murmur reassuringly in her ear.

But neither of them was aware of the figure that watched them from the window at the top of the house with tight-lipped fury.

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Gathering for dinner at the long wooden table with its many mismatched chairs was a noisy affair. Hermione, whose job it had been to prepare the cucumber salad and the gooseberry fool for pudding, took a place beside Luna Lovegood, wondering if her husband would deign to appear for the meal. She would have liked to believe that six months of marriage to Severus Snape had given her insight into his character...or, at a minimum, the ability to predict what he would do in a given situation. This, however, had not proved to be the case. There were times when he became inexplicably prickly about mere nothings and other times when she expected explosions from him that never materialised.

Molly went to the door and screeched for the laggards, and Harry, Ron, Percy, Ginny, and the twins crowded noisily about the table. The Patil sisters and Cho Chang already occupied the spaces on Luna's other side, so Ron fell into the empty chair beside Hermione and snatched a warm roll from the basket in front of him.

'I'm starving,' he moaned, taking a bite.

Then Professor Snape appeared in the doorway, and silence fell around the table. His cold black eyes swept the room, lingering for an uncomfortable moment on Hermione's face, and she felt her cheeks flush.

'Ron, go sit by Remus,' Arthur Weasley instructed. 'Let Severus sit with his bride.'

At the horrible...and entirely innocent, for Arthur had no knowledge of the true state of affairs existing between Hermione and her husband...irony of being stigmatised as a bride, Hermione's flush flamed to a full-fledged, burning blush. Ron looked for a moment as if he would argue the point, but Snape's assumption that Ron would obey his father brought him forward; with less than good grace, Ron vacated the chair, and the professor seated himself.

'Thank you,' Snape murmured, seeming to speak to Arthur rather than to Ron.

No, Arthur and Molly were unaware of the nature of Hermione's marriage. They had not been involved in the tense discussion of how to counter the abrupt Ministry decision not to allow Muggle-born students to return to Hogwarts after the Christmas break.

Food was passed, plates were filled, and it seemed to Hermione that the table conversation picked right up where it had left off before the end of the war. Arthur, Lupin, Percy, and Bill gravely discussed the 'credible threat' and its likely genesis, Molly and Fleur discussed the housekeeping arrangements, and Harry, Ron, and the twins squabbled over the chances of the Chudley Cannons to finish the season in some position other than solid rock bottom. The young witches debated possible group activities for their evening entertainment. Hermione sat, pushing mash about on her plate, keenly aware of the solid bulk of the professor beside her; he ate dispassionately...methodically...as if nothing of import were on the agenda for that evening.

No one, save for Hermione and Severus, knew that they had never before been forced to share a bed...well, not since the consummation of their marriage, and that been a one-off. Their mutual agreement to preserve the appearance of a marriage whilst they each maintained their own bed chambers and relative independence was now to be put to the test. In this house crammed with excess humanity, their charade could easily be revealed for what it was...and that would be in strict contravention of their agreement...the one of which he reminded her, it seemed, every time she walked out the door.

The prospect of putting up a believable front as a married couple in this small house, amongst these people who knew her rather well...and maintaining the fiction for an undetermined length of time...filled Hermione with a combination of dread and some other caroming emotion for which she had no name.

Luna and Ginny collected the dinner plates, and Molly served up the pudding. Hermione, who'd had no interest in bangers and mash, devoured her gooseberry fool with single-minded purpose.

'I see you discovered your appetite,' the professor observed quietly, breaking his silence for the first time since he had sat down beside her.

Hermione darted a glance to the cup of unsweetened tea before him, his pudding untouched. With one long digit, he pushed the dish towards her.

'Perhaps you could assist me with this,' he murmured, and Hermione risked a look into his eyes. He looked neither angry nor scornful...nor even as if he had judged her and found her wanting. And in spite of their putative relationship, she had no Snape-standard by which to gauge his expression. What did he mean by it? The uncertainty kept her off balance, made her feel awkward and wrong-footed.

But it was the sudden realisation that their interplay was being watched indulgently by Molly Weasley that goaded Hermione into responding.

'Thanks,' she muttered, digging her spoon into the sweet treat without looking at him again.

Clearly, she was already failing to sustain her side of their bargain, and her performance did not improve as the evening wore on.

They adjourned en masse to the sitting room after dinner, where Remus and Bill embarked on a game of wizard chess and the twins began to plan the details of a new advertising campaign for Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. Padma, Parvati, and Cho shared a stack of magazines, avidly perusing them and discussing new fashions. Percy sat at one end of the long sofa, scribbling in an official-looking leather portfolio; at the other end, Fleur sat happily with Molly, continuing an apparently on-going series of knitting lessons. Harry and Ginny, with Ron and Luna, began a game of Gobstones. When Hermione returned from doing the washing up...a chore for which she had cravenly volunteered rather than accompany her husband into the sitting room...she slipped into an empty seat at the Gobstones table, making a conspicuous fifth wheel in that game.

Professor Snape sat in solitary splendour near the staircase, his considerable nose buried in a scholarly periodical. His brow furrowed briefly when Hermione came into the room...just at about the time she sat down between Harry and Ron...but he didn't raise his eyes from his magazine, so she supposed the frown was a response to something he was reading.

At half-past nine, Arthur, who had been dozing in his chair, startled awake and said, 'I'm shattered, Molly, dear. Shall we make an early night of it?'

'Of course, love,' Molly responded, tucking away the soft white blanket she was knitting.

At ten, Bill stood and shook hands with Remus, then turned to his wife. 'Ready, love?' he asked, moving to stand before her.

'Oh, yes,' Fleur replied tranquilly. She placed her knitting project...a tiny, pale yellow oblong-shaped item...into Molly's sewing bag and rose to link her arm with his.

'Finally,' George exclaimed, standing and stretching. 'Come along, Remus...you promised us a game of Exploding Snap!'

Percy responded to this with a disgusted sigh. 'I can see I'll get no peace for work in this place!' he exclaimed. 'Good night!'

Percy departed as Remus and the young people converged on the games table, and Luna began scooping up the Gobstones, replacing them in their velvet bag. Harry and Ron moved around the large oval table to make room for the newcomers, and Remus slipped into the chair at Hermione's side.

For the first time since she'd entered the room, Professor Snape looked up, his eyes flicking over the table's inhabitants once before dropping again to his magazine.

'I hope I'll do better at cards than I did at chess,' Remus said with a wry smile. 'Perhaps Hermione will bring me luck.'

There was the sound of Professor Snape's magazine slapping onto the end table, and all eyes turned to him as he stood, a forbidding expression on his face.

'It's time for bed,' he said, his eyes on Hermione's face.

Hermione felt the blaze of colour in her cheeks again. Now all of her friends were looking at her, as if they were waiting to see if she would jump up and follow her husband to bed, like a good little wife. But she couldn't do it...couldn't pretend she wanted to do it...dreaded the very thought of being trapped alone with him and her ungovernable thoughts in a tiny room with one double bed.

'I ... I'll be up when the game is over,' she said nervously. She knew she was turning in an abysmal performance as the wife of Professor Snape, but she could not seem to help herself.

His black eyes glittered in the light of the ceiling-mounted oil lamp, and his lips thinned into a straight, irate line.

'So be it,' he responded, and without another word or glance about the room, the professor turned on his heel and marched up the staircase.

## Chapter 3

*Chapter 3 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.



### Chapter 3

Even through the darkest phase, be it thick or thin  
 Always someone marches brave, here beneath my skin  
*Constant Craving* - by k d lang

2 July, 1998

Hermione trailed up the staircase, her feet like lead and her mind in turmoil. The card game had ended, and everyone had put out the lights and headed upstairs, voices hushed in an effort not to disturb those who had already retired. Lupin left them on the first floor, then all her schoolmates went to their second floor rooms, and Hermione was left to climb the final flight of steps on her own.

Would the professor be awake or asleep? Would he be in the bed or on the floor? Which would be worse? If he was in the bed, she'd be forced to choose between a comfortable sleep on a mattress or a cold, uncomfortable time on the uncarpeted floor. If he was on the floor, then that meant he had conceded the bed to her, and she could sleep there ... undisturbed.

But how would she feel if he was on the floor? What would it be like to know that he'd rather sleep on the hard floor than lie down next to her, even for something as innocent as a decent night's sleep?

She stopped halfway up the flight and sagged onto a step, her hands over her face. There was no one who knew her situation...no one in whom she could confide...and what was there to tell, really, when she didn't remember properly?

It wasn't that she was afraid of him. In truth, she scarcely knew him better now than she had done when they married. He had insisted that she maintain her sleeping

quarters in his rooms, but she had spent little time there. As a Gryffindor prefect, she'd had many duties, in addition to her studies and her efforts on Harry's behalf, which had kept her busy from cockcrow to midnight. She and her husband had seldom crossed paths; when they had met by chance in his sitting room, he had usually been perfectly civil to her.

The times when he had not been civil were memorable.

'Why must I live with you?' she had demanded during their prenuptial negotiations. 'It's not as if we'll actually have a relationship with one another!'

He had sat across the table from her in a room off Dumbledore's office, away from the listening ears of the previous headmasters' portraits. His posture in his enveloping black robes had been rigidly erect, his arms crossed tightly over his chest, his dirty hair hanging about his face like stringy black curtains. His lip had lifted in a signature Snape sneer.

'How do you propose to present a front as a married couple if you continue to live in your dormitory like a schoolgirl?' he had inquired icily. 'Your position as the wife of a fully qualified wizard...the purpose for this farce, I might remind you...will be unassailable in my quarters. You will be safe there. The matter is not up for negotiation. Move to the next point on your agenda.'

Hermione pressed her fingers against her eyes so hard she saw lights behind her lids. *He'd* kept her safe. That had been no idle promise on his part. And what had she done, beyond flouting and aggravating him?

'I've honoured our bargain,' she muttered aloud, dropping her hands to her lap.

But it had been easy to do at Hogwarts. All she'd had to do was sit with him at the High Table for dinner every night, per their agreement...only dinner...she could do what she liked the other meals. He had required no other show of wifely devotion of her there.

She drew in a deep breath. She couldn't spend the night sitting in the staircase; it was rather cold, and she'd never get comfortable. Besides, if she were discovered, that would definitely breach their agreement, the purpose of which, as far as Hermione could determine, was to shield Severus Snape from any hint of embarrassment. He had not specifically told her so, but Minerva McGonagall had explained it with great delicacy on Hermione's wedding day.

'Severus is a good man, and an honourable one,' McGonagall had said, avoiding Hermione's eyes in the mirror as she pinned a wedding wreath in her hair, 'but he's suffered some ... disappointments in life. It is ... important that he not be ridiculed in any way.'

It had seemed a rather vague explanation to Hermione, but it was all she got, and she dealt with it. She was good at dealing, when it was necessary. For now, the necessary action was to go to the room where Severus Snape was sleeping and shut herself in with him for several hours.

She only wished it didn't make her feel so anxious.

The odd dreams had begun several weeks before, flashes of heat...of passion...so intense that she'd woken from them disturbed and ... well, aroused. There had been two occasions when she had woken after experiencing an orgasm in her sleep...something that had never happened to her before. And the most embarrassing thing of all was that the dreams, indistinct as they were, were about her husband. There was no question but that his voice, his hands, his lean, lithe body, were the ones she dreamed of...and there was equally no question but that the emotions stirred by the dreams were beginning to bleed over into her waking hours.

It was at its worst in his presence, and the scent of his aftershave doubled the intensity of the dream-memories. Still, it was her duty to go to him now, uncomfortable or not.

'So be the brave Gryffindor and face your fears,' she chastised herself. 'Go to bed!'

And rising to her feet, she trudged off to what felt like her doom.

---

Hermione entered the room as quietly as she could, desperately wishing for the use of her wand to muffle the creak of the door and the sound of her footsteps upon the floor. One candle burned, on a table on the far side of the bed; on the near side, a man-sized lump loomed under the covers. She held her breath and froze in place when she closed the door behind her, but the professor neither stirred nor spoke, so after a short time, she moved across the room.

She had hastily departed the room before she finished unpacking her things, and the neat stack of clothing she had left on the end of the bed was gone. There was an indistinct dark shape against the far wall, though, and reaching it, she was relieved to find that it was her rucksack, with her things piled atop it. Oddly enough, her plain white cotton nightdress was the first thing she found. Had he fished it out and put it on top, making it easy for her to find? No, she wouldn't think about those elegant, long-fingered hands amongst her underthings...she *wouldn't*.

Pulling the nightdress over her head, she turned her back to the bed and pulled her arms from her tee-shirt, finagling it from beneath the nightdress neckline to pull it over her head. The rest was easier to manage, dropping her bra on top of the tee-shirt and toeing off her trainers before wriggling out of her jeans. She left her discarded clothing in a pile and slipped into the narrow space between the wall and the bed, only large enough to accommodate the slim bedside table where the candle rested. Why couldn't he have taken this side of the bed, rather than make her wriggle into this impossibly small space?

She turned the covers back, and in the light of the candle, she saw a most disturbing prospect...the naked shoulders and back of her husband as he lay upon his side, facing away from her. The pale skin was faintly golden in the candlelight, marred in irregular slashes by what appeared to be scars. There was a slight concavity tracing the line of his spine, and his shoulder blades were in stark relief, like the incipient wings of a dark angel.

*Stop it!* she chided herself, but it was already too late; at the sight of the lean, lightly muscled expanse of his flesh, a familiar ache began, low in her abdomen.

Oh, not again.

She blew out the candle and clambered into the high bed, careful to keep to the edge of the mattress. It wasn't as if she'd never been on a bed with him before, she reasoned. But he had never so much as hinted to her that he wished to repeat the grim act of consummation they had endured together, and she would certainly never suggest it. Although ... it was true that since the end of the war, his looks had improved tremendously. Regular sleep had removed the impossibly dark circles about his eyes, improved digestion had permitted him to partake more heartily of nourishment and filled out his somewhat skeletal frame...*just look at him now!* her unhelpful inner voice urged...and she was quite sure that he was bathing more frequently, taking more pains with his personal hygiene.

*Not helping*, she thought, squinching her eyes closed more tightly, as if doing so would remove the memory of his naked body from her mind. But was he completely naked? Had he thought this little forced holiday would be an opportunity to ... make their marriage real? Had she actually disappointed him by staying downstairs to play cards?

She lay very still on her pillow, desperately willing herself not to think about Severus Snape or the dreams which increasingly haunted her sleep, and fisted her hands at her sides, determined not to ... But as she trembled beside him, he shifted in his sleep, turning towards her, and the sandalwood and musk of his signature scent wafted over her, like an incitement to riot.

The heat in the pit of her belly increased, spreading through her bloodstream like a sensual poison. Biting her lip nearly hard enough to draw blood, she turned her head on her pillow towards him, peering in the darkness to detect any sign of wakefulness, but his breathing was deep and even.

*Thank Merlin for small mercies*, she thought inanely, even as she insinuated one hand down the front of her knickers, fingers seeking and finding the slick, warm cleft of her quim. The gasp of pleasurable relief escaped her in spite of the grip on her lip, and in her desperation to squelch the sound, she bit harder. The taste of blood on her tongue was not too high a price to pay as she spread moisture from within over swollen, needful flesh, her fingers busy about the work they had come to know very well.

She made no effort now to stop the fluttering, rippling images that flashed through her mind like a silent Muggle film. His hot mouth upon her breast, pulling the nipple between his lips...and then he was rising above her, shoulders blocking the light, the tips of long black hair kissing the skin of her face. Her gaze travelled down his wiry frame to the thick, engorged member jutting from the tangle of his pubic hair, and then he was within her, filling her, driving them both, until her entire world was down to the scorching point of light where their bodies joined and became one ...

The orgasm exploded behind her closed eyes in a wash of light so intense that the dream images were burned away, and all that was left was Hermione, her breathing irregular, her heart beating too fast, and the fingers she removed from between clenched thighs, sticky and fragrant of a sated need she could neither explain nor accept.

## Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.



### Chapter 4

#### I have tried so, not to give in

I've said to myself this affair it never would go so well

But why should I try to resist when I know so well

That I've got you under my skin

*I've Got You Under My Skin-* by Diana Krall

3 July, 1998

She roused after daybreak, when he rose from the bed. The shafts of early morning sunlight struck him as he donned a non-descript dressing gown over plain dark pyjama bottoms. So he hadn't slept nude, after all. She wasn't sure if she felt relieved or perversely disappointed. Then he turned towards her as he belted the dressing gown, his unreadable gaze flicking over her as she lay curled on her side...and she was startled to see the tenting of the pyjama trousers. He registered her discovery with a slight narrowing of the eyes, and she immediately shut hers and feigned sleep, turning towards the wall.

Good God! Was he aroused?

*Don't be stupid!* her inner pragmatist scolded. *Men wake up with morning erections all the time. It doesn't mean a thing.*

The bedroom door closed, and she breathed a sigh of relief. It was bad enough masturbating beside him in the dark, driven by equal measures of craving and humiliation, frantic that he should sleep through her shameful desperation...but to be given any further fuel for the fire of her insane sexual preoccupation with him was a piece of cruelly bad luck.

Obviously, the Fates *hated* her.

She curled into a tight ball, clinging to the far edge of the mattress, and prayed to fall asleep again, but she was too agitated to manage it. The prospect of looking into his face after being caught out eyeing up his morning glory was more than she could contemplate. It was simply too embarrassing.

Perhaps twenty minutes had passed when she heard the door again, swiftly followed by the voice of her husband.

'There is a bathroom outside this door that will vanish in half an hour. If you despise sharing with a horde of people, as I do, you will get up and make use of it.'

Hermione was surprised enough to push into a sitting position. 'You conjured *abathroom*?' she said blankly. 'But we can't use wands!'

He was dressed in clothing identical to what he had worn the previous day, black hair still damp from the shower. He was not looking at her, but placing neatly-folded soiled clothing in a bag.

'We cannot use wands registered in our names. I have an unregistered wand that will be used for any necessary magic for our stay here. The loo conjuring is durable for about an hour,' he added, his tone devoid of inflection. 'If you do not wish to be left standing naked on the landing with soap in your eyes, you'll shake a leg.' He looked up

suddenly, his endlessly dark eyes piercing her. 'In my experience, you are not particularly quick in the shower.'

Suddenly mindful of her dishabille, she pulled the sheet up to cover herself, trying not to imagine how her hair must look...but she quickly regretted her action, for the professor reacted with a narrowing of his eyes and curling of his cruel lip.

'Suit yourself,' he spat and stalked out, closing the door with a jerk of his wrist.

Feeling defeated before the day even began, she dragged out of bed.

---

Hermione walked into the kitchen to find it devoid of males. Molly drank tea whilst flicking over the pages of *Witch Weekly*, and Fleur handled the washing up of the dishes in the sink.

'Where are the men?' Hermione asked, wandering over to pour a cup of tea from the pot.

Fleur gave her quick, knowing smile. 'I remember when I was first married,' she said dreamily, as if it were in the distant past, rather than barely a year ago. 'I could not bear to be separated from Bill, either.'

Embarrassed by the very notion that she would feel something so inappropriate for the professor, Hermione pretended she had not heard. 'Did they go somewhere?' she persisted.

'They are patrolling the perimeter, checking the protective enchantments...well, your husband is, for he has the usable wand. Bill and his father went for the exercise, I believe. Lupin was the only one your husband required to go with him.'

Hermione put sausages on her plate with eggs and sat down near Molly.

'I'm just glad Bill and Arthur got up early enough to eat a good breakfast,' Molly said, putting her magazine aside. 'Severus marched in here and roused Lupin out before he could finish eating his eggs!'

Hermione was surprised to hear it. The professor loathed Lupin and seldom passed up a chance to make his feelings known. Why would he want Lupin's company for something so mundane as patrolling?

'Hermione, dear,' Molly said quietly, 'I know you've been living at the castle, where the house-elves do all the cooking, but I hope you mean to begin cooking for Severus now. He's so thin, and he wouldn't sit to eat or even drink a cuppa this morning.'

Hermione didn't know what to say to such an absurd suggestion. She couldn't begin to imagine preparing food in the kitchenette in the professor's quarters at Hogwarts, much less voluntarily sitting down to a private meal in his company.

'He's gained some weight since the end of the war,' she offered, sprinkling unnecessary salt on her eggs, avoiding Molly's eyes.

Fleur slipped into the chair on her other side and began to butter a piece of toast. 'I was a terrible cook,' she said. 'Then I asked for help.' She placed a hand on Hermione's arm. 'I am sure Bill's mum would help you, too.'

Hermione felt trapped and a bit panicky. If breakfast was going to be like this every morning, she might have to learn to do without it at Forest Haven.

'Just say the word, dear,' Molly affirmed.

Hermione muttered a muffled acknowledgement and put a bit of sausage in her mouth, forcing herself to chew.

'I imagine you'll be starting your family soon?' Molly said, and rather unwisely, Hermione was startled into answering honestly.

'God, no! I'm going to uni!'

Fleur seemed offended by this, abandoning her confiding attitude and withdrawing behind a posture of disapproval, but Molly broke into a broad smile. 'University!' she exclaimed. 'I didn't know! Congratulations, Hermione! Severus must be so proud!'

Oh, shit. Of course Molly didn't know...no one knew, especially not her husband.

'I just found out,' she lied desperately. 'I ... I haven't told him yet. Please don't mention it until I've had a chance to tell him.'

Molly looked concerned. 'But where will you go to school? The nearest wizarding university is in Geneva.'

Hermione began to feel unwell, her stomach churning with anxiety. 'There's one in Salem,' she said.

'In America?' Molly demanded, her voice going up to a near screech on the last word. 'You can't possibly mean to commute to America! You have to travel by Portkey, and only registered international Portkeys are allowed by the American wizarding government. Oh, those are frightfully expensive, dear. You can't have thought this out!'

Fleur's interest was roused by this subject, and she deigned to speak again. 'Perhaps the professor is going with her to America,' she said.

Going *with* her? As if he would even care if she went to live on another continent! But she had ~~had~~*promised* to maintain the fiction of a happy marriage...oh, this situation was going positively *pear*-shaped.

'We ... we'll work it out,' she said. 'As I said, we haven't talked about it yet. I'll let you know when we decide...but please don't tell him before I have a chance to do it.' Hermione heard the pleading tone in her voice and was ashamed of it, but she couldn't have him finding out about America from someone else.

Fleur assumed a sanctimonious expression. 'It's wrong to keep things from your husband,' she said.

Molly looked grave. 'Fleur's right, dear. Secrets will come between you.' She patted Hermione's hand. 'You'll tell him soon?'

Hermione nodded miserably, even though there was no conviction behind her acquiescence...she couldn't imagine telling her husband she meant to leave him whilst penned up in this house with him and unable to escape his reaction.

---

Boredom drove her out of doors later with her lunch sandwich in her hand...that and the desire to be away from the overly-wise Weasley wives. The other young witches were lying about on a rug beside the stream, their impromptu picnic piled in their midst. Padma saw her and waved.

'Eat with us, Hermione!' she called brightly. 'The men can't be bothered.'

Parvati laughed at this witticism, but Cho murmured, in her soft, northern accent, 'They're playing Quidditch, except for Percy. He's up in his room, working.'

Luna stood and gestured at the place beside Ginny. 'Have this seat, Hermione,' she offered. 'I need to go in for more crisps.'

Hermione sat and gnawed on the sandwich she clutched like a lifeline, unaware of the speculative consideration of her companions.

Parvati was the one who broke the conversational ice. 'Hermione, I've always wanted to ask you, but there never seemed like a good time...but now we've got absolutely nothing to do but talk to one another, do we? So, what the girls and I are wondering is, how's married life?'

Hermione paused in mid-chew. Seriously? Was there not going to anywhere at any time during this ordeal of being in hiding when she would be alone with her thoughts? When there would be no one prying into her business? She gazed around the group, seeing Ginny and the Patils looking interested; only Cho had the decency to look a bit ashamed of the nosey question.

When she didn't say anything, Padma broke the awkward silence. 'I thought it was so romantic, how he married you to keep you in school, and then when that thing happened with the Death Eaters ...'

Hermione swallowed her food and picked up a bottle of Butterbeer and drank before saying what was on her mind.

'I'm not going to discuss my marriage.'

Ginny snorted. 'We don't want any gory details, Hermione...it's creepy enough that you married our Potions professor. I'm not interested in his ... habits.'

Luna had returned with a bowl of crisps, which she held aloft as she frowned at her friends. 'It's just that none of us are married,' she said to Hermione. 'And we're ... curious.'

Hermione stood with her bottle of Butterbeer in hand. 'Talk to Fleur,' she advised, turning to walk away.

'Fleur is ooey-goey in *lurve*,' Ginny said disdainfully. 'I was hoping you could tell us how it*really* is.'

Hermione felt the flash of hurt...not because she was not in love with her husband, but because her feelings were so clear to her peers...and she had no hope of it ever, ever being better. But she was no more confident of being able to hide this sadness than she was successful at pretending to be Severus Snape's wife, so she fled into the house again.

---

By the time they all assembled for dinner that night, Hermione was ready to jump out of her skin. The professor had remained out of doors for hours, and she did not see him until he stalked into the kitchen for dinner and sat down beside her.

'Severus!' Molly exclaimed, placing a platter of chops on the table. 'We haven't seen you all day! You must be starving!'

If Hermione had dared to say such a thing, she had no doubt it would have been met with stony silence. Therefore, when her husband turned to Molly with a polite reply, she was surprised.

'It smells delicious,' he said.

Hermione picked miserably at her parsnips and peas, fretting over her indiscreet disclosure of the morning. How long could she rely on Molly and Fleur to keep her secret? And even if they didn't tell the professor, would they divulge the secret to *their* husbands? She could easily imagine Arthur sharing the titbit of information with her husband 'for her own good'.

She meant to tell him. She had *always* meant to tell him. But hard on the heels of the Leaving Feast, they had been sent willy-nilly into hiding. She had every intention of telling her husband she would be going away to America to further her education, though she could scarcely imagine why he would care! It wasn't as if they were actually a part of one another's lives, was it?

'I think Miss Weasley might combust,' the professor murmured into her ear, the warmth of his breath stirring her hair.

Hermione was jerked out of her own head to what was happening at the table.

'... a total lunar eclipse,' Cho was saying enthusiastically to Harry, who was giving her polite attention, and Hermione understood the danger in a heartbeat. Ginny was looking on, her expression growing more stormy with each second that Harry listened to Cho.

Having Ginny and Cho together in the same house was a good idea only when Harry paid Cho no mind whatsoever. Obviously, Harry had made the mistake of responding to Cho, and now, unless Ginny were diverted, there would be hell to pay.

'Percy,' Hermione said, drawing the attention of the serious, sober Weasley brother, 'Cho took the school award for Astronomy a few years after you...did you know that?'

Percy turned courteously to Cho, who was ensconced across from him, between Fred and George. 'I did my project that year on the moons of Jupiter, with particular attention to Ganymede and Calisto,' he said. 'What was your topic?'

Cho smiled. 'I remember your paper,' she said. 'Mine was on lunar eclipses.'

Percy nodded judiciously. 'I happen to have my telescope with me,' he said, 'if you would care to borrow it to observe the eclipse tonight.'

Ron snorted rudely. 'Yeah, I never leave home without my telescope.'

Molly scolded her youngest son, Percy rose from the table to fetch his telescope, and suddenly, dinner was over.

'That was rather well done of you,' the professor said quietly.

Hermione glanced at him, searching, as ever, for signs of mockery or derision, but finding none.

'Cho doesn't mean to cause trouble, but she does still fancy Harry just a bit,' Hermione said.

'Young witches inevitably fancy ... someone,' he replied. 'I wonder who that might be ... for you.'

Suddenly, with no warning, alarm bells were clanging in Hermione's head...how had they arrived here from where they'd begun this conversation? She had to get away.

Acting as if she had not heard him, Hermione began to stack dishes, standing and calling, 'I'll do the washing up!'

She carried her pile of plates and utensils to the sink, where warm, sudsy water awaited. When she dared to glance again at the table, the professor was gone.

---

The late summer sunset spread red tendrils across the clear sky, casting the sitting room into gloom, prompting Arthur to light the lamps. Hermione stood in the kitchen doorway, drying her hands upon a tea towel, hunting out a safe place to be. Harry and Ron had gone outside with Ginny and Luna; Molly and Fleur had retreated to Molly's bedroom for a knitting lesson; the two sets of twins were playing poker for popcorn kernels; and Lupin sat on the sofa with Percy and Cho, examining the telescope and commenting on its use.

'A total lunar eclipse doesn't require the use of the telescope you know,' he said to George, who was complaining that there were not enough telescopes to go around. 'You can view it with the naked eye.'

Fred leaned close to his brother. 'Lupin said "naked",' he informed George, in case his twin had missed it.

Fortunately for him, Arthur failed to hear the comment, for he and Professor Snape had their noses buried in back issues of *Wizarding Life* magazine, but Padma and Parvati giggled.

*Naked.* The word had scarcely penetrated Hermione's mind before she had a flash of herself, standing naked, with unbound locks spilling down her back, her hands buried in the blue-black hair of the man kneeling at her feet, his face buried at the apex of her thighs.

The vision filled her mind and then it was gone, leaving her weak-kneed and discomfited. Why? Why did she have *td*think these things about him...some of them things she never would have dreamed of doing with him or anyone else!

'Are you unwell?'

He had abandoned his magazine and crossed the room to her with the stealth of a panther on the hunt, and when she raised her eyes to his face, he watched her with a line between his brows. Then like an ill wind, *it* came in his wake, reaching her a moment after he did...the scent that was the greatest trigger of her inexplicable feelings. The sandalwood and musk mixture was a catalyst, her torment and her oxygen; she loathed the dark, sexual fantasies, but clung to them like an addict to her drug of choice, for the sensations they engendered were such as she had never known existed within her.

Even so, she could almost feel the colour draining from her cheeks in response to the potent physical reaction.

'You're as pale as a ghost. Perhaps you should lie down,' he said, his concern palpable. 'Go to bed early and get some rest.'

Endure more time lying in bed with him than she absolutely had to? No!

She stepped away, turning to fold the tea towel and put it away. Just as she turned, she heard Parvati speak, her voice soft, but carrying.

'She never touches him...not *ever*.'

Hermione felt slightly sick to her stomach. Didn't the gossips have anything better to do than watch her every move? But the answer was obvious, wasn't it? They were cooped up in this house with nothing to do but observe one another; of course they'd be making note of the difference between how Hermione and Fleur behaved with their husbands.

She could only hope the professor hadn't heard Parvati's remark, but who was she fooling? This man was a secondary school teacher: He heard ~~everything~~.

'I'm fine,' she said, turning to him with all the composure she could manage, though she spoke to the top button of his shirt, unable to force herself to look at his face. 'Besides, I planned to sit outside and watch the eclipse. The ... the fresh air will be good for me.'

Lupin paused in the doorway, the tripod for Percy's telescope in his hands.

'You should come out with us, Severus,' Lupin urged. 'We won't have another total eclipse until after the turn of the century.'

'Hermione.'

It was odd to hear her name upon her husband's lips; in his rooms, when he had spoken to her, he had usually called her 'Miss Granger'. But there was a note of command in his tone, and years of conditioning forced her to meet his eyes.

His attention was focussed on her, as if Lupin had not spoken to him. She knew he wanted her to comply with his wishes. *why? Why does he want that?..but she couldn't.* Given a choice between being trapped alone with him behind a closed door and being outdoors with friends, the decision was obvious. Surely even he could see that.

'I'll be up afterwards,' she said nervously, averting her gaze from his compelling black eyes. 'I wouldn't want to miss the eclipse.'

'Clearly.' The word was snapped in an attitude of severe displeasure, and though he wore no robes, she clearly saw them swirling about his menacing figure as he whirled and exited the kitchen, shouldering Lupin to the side as if he were a bothersome drapery.

---

When their outdoor excursion began, they were grouped together. The clearing before the house was the perfect place from which to watch the sky. Percy and Cho set up the telescope in the best position and took it in turns with Lupin, watching through the lens. After a time, Lupin joked about his back being too old for bending over a telescope, and he moved to sit beside Hermione.

Hermione sat upon her favourite boulder perch, her jeans-clad legs dangling down, her palms braced on the rock behind her as she gazed up. The large white moon, six days past the full, turned as red as blood as it was overtaken by the shadow of the earth.

Hermione watched the show, utterly rapt, dimly thankful to have something so momentous to chase her worries out of her mind for a bit. The respite was sweet, but not everyone was as absorbed by the spectacle as she was.

Ginny and Harry were the first to creep off, hand in hand, traversing the stepping stones across the stream to the relative privacy of the opposite bank. Ron and Luna followed almost immediately, though they appeared to turn to the left rather than the right when they reached the other side.

A soft laugh floated through the air, and Hermione turned her head to see the Weasley twins on either side of the Patil twins, like matching bookends. The couple on the right...she thought it was George and Padma, though she couldn't swear to it...melded into a kiss, swiftly emulated by the couple on the left, Fred and Parvati ... perhaps. She couldn't be sure. She watched the twining arms, wondering if it mattered who kissed whom when two sets of identical twins paired up.

*Of course it matters!* she scolded herself. *They're people, not just vessels of alleviation for each other's ...*

No, she wouldn't finish that thought. But was she doing that? Using Severus Snape as the convenient target of her burgeoning sexual awareness? He had done nothing to warrant that sort of objectification from her. He deserved more respect.

*He deserves to have someone who can put on a better performance as his wife than I do* she conceded to herself. *I'll do better. I must, for the sake of our agreement.*

Another sound reached her then, a low, purring moan, followed by a gasped French word Hermione was unfamiliar with. Fleur's voice was cut off, and if one were to judge by the growl of Bill Weasley's voice, it was by an insistent kiss. Hermione realised that Bill and Fleur were directly behind her, at the base of the boulder, certainly hidden from the other sky-watchers, but clearly audible to Hermione ... and to Lupin, who exchanged one embarrassed, humorous glance with her before she turned from him. She would *not* share Bill and Fleur's amorous adventure with Lupin...it would be far too intimate.

But the couple seemed oblivious to possible detection. Hermione shifted positions, feeling suddenly disinterested in the progress of the eclipse. Sitting forward, she drew her knees up and wrapped her arms about them, resting her forehead there. Now the only stimuli discernible to her were of the auditory sort: The low-voiced conversation

between Percy and Cho, the occasional rustle of wind through the trees, and the distinctive sounds of lovemaking from the Veela and her man.

Hermione felt the now familiar heat begin low in her belly, the arousal commencing its slow, tormenting spiral. Each murmur, each gasp, was like a piercing blow, but it was not Bill and Fleur she saw in her mind's eye...no, her traitorous memory served up every shameful fantasy she'd endured about her husband in the last several weeks. The feminine coo of pleasure was her, as the dark head at her breast moved from one side to the other, his lips releasing a nipple with a distinctive *pop*. The masculine groan, followed by the unmistakable slap of flesh on flesh, was their coupling, hers and *his*, the rocking, striving motion like a fire in her blood.

Such provocation as lovemaking in the great outdoors made short work of it; Fleur's cry of completion was surely heard by everyone, whether within the house or without, and it was followed almost immediately by a shuddering sigh from her husband. Hermione raised her head, seeing that everyone was now staring in her general direction, from whence the sound had come. But she was acquitted almost at once, as the lovers rose from the ground, straightening their clothing and going unconcernedly into the house.

'Without so much as a "sorry for the disturbance"!' Percy was heard to say, followed by the raucous laughter of his brothers.

Hermione slid down from the boulder, feeling the need upon her like an itch demanding to be scratched. She had to be alone...perhaps in the bathroom...but if not, Snape had slept through her activities the night before. If she had to, she could do it in their bed again.

'Goodnight,' she said, feeling that some explanation of her leaving was necessary, but unwilling to put forth the effort to make one up.

'Sleep well, Hermione,' Lupin said, and he reached down to pat her shoulder, but Hermione shied away from his touch. She registered Lupin's hurt, but she turned and walked away from him.

Remus Lupin was not her concern.

Neither she nor Lupin noticed the brief flare of light from the window at the top of the house nor the movement behind the darkened glass.

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The sitting room was empty, but when Hermione reached the bathroom, she could hear the water running and voices behind the closed door.

Apparently, Bill and Fleur had moved their activities to the shower.

*I won't think about that*, she insisted, but she might as well have saved the energy, for the shower dream and been one of the most vivid she had experienced, and in her current state of disturbance, she could not repress the memory.

Still, she doggedly advanced up the steps, heading for the relative privacy of the bedroom where her husband slept, even as the steamy images from the dream streamed through her head. There had been so much steam, in fact, that the face of her partner had been obscured, but the voice was inimitable. The shower dream was one of her favourites, because there was no scent associated with it, save the aroma of bath soap. She liked it as well because there was more to it than her own heady pleasure. She had delivered some of her own beneath the pounding pulse of the water, mapping the contours of his erection with eager hands before sinking to her knees to repeat the exploration with lips and tongue.

Before she was ready for it, she stood before the closed door behind which her husband slept...he must be sleeping, for there was no light showing beneath the door. She scarcely hesitated before entering this time; the throbbing need was intense, but even so, she was not made of the stuff that would permit her to bring herself off on the staircase landing.

As before, the man-shaped lump occupied the near side of the bed. Hermione knew where her nightdress was stowed, this time, and she quickly changed into it. She slipped into the narrow space between the bed and wall; from this vantage point she could see the professor, the bedclothes pulled halfway up his shirtless torso as he lay upon his back, his breathing deep and even.

His chest riveted her attention, the hair indistinct in the golden candlelight, but the slight, rippling definition of a fit body evident in the tone of his upper arms and pectoral muscles. Would his belly be as interesting? Might she move the bedclothes down to see?

*Get in before you do something stupid* she thought. She clambered onto the high mattress and put out the candle. Even if her arrival disturbed him, he ought to settle down again fairly quickly, and she could ... take care of business.

He stirred as she settled onto her pillow, shifting onto his side, so that he faced her.

*Damn!* she railed. *Why couldn't he turn the other way?*

Hermione lay as still as a stone, every second that ticked by feeling like an eternity. Some of the arousal from listening to the lovemaking had seeped away, but the shower fantasy had refuelled her passion, and seeing his well-toned upper body didn't exactly dampen her ... interest.

She counted slowly to one hundred, listening to his breathing, straining to detect any change in his position, but he remained stationary. After counting to one hundred a second time, she judged herself safe to proceed with the rather pressing business at hand.

Sucking her lower lip between her teeth, ready to stifle any sound, she pushed the sheet down with one hand and with the other reached down to administer a much needed ...

She wasn't sure which happened first...was it the flare of light as every candle in the room came to life, or was it the iron grip about her wrist?

Severus Snape loomed over her, black eyes glittering, and he slowly bore her arm back, until it rested over her head, still imprisoned by the vise of his unrelenting grip.

'Stop it!' she cried, pulling fruitlessly to retrieve her hand. 'What are you ...?' but she couldn't force herself to complete the sentence.

He looked into her eyes so intently that she wondered if he would attempt Legilimency, but that was not his purpose. When he spoke, it was in a cool, even tone, his voice completely devoid of feeling, though his words spoke of powerful emotion.

'No wife of mine, Hermione Snape, is going to lie in *my* bed and pleasure herself as if I am not here.'

Hermione struggled against him again, wanting to escape his merciless gaze, but she did not succeed in throwing him off, so she closed her eyes and turned her burning face away from him. Had he known what she was doing the night before? He must have done, else he would not have known what she was intending tonight. The mortification knocked every vestige of fight out of her.

She might better be dead than have to live with the humiliation of being found out by her husband in this shameful way.

'Now,' he continued in the same even tone, 'tell me what you need, and I will attend to it.'

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A/N: There was no total eclipse of the moon in the summer of 1998, so you needn't check on me and tell me so. I made it up and stand upon my Poetic License (which is framed and hanging in my Writing Nook, of course!)

# Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 26

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.



Chapter 5

My will has disappeared

Now confusion is so clear

Temptation, temptation, temptation

I can't resist

*Temptation* - by Diana Krall

*'Tell me what you need, and I will attend to it.'*

Only candles burned in the room, yet it felt as if electric light beat upon her closed eyelids, painfully bright and unrelenting. Unbidden...and unwelcome...a memory came to her, as vividly real as the day it had happened.

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9 January, 1998

It was the morning of her wedding day, and still, she and Professor Snape had not come to a final agreement on their ... arrangement. The night before, he had failed to appear at their appointed meeting after dinner. Hermione was, therefore, not entirely surprised when Minerva McGonagall knocked on her door soon after dawn.

'Professor Snape would like a word, Miss Granger,' her Head of House said. 'He was ... unavoidably detained last night, and he asked me to deliver his apologies. Can you come now?'

Hermione was frantic with worry and indecision...why should she go through with a wedding when her intended couldn't even be bothered to show up for their final negotiations?...and her anxiety bled through in her response.

'Why must I go to him?' she demanded. 'He can come to me! I waited for two hours last night!'

Professor McGonagall cast furtive looks up and down the stone corridor of Gryffindor Tower before replying. 'I am sure he would be happy to come to you, if we were not doing everything humanly possible to hide our intentions from the ... *High Inquisitor*.'

Minerva McGonagall scarcely ever used the title "Headmistress" when referring to Dolores Umbridge.

At the mention of the menacing Umbridge, Hermione's wayward emotions swung wildly to a new extreme. 'Of course I'll go to him,' she averred. 'He can tell me himself why he left me waiting.'

Hermione hurried through the castle at McGonagall's side, puzzled when they passed Snape's office and continued down two more staircases, deep into the bowels of the castle.

'Where are we going?' she whispered, but McGonagall did not answer, leading Hermione beneath an elaborate stone arch to knock upon the door situated there. Hermione hung back, hesitant, but the older witch gathered her in with an arm about her shoulders, so that they stood side by side as the door opened.

Snape's gaze raked Hermione with something akin to distaste as he threw open the door. He was extremely pale, dirty black hair hanging almost to his shoulders, with coloration like a bruise about his impossibly dark eyes...he had not been sleeping much, either. But of far more interest was his attire; for the first time in all her acquaintance with him, she saw her Potions professor without his teaching robes. He wore a high-necked black jumper over his usual black trousers, and the novelty almost made her forget why she was there.

'Can't you do something with your hair?' he snarled.

Hermione bridled as if slapped. 'Can't *you*?' she countered querulously, one hand stealing...against her will...to fumble at her untidy, hastily-created queue.

'I pulled her out of bed, Severus,' McGonagall said in astringent tones, walking forward until Snape fell back to allow her and Hermione to enter what appeared to be a small, book-lined sitting room.

It was Hermione's first sight of the place that was to become her home.

'She had no time for primping,' McGonagall had continued, 'not if we were to make our way down here unobserved...before ~~the~~ spies are about.'

Snape raised a hand at his colleague in acquiescence. 'It is of no matter,' he murmured.

'Then I will leave you to complete your business together,' the old woman said. 'Miss Granger, I will come to your room at five o'clock to help you prepare for the ceremony.'

Hermione nodded her agreement, and in the next moment, she was alone with her fiancé in his private rooms.

Though her heart was beating too fast...she was discomfited to be closed in with him, in his unfamiliar, casual attire...she lifted her chin and spoke before he had a chance to begin.

'Where *were* you last night?' she inquired tightly. 'I waited in the Room of Requirement for two hours.'

He focused his black eyes on her face. 'I was unavoidably detained,' he replied icily. 'You'd best accustom yourself to the fact that you have no control over my movements.'

Hermione felt her fury rising at this cool dismissal, until his next muttered words made him seem less like the imperious martinet he'd always been in her presence...made him seem almost human.

'Sometimes, it seems I don't have much control over them, either.'

A pulse of sympathy drew her one step closer to him. She'd known since fourth year that her Potions professor was a Death Eater who spied for the Light, but she was not at all sure what sorts of hazards that position posed for him.

He watched her come closer with a speculative narrowing of his eyes, and as if he was following her train of thought, he forestalled her with, 'No questions. Just tell me this: Can we agree on our arrangement without any further wrangling?'

Hermione felt a twinge of annoyance. He had agreed to negotiations regarding their roles in this marriage scheme, but then he made her fight with him for every point she had gained. Even so, she had no new demands to make of him.

'Yes,' she replied.

He nodded once. 'Then you may go.'

A certain stubborn determination stayed her feet. 'If this is where I'll be living, I would like to see my room,' she said, trying desperately not to sound like a frightened eighteen year old female.

She half-expected annoyance...fully expected resistance...but he surprised her, with another show of humanity. *Two in one encounter!* she marvelled, following him as he led the way across the sitting room in silent compliance with her request.

There were three doors visible, plus a tiny alcove that proved to be a kitchen, of sorts. The first door he opened and stepped back, as if to allow her full access. 'Your sleeping quarters,' he intoned flatly, and Hermione entered the space, noting the narrow single bed, the mirrored vanity table...an odd item to find in Severus Snape's quarters, surely?...and an ancient wooden wardrobe, fragrant of cedar.

Not as large a space as the one she shared with Lavender and Parvati, high in Gryffindor Tower, perhaps, but it would be her very own, uncluttered with the girly paraphernalia her dormitory mates considered indispensable.

'You find it ... acceptable?' the professor inquired.

Hermione darted a quick look to his inscrutable face. 'Yes, thank you,' she murmured. 'Is there a bathroom?'

The second door led into a bathroom complete with toilet, a basin with faucet handles shaped like coiled serpents, and a shower. 'If you should prefer a bath to a shower, you have access to the Prefect's Bath, of course,' he said.

Hermione exited the loo and pulled the door closed behind her, her gaze travelling inquiringly to the third door. Snape, following her gaze, replied with a thinning of his lips and a flare of his considerable nostrils.

'That is *my* room, which can be of no possible interest to you.'

Hermione stood before him for a moment, seeing his long, slender form, his thin, inflexible lips, and the deeply furrowed brow, which made him appear to be older than the thirty-eight years he'd admitted to. She knew she ought to go, but there was a question burning in her that demanded an answer.

'Do you,' she began, and his attention fastened upon her face. 'Do you think ... you could ever be ... attracted to me?'

His mouth twisted into an ugly sneer. 'Don't be ridiculous!' he spat. 'Now, get out!'

She turned and fled from him, humiliation burning in her face.

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3 July, 1998

The entire situation felt like a cinema-worthy nightmare, yet even the most brutal nightmares would fade if she dragged herself out of sleep and opened her eyes. Trying that experiment now only brought her face to face with her black-eyed, implacable husband.

His jaw was darkened with the five o'clock shadow of a beard unshaved since morning, and the column of his pale throat rose above the fascinating notch of his collarbone, clearly discernible above the dusting of dark hair upon his chest...a much safer place to rest her gaze than his all-seeing eyes. How...*how*...could she be both riddled with embarrassment and hungrily captivated by the body of her captor?

'Well?'

The word was like a slap. Hermione moistened her dry lips and said, 'Please.'

'I have said I will do it, Hermione. There is no need to ask.'

That wasn't what she'd meant! How could he *taunt* her so? She tugged again to free her wrist, but he would not release her.

'Please...just let me go,' she whispered. 'Put out the candles...I'll sleep, I swear it.'*Please, please just make it so that this never happened*

He did not reply, and at length, she looked at his face again.

'Are you going to tell me what you need, or will I have to work it out for myself?' he asked quietly.

'I'm sorry,' she tried, desperately wishing to find a way past his ruthless determination. 'I never meant to ... to put you to any ... trouble.' Perhaps she could appeal to his own insecurities...the ones Professor McGonagall had indicated he possessed. 'This is terribly embarrassing. Couldn't we just ... forget about it?'

He appeared to be giving her every attention as she spoke, yet his next words proved that he had not heard her at all.

'You were reaching for this,' he said, taking hold of the hem of her nightdress with his free hand, causing his knuckles to graze her upper thigh.

Her body betrayed her, and she shuddered.

'Right then,' he said, and without further discussion, he drew the bottom edge of the nightdress up to her waist, exposing her plain, white knickers. 'I believe you managed with these in place last night,' he said. 'Would you care to remove them?'

'No!' she gasped. 'No...don't!'

'Very well,' he answered. 'It would doubtless be easier if you were ... unclothed ... but keep them, if you must.'

His brows drew together as he studied the construction of her underpants, and against all reason, Hermione felt a throb of heat. Did he really mean to ~~touch~~ her, or was he just trying to embarrass her so comprehensively she would never want to frig herself again?

Having studied her thinly covered mound quite thoroughly, he slipped his fingers beneath the elastic about her leg, and she felt the cold of his fingertips upon the heat of her inner thigh with another rush of pure fire. As if helpless to resist the impulse, she rolled her hips slightly toward him, and in the next instant, his fingers were sliding through the slightly damp curls directly over the slit of her quim.

'It's easier when you help,' he said, and his fingers parted her labia, a shock of foreign contact, the relative coolness of his skin suddenly engulfed by her slick, sensual heat. Her head fell back onto her pillow, her eyes closing and the muscles of her inner thighs relaxing, submitting wantonly to the invading digits.

'That's right,' he murmured, but she scarcely heard him over the pounding in her ears...could that be her heart?

The knowing fingers angled more, and finding the passage further into her woman's body, they delved, drawing a gasp from her, a sound so licentious that she was driven to bite her lip to stop it. But it was difficult for her to be overly concerned now about sound when the lower half of her body completely disregarded her swiftly fading sense of decency. No, the fingers, wholly acclimated now to the heat of her quim, took full advantage of the way her legs parted to allow fuller access, and within mere seconds, it seemed, her fate was sealed.

*No!* her mind screamed, even as she rubbed herself blatantly against his willing fingers, driving herself blindly towards the completion she craved*No! Too soon! Make it last longer ...*

The orgasm hit with the force of a thunderclap, drawing her hips up from the mattress in a final thrust against his hand, the stifled cry she uttered ripped from her lungs like a stolen breath.

The probing digits stilled, and for a moment, the only sound in the room, it seemed, was Hermione's ragged breathing.

'Are you ...?'

He seemed to flounder for words, and Hermione slitted her eyes open, peering at him. His hand was still trapped in her underpants, and as the heat of passion leached from her, the position began to seem quite ludicrous to her. Wildly, she fought the rising hilarity threatening to give voice through mad-sounding laughter.

He removed his fingers and adjusted the elastic at her leg, as if to close a door he'd found ajar. 'Are you prepared to sleep, now?' he inquired, the evenness of his tone sounding slightly strained, his gaze resting anywhere but on her face.

'Yes, thank you,' she managed. What were the proper words to acknowledge such a signal service as the one he had just provided?

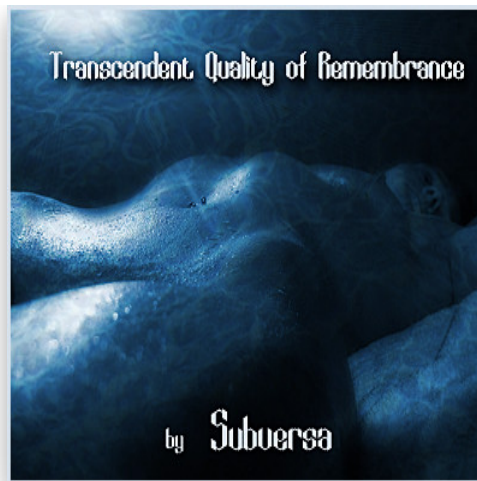
He released the wrist he had held imprisoned and pulled her nightdress down again before a wave of his hand extinguished the candles.

'Good night, Hermione,' he said, rolling away from her onto his side.

## Chapter 6

### *Chapter 6 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.



## Chapter 6

You give your hand to me, and then you say, "Hello."

And I can hardly speak, my heart is beating so.

And anyone can tell

You think you know me well.

Well, you don't know me.

*You Don't Know Me* - by Don McLean

4 July, 1998

Hermione lay in a near-stupor, her eyes blinking, trying to acclimate to the dark stillness after the bright, burning furor of the preceding minutes. Her body hummed in sharp contrast to her confused mental state. Had he made love to her with unemotional precision, brought her off, and then turned away and doused the light?

Really?

Ought she to touch his shoulder and offer a similar service? Not that she had much. *Any!* her unhelpful mind insisted...expertise, but shouldn't she make the effort? She rolled her head upon her pillow, trying to make out his shape in the darkness. Simple contact, her fingertips upon his naked flesh...and who knew what the gesture might start between them? He wasn't completely indifferent to her...'No wife of mine, Hermione Snape'...those words had been spoken with some feeling, hadn't they?

She stared hard at his indistinct bulk, as if her gaze alone might brush the well-remembered outline of his shoulder blade, initiating an exchange between them. But seconds ticked past, and still her hand did not reach for him. Who was she kidding? If he had wanted her, he would have done or said something to show it, wouldn't he? And besides, he had long ago expressed himself on the subject, and quite clearly, at that: *Don't be ridiculous!*

And besides, she wasn't thinking too clearly now; her mind was wandering off-topic as the languorous inertia of post-orgasmic bliss overwhelmed her. Relinquishing the silly idea of offering sexual relief to her husband, she slept, deeply and well.

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The attic room was flooded with sunlight when she woke, and the other pillow was empty. For the veriest instant, she relished her physical well-being...when had she last slept so soundly?...but then the memory of what had transpired between her and Snape the night before rolled over her like an ocean wave, and she was flattened by it.

How could she ever look him in the face again?

Disconsolate, she rolled out of bed and pulled on her dressing gown, gathering her shower supplies and creeping down the stairs. If her husband had conjured a private shower this morning, it was long gone. Thankfully, she found the communal bathroom empty, and she locked herself in for a therapeutic shower.

She wielded her soap and face flannel, forcing herself to be reasonable. She had nothing to be ashamed of. She had not initiated the ... incident. She had ~~not~~ asked to be ... had not asked for his ... assistance. And besides, they were married. Married couples had sex all the time, didn't they?

*Not us*, her troublesome mind reminded her. *Just the once.*

She raised her head to allow the stinging spray to hit her face, closing her eyes against the pulsing heat. She shied away from thinking about her one-time, required-by-law-to-make-her-marriage-legal sexual intercourse with her husband. She knew only that it had happened, and until last night, nothing of a remotely intimate nature had passed between them since. They had no desire for one another...it was an established fact that they didn't. He had all but laughed in her face at the mere suggestion of it, and she had cringed from the very idea of such an embarrassing, world-changing thing as having sex with her teacher-turned-husband.

What right-thinking teenage girl wouldn't?

*But now there are the dreams*, she reminded herself.

Stepping from the shower, she dried herself and then wrapped the same towel about her sodden hair. The mirror was steamed up, but still she stared at it, as if she might receive some words of wisdom from a clear look at her own reflexion. Words came to her lips unbidden, and she spoke them aloud to her mist-shrouded image. 'It didn't begin with the dreams. Tell the truth. It began after the battle...after the Death Eaters in the dungeons.'

And with those words echoing in her mind, she retreated again to the bedroom she shared with Snape to dress for another dreaded day.

---

Cho and Luna were at one end of the kitchen table, their heads bent over a parchment, and they murmured a greeting when Hermione entered. Fleur sat at the other end, flipping idly through an old issue of *Witch Weekly*. Molly was spreading something that smelled like egg mayonnaise on slices of bread, but she spared a distracted smile for Hermione.

'Good morning, sleepyhead!' she said. 'Severus said we should let you have your lie-in. I hope you're rested.'

Hermione froze in the act of pouring tepid tea from the pot into a cup. 'He said that?' she asked.

'He said you were "dead to the world", and he didn't know when you would be up,' Fleur supplied helpfully, sounding marginally less distant than she had done the day before.

Hermione nodded her thanks and took a cold scone from a plate near the oven. Molly placed the last sandwich on top of the pile and turned away to wash up. She was vigorously drying her hands as she spoke again to Hermione.

'You look less peaky today,' Molly said, studying her. 'Still, a nice walk outside would do you good. I'll pack up these sandwiches, and you can carry them out to Arthur and Severus.'

A bite of scone stuck in Hermione's throat, and she had to drain her teacup to dislodge it. 'All right,' she agreed belatedly.

She didn't want to face Snape, but she was going to have to see him sooner or later...she might as well get it out of the way.

As she emerged into the bright summer day, she saw a group of fliers playing at Quidditch, their shouts indistinct as they battled before one of the make-shift goal hoops. She almost wished she liked flying. There was precious little to keep her occupied here, in hiding at Forest Haven. With any luck...if there were any mercy in the world...Dumbledore would send for them to return to Hogwarts soon, and she would no longer have to spend her days avoiding constant meetings with Severus Snape.

The farther she walked into the trees, the less she could hear the others at their Quidditch, until finally, she heard nothing but occasional birdsong or the scamper of small animals through the brush. Molly had given her directions to where Arthur and Snape were settled in, near the perimeter of their hiding place. Hermione trekked through the woods, the sunlight steaming through the trees, dappling the ground. The basket filled with sandwiches, tin mugs, and a sealed jug of pumpkin juice, dangled from her hand as she walked along, breathing freely of the fresh air. Deep breaths also helped to calm her nerves, for she did not want to look Snape in the eye.

When she neared them, it was their voices that pinpointed their location. Arthur Weasley gave a mighty shout, and Hermione stopped where she was, her eyes darting everywhere, looking for the threat, her wand-hand feeling naked and useless without her weapon.

It was quickly evident that Arthur's shout had been one of laughter, though it had been loud enough to frighten all the small creatures away from their immediate vicinity, and perhaps that was why Hermione could hear their conversation so clearly.

'... been meaning to say to you, Severus...about Hermione.'

She pressed her back to the trunk of the nearest tree, unsure if she wanted to remain hidden so she could hear what they would say or to be seen, so she would never have to know what Arthur's next words would be.

'You needn't, Arthur.' Hermione would have expected her husband to sound angry...forbidding, even...but instead, he sounded *designed*.

'I know you don't like to talk about your private life, and I don't blame you,' Arthur continued doggedly. 'But I also know something about wives, and it's easy to see that she's not very ...'

He paused, as if unsure how much he could safely say to the least approachable wizard in Great Britain. There was a heavy sigh, and the professor spoke in a long-suffering tone.

'All right, Arthur. I can see you are not going to let it go. Spit it out, and let's be done with it.'

Hermione, unmoving, now felt she ought to stop breathing as well...she wanted nothing to interfere with her ability to hear what Arthur would say next. Would he speak up on her behalf, castigating the professor for being cold and unfeeling? Her very stillness, accompanied as it was by the odour of fresh food, lured the bravest animals back towards her; a squirrel here, on its haunches, its nose wriggling, and a bright-eyed crow. Perhaps they, too, were consumed with curiosity about what the men would say to one another.

'Well,' Arthur said, sounding as if he were choosing his words very carefully, 'it just seems that Hermione is having some ... difficulty coming to terms with her new role in life. I won't attempt to guess why, but after thirty years of marriage, I think I've seen it all. So if there's anything Molly or I can do to help the two of you, just say the word.'

Hermione felt her mouth fall open at these unexpected words. SHE who had a problem? How could anyone see the two of them together and think that SHE was the one at fault?

Snape spoke then, his tone unlike any she had heard from him before, neither pedantic nor biting, but somehow thoughtful. 'Is it any wonder that she may appear to be as skittish as a nervous filly, Arthur, considering what she's been through? And now, being thrust under the glaring light of our claustrophobic circumstances here, with the household watching her every move ...'

There was a moment of silence, and Hermione was simultaneously desperate to hear what else he would say and frightened that he would leave it there. He was not, however, finished, and his next words confused her mightily.

'Let us say that I find Hermione to be satisfactory in every way, shall we?'

And there was a finality to his words, a tone that said the subject was covered and closed. Arthur's response was almost immediate.

'I am happy to hear you say so, Severus. We want only the best for you both.'

'We thank you, Arthur...don't we, Hermione?'

She closed her eyes miserably. Bugger. What had made her think she could sneak up on Dumbledore's spy?

'Come out...I imagine you are bearing food from Molly.'

Did he think she would shrivel in embarrassment? Well, she would have to prove him wrong about that, wouldn't she?

She stepped from her hiding place to find the two wizards on their feet, faces turned expectantly towards her. There was a sardonic expression about the professor's lips, and Arthur seemed to be having a bit of a struggle not to grin outright at her discomfiture. Hermione tilted her chin defiantly and strode up to them with the basket of food.

'Here's your lunch,' she said airily, avoiding Snape's eyes.

The professor removed a sandwich from the plentiful supply and extended it to her, saying in a provocative undertone, 'Did your mother never tell you that an eavesdropper seldom hears good of themselves?'

She ignored the food...although she *was* hungry...and hunched a shoulder at her amused husband. She was desperately determined not to appear childish and ridiculous in front of Arthur Weasley, and that somehow trumped any shyness about seeing her husband so soon after their last ... encounter.

'I didn't want to interrupt your conversation,' she informed the top button of his broadcloth shirt.

'... particularly when the subject was so fascinating?' Snape suggested snidely.

Hermione snatched the sandwich from him and whirled away. 'I'm needed back at the house,' she tossed over her shoulder and marched off, her back ramrod straight and her emotions strangely disturbed.

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She saw him again at dinner, where they sat side by side sharing a meal of spag bol with the others. Hermione felt more conscious of him than ever, the solidity of his presence at her side, the clicking of his silverware upon his plate, his quiet, measured contributions to the conversation.

Had she been filled with this awareness before, sitting with him at the Hogwarts High Table each night for dinner? It did not seem so, in her memory. He had ever been distant, sharp, irritable...but who wouldn't be, given the existence he endured, walking an impossibly thin line between the Light and the Dark, with so much at stake? And hadn't she been withdrawn, her mind full of her duties as Prefect, her position at the top of her form, her role as Harry Potter's friend and confidante?

They had both been too taken up with the grim, undeclared war between the Order and the Death Eaters to have thought or energy to spare for cobbling together some sort of relationship. It wasn't until after the battle...the one brutal, violent clash between Harry and Lord Voldemort and all of their supporters, which raged through the castle from the dungeons to the tower tops...that there had been leisure for such minor details as becoming acquainted with one's spouse.

'Hermione.'

He spoke her name rather sharply, and her fork clattered noisily to her plate, still quite full of the saucy pasta that she had been mounding into interesting shapes. Just now, she had been creating a tower, but she needed to be in the present, for everyone was looking at her, as if awaiting her response to a question.

'Pudding,' her husband prodded. 'Do you want pudding?'

Hermione looked up at Molly, who stood at her shoulder, hand outstretched to receive her plate. 'You're not eating enough to keep a bird alive,' Molly scolded, continuing down the table, collecting dishes.

Hermione slipped from her seat. 'I'll begin the washing up,' she said, cravenly fleeing from the cause of her confusion as she never had done...~~never~~*would* do...in the face of enemy fire.

*I'm not a coward*, she thought, casting a surreptitious glance behind her...but the eyes of Severus Snape, tracking her progress with glittering intensity, challenged her conviction.

She was a coward where he was concerned.

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The telescope was taken outside again after dinner, and most of the inhabitants of the house were lured out beneath the stars. Hermione followed Harry and Ron from the house, but they quickly paired up with their girlfriends and melted into the dark, and she was left alone on her boulder perch, thoughts in a quandary.

It was time for her to make definite, serious plans. This bizarre, dream-like life, closed up in this tiny house with so many people and Severus Snape as her roommate would not...*could* not!...go on for much longer. As soon as they were away from this place and back at Hogwarts, she would tell Snape of her plans. In mid-August, she would pack up and depart for Salem. He could have his space back then...could expunge her presence from his rooms and regain his solitude after the little half-year of their pretend marriage. And after another six months, the entire experience would seem like nothing but a bad dream ... to both of them.

She was distracted as a bright, ghostly shape appeared in the darkness, approaching swiftly along the course of the stream. Hermione reached instinctively for her wand...*not there!*...and with her hand empty, she glanced to the small group about the telescope, seeing that she was not the only one to feel naked without her weapon. Percy stepped closer to Cho, and their hands clasped together, comfort given and support shared. Lupin, though, was smiling.

'It's a Patronus,' he said. 'Look...a phoenix.'

The large bird glided through the clearing and into the open window of the sitting room, where the elder Weasleys sat with Snape. The professor and Arthur dropped their newspapers, their attention riveted upon the words of the messenger, indistinct to those outside. Harry emerged from the murk on the opposite stream bank, Ginny's hand clasped in his.

'What does the headmaster say?' he asked excitedly. 'Is it safe? Can we go back?'

And another figure emerged from the woods, small and spiky-haired, a knapsack hung over one shoulder. Molly hurried from the house and down the steps, her hands outstretched.

'Tonks,' Lupin said, and Hermione watched him rush forward, reaching the newcomer before Molly could do so and catching her up in his arms.

Hermione felt a pang as Tonks wrapped her arms about Lupin's neck, apparently deaf to Molly's greeting from within the comfort of her man's arms. What was it like, to be so sure of your welcome in a man's embrace? What must it be like to find such comfort and completion in the presence of another person?

Now Tonks, on her own feet again, had turned to accept Molly's welcome, and Hermione joined the group converging on the newcomer.

'What news?' Harry asked, giving the pink-haired Auror a one-armed hug. 'Can we leave here?'

'Not yet,' Tonks said. 'The headmaster sent me because he said it wasn't safe for me to stay on duty. He's got some ideas about who's behind it all, but he's keeping it to himself, so far.'

A chorus of muttered grumbling began, but Tonks didn't seem very disconsolate about it all: She wrapped her arms about the waist of her greying paramour and gazed up at him with her heart in her large, dark eyes. Lupin seemed slightly embarrassed by her overt display, but he held her close by his side, even as he spoke with Arthur and Molly in low undertones. Hermione stood to one side, forgotten, surveying her companions. Even Percy and Cho had paired up, Cho seeming almost bemused to discover a male other than Harry with the power to engage her interest.

Hermione tarried for a while outside, sitting quietly upon her boulder, listening to the murmurs of conversation all around her, but she felt out of place. Slipping unnoticed into the sitting room, she was confronted with the sight of Bill and Fleur in a clinch upon the sofa, as if the momentary privacy of an empty room was more inducement than they could bear to resist. With nowhere else to go, she headed up the steps to her...*their*...room. Even if Snape were still awake, she would be no more uncomfortable in their bedroom than she had been in the midst of a group of hormone-driven, lovesick friends.

At the very least, she could be confident of the company of someone as disgusted as she was by the atmosphere so thick with sexual tension.

Thank Merlin she was past that phase of constant arousal, herself.

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She noticed the light beneath the door, but she steeled her nerves and pushed into the attic bedroom. So what if Snape was her roommate? He was no more interested in her than her school dormitory mates had been, so she need give no more or less thought to him than she had ever done to Parvati or to Lavender Brown.

He lay upon the bed beneath the covers, his head and bare shoulders propped up on the brass headboard with his pillow behind him. Open in his hands was a leather-bound book, but his glittering black eyes were on her face the instant she opened the door, rather than upon the written word.

He did not speak as he tracked her progress across the room, and she felt compelled to offer some explanation. 'Tonks is here,' she said, pulling her nightdress over her head, her back to him.

From beneath the nightdress, she removed her shirt and bra, dropping them to the floor, then unfastened her jeans, pushing them from her hips and allowing them to puddle about her ankles before stepping from them and putting her arms through the sleeve-holes of her nightie. Only then did she turn again to face him.

'Tonks said the headmaster may have some new information, but he's not telling what he suspects, yet,' she told him.

'Yes, I heard his Patronus,' the professor said dryly, his tone heavy with irony. 'How uncharacteristic of him! Just imagine...Dumbledore, keeping a secret.'

Hermione slipped between the bed and the wall and clambered onto the high mattress. There! She was on the bed with him, now beneath the covers, now lying at his side with her head upon her pillow, and the world was not ending...she was going to be fine. She could do this. It was just like sharing a bed with Lavender, really.

*Lavender never put her hand in my quim* her mind argued, and she blanched a bit. No.No. She would *not* think about that.

'So, did Lupin's girlfriend show up and cut you out?'

Hermione's mouth dropped open in indignation, and she pushed up on her elbows, turning her head to him. 'What are you talking about?' she cried.

Snape gave her a narrow-eyed stare. 'You've been content to hang around with Lupin, but now his girlfriend's arrived, and here you are with me.'

Hermione was flabbergasted with the injustice of this attack. Had she thought this room and this man were her safe haven? Was she *aving*?

'Lupin is nothing but my friend,' she flung at him angrily. 'He's always been my friend, ever since the year he taught us. Of course I would rather spend time with a friend than ...'

She trailed off, realising her words were infelicitous at best...perhaps even inappropriate...and if the thin, angry line of her husband's tightly-pressed lips were any indication of his opinion of the matter, she would be better off sleeping in the forest than remaining here with an angry Snape.

'Never mind!' she said, flinging the covers from her and beginning to rise. 'I'll find someplace else to be.'

But Snape popped her bubble of indignation with a sneer. 'Try not to be such a child,' he advised, placing his book on the bedside table and flattening his pillow before sliding down onto it and extinguishing the candles with the flick of his fingers. 'You will remain where you are and go to sleep. Good *night*, Hermione.'

A hot, angry denial leapt to her lips, but proclaiming her lack of childishness at this point seemed rather counterproductive. Had there ever been a person more difficult and annoying than Severus Snape? If so, she could not imagine who it would be. Pulling the covers up to her chin again, she rolled onto her side away from him, punching her pillow into shape and wishing it were his face.

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*He spooned behind her, a hand stroking over the curve of her hip to the dip of her waist, then sliding slowly downward until it lay upon the flat of her lower abdomen, just above the thatch of dark curls below. She opened her eyes to the glow of candles staggered about a murky room, halos of golden light punctuating the darkness in which so much love had been made. She rolled to face him, eager for his touch, for the stirring of the embers which lay between them like cities sacked and burned to ash by the conflagration of flesh against flesh. Only this would prolong the night and stave off the all-conquering opposing army whose drums, though distant yet, were like thunder in her consciousness, approaching with superior force of numbers and weapons: the dreaded dawn.*

Her lips sought his, hungry and insistent, her hands stroking a stubbled cheek, running swiftly down a too-prominent ribcage, gliding along the blade of a sharp hipbone, until she cupped the heavy sac of his scrotum, finally finding and grasping the erection already stirring, stiffening, readying to pierce and possess her. Her lips trailed her hand, tongue laving the pebbled disc of a flat nipple, teeth nipping at the oval of his navel, until her hand guided the prize betwixt her lips, and she tasted the salty emulsion, slick beneath her tongue as she encased his cock in the wet warmth of her mouth. The gasp of his breath was as music to her ears, the muttered, indistinct imprecation...*fuck me!*...far more an expression of surprise than a directive for action.

Then she was gripped, dragged upward, and flipped onto her back so smoothly that she was pinned by the hands gasping her hips and holding her down before she knew what had happened. Next, her pants were dragged off...no, she had been naked, hadn't she?...and his face was plunged into her nether regions, his prominent nose first through the outer lips, to nuzzle her, swiftly followed by his mouth, lips pulling her nub inside, to be circled and flattened by his tongue.

Sweet Circe! Dear Nimüe! Pleasure shot through her body, leaving no nerve ending untouched. She writhed against him, whimpering and mewling sounds forming in her throat and passing her parted lips as if no power of thought or speech were required upon her part to produce them. His grip upon her hips lessened, and his fingertips spread her open to his marauding mouth, driving her passion through her chest and into her mind at the speed of sex...too fast, too much, too soon, not yet!...until she came undone.

Head thrown back, back bowed, feet flat upon the mattress, her body seemed to arch off the bed as completion shuddered through her body like silver flame, molten and too bright to look upon with the naked eye. She lay dazed, shattered and spent, her breaths coming in hitching gasps.

Then he rose to his knees between her thighs, his hands busy at his waist. In the ambient light...hadn't there been candles?...she saw him pull his rigid member from his pyjamas...and hadn't he been naked?...and bend over her, one arm braced to support him. For an instant she thought he would enter her...*fuck her*...but the silken head of his penis thrust through her labia and upward, sliding slickly over her clitoris rather than inside her body. Had she not been overly-sensitive from her orgasm the sensation would have been divine, but as it was, it was all she could do to hold still as he thrust himself once, twice, thrice, through her slick folds, then grasped himself and pumped, his completion a heavy expulsion of air from his lungs and a warm splattering of slickness low upon her belly.

She reached for him when he moved to his pillow again, but he blocked her seeking hands with an unyielding arm. Her eyes were heavy with sleepy satiation, and she was content to lie upon her side, drifting toward slumber. When she slowly migrated onto his pillow, one arm and one leg using him like a body cushion, he did not push her away, and soon, she was sleeping deeply.

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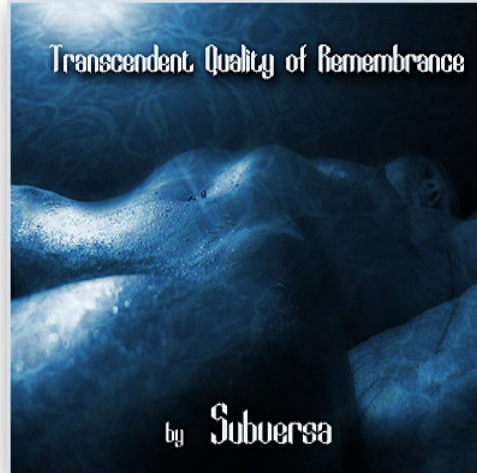
Severus lay unmoving in the double bed, both of them crowded onto one side of it, and he tried not to be aware of the weight of Hermione's body against his side, her arm familiarly draped over his chest, her face so close to his upon his pillow that her warm breath stirred the hair at his temple. He endured the intimate embrace, staring miserably into the dark, waiting for daybreak.

## Chapter 7

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: I apologize in advance for the fact that I have not responded to a single review on Chapter 6. I will be honest and tell you two things: I read every one of your comments with pure pleasure, and last week Real Life kicked me in the teeth so hard that I had neither the time nor the energy to respond. I hope you can forgive me.

This chapter begins with a flashback, so please be mindful of the date headings!



## Chapter 7

Anytime you need someone

Somebody strong to lean on

Well you can count on me

To hold you till the healing is done

*Count on Me*

*2 January, 1998*

Many hours later, long after Dumbledore's dramatic exit and the arrival of Dolores Umbridge to take up the post as headmistress, the fire in the staffroom hearth had fallen to embers, and though snow fell upon the ancient castle, neither occupant of the room had stirred to add more logs to the grate. Septima Vector did not move because she was quite comfortable in her squashy armchair, curled up beneath a knitted blanket, her head resting against the chair back. Severus Snape sat across from her, a time-worn book in his hands, his black eyes focussed on the words, though he had failed to turn a page in the last quarter-hour. It was never profitable to prod the panther when he was in a black mood, but at last Septima's curiosity won out over her sense of self-preservation, and she spoke to him.

'Are you going to sit there trying to cow the book into submission by the force of your glare, or are you going to tell me what that cryptic exchange with Dumbledore was all about?' she asked, her tone gently teasing.

The two of them had been at school together, though she had been a year ahead of him, and a Ravenclaw, to boot. They hadn't known one another until they'd met in the NEWT-level Arithmancy practicum, a by-invitation-only class with six invitees that winter term; there were two Gryffindors, three Ravenclaws, and a Slytherin...the universally unpopular Severus Snape. The Gryffindor boys, James Potter and Sirius Black, had commandeered the work table furthest from Professor Euclid's desk; the middle table had been taken by two swotty Ravenclaw boys who had little interest in Septima Vector, so she had found herself, by default, sharing a work space with the ever-glum Snape.

Septima had been quick to pick up on the bullying nature of the Gryffindor boys' interactions with Severus...they called him *Snivellus*...and her sense of fair play had been roused. Ignoring Black's flirtatious sallies and Potter's insincere condolences that she had to sit beside the greasy Snape (for Potter was enamoured of Lily Evans, who had taken the practicum last term, and everyone knew he never made up to other girls), Septima had set about the difficult task of befriendng the stringy Slytherin. It had taken three weeks before he had unbent enough to speak to her, but after that, an easy camaraderie had developed between them. In his way, when roused to friendship, Severus Snape became fiercely loyal, a commodity that Septima had come to cherish in later years.

In the interval after they'd left school, their friendship had been damaged by Severus' association with the Death Eaters, and when he had joined the Hogwarts' teaching staff, Septima had been polite to him...but she had kept her distance. It was not until she had seen how Albus Dumbledore trusted the sour-faced Snape that she had slowly warmed to him again, and their friendship had solidified and grown, through the years. At Hogwarts, they were allies and confidantes, and Septima valued his snide, astringent counterpoint to the sometimes overwhelmingly syrupy nature of their Headmaster. To Severus Snape, she was 'Tima'.

Now he turned his glare upon her, but she, who had known him for twenty years, was unimpressed.

'I know you don't like Harry Potter, Severus, and I've yet to have him in one of my classes, so I can't judge...but Dumbledore mentioned ~~thy~~ prize student as well...what's going on with Hermione Granger?'

Severus' head fell back until he was staring at the smoke-blackened ceiling, and he passed a hand over his face. He was looking even paler than usual these days, and Septima thought he was looking older than his years since the return of the Dark Lord. She was a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and she knew her friend's role in the enemy's camp. She worried about him constantly.

'The Ministry has gone beyond interfering at Hogwarts,' Severus said heavily, sounding too weary for words. 'They're trying to orchestrate some of the Dark Lord's more obscure schemes, the ones so marginal that even I don't know what they're all about.'

Septima frowned. 'Do you hear what you're saying? That's absurd! The Ministry is terrified of You Know Who...so much so that they've never truly admitted that he's back.'

Severus uttered a strangled laugh. 'Oh, they know he's back, and they're trying to work it to their advantage. That's why the Wizengamot enacted their marvellous scheme.'

He sat forward now, his elbows on his knees, long-fingered hands dangling helplessly. Septima simply waited for him to continue.

In a lower pitched voice, he said, 'Dumbledore believes that Granger is an integral, indispensable member of Potter's coterie. He is insistent that she not be removed from Hogwarts, despite the Ministry's decision not to allow Muggle-born students an education here. So he combed the school charter and found a little-known by-law that states no Muggle-born who is married to a fully qualified wizard can be denied matriculation here.'

Septima straightened in her chair, incipient panic lapping at the edges of her mind. 'A fully qualified wizard! That would be someone who's already left school. Does Hermione even know any such person?'

She stood up abruptly, her abandoned blanket sliding to the floor, and began to pace, thinking out loud. 'Muggle-born students don't generally come to know other wizarding folk outside of school until they've completed their educations...Hermione knows only her classmates and teachers.'

Severus raised his head and watched Septima pace, almost as if he approved of her chosen method for attempting to comprehend the incomprehensible. He sketched an arc in the air, refreshing the Muffliato Spell he'd cast when they'd sat down together in the staffroom, and Septima was glad. With Umbridge back in residence, they would have to be very careful of what they said and to whom they said it.

Septima stopped in her tracks, her disquiet mounting despite her efforts to quell it. 'What's Dumbledore's plan? Surely he realises that Hermione will be in far more danger from You Know Who if she no longer resides at Hogwarts! How can we keep her here?' she cried.

Severus pushed himself to his feet, his pale, narrow face twisted with derision.

'By marrying her off in secret, before Umbridge or the Ministry knows what's happening,' he ground out. 'To someone ... not otherwise attached.'

Septima cast about in her memory. 'She's only friends with Potter and that youngest Weasley boy...of course, Weasley has plenty of brothers.' She stopped and faced her friend. 'Whom is Hermione going to marry?'

Severus gave her a tight, bitter smile. 'Why, the very available, bachelor Potions master, Tima. What Hogwarts student wouldn't jump at the chance?'

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5 July, 1998

The first rays of dawn lightened the sky above Forest Haven, but Severus had fallen asleep, despite the misery of his memories...despite the soft pressure of Hermione's body pressed against his, and the aftertaste of her upon his lips. He slept and dreamed, and awoke to find the full morning light flooding the attic bedroom.

He greeted the day with savage relief. Disentangling himself from his sleeping wife, he pushed himself to sit on the edge of the bed, wondering what the fuck he was going to do.

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Her eyes fluttered open in the pale, early morning light, to the sight of her husband sitting on the side of the bed, his naked back close enough to touch. Her hand lifted of its own accord, reaching to smooth fingertips over one alluring shoulder blade, when a question occurred to her.

What was Snape doing on her side of the bed?

Her hand fell, and she glanced about her. Actually, she was on *his* side of the bed...the one nearest the door. Had they swapped places in the night? Or had one of them...*me!* her spiteful inner voice insisted...migrated across the mattress as they slept? She turned her head, seeing the empty pillow on her unoccupied side of the bed.

Had she slept on his pillow with him? They had to have been touching one another, if that were true...touching, as they had done in her dream. She felt herself flush at the memory of her intemperate dream life...he had held her down and licked her most needful spot until she had come apart beneath him, then knelt over her and spilt his seed upon her belly...it was like something out of one of her mum's bodice-ripper romance novels.

He turned his head, his angular profile in sharp relief, and glared at her from the corner of his eye, almost as if he wanted her to say something...to challenge him, in some way. Well, she was sorry if she had crowded him on the bed, but it was scarcely a fighting matter. And he could have woken her and insisted that she move back to her own pillow, couldn't he? It was nothing to row about.

He stood, his pyjama bottoms hanging precariously from narrow hipbones, his long black hair slick with morning oiliness. He snatched up his toiletry bag and clean clothing, taking the unregistered wand with him, and departed the room, somehow making his silent exit feel like a slammed door.

Hermione pushed herself into a seated position. Why did he have to be so prickly...so unapproachable? Was it any wonder she couldn't wait to put an ocean between them? Maybe when she didn't have to see him...*smell him*, her unhelpful inner voice supplied...then the dreams about him would cease, and she could return to her normal, undisturbed state of being. How could she hope to accomplish anything in life if she spent all her time unsuccessfully avoiding her spouse and being plagued with disturbing dreams about him?

Then her eye fell upon something near the foot of the bed, nearly obscured by the white sheet Snape had flung off when he awoke. It resembled her underpants...plain white knickers of the sort favoured by grannies everywhere...pants no one could say she was wearing to attract the attention of her husband. And as she stared at what appeared to be the white elastic edging the leg-hole, it dawned upon her that she was naked beneath her nightdress.

Had she passed such a restless night that in addition to crowding onto Snape's pillow she had also managed to wriggle out of her underpants? How was that even possible? She had lost her knickers in her dream...ripped from her rather unceremoniously by her dark lover...but she had also been pleased by him, which Snape would never do. *Of course he would*, her inconvenient mind reminded her. *Have you forgotten him sticking his hand in your pants and making you come?*

Besides, in her dream, the lover had rubbed the head of his erection through the slickness of her quim, then grasped himself and finished off with a splash of warm, sticky fluid, just above the triangle of her pubic hair. The dream lover had performed this erotic feat with perfect sangfroid, and Snape would never permit her to see him in such a state. It was preposterous...it was *impossible*.

*Then why don't you stop dithering and prove it...pull up your nightdress and check your tummy.*

'Oh, mind your own bloody business!' she snapped, talking out loud to herself, even though she knew it was a sign she was going mental.

She rolled onto her knees, and with her back to the door, knelt in the middle of the bed, lifting the hem of her nightdress to her waist. She was staring down at her winter-white skin, reflecting that she really needed to get some sun, whilst her fingertip glided rather incuriously over the filmy patch of dried ejaculate below her navel. She watched it flake off to fall into the brown curls of her pubic hair.

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Somehow they managed her succeeding him in the conjured shower on the landing without the exchange of a single word, and she had the leisure of fifteen uninterrupted minutes beneath the hot, sharp spray.

She spent the time in a merciless examination of her behaviour with Snape. With no provocation from him, she had managed to spend the last few days steadily

encroaching on his privacy. It was one thing for her to have dreams about him...she really didn't see how either of them could be held at fault for that!...but it was another matter entirely to thrust herself upon him sexually. Theoretically, men liked it when women showed signs of sexual interest, but Snape had made his position clear before they'd become man and wife.

*'Do you think you could ever be ... attracted to me?'*

*His mouth twisted into an ugly sneer. 'Don't be ridiculous!' he spat. 'Now, get out!'*

Even so, she knew him to be a man of honour, who clearly felt some responsibility for her well-being as well as her safety. There even seemed to be some element of masculine pride involved.

*'No wife of mine, Hermione Snape, is going to lie in my bed and pleasure herself as if I am not here.'*

She had, however unconsciously, deprived him of far too much self-determination in their short stay at Forest Haven. And all he asked...all he had ever asked...was that she maintain the fiction of their marital relationship before the eyes of other people, an agreement she was failing to fulfil with any shred of authenticity.

Well, that was going to change, starting today. Her hope that he would not become cognisant of her raging awareness of him had been squashed by her own actions. It was time to stop trying to protect herself at all costs and to begin keeping her part of their bargain.

She would bloody well appear to be a proper wife for the rest of their sojourn here.

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Rain pattered on the roof, and everyone was lounging about the kitchen table. Molly Weasley, a cheerful yellow apron tied about her, was scrambling eggs in a large saucepan, whilst Fleur poured coffee from an old-fashioned percolator into cups half-filled with steaming milk.

'Your coffee is ready, Professor,' Fleur said.

Hermione intercepted the cup her husband had stood to accept. 'Oh, real café-au-lait! May I keep this one, Fleur? The professor prefers his coffee black.'

'But of course,' Fleur agreed, and she pivoted to Summon an additional cup, which she filled with the dark brew. Hermione accepted the black coffee and placed it on the table before her husband's chair.

'Thank you,' he said quietly, directing a questioning glance her way.

'It was nothing,' she replied, and taking up her café-au-lait, she slipped into the empty chair at his side.

She felt a flush of triumph when she saw Parvati and Padma exchange puzzled looks before pretending they hadn't been paying any mind at all to the Snapes' interaction.

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The rain kept the lot of them inside all day, and Severus found it to be almost unbearable. The lovers cuddled, the siblings squabbled, and the adults carried on desultory conversations; through it all, Hermione was at his side. The hell of it was, he had no idea what her behaviour *meant*. Did she remember what had happened in the night? It had seemed to him that she never truly woke, and even though he rationally knew he had been driven to the last ditch of desperation, he still despised his weakness in taking even a scrap of pleasure from the interlude.

An interesting facet of her behaviour...though by no means an explanation, of course...was that she had obviously *noticed* things about him and his preferences. After six months of sitting beside her every night at the High Table for dinner, he would have sworn that she had never noticed him at those meals, much less what he ate or drank. Yet she had almost *fussed* over him at lunch today, serving his plate before her own, showing to a nicety that she had indeed been aware of him...well, at least of his eating preferences...during those seemingly interminable High Table meals, when he had been positive all along that she had been counting down the seconds until she could escape him for the company of her friends.

He couldn't help but notice that the elder Weasleys...Molly, in particular...were watching Hermione with extreme approval. Perhaps they believed that the Snapes had been in the midst of a row for the first three days of their incarceration here, and that they had finally made up and resumed the 'normal' state of their relationship.

There was also a niggling worry, deep in his mind, that perhaps they or others of the house's inhabitants had heard Hermione's rather intemperate response to his tongue in her nether regions the night before. A man who wished to pleasure her regularly would have to teach her to be quieter...or gag her. To his horror, he realised his cock was stirring to life at this line of thought, and he quickly glanced about the sitting room, seeing the many people occupying it, letting the sight of Potter and his friends have its usual effect upon his libido.

Rain streaked the windowpanes before which the Patil twins sat playing a noisy game with the Weasley twins, and at Severus' side, Hermione read a book as if she would be perfectly content to spend all of her days in exactly this pursuit.

Why didn't he feel happier about it?

---

Hermione stood in the kitchen as the grey day faded to dark, obediently chopping the veg for their dinner. As she worked, she reflected on how much more restful it was, this new tactic for getting through the days. When she no longer had to protect every minute against exposing herself to him, she found a definite comfort in the solid presence of her husband. If she did not regard him as the enemy, he became an ally of immense usefulness. He took his job as her protector in dead earnest...he had proven it in battle and blood, after all...and he allowed her to use him as a human shield against the other Order members, almost as a matter of course. Why had she fought so hard against accepting this service from him? It was almost like being swaddled in a blanket and insulated from her surroundings.

Of course, there were drawbacks. At one point in the afternoon, after a trip to the loo, she had reached across him to retrieve her book, and he had picked it up to hand it to her, their hands colliding. She had glanced curiously into his face and found him watching her with speculative, calculating eyes. Their collision had caused her to bump his upper body with her own, and after a moment, the ubiquitous sandalwood of his shaving lotion had wafted over her like a hallucinogenic inhalant. Dizzying dream images had swirled through her mind, leaving her dazed and unsteady.

'Hermione?' he had said quietly, and the sound of her name on his lips had rippled through her, leaving her fingers tingling and her nipples inexplicably hard.

'I'm fine,' she'd muttered, hunching her shoulders to obscure her body's outline in her tee-shirt and hoodie, staring at her book until his attention had been claimed by Arthur.

She completed the chopping of the onions and poured them in with the potatoes before passing the bowl to Molly. Washing her hands at the tap, she stared sightlessly through the window, her thoughts full of her husband. Next would be dinner, and after dinner would be still more sitting around doing nothing, and then...then, it would be bedtime, and she would surprise him...she would surprise them all.

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The washing up completed, Hermione stood in the doorway to the sitting room, folding a dishtowel. Ginny bounced up from her place at the games table to press her face to the window.

'It's stopped raining!' she said excitedly.

Harry popped up too. 'Are you sure?'

Molly gave an exasperated snort. 'And what do you think you'll do outside, pray tell? If you step off the stoop you'll be all over mud!'

George threw the door open, and it was apparent that the rain *had* stopped, for the moon peeked from the diminishing cloud cover.

'Close ze door!' Fleur exclaimed, her French accent becoming more pronounced in her annoyance. 'It is freezing!'

'Let them go, love,' Arthur said soothingly to his wife. 'If this lot don't know Cleansing Charms by now, I reckon they deserve to get muddy.'

Molly threw up her hands. 'Go on, then! But I had better not find one speck of mud in this house tomorrow!'

The mass exodus...joined even by Lupin and Tonks, who were the last ones out the door, their fingers entwined...left only the married couples in the sitting room. When the door had been pulled shut behind them, halting the ingress of the cool, rain-washed air, Bill bent his head over Fleur, exchanging murmured conversation. Then he stood and pulled her to her feet.

'Fleur's sleepy,' he said to his parents. 'I'm going to take her up to bed.'

Molly nodded fondly. 'She'll need plenty of sleep in her condition,' she agreed.

Hermione placed the towel by the basin but remained in the kitchen doorway, wondering if she could actually do what she had planned. The conversation seemed to be at a perfect place for it, but she couldn't force herself to speak.

Bill and Fleur went upstairs, and the professor quirked an inquisitive brow at Arthur. 'Are you going to be a grandparent?' he asked.

Arthur grinned broadly. 'Yes! We couldn't be more pleased.'

Molly sat forward a bit and spoke in an encouraging tone. 'But you mustn't worry, Severus...remember that Bill and Fleur have been married for a full year now! Why, you and Hermione have hardly had a chance to get started!'

Hermione burst from the kitchen, suddenly incapable of standing silently in the shadows. 'Well, that's organised!' she said brightly, as if she had no idea what conversational topic she'd interrupted. She marched boldly up to her husband, looking down at him with a wide, bright, utterly artificial smile. 'I'm shattered. I think I'll go up to bed.'

His answering expression was the closest she had ever come to seeing him startled. Arthur and Molly were watching them avidly, and Hermione felt as if a glaring spotlight were shining on her and the wary-eyed man before her.

'I'll be up later,' the professor replied coolly, indicating the thick, glossy journal in his lap. 'I wish to finish reading this article.'

Determined not to notice the humiliation of his public denial, Hermione nodded enthusiastically, continuing to project her inane grin. 'Great! I'll see you later, then.'

---

Hermione undressed in the middle of the attic room, letting her clothes fall where she stood. She frowned as she stared at the double bed, the object she had feared and dreaded the most upon her arrival at this place. Despite her ostensible concerns, she had brought Snape's attentions upon herself and *enjoyed* it. Sex with another person...even him...was qualitatively better than sex alone. And the fact that she had experienced so many sexual dreams...which parlayed themselves into waking sexual fantasies...specifically about him made the act that much more exciting.

They had consummated their marriage...it had been absolutely necessary to do so, to make it legal...so they had had full intercourse together before tonight. By agreement, they had resumed their independent lives after their wedding night, living much as they had done before pledging themselves to one another. But in the last two nights, Hermione had received pleasure from him, raw and exquisite, and she wanted it again. But the only way it would be fair is if they both got something from it. Merlin knew she was not particularly skilled in the art of lovemaking, but surely her body itself was a ... useful tool for his pleasure. She had all the requisite girl parts and she was completely willing to make them available for his use, in exchange for his hands...lips...upon her.

She swallowed and kicked at her piled clothing, angry with her train of thought. Was this what her entire day had been for? A cheat to get him naked and into bed with her? Rather than wanting to fulfil her part of their bargain by appearing to be a normal wife before their audience, had her motivation been a selfish desire to receive his lovemaking?

How low was that?

*It's a fair trade* her inner harlot insisted. *Everyone wants sex.*

She looked down her body, wishing she were as tall as Fleur or as slender as Cho or as buxom as Ginny. She knew it was unfair to thrust her nudity upon him all unexpected...*uninvited!*...but she didn't have the patience or the courage to ask for what she wanted and endure the conversation that would ensue. If she just grabbed the metaphorical bull by the horns, she wouldn't have to wait.

Bull? Horns? She sniggered in spite of herself. Ah, there was nothing like self-justification to bring a cheery note to a rainy day.

She gave her head a shake, dragging her unruly mind back on topic. Her rambling thoughts had a bit of a wild quality about them, and if she didn't rein herself in, she would never pull off her plan for the night.

She took a deep, steadying breath. She wasn't the wife he would have chosen, but she was undeniably the wife he had, and perhaps this night could be the one that would permit them a fresh start on their marriage.

*At least until I leave for uni* she amended, and immediately suppressed that line of thought. She still hadn't told him of her plans to go away in the autumn, and now was not the time to initiate *that* conversation, either.

She was so deep in thought that she failed to hear him on the stairs, and when he opened the bedroom door, she was unprepared. She squeaked and instinctively covered herself with her arms, and he reacted as any decent man would.

'I beg your pardon!' he exclaimed, averting his eyes. 'I'll come back later.'

Cursing her hopeless clumsiness at seduction, Hermione dropped her arms and took a step forward, pleading. 'Please don't go! I know you don't want me but ...'

The door snapped closed with dull finality.

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A/N: I include the song lyrics at the beginning of each chapter because the songs have been an integral part of my writing process, and the importance of my writing playlist, which is different for every story, has only grown through the years I have been writing. The lyrics don't matter to anyone but me, I'm sure, but I include them because it makes me happy.

A treasured reader on one of the archives pointed out to me that it was improper form to post my beginning-of-the-chapter song lyrics and accredit them to the artist who performed the song, because I was denying the composer due credit. As a writer of stories (if not songs), I shudder at the notion of a writer not receiving proper credit for their work.

When you hear a song on the radio, you're told who the performer of the song was, not who composed it. My decision in this matter has been to leave the song name but remove the artist name from the chapter beginning. I will instead include a link to the video for the version of the song I used, which you may follow or not, as it pleases you. If you're curious about the composers, as you might be whether you hear a song on the radio or on YouTube, the information is available to you on the boundless Internet!

Without further ado, I give you *Count on Me* by Default.

<http://youtu.be/g1FQac3CqdQ>

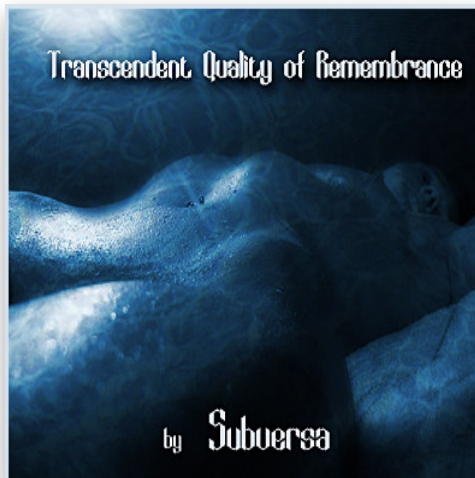
## Chapter 8

*Chapter 8 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: Once again, my friends, I offer you my apologies for not responding to reviews. My daughter's wedding is less than a month away, I am in the middle of the most stressful part of the year at my work, and I don't have a moment to myself. Please be assured that I read your comments with the greatest of enjoyment. I hope those of you who celebrate will have a lovely Easter. And with no further ado, I give you Snape's POV, the wedding, and the honeymoon. And as always, mind the date headings!

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### Chapter 8

I know your profile, and I know the way you kiss

Just the thing I miss on a night like this

*Isn't It Romantic?*

*5 July, 1998*

Severus started down the steps, his brain scrambling for a notion of where he could go since the attic bedroom wasn't ... safe. On the second floor landing, the open doors indicated that none of the young people had yet sought their beds; that meant they dappled the surrounding landscape like locusts in a wheat field. On the first floor landing, he noted that all of the adults' doors were closed, including the one to Lupin's room. There had been no free bedroom available for Tonks, so she had been given a place in the young witches' room...but there was no doubt in Severus' mind that the clumsy Nymphadora was, at this moment, in Lupin's bed.

He moved silently down the staircase, unsurprised to find the sitting room in near-darkness, with one couple at each end of the long sofa, wrapped in heated embraces. If he was not mistaken, one Weasley twin and one Patil twin comprised each tangle of limbs. He eyed the door to the outside, but reasoned that at least three more sets of lovers were at large beneath the clearing night sky. There would be no place to seek refuge without the risk of encountering further former students in situations he did not care to witness.

That left the kitchen.

He lit one candle, and by its insubstantial glow he managed to assemble an excuse for being there rather than in bed with his wife: a mug of steaming water, a paltry teabag, and two homemade biscuits on a small plate.

He sat at the end of the long table furthest from the doorway and stared into the teacup, as if doing so would induce the tea to brew more quickly. The night was quiet, save for the occasional indistinct murmur from the sitting room, and the thoughts he preferred not to think welled up in his mind like leaking water from a poorly mended tap. The resulting Chinese water...*thought!*...torture sent him, as always, back to his wedding night.

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9 January, 1998

The negotiations around their decision to marry had been conducted tensely. The girl brought a leather folder thick with parchment, her list of demands detailed and extensive. Severus had made it through the meeting on sheer nerve, his iron emotional control preventing him from reacting too violently to what could only be understood as her extreme repugnance at the notion of becoming his wife. Her words at the end of the meeting, however, took him completely off guard, and seared themselves forevermore in his memory.

'The only thing I dread,' she had said, her tone confiding, 'is how awkward it will be between us to carry on with business as usual after ... the consummation.'

Now Severus paced edgily before the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, his irritation with the fatuous subject matter suspended for once, his attention centred upon what was about to happen. Mr Jones, the wizarding village chaplain...a frowsy bloke who spent most of his time dozing in his office, but who was a drinking crony of Dumbledore's, and fiercely loyal to the headmaster...stood patiently against the wall, awaiting the other participants. Severus glared at his pocket watch, noting that McGonagall and Granger were late...but his other hand remained in the pocket of his robes, long fingers caressing the stoppered phial stashed there. The concoction within boasted an opalescent sheen, and the black sealing wax securing the stopper indicated to the knowledgeable to what drug class the potion belonged.

It was madness to have brewed it...lunacy to risk being caught with it in his possession...but her distress clawed at him, and his powerlessness to provide a different solution to the problem drove him like a scourge.

Footsteps could be heard scurrying along the seventh floor corridor, and the two witches appeared, McGonagall looking grim and Granger's face as white as the simple wedding robes she wore, the festive bridal wreath in her hair belied by the fear in her eyes.

'What kept you?' Severus demanded of his colleague, his words clipped and urgent.

'She is not at dinner, but lying in wait at the foot of the headmaster's staircase,' McGonagall explained breathlessly.

Not for the first time in his tenure at Hogwarts, Severus cursed the unhappy placement of the Room of Requirement and the entrance to the headmaster's office on the same bloody floor.

'What the hell for?' he snapped. 'It's not as if she can actually gain entrance.' As during her first sojourn at Hogwarts, Umbridge found the headmaster's office remained sealed to her, the school itself refusing to recognise her so-called authority. 'Were you seen?'

McGonagall replied with a terse shake of her head. 'No, we were heavily Disillusioned and praying no one would see us in the window embrasure. Professor Vector hurried ahead and was keeping *her* busy with conversation so we could escape, but before we could step into the corridor, Cornelius Fudge appeared.'

Severus swore and began herding them forward, where the chaplain stolidly paced before the tapestry, in the requisite manner, to open the Room of Requirement. 'What did you hear?' he asked.

'F-Fudge spoke with *her*,' Granger managed between lips that seemed to tremble. 'They were ... talking about*me*.'

Septima Vector dashed into view, her long skirts held up almost to her knees to permit her to run.

'They're in the infirmary with Pomfrey!' she gasped. 'Fudge and the headmistress. We've told them Miss Granger is quarantined with dragon pox, but *he* was demanding to see her when I came away.'

Granger gasped, her pallor assuming a greyish tinge. McGonagall put a protective arm about her prize Gryffindor and turned on Severus, her beady eyes snapping. 'Professor! We must hurry!'

In the wall before them a highly polished door appeared, and the chaplain pulled it open and held it for them.

'Come in, friends,' he said, smiling benignly as if he had no idea of the drama unfolding in the castle. 'We have a wedding to celebrate!'

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Afterwards, a house-elf thrust the modest wedding supper into a covered basket, whilst Professor Vector bundled Hermione up into a warm, hooded cloak and Snape conferred with McGonagall.

'Are you warm enough, Miss Granger?' Professor Vector inquired kindly, pulling the hood forward to hide the bridal wreath from curious eyes.

'I ... I'll do,' Hermione replied, struggling against the complete unreality of it all. Was this really happening? The Minister for Magic was in the school, looking for her, wanting to put her out of Hogwarts for good...simply because she was Muggle-born. And she was married to Snape...that sad little charade in the Room of Requirement had been her wedding, with no bridesmaids, no music, no parents...only the undignified Mr Jones to officiate and two professors to bear witness.

Snape strode up to her and glared into her face. 'We'll go out through the kitchen garden, past the utility gate, to the village. Come!'

He set off, his long legs drawing him swiftly away from her, and Hermione hurried to keep up, McGonagall and Vector at her back like a rear-guard.

'But why are we leaving?' she gasped. 'I thought we were going to stay here?'

Snape ignored her, his head constantly swivelling from side to side, watching for trouble, she supposed. But McGonagall took pity on her.

'The marriage pact must be ... completed before you'll be safe from the Wizengamot's new rule,' she explained in an undertone. 'It will be best if we can smuggle you out of the castle, where the headmistress can do less to ... hinder you. You'll Floo from my quarters to the kitchen and slip into the gardens from there.'

Hermione shut her mind to the idea of sex with Snape and concentrated instead on the urgency of escaping the castle.

'But where will we go?' she asked plaintively, even as McGonagall threw open the door to her rooms, and Snape barred the way in, casting *Hominum Revelio* before allowing them to enter. He marched across the room and took up a glittering handful of Floo powder from the bowl on the mantel.

'The school owns a cottage in Hogsmeade...it's Secret Kept. I've sent a house-elf ahead with your and Professor Snape's things. You'll be safe and comfortable there,' McGonagall assured her.

Hermione felt a ray of hope. 'Is ... is Dumbledore there?' she asked.

Snape snorted derisively. 'Believe me, Dumbledore would never consent to something so mundane. Hiding in a Secret Kept cottage with plumbing isn't nearly as much of an adventure as having a hideout in a cave in the mountains.'

He took Hermione's hand and filled it with the powder. 'To the kitchens,' he instructed. 'We'll go up the backstairs to the garden door. Stay with me at all times, Miss Granger. Do you understand?'

Hermione nodded, and Snape stepped into the fire, saying, 'The kitchens!' in a clear voice before whirling away in the flash of green flames.

McGonagall gave Hermione's shoulders a squeeze. 'You're a very brave girl, and you're doing the right thing,' she assured her. 'You'll be safe with Severus. Trust him!'

Vector offered a steadying hand as Hermione scrambled into the hearth. 'Go quickly and quietly to the cottage, my dear, and once you're there, remember it's your wedding night. Try to enjoy it.'

Hermione dropped the powder into the fire, wondering how she could ever look upon mandatory sex with Snape as anything but an ordeal to be got through.

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They fled into Hogsmeade without once being challenged, and Snape led the way down a darkened side street, stopping at the end, before an empty field. He then leant towards her and spoke very quietly.

'The Hogwarts Cottage may be found at number nine, Twirlees Terrace, Hogsmeade.'

The structure seemed to spring from the ground, with steep roof lines and intersecting gables. It was small, though it had a massive chimney dominating the front wall, and lights burned in the small-paned casement windows framing the bright red door. Hermione followed the professor eagerly, hoping it would be warm and dry inside. She hadn't really dressed for a romp through the snow-covered fields...she was in her thin wedding robes and slippers, after all, not layered jumpers and winter boots.

When they approached the door, it was opened by a bowing house-elf.

'All is prepared for you, Professor, sir!' the little creature proclaimed to its feet.

Snape thrust Hermione into the cottage and brushed past her without a word, stalking from wall to wall and investigating every cupboard. But Hermione paid him no mind...she moved immediately to the fire, which crackled invitingly in the hearth.

The cottage had an upper storey; a loft, presumably where the bedroom was. The ground floor appeared to consist of three rooms...no doubt the doorways led to a bathroom and the kitchen. The front door had opened into the main room of the cottage; it was furnished with a large, yellow, squishy sofa and two matching armchairs. Hermione seized a stool and dragged it near the fire before sitting down to warm her hands and feet.

The house-elf gathered up her discarded cloak, heavy with snow at the hem, and hung it upon a peg before pausing at Hermione's side.

'Would madam like a cup of tea?' it asked in a high, squeaky voice.

Hermione turned a frown on the creature. 'Madam?' she said blankly.

The house-elf nodded sagely. 'Binky knows madam and the professor were married tonight! Congratulations!' And it bowed again.

Hermione closed her eyes, absorbing the blow of truth. 'I'll have some tea, thanks,' she said, and she turned to see the tea service set out on a low table near the sofa...a cosy-covered teapot, two cups with saucers, milk, sugar, and a plate of fresh scones. When Hermione's mouth watered, she remembered she had eaten no supper.

The professor descended the stairs, silent as a wraith despite his boots, and addressed Binky. 'Have you completed all the tasks given you by Professor McGonagall?' he inquired. 'If so, you may go. We won't need you any more tonight.'

Binky delivered Hermione's teacup, then abruptly disappeared, with a loud *pop*.

Hermione wrapped one hand about the cup, inhaling the fragrant aroma, refusing to give in to the panic lapping about the edges of her consciousness. She would *not* think about being alone with Snape in this cottage...would *not* consider the deed they had to accomplish before they would be free to leave this place.

'Are you warm enough?' Snape asked.

Hermione did not look at him. 'I'm warming up now,' she said, staring into the flames and sipping her tea.

She waited for the sound of him pouring a cup of tea, but instead became aware of him standing over her. She angled her face up to watch him from the corner of her eye, surprised to find him watching her. She straightened her spine, then drained her cup and sent it back to the table with a flick of her wrist.

'So, shall we get it over with?' she asked in her most business-like way.

'Perhaps you are capable of functioning without food, but I am not,' he replied testily. 'I was forced to forego my dinner to ...'

He seemed to hesitate, so Hermione finished his sentence. 'To marry me against your will?' she suggested. 'I'm very sorry to have disrupted your routine, Professor.'

His eyes glittered dangerously as he answered her. 'I'll not tolerate cheek from you, Granger...we'd best be clear about that from the start.'

He turned his back on her and walked away, his robes billowing, and disappeared through the lighted doorway into the next room. Hermione wanted to remain where she was in protest of his cavalier treatment, but really, he was perfectly within his rights. She had agreed not to be disrespectful simply for the sake of it, and she supposed sarcasm fit into that category. Besides, her stomach was growling, and she found that she, too, was missing her dinner.

She followed him into a small kitchen and stopped in amazement at the sight of the starched white linen cloth and silver serving pieces upon the small, round table. A bouquet of pink and ivory roses graced the middle of the table...the same blooms that adorned the wreath she wore...as well as a supper of roast chicken, jacket potatoes, and sprouts in cheese sauce. A silver bucket held a bottle of wine, and for afters there were fairy cakes, iced in pink and white.

'How lovely!' Hermione exclaimed before she could prevent it. 'But it's enough food for ten people!'

Snape darted her a sardonic look and passed an empty plate. 'We were meant to share the meal with the professors and Mr Jones, I think. But plans changed.'

Hermione eagerly accepted the plate and began to fill it. If she was going to have to be intimate with Snape, at the very least, she could go to that certain doom with a full stomach.

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Severus consumed his meal with the single-minded discipline that had served him through a life of serving two masters. The purpose was to fuel his body, permitting him to function until next he required sustenance. He scarcely tasted the well-prepared wedding feast. The girl had resumed her place upon the footstool by the fire, and she ate heartily, her probable misgivings overcome for the moment by youthful appetite.

She made a beguiling picture in her pristine white robes, symbolic of virginity (was she?), and her bridal wreath, the pink and ivory blossoms a match for her complexion, now that she was warm and relatively unafraid. Would the colour palette hold for the rest of her body? Would he be permitted to see her, or would she want to consummate their marriage in the dark with all their clothes on, save for the bits that had to be uncovered to manage the business?

Even her hair was not entirely objectionable tonight, but plaited and pinned upon her crown, with curling tendrils caressing her nape and framing her face. She had tried to look pretty...to please him? Severus had certainly made an effort, appearing for his wedding in his best suit of clothes, his newest robes, freshly showered and shaved. McGonagall had insisted upon snapping a photograph of the bridal pair, promising to have it framed as a wedding gift.

The girl had stopped eating but was pushing food about on her plate with her fork when he stood and took it from her. 'Would you care for a cake?' he asked, stacking her half-full plate atop his empty one. It was no wonder; he was far more experienced at eating to keep going, regardless of how his nerves were faring. He hoped to God she would never need to develop that particular skill.

'I'm full now, thank you,' she replied, briefly meeting his gaze before she looked away again.

Severus set the dishes to washing themselves, steeling himself for the conversation to come. He'd rehearsed what he would say to her, but how she would respond to his suggestion was *not* a foregone conclusion.

When he returned to the sitting room, she was standing before the fire, shoulders straight, chin up, just as he'd seen her do at duelling practice. Briefly he wondered if she'd pull her wand on him at some point during the proceedings, and just in case, he cast a non-verbal protective spell.

'I'm ready now,' she announced in a voice that scarcely shook at all.

Brave little Gryffindor.

The fire had made the small front room almost stifling, so Severus removed his outer robes and the coat he wore beneath them, leaving him in his shirtsleeves. She watched him with apprehension but remained silent. He slipped the phial into the pocket of his trousers and seated himself upon the sofa, crossing one leg over the other, hoping he presented a picture of confidence, little though he felt it.

'I would like to speak with you before we go on,' he said quietly.

Her brows arched, and she met his eyes, seemingly intrigued but cautious. 'What is there to talk about?' she asked.

'You told me that your ... greatest concern was for how awkward you would feel with me after...' He almost faltered, but finished with, '...tonight.'

She bit her full lower lip, a nervous habit of hers he'd first noted in his classroom when she was a scrubby first-year with protruding front teeth and a perpetually waving hand.

'Yes, it's the most difficult thing, isn't it?' she agreed, seeming to relax a bit. 'I've thought and thought about it, and I can't see a way around it.'

He sat forward, his eyes intent upon her face. 'If I told you there is way for you to achieve our purpose here tonight without being bothered by the memory of it, would you be interested?'

A familiar line appeared between her brows, and she cocked her head slightly. Severus knew she was plumbing the depths of her prodigious memory for a spell that matched up with his words. He watched her with a slight twinge of bewilderment at his encyclopaedic knowledge of her idiosyncrasies. Had he been cataloguing her behavioural quirks for the last seven years? Did he do that with all students or only the ones who annoyed him the most?

'Are you suggesting a memory spell?' she asked him. 'Because I have no desire to subject myself to *Obliviate*...I've seen what it did to Gilderoy Lockhart. No offence to you, Professor; I'm sure you're a much better spell-caster than Lockhart could ever be.' She smiled a bit wryly. 'In fact, I know you are, because I saw you duel with him.'

Severus made a derogatory noise, and the girl actually chuckled before saying, 'Yes, he was quite ridiculous, I agree. But I have no desire to have a Memory Charm worked on me, sir. I rely heavily on my memory.'

Encouraged by this free exchange of ideas, Severus explained more. 'But what if the method is not a charm that relies upon the skill of the caster to be effective? What if it's a potion?'

He withdrew his hand from his pocket and opened his fingers to reveal the phial.

She came toward him at once, her scholar's curiosity roused, as he had known it would be. Without hesitation she sat beside him on the sofa and took the phial from his palm, her fingertips like sparks of energy against his skin...ah, it was so seldom that he was touched by anyone!

She held the phial up to the firelight, where its opalescent sheen glimmered to the colour of flame. 'At first it looked like Amortentia,' she said, musingly.

'I assure you, it is not a love potion,' he replied dryly.

She darted a rather roguish look from the corner of her eye. 'Certainly not! I would expect better of you, sir.'

He could not prevent a smirk at this comment, and she answered him with a shy smile.

'Still, I can't identify it by appearance,' she said, 'and the seal has me in a puzzle. I've seen the yellow for preventatives, the green for antidotes, the blue for analgesics, the red for narcotics...but what is the black seal? What does it denote?'

Sidestepping the question, Severus posed one of his own. 'Would you care to read about the base potion this one is a variant of?'

'Yes!' she agreed instantly. 'That would be helpful.'

He pulled his wand from his sleeve. *Accio my copy of Moste Potente Potions!*

He had been careful to place the book among his things for their wedding night, so it zoomed down the stairs and into his waiting hand. He presented the book to the girl.

She hefted it curiously. 'I've checked this book out from the Restricted Section before...'

He cut across her with a slightly malicious barb. 'But of course you have! How else might you have brewed Polyjuice Potion with ingredients stolen from my private stores?'

She flushed crimson but did not back down. 'As I was saying, Professor, the copy in the Hogwarts library is about half this size.' She thumbed through the pages and stopped. 'You see? There are over six hundred pages in this book, but the Hogwarts edition ends on page three hundred ninety-four!'

He settled back against the sofa and crossed his arms over his chest. 'Yes, well, this edition is more ... complete than the one in the school library. The potion you're looking for is bookmarked.'

The girl turned obediently to the marked page near the end of the book and began to read, her eyes running swiftly through the text. 'Chemically, this appears to be some sort of hypnotic drug,' she murmured. 'Muggles use such things to induce an amnesiac state in patients for the purpose of medical procedures. I can't imagine what the application would be in the wizarding world.'

She turned her gaze to his face, an almost eager expression in her eyes. Severus felt a rush of validation; his skill at reading people and predicting their reactions was serving him well tonight.

He took the book from her, closed it, and put it aside. 'Suffice it to say that with a slight alteration of this formula, you produce a potion which provides a unique benefit.'

She tilted the phial in the firelight. 'What benefit? Are you going to tell me?'

Severus inhaled and slowly released the breath before answering. 'If you ingest this potion, everything that occurs between your swallowing it and the time you next sleep will be wiped from your memory when you awaken.'

She considered this information. 'What if it made me sleepy, and I fell asleep immediately after taking it?'

He frowned. 'Then you would have wasted an extremely expensive potion,' he snapped. 'There is nothing in it to induce sleepiness.'

'But I still don't understand what class of potion it is,' she said. 'I've never seen phials with black stoppers, not in the infirmary storeroom, or the Potions cupboard, or in an apothecary shop. What is it?'

With avenues of evasion diminishing, he gambled. 'I did not expect an interrogation,' he said testily, plucking the phial from her fingers. 'I see I have misjudged you. I went to a great deal of trouble to procure this for you, believing you would be pleased to have a solution to your most troubling dilemma.'

Her hand shot out, and she grasped his wrist; Severus felt the jolt of contact like a shiver of anticipation.

'Wait!' she said, and he felt a jubilant rush of relief.

Apparently, her straightforward soul could not conceive of the machinations of a mind such as his.

'Well?' he demanded, looking pointedly at her hand, wrapped about the starched French cuff of his shirt.

'If I take this potion, everything that happens tonight, until the next time I sleep, will be wiped from my memory?'

He waited until she lifted her eyes to his before he answered. 'It will be as if it never happened,' he promised.

She looked pensive, and he played his final card.

'Hermione,' he said, and her warm brown eyes widened in shock, for he had never called her by her given name before. 'You can trust me. The purpose of our alliance is for me to protect you. The potion is simply one more way for me to do that.'

She took the phial and broke the seal with one twist of her wrist. 'What is it called?' she asked, holding the potion aloft as if to toast him with it.

'The Lethe Elixir,' he replied and was rewarded by an ironic smile.

'How appropriate,' she said and swallowed the liquid. Then she surprised him by hurling the small crystal vessel into the fireplace, where it shattered with a tinkling of glass shards.

Sitting at the edge of the sofa cushion, she turned sideways to face him. 'Will you take a dose as well?'

'I have no need of it,' he answered, feeling an infinitesimal reduction in his normal state of tension. He need not guard every word and action now, for she would remember none of it.

She considered this. 'I suppose any period of ... forgetfulness ... could be a detriment in your ... position.'

He rested an arm along the back of the sofa, his mind turning from the seduction of her intellect...how else could he have manipulated her into taking the potion?...to the seduction of her person. That was the next item on his agenda, and it deserved no less careful attention to execution.

'I have no desire to forget tonight,' he said allowing his gaze to move from her eyes to her lips and back again, pleased that he could speak the truth to her.

She blushed rosily. 'That's a really decent thing for you to say!' she exclaimed. 'Thank you.'

He gave her half a smile, but did not answer her. He had no idea, really, of how to proceed. He'd seldom ever been in such a situation with a woman whose presence had not been paid for in coin or influence.

'Professor Vector reminded me that it's our wedding night and I ought to enjoy it,' she confided, settling back beneath his arm, and when he brushed the nape of her neck, she shivered deliciously.

'Professor Vector loves giving advice that's not always easy to implement,' he said, inclining his head towards her to take a breath of her hair.

She turned towards him, their faces inches apart. 'You smell good,' she murmured, breathing deeply. 'Sandalwood and musk.'

Severus felt an aura of unreality settle over him. No woman, paid or otherwise, had ever said such a thing to him, and this one.*my wife!* his disbelieving mind whispered...actually had the tip of her nose very close to his throat.

'How shall we begin?' she whispered, and though she sounded trusting and strangely comfortable, there was another component to her acquiescence...something very much like captivity.

The insight brought a wild, heady sensation, and it spurred him in an elemental way quite unconnected to reasoned planning.

He cupped her chin and tilted her face up to his, the arm about her drawing her closer. As he slowly lowered his lips to hers, her eyelids fluttered closed, and her hand rose to caress his cheek.

With his lips a mere millimetre from hers, he said, 'I believe it is customary to begin with a kiss.'

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5 July, 1998

The closing of the front door roused Severus from his reminiscences, but he paid no mind to the indistinct figures that moved through the murk of the sitting room. In his mind he saw again the vision that had met his eyes when he opened the attic room door...that flash of her nakedness, of petal soft ivory breasts tipped with pale pink nipples crinkled against the chill...for the texture and taste of her skin were indelibly imprinted in his memory, both his treasure and his torment.

After six long months, for some inexplicable reason, his wife was waking to her sexuality, needful enough that she sought him out for satisfaction. And what had she said to him?

*I know that you don't want me, but ...*

He rose from the table so suddenly that his chair wobbled, but thankfully, did not fall. If it had done, he would not have known, for he was halfway up the staircase and moving quickly...she must not be permitted to think she was unwanted.

# Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 26

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: Two weeks out from my daughter's wedding, in the dead heat of the fiery last ten days of tax season, and yeah, I'm toast. It isn't a very big chapter, but when you're done, I'll be waiting with a cigarette.

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## Chapter 9

Maybe a great magnet pulls

All souls to what's true

*Constant Craving* - by k d lang

Hermione stared at the closed door, feeling ridiculous...and defeated. He was not *attracted* to her. In fact, he might actually be *repulsed* by her, because didn't most men stick around when confronted with a naked woman?

Disconsolate, she picked up her nightdress and crawled onto the bed, dragging it with her. When she reached her pillow, she sagged onto it, rolling onto her back to stare at the ceiling, her nightdress draped across her like an insufficient sheet.

She had long had doubts about her husband's involvement with one of his co-workers, but she'd tried not dwell on it. Professor Vector. *Tima*, she'd heard him call her once...was a beautiful woman. She was taller than Hermione, more slender, her hair was a darker brunette and not bushy, and worst of all, she was his friend...a position of trust and camaraderie Hermione could never hope to attain.

Hermione hadn't suspected a thing in the beginning. After all, Snape had proclaimed himself to be unattached, as had she, when they began to make their marriage plans. It was only after finding them together in Snape's rooms...Snape's and *Hermione's* rooms...that she'd begun to put it all together. Why else would Vector have been at their wedding? And hadn't she been the one to tell Hermione to enjoy her wedding night? And didn't Snape sit with Vector many days at breakfast and lunch, the meals Hermione was not required to take with him?

It had been late one night in March, when the final shows had begun to melt, and Hermione had hurried back to the professor's rooms after her curfew. She'd been revising in the Gryffindor common room, piles of books stacked around her like a fortress, when Harry had yawned and said, 'You do know it's past midnight, right?'

Hermione had passed through the warded arch leading to their door, knowing Snape would feel her passage and dreading the telling off she would receive for being late. But she had been less discomposed than he and Vector when she walked in on their tête-à-tête conversation.

Snape had recovered quickly and gone on the attack. 'You came in hours ago!'

'I went out again,' she'd said, without pausing in her forward motion.

'I thought you were in bed!'

'Apparently.'

Hermione had gone through the room without making eye contact, passing Vector without a word of acknowledgement.

'Good night, Hermione,' her Arithmancy teacher had said to her back, but Hermione had not responded.

Ever since that time, she had watched for signs of attachment between her husband and Professor Vector, but they gave her very little to work with. Even so, Hermione was not stupid; she could deduce easily enough what went on between the tall, slender, smooth-haired siren of the Arithmancy department and her dangerously attractive spouse.

She groaned and rolled onto her side. When...*when!*...had Snape evolved from the unpleasant teacher she'd had to marry into someone she was so damnably attracted to? Had it been before the dreams began or after? Had the dreams been caused by the attraction, or had the attraction been caused by the dreams? She had tried before to puzzle it out, and it never seemed that she reached a conclusion. It was as if there were some impediment in place that prevented her from concentrating on it for long enough to work it out.

She heard him speak before she knew the door had been opened.

'Are you sleeping?'

The deep timbre of his voice was like an accelerant to the embers of her seemingly perpetual desire. The want was acute, like a pain low in her belly.

She swallowed and sat up. 'I was just dressing for bed,' she lied, untangling the nightdress from her legs so she could put it on. After all, it wasn't as if Snape had never seen her naked ... presumably.

'Wait.'

He seated himself on the edge of the bed, his weight causing the mattress to dip, his hip brushing her naked leg. Hermione froze in place, the fabric of her sleepwear crumpled in her clenched fists.

He looked into her face with sharp, calculating eyes. His jaw was dark with end of the day stubble, his hair gone limp with oiliness, his lips pressed together in a thin, angry line. He did not look at all approachable.

Dear God, why did she want him so?

'Why are you doing this?' he asked, his tone clipped, abrupt.

'I ... I thought we might ...' she began, but he continued speaking, as if her answer were unimportant. Not that she'd managed to formulate much of a response ...

'And what was that twaddle about me not wanting you? You'd have to be witless to believe any man with blood in his veins could fail to want you.'

The words were delivered in his signature acerbic style, spoken in such a way as to demean and denigrate...twaddle? Witless?...but what was he really saying? That he wanted her? That any man would want her? Wait, wasn't that a compliment?

His eyes took on an odd, glittering appearance, and he allowed his gaze to roam over her face, pausing at her lips before dropping to her chest. Hermione glanced down to see her breasts, nipples crinkled in the cool air, and her nightdress, stretched tightly across her tummy by fisted fingers that seemed to have lost the capacity to function.

Instinctively, she began to lift the fabric to cover herself, but he pried the nightdress from her fingers and dropped it to the floor, his rapacious eyes never pausing in their languid survey of her body.

'No,' he said, his eyelids falling to half-mast over his glittering eyes. 'You wanted me to look, so I shall.'

Sweet Circe, it was as if she could feel the trail of his gaze upon her flesh, heat searing her hyper-sensitive skin, her useless hands suspended where he'd left them, fingers splayed like small white starfish.

Then his eyes rose to meet hers, and she was undone. Captive and captivated, she did what seemed to come naturally...she capitulated.

'What else do you want, I wonder?' he said, and Hermione closed her eyes against the blaze of desire that flared in her.

'I thought we could...' She hesitated over *have sex* and said instead, '...make love.'

His thin, expressive lips twisted. 'You want me to fuck you?' he asked, but the thumb he rubbed over her lower lip robbed the question of its sting.

Her lips parted, and he hooked his thumb over her bottom teeth, skimming the tip of her tongue. Hermione shuddered, her lips closing on the invader, and he chuckled, sending another ripple of warmth straight to her core.

'I'll take that for a "yes",' he said, and then he was gone, moved to the foot of the bed, where he began disrobing.

Hermione watched him, rapt, scarcely believing this was really happening. But this was no dream...this was reality. He undressed quickly and efficiently, scarcely giving her time to absorb all there was to see. He *was* aroused, though; of that, there could be no question...and the realisation came with an ache of desire so piercing she'd have bent double with the pain, had he not covered her body with his, one leg insinuating between her thighs, and his face appearing over hers, so close she could smell tea upon his breath.

'How shall we begin?' he inquired, the expanse of his thigh applying pressure to her slick, needy quim.

She twined the fingers of one hand in his hair, thrusting slowly against his conveniently placed leg. It was verboten for her to ask for details of the time she had forgotten...what happened after she drank the Lethe Elixir...so she came at her request in a roundabout way.

'Let's begin as we did on our wedding night,' she said, her body tight as a bow string, waiting the nock of his first arrow.

And she was dumbfounded...but entirely receptive...when he captured her lips in a searing kiss.

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It was like burning alive, as if the blood in her veins had been replaced with liquid dragonfyre and Severus Snape had come along to supply the detonation. Every spot he touched, every place he kissed...with each stroke of fluid motion, piercing her body, he stoked the bonfire devouring them to blinding blue flame. She felt helpless to anticipate him, a mere vessel consumed by his heat, his body atop hers, the muscles of his arms and shoulders rippling with his efforts, his hawkish face intent upon hers. She had thought he might finger her or put his mouth between her legs as he had done the night before, but this was better...was more. It was happening not only to her but to him as well, this long, slow, all-consuming burn, a simultaneous immolation of their bodies and souls, and she would willingly die in the next moment if in this one she could open to him and experience this ... oh, *this*.

And in that instant when she might have died, instead, she fell. Weightless, through time and space and memory, every nerve synapse in her body firing, until all was bedazzling white light, her cry (and his?) echoing in her mind as strong arms enveloped her, and the voice she heard in her dreams was at her ear.

'Hush. I've got you. You're safe.'

It was only then that she felt the wetness upon her cheeks and knew she was crying and trembling, overwhelmed by the paroxysm of emotion...by the tectonic shift from longing for him to being possessed by him.

'Oh, Severus,' she breathed, clinging to his sweat slick body, and he anchored her.

And over all, saturating her senses and absorbed into her very body by the pores of her skin, was the intoxicating scent of sandalwood and musk.

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A/N: Constant Craving by kd lang, a staple of the playlist for this story: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABYJo53mHHQ>

## Chapter 10

*Chapter 10 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: My dear ones, it is posting day again! I am one week from my daughter's wedding, three days from the end of tax season, and exhausted beyond my ability to explain to you. But my work week is behind me, and other than taking the bride shopping tomorrow for her wedding cosmetics, the next 3 days belong to me. I shall spend them resting, recruiting my strength, and reading your comments.

Next weekend, I probably will not post. Don't count on it. If I do, it will not be until late into the weekend. I entreat you not to forget me, though - I do adore sharing this story with you.

I think you'll like this chapter - but I say that every time, don't I?

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Transcendent Quality of Remembrance

Chapter 10

Some day, when I'm awfully low,

When the world is cold,

I will feel a glow just thinking of you

And the way you look tonight.

*The Way You Look Tonight*

*6 July, 1998*

He slipped from beneath her...all silken, naked legs and fragrant, bushy hair...and made his morning ablutions before the glimmer of dawn was in the sky. When she had drifted from trembling tears to sleep, he had slept as well...slept like the dead...but the deep, dreamless state had been short-lived. Once awake again, the recriminations had begun in his mind, and the only way to manage those was to be up and moving.

The downstairs was blessedly clear of inhabitants, and when he had drunk a cup of strong tea and ingested plain toast, he was free to escape into the quiet grey of daybreak. He set about to patrol their perimeter...a needless exercise, but one that gave him an excuse to be out of the house when he needed the break.

He examined the early-warning systems he had put in place, both magical and physical, and in the back of his mind, refusing to be silenced, his troublesome better nature clamoured for his attention.

*How could you? She was vulnerable...she needed comfort and reassurance, not ravishment!*

But was that true? Had she not been begging his sexual attentions from their first night in this accursed place? Pleasuring herself whilst lying in bed beside him...what in blazes was he supposed to make of that? And when he had confronted her...when he had held her down and ... been *insistent* about his participation...she had succumbed to his touch with the ready, responsive sensuality she had shown him on their wedding night.

Dear God. How was he supposed to forget when every second he occupied that bed with her was like fuel to the fire of remembrance?

*I never wanted to forget.*

He kicked viciously at the forest undergrowth and thrust his hands in his trouser pockets, scowling impatiently at the ground. What man in his right mind would want to forget an interlude of such sweet sexual abandon with a willing...even a *demanding*...and lovely, lissom young woman?

Subsiding hopelessly to the forest floor, he propped his back against a tree trunk and allowed himself his greatest weakness...that of reminiscence.

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9 January, 1998

She seemed to melt in his arms, like chocolate fondant over a low flame. Melting did not diminish the curvaceous reality of her woman's body but caused it to be moulded to his form, like two parts of a whole, naturally united. Her lips were soft beneath his, pillowy and yet mobile, surprising him with their participation in this erotic exercise of tongue against tongue. Severus had never had much use for kissing in his limited amatory adventures, so this experience was a first...this woman's breath sweet in his nostrils, her tongue enticing in his mouth, the taste of her mysterious and compelling, driving him in some way that seemed beyond thought or reason.

When he broke their kiss and lifted his head to observe her facial reaction...to assess her acceptance of their mutual endeavour...she remained for a moment with her eyes closed, lashes dark against her ivory skin, face raised to his, lips lightly parted, inviting him to delve into the honeyed depths of her mouth. Then her eyelids fluttered up, her brown eyes unfocussed for a moment, then fixating upon him...upon his face, unlovely though it was...and she drew a deep breath though her parted lips.

'What ... what was *that*?' she breathed, making no effort to move from the circle of his embrace.

He considered a sneering reply...a repudiation of the notion than anything out-of-the-way had just occurred between them...but the realisation that she would remember none of this after she had slept allowed him to answer honestly.

'I believe it is called good chemistry,' he replied, making mental note of the press of her breast against his chest and the weight of her as she leant into him. 'I take it you've never ... enjoyed a kiss in that way before?'

She gave a minute shake of her head. 'Have you?' she inquired curiously, her fingertips releasing the hank of his hair she had grasped and ghosting over the sensitive skin of his nape.

The simple touch, innocent in its way, reverberated through Severus like thunder, the surety that he was to have her. *bad* to have her, to make their marriage binding and legal...driving him to kiss her again. 'Never,' he growled before capturing her lips again, his tongue thrusting against hers. Her voracious lips closed over his tongue as she sucked him deep into her mouth, a tiny moan escaping her throat.

He abandoned restraint and gave himself over to the mind-set: they would have sex together tonight...a necessary evil...and there was no reason not to make it as enjoyable as possible for them both.

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He kept her on the sofa before the fire for now, content with their progress, knowing that to move her to the bed in the loft above at this point would be a setback. He needed her farther along in arousal before he moved her, but he knew with a certainty that he would not attempt intercourse upon the sofa, like a teenager with inadequate adult supervision.

She opened to him like a flower to the sun, no mere object in this exercise, but an active participant. Her tongue caressed his and ventured into his mouth, as if she too were chasing the elusive taste of their comingled sex hormones...testosterone and oestrogen, a potent and intoxicating elixir. Her hands tangled in his hair and touched his face, novel experiences for a man who'd never put much store in making love when mere fucking would get the job done.

No, he was not unmoved by this...and by her inexplicable response to him...for he was feeling far more than a stiffening of his prick in his trousers and a need to plunge into her body with it. His heart was racing, far more than his exertions thus far warranted, and there was a *feeling* beneath his breastbone, a rising, swelling emotion he'd never known before. It was only by the very fingertips of his reason that he was able to hang onto any semblance of control.

Even so, he was still alert enough to judge when she was ready for an escalation of their activities, and he dragged her into his lap, changing the angle of his kiss and the depth of penetration for his tongue, which seemed incapable of getting enough of her sweet mouth. He could feel her sudden alarm at this change, as if she were drawn out of the swirling passion...as if she might be thinking *Good God, I'm getting off with my teacher*.

He released her lips and nudged her head slightly to one side with his nose against her cheek. Then he was trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses across her throat, cradling her torso across his chest with one arm about her shoulders, and with his free hand, he caressed her side, a firm, possessive stroke from the swell of a breast into the dip of her waist and over the curve of her hip, ending halfway down her thigh. She shuddered at this new assault upon her senses, and he raised his face from her throat, looking down into her languorous face even as his hand retraced its journey, pausing upon her ribcage, beneath which her heart hammered like that of a captive wild bird.

'Shall I stop?' he asked, hearing the ragged passion in his voice and not caring that this emotion was betrayed to her. Perhaps she would respond more powerfully to him if she perceived that he was not unmoved by their grappling.

She did not hesitate. 'No...don't stop,' she gasped, and as if to prove her commitment to their activities, she stroked a hand down his throat to his chest, then his upper arm, and grasped his bicep, her fingers closing about the muscle, as if judging its size and strength.

Severus, unaccustomed to being touched by anyone for any reason in his everyday life, felt his eyes close for a moment, almost like a cat being petted. Then the hand at her ribcage rose to cup her breast, firm and full in his palm, and his mouth found hers again, tongue plunging recklessly as he gently squeezed his prize, rippling a thumb over the hardened point of a nipple.

When she whimpered aloud, he swallowed that incipient moan and moved his hand to the other breast to administer fair treatment.

Once he began to tease her nipples, her arousal mounted much more quickly, the scent rising in an intoxicating wave to his sensitive nose, increasing his own desire. She struggled against him, seeking to direct her own movements, and when he loosened his hold on her, she grasped his shoulders, twisting about until she straddled his hips, her warmth pressed against the rod of his erection, her eyes fever-bright with excitement. His hands found a natural perch upon her hips, fingers splayed over the rounded delight of her bottom, and he allowed his head to fall against the sofa cushions, watching her.

She rocked once against him and gasped. He was unable to prevent his hips from thrusting in retaliation, his cock seeking the heat of her, and he brought both hands to her breasts, pinching the twin protrusions, dimly wondering if he had at any point imagined that he would have his bride rutting in his lap as if she *wanted* his attentions.

She grasped his wrist and dragged his hand down from her breast to her quim, but the gathered folds of her bridal robes, piled in a lump between them, prevented her from putting his fingers where she needed them.

Severus pressed up gently from below, an inability to deny her anything flitting at the edges of his consciousness. When a witch wanted her man with such wanton

abandon, it was unwise to gainsay her; this truth was ingrained in a wizard from boyhood on.

'Perhaps,' he said, 'it is time to move to a more ... propitious location.'

She rocked against him again, grinding down, the warmth of her naked sex seeking his erection through his clothing. 'I don't want to *move*,' she complained.

'You don't want to *stop*,' he corrected her. *And neither do I*, he thought but did not say aloud.

Instead, he held her tightly to him and Disapparated.

They moved only the few feet from the sitting room up the steps into the loft, but they landed in the middle of the goose down-stuffed mattress of their bridal bed, him flat upon his back, and she toppled to one side, giggling in delight. He rose over her, a mock glare upon his face.

'Do you laugh at me, wife?' he demanded.

She stilled, and he immediately regretted his choice of words...would she retreat from him now, when they were so close to accomplishing their goal? But the look in her eyes was one of wonder, and her fingertips rose to his face, brushing hair back from his brow.

'How can it be that I've known you for so long and yet haven't known you at all?' she marvelled.

Severus had no answer for that comment...had no desire to ponder one, for his need to push into her body was strong, and he had no interest in a speculative conversation about their *relationship*. So he kissed her, possessively, insistently, sliding his hand down her tummy to pause just before the mound of her sex. No, he need have no scruples; she had attempted to put his hand here, and though it might surprise her, she would soon be far too lost to sensation to question him about it.

He completed the journey to cover her vulva with his hand, and as he made the possessive gesture, the insubstantial bridal robes dissolved, leaving his wife naked upon the bed.

'Good God!' Hermione cried, one arm covering her nipples and the other dropping to push at his hand. 'They told me it would be to that, but...'

He continued as if she had not spoken. Bending his head, he kissed her, his tongue tracing the path between her lips, entreating entry, and at the same moment, he slipped two fingers through the folds of her slick, warm quim, wringing an audible cry of pleasure from her. His tongue darted into her mouth, finding and fondling her tongue, while between her thighs his fingers imitated the movements, finding and fondling her clitoris. She was instantly responsive, the tension falling from her body as she thrust against his pleasuring fingers, her hands grasping, pulling him atop her.

'Sweet *Circe*,' she cried, arching beneath him. 'It feels ... oh, Severus, you ... you're still dressed!' She pushed ineffectually at his shirt, her movements erratic as she sought more skin-to-skin contact, whilst trying hard not to dislodge the fingers that currently made up the core of her entire existence.

Severus stared down at her, mesmerised by the sight. She still wore the bridal wreath in her hair, but she was otherwise naked. Wizarding brides came to their weddings in naught but the bridal robes, which were spelled to dissolve at the command of the groom. Wizard boys grew up with many sexual fantasies around naked witches with flowers in their hair, and Hermione was the embodiment of that fantasy: naked, aroused, and writhing, needful of his cock in her cunt to make everything right in the world they inhabited, a world populated by only two.

A non-verbal bit of wandless magic dispensed with his clothes, and she seemed to know the instant he was unclothed, for her near hand snaked between them and found his aching cock, grasping him eagerly, if inexpertly. He thrust once in her fist, stifling the groan of pleasure at the touch of a hand other than his own wrapped about his erection. She turned towards him, her eyes wild.

'Hurry!' she urged. 'But try to go slow ... it's always over so quickly, and I always want it to last and last ...'

He paused, surprised at these confidences. So, she'd had lovers who failed to take time with her? He told himself he was indifferent to this information, save for the useful bit...how to make it better for her, which would make it better for him...but he was astonished by the surge of possessiveness that did not want to hear about her other men.

Pushing the jealousy aside, he gathered her closer, luxuriating in the press of her nakedness upon his. How could it be that she would react this way to him...to his kisses and caresses? How had she progressed from an aversion so deep that she felt she could not bear the memory of it to this armful of simmering sensual seduction?

'You're like a tempest in a teacup,' he observed, slowing the rhythm of his fingers and instead, cupping her sex in a protective palm

'Teapot!' she objected, her know-it-all nature dimmed but irrepressible, even in her extremity, as she squirmed her hips, seeking more direct contact.

'Teacup,' he averred, nuzzling the skin at her temple, smelling the rosebuds and the clean scent of her hair. 'More fragile than a teapot, and a far better vessel for such a tempestuous temptress.'

She turned her head away from him, offering the slender column of her throat. 'I'm not,' she said, sounding embarrassed, his tempest suddenly tamed to a woman, perhaps ... unsure of her appeal.

He took advantage of the proffered throat and nipped her there, following with a sucking kiss, and renewing his incursion between her slick, swollen labia. She was ready for him, her body fully ready for what was to come, but she wanted more...more of the pleasure he could provide, and he was determined she should have it...for it would prolong this dreamlike night, full of experiences Severus Snape had never expected to know.

She sighed and humped beneath his fingers, quite happy to leave off discussion for action.

'That's right,' he murmured, moving on to her ear, the tip of his tongue tracing its delicate shell. 'That's my tempest...let the storm build and blow.'

She turned to him again, trusting and clinging, one hand about his shaft, her free arm hooked about his waist

'What if I bring you off, then let you rest a bit before we finish?' he suggested, nipping the lobe of her ear. 'If we ... take the edge off, the second time will last longer for you.'

Her eyes grew wide. 'Shall I ... take the edge off for you too?' she asked. 'I ... I'm not very good at it, but you could tell me ...'

He rolled her onto her back, kissing her mouth as he caressed her torso, marvelling at the soft smoothness of her skin beneath his hands, memorising every detail of this one-time event, which was turning out to be something entirely other...more marvellous...than he had ever envisaged.

'No, I think I'll ... keep my edge for the grand finale,' he murmured into her hair, and then he was sliding downward, pausing to suckle each nipple before trailing kisses down her body until he was ensconced between her smooth, soft legs, her neatly trimmed pubic hair, fragrant with her essence, just beneath his nose.

'Lie back and breathe, little tempest,' he said, meeting her eyes down the ivory expanse of her beautiful body. 'I've got you.'

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And the bridal couple engaged in an act of lovemaking, the ebony of the groom's hair distinct against the bride's pale belly as she squirmed and writhed beneath his ministrations, her hands clutching desperately at the bedclothes, though not for long, for she had told him truly: scarcely had the hawkish wizard settled to his task before his witch arched off the bed with an inchoate cry of pleasure.

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6 July, 1998

*Hermione stared past her navel to the unthinkable. Her husband, his inky black hair spilling over her thighs and tangling in the brown of her pubic curls, had his face buried in her quim, his lips and tongue doing unspeakable things there, sending waves of unbearable pleasure shuddering through her body, driving her over the edge to an unrestrained shout of completion ...*

She awoke with a start, the sunlight flooding the attic room of the Secret Kept house in the forest, not at all like the darkened room of her dreams, which had been lit only by candlelight and brightly burning passion

She sat up in the bed, naked beneath the sheet and slightly sore from the previous night's activities. She had dreamt again of her husband using his tongue to make her come. Why in the world would she have such a dream when she'd had very satisfactory, *real* sex with him just hours before?

Gathering her clothes and her shower things, she started down the steps towards the communal bathroom, the memory of her fantastical dream dimming in comparison to the memory of being wrapped around her husband in the night...and being held and soothed into deep, peaceful sleep.

It made her ache to see him again.

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A/N: For your listening pleasure, a delightful rendition of an old classic by a favorite artist of mine. *The Way You Look Tonight* by Maroon Five:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJZwPIJylhM>

## Chapter 11

*Chapter 11 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: My dear ones, I have missed you! I bring you more of the honeymoon of our pair as a gift after my absence. You'll be happy to know my daughter is married now, the wedding was lovely, and my life is my own again ... well, as much as it ever is. I hope you enjoy the chapter, and I will be very happy to read your thoughts and feelings on the matter.

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### Chapter 11

Time, you found time enough to love

And I found love enough to hold you

So tonight I'll stir the fire you feel inside

Until the flames of love enfold you

*Somewhere in the Night*

6 July, 1998

When he hadn't appeared by lunchtime, Hermione wrapped some sandwiches, gathered some other things, and thrust them into her knapsack, a lovely contraption with an Extension Charm on it. The Weasleys and assorted Order members spoke to her, milled about and carried on with life in hiding, but Hermione felt as if she were watching them from a distance. The only subject that held her attention was Severus...what had happened with him the night before...and she was prone to wander in her mind over the things they had said and done together in the night.

She wanted...she *needed*...to see him again, to know how he would look at her, the tone of voice in which he'd speak to her, and most importantly, the words he would say.

She escaped into the clearing between the house and the stream, and she paused for a moment in the freshly washed air to raise her face to the sun. Others were outside to enjoy the warmth after a day of unrelenting rain, and they smiled and nodded to her, but she spoke to no one. Her favourite perch, the boulder on the stream bank, was unoccupied, so she climbed up to wait and consider.

Remus and Tonks were sitting across the stream on the far bank with Percy and Cho, the four of them indulging in lethargic, post-lunch conversation. Harry, Ron, Ginny, and the twins could be spied occasionally swooping into view overhead on their brooms, playing at Quidditch. Hermione had left the Patil twins indoors, flipping through well-thumbed magazines, making fun of the out-dated fashions, whilst Luna kept them company, watching them as if their behaviour intrigued her.

Bill and Fleur had gone upstairs 'for a nap' after lunch, but no one believed they were sleeping, and Hermione envied them the freedom to go upstairs for a rendezvous in the middle of the afternoon. What must that be like, to undress one another in the light of day, to see every facet of your lover's body unclothed and unshadowed? The very idea made her shiver, though whether in fear or longing, she could not have said.

*I could go looking for him*, she thought, but she lay back on the warm rock and looked up into the sky, content to let him come to her, in his own time.

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He stood from his place beneath the tree and dusted the debris from his trousers. He'd been thoughtless, rushing out of the house without making provision for lunch. He would be driven back to the lions' den...that damned house, chock-a-block with noisy Gryffindors...in search of sustenance.

He began the walk purposefully, his shoulders squared, his back straight. He had not been driven from the house by a slip of a girl. *my wife*, his brain supplied

helpfully...no, of course not. He'd had many important matters to consider, so he had slipped out into the quiet of the morning where he could think uninterrupted.

*And what fabulous scheme have you concocted?* he thought derisively. *How, precisely, will you sleep every night in bed with your wife without taking advantage of her ... proximity?*

'But she needs me to,' he muttered, arguing with the voice in his head. 'And if she needs me to ... take care of her, what else am I supposed to do?'

Because *she* didn't remember, did she? And without the memory, she couldn't possibly understand why she reacted so strongly to his presence. He wasn't blind...he hadn't been ignorant of her growing awareness of him...but he was damned if he knew what to do about it. Her choice had been to remove her memory of their time together, and he was hell-bound to honour that choice...but how was he supposed to behave when her body remembered what her mind had forgotten?

He slowed his pace, realizing his long legs were carrying him to the house faster than he wished to arrive there. *She* would be there, somewhere, and he would have to face her and handle her questions or her hurt or her indifference, and he was unsure which would be the most difficult task. Questions might force him to articulate things better left unsaid; hurt feelings would be irritating; but indifference would be the unkindest cut of all. If she could copulate with him with the tempestuous emotion she had shown the night before and the next day be entirely unmoved by the event...either to embarrassment or shame or some other female reaction he had yet to catalogue...if she could be that cold-hearted, then he *really* didn't know her at all.

*What do you want her to do?* his ridiculing inner self demanded. *Run to you with smiles and hugs and kisses, for the entertainment of the Order at large?*

He balled a fist, as if to obliterate such puerile thoughts from his mind. She had never embarrassed him with any show of emotion before other people...not in her right mind, at least...though she *had* at times shown him a cold disregard that had pricked his pride. But he had never reproached her for it...not in words...because such conversations were unheard-of in their household. He had contented himself with periodically...not every time she left their rooms, as she was wont to insist...reminding her to honour their bargain and to give the appearance to outside observers of being a wife in truth.

The voices from the clearing reached him now, and he tugged once at the placket of his broadcloth shirt, missing his teaching robes and the ease with which one could present a proper appearance when wearing a garment that covered one from throat to ankle. But he marched on until the milling throng were in sight, mingling and laughing and talking as if life were a big garden party...all except for Hermione, who lay atop a shoulder-high boulder, lazing like a lizard in the sun.

Then she sat up, and in the same motion, turned towards him, as if she had known of his arrival. *as if she was waiting for me*, he thought inanely. And when her eyes met his, she smiled, spontaneously and delightedly, as if she were suddenly lit up from within.

All thought of carefully planned, restrained response escaped his mind, as did his awareness of the assorted Weasleys and Order members littering the sunshiny space; his strongest instinct was to go to her, drawn by the woman's welcoming smile as surely as a moth to flame.

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Hermione stretched and sat up, feeling warm and content. She glanced across the clearing, towards the trees, and there he was, the sunlight on his curtain of black hair like the sheen of a panther's pelt. Their eyes met and locked, her heart tripping into an accelerated rhythm, and then he was striding across the ground separating them until he stood within arm's reach...close enough for her to smell the treacherous sandalwood of his aftershave.

'Good morning,' she said stupidly, searching for words to hold him there.

One jet black eyebrow quirked. 'I believe you will find it is afternoon,' he replied, correcting her. But even though he was correcting her, she didn't mind it, because his eyes seemed to be communicating something else entirely.

'Are you hungry?' she asked. 'You didn't come in for lunch, so I thought you might be ...'

He took one step nearer to her, still a proper distance away, if anyone cared, but the closer proximity made her feel strangely short of breath...or perhaps she felt so confused because of the way his eyes took her in, from head to toe.

'Thought I might be ...' he prompted, the barest note of teasing in his tone.

'Hungry!' she blurted. 'I've got some sandwiches and such in my bag.' She indicated the well-worn rucksack. 'If you were interested, I mean,' she added. It was as if he wasn't even listening to her...or as if he were hearing words completely *other* than those she was speaking.

His hands, long-fingered and strong, closed about her waist as he lifted her effortlessly to the ground, then they remained about her for just a moment longer than was strictly necessary. When he released her, he lifted her old bag and slipped it over one shoulder.

'And have you chosen a place where we will eat this feast?' he inquired.

Hermione gazed up at his face, slightly averted now as he adjusted the strap of the knapsack, and she could still feel the imprint of his hands upon her, just as they'd been last night, creating utter havoc. But she couldn't think about that now...not with other people watching them...not when he might guess that all she wanted was to be naked with him in the attic room in the light of day ...

'No,' she said, managing to remember that he had asked a question.

'Then allow me to suggest a spot,' he said smoothly, and with a hand at the small of her back, he guided her past the others, returning greetings with no more than a nod as he steered her into the trees.

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They walked for perhaps ten minutes through the sunlight dappled trees, until they came to a bend in the stream. The burbling of the water was softly audible, and the grassy bank offered a level space beneath the shade of a convenient tree.

'It's lovely!' Hermione said, feeling genuinely pleased. She took the bag from him and withdrew a large red cloth, which she spread on the ground before seating herself in its centre and beginning to remove food from the rucksack.

He looked down at her with a sardonic eye. 'If I'm not mistaken, that's Molly Weasley's second-best tablecloth.'

Hermione sniffed and thrust her hand into the bag again. 'It's not Molly's...it belongs to the house...and besides, it will be back on the shelf, all clean and folded, before she ever knows it's been gone.'

He gave a snort of laughter, but at that moment she withdrew a tall blue thermos flask from her bag, and his attention was riveted. 'Is that what I think it is?' he demanded, bending to sit beside her.

Hermione darted a look at him from the corner of her eye, delivering her best Mona Lisa smile. 'Perhaps,' she murmured, allowing him to take it from her hands. Men could become passionate about the oddest things, sometimes!

He unscrewed the top, and the aroma of hot coffee filled the air. She watched as he poured the liquid into the blue thermos top, which doubled as a drinking cup, and he took an appreciative swallow, his eyes closing as if in sensual pleasure, the taste taking him away for a moment. When he opened his eyes again, she offered a sandwich, which he accepted with a wry half-smile.

'How did you know?' he asked, taking a large bite of cheese and pickle.

Hermione looked at him, informal and relaxed, sitting with her on the ground to eat his lunch, and there was an unfamiliar ache beneath her breastbone, fleetingly there and then gone.

'At Hogwarts, you always took a cup of coffee with your lunch, even on the weekends,' she answered, suddenly embarrassed to be caught out with such knowledge. She hadn't been spying on him...anyone might know he drank coffee at midday, not just pathetic stalker-types.

But all he said was, 'Right you are,' and took another bite of sandwich.

Hermione allowed herself to relax. There was nowhere else for her to be, no other task she could be performing...not whilst Dumbledore kept them cooped up here...so there was no reason on earth why she ought not to lighten up and enjoy the opportunity to spend time with her husband. He might have better things to do (*Don't be ridiculous, Granger! Now, get out!*) but not here...not without his office and his books and his papers...and she knew he had no interest in socialising with the others. So she was doing him a service, really, providing a distraction from what would otherwise be an intolerably tedious interlude.

'Where's your cup?' he asked, brandishing the flask as he refilled his.

She looked blank. 'Oh, I didn't bring another one,' she said. 'I didn't think of it.'

He held the cup out to her. 'Have a drink.'

Hermione stared at the hand holding the cup, her eyes rising up to his shoulders...*rising over her in the ambient light as he strove over her body*...then to his face. It seemed almost unbearably intimate, to drink from his cup.

'You weren't worried about my germs last night,' he said, his voice seeming deeper...rougher...than it had done before.

She took the cup from him, her fingertips sliding deliberately across his hand. 'I'm not worried about a thing,' she averred before taking a long swallow of the bitter black brew. She could not repress the moue of distaste that followed. 'I don't usually drink it black, though,' she added, passing the cup back to her smirking companion.

He seemed to relax after that, and the rest of the meal was spent in companionable silence, with only the gurgling of the brook and the occasional call of birdsong to touch upon the quiet.

Not having ingested enough coffee to energise her, Hermione felt herself becoming drowsy in the warm sunshine, the only thing keeping her awake the fraught tension between her and the watchful man at her side. The matter was put to rest when he leant against the tree trunk and gestured to his expanse of long, black-clad legs.

'Have a nap,' he suggested neutrally. 'We've nowhere else we have to be.'

Another time, she might have declined, but at this moment, she could imagine nothing she'd rather do with him fully clothed than drowsing in the detritus of their picnic lunch. Pushing the rucksack out of her way, she stretched out and allowed her head to rest in his lap.

As she drifted to sleep, she could have sworn she felt the ghosting of his fingertips across her hair.

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9 January, 1998

Her shout of completion was the sweetest music he'd ever heard, and for a few seconds he rested where he was, cheek upon her soft inner thigh, face coated with the essence of her, arms wound under her legs to embrace her hips, fingers resting now on the concavity of her belly. Then he moved alongside her, mindful of her fragility; he knew it was of paramount importance *not* to forget his responsibility to her, even through the exercise of his husbandly rights.

The moment his head touched the pillow beside her, she turned into his embrace, clinging and trembling, and he pulled her as close as he could, gentling and murmuring as if she were a nervous unicorn.

'Oh,' she whispered, her face against his shoulder. 'Oh, *Severus*.'

No reply seemed to be required so he made none, simply cradling her against him, making no effort to hide his continuing arousal, wondering how soon he might be able to bring her to readiness again...for as pleasurable as it all was, he had a mission to accomplish here tonight, and it behoved him to be mindful of the passage of time. Simply put, he had to fuck her before she slept, or the costly Lethe Elixir would have been for naught.

After a few moments she released her death grip on him and lay back, eyes big in a face changed in ways he could not articulate...not even to himself. With careful fingers, she reached to caress his unlovely countenance, ineffable tenderness in her every movement. 'I want to tell you how that felt,' she said softly, 'but I seem to lack the words.'

His lips quirked into a twisted smirk. 'I never thought I'd live to see the day Hermione Granger was bereft of words.'

She emitted a breathy giggle before making her mouth prim and lightly punching his arm. Enchanted with this flirtatious exchange, Severus swooped down to kiss her again, capturing her mouth and plunging his tongue between her lips.

Her response was sluggish, as if her orgasm had wiped her memory of the level of passion they created between them. After a moment she pulled back, her expression a bit startled.

'You taste ... different,' she said, the tip of her tongue darting between her cupid's bow lips, drawing his gaze like a raptor to a rabbit.

'I taste of *you*, little tempest,' he growled, 'and believe me, there's nothing sweeter.' He loomed over her, knowing he was overwhelming her a bit, but unable to restrain the temptation to assert his dominance...he felt driven and wild with the need to have her yield to him.

The impact of his words was instant and visible; her lips rounded to an 'o' of shock, her brown eyes darkening, even as her hands twined in his hair, pulling him down so she could greedily suckle his lower lip, as if to feast upon her own essence. Severus was galvanised by such a show of unfettered sensuality from this temptress in the traditional bridal wreath. All vestiges of planned control deserted him, and he descended upon his prize with single-minded intent.

He kissed her with renewed purpose, his tongue dominating hers, invading her mouth, tantalising and provoking, drawing her on to incursions of her own. He wanted to possess her, but even more, he wanted to engage her. Their earlier grappling, the give and take of their shared passion, drove him to seek more of the same on a grander scale. This was no quick satisfaction of carnal desires with a female whose interest in him was transitory at best; no, this was his wedding night with a bride worthy of any wizard's devotion to her pleasure...and her favour, best won by attention to every detail of her lusciousness, body and soul.

Keeping her pinned down by the mere expedient of overcoming her with kisses, he allowed one hand to wander free, gently pinching and twisting her nipples until she writhed helplessly, her attempts to reach him and deal commensurate attacks thwarted by their relative positions, she flat on her back, he bending over her. The best she could manage was to reach his head, his shoulders, and upper chest. It pleased him to control her with kisses and caresses, his object to bring her again to the state of readiness to receive his cock into the heat of her body...he needed no such readying, was almost beyond himself with readiness now.

Stroking down her torso, he was unsurprised to have her lift her hips in invitation. She wanted his touch in her quim, was aching for him, whimpers of urgency beginning to

fill his mouth from deep in her throat. He probed her folds with an exploratory finger, finding her warm and slick again from his ministrations. He felt a flare of self-satisfaction to be managing this wedding night seduction so well...but truly, had there ever been a witch more ready to meet her wizard's every advance?

But she was not content to let him congratulate himself on her handling...no, his tempest broke their kiss, allowing his suckling, bruising kisses down her throat as she pulled ineffectually at his arms and shoulders.

'Severus!' She was breathless, but a note of hysteria tinged her voice. 'Severus,*please*.'

Her request was too much in concert with his own desires for him to quibble with her. He half-rose from her, and she needed no command to part her legs for him; she was wanton in her need of him, and she spread her thighs readily, the picture of primal femininity. He knelt between her thighs, a non-verbal charm adding to the birth control potion she'd already ingested. Meeting her feverish eyes from this vantage point, at the apex of her body, he placed the ball of his thumb between his lips, coating it liberally with saliva, and then placed the slick digit on the swollen nub of her clitoris, stroking in a circle, gauging the state of her readiness, both physical and mental.

Her hips rose from the bed, her mouth opened for a raggedly gasped, *Do it!*, but the crowning response was her arms, reaching for him in welcome. The man had not been born who could decline such a summons. Positioning himself at the slick lips of her quim, he thrust forward with what restraint he could manage into the fitted glove of her cunt, his body following to cover hers as he came to rest on his upraised arms, his cock enclosed in her welcoming heat. She pulled him closer, heels hooking about his upper thighs, hands scrabbling over his back, seeking purchase.

He withdrew and plunged again, his eyes never leaving her face, the raw ecstasy of being where he belonged only enhanced by the frantic burning in her dark eyes and the gasps of her open mouth, seemingly as needful of filling as her quim...sweet Circe, a thought for another time.

He moved within her fluidly, hips pumping between her accommodating thighs, she trying to move to meet him, her movements at times out of rhythm with his, but it was of no matter; nothing would derail this engine of need pounding within him, driving his body to couple with hers, the blinding pleasure of it running through him like thunder, any attempts at control like struggling to contain a waterfall with a tea strainer. The sight of her beneath him, hips rising, bountiful breasts bouncing, eyes wide and staring into his, was the most beautiful vision of his life, the loveliest he was ever likely to see, but in the end, he did not possess the ability to make it last any longer than it did, this fucking of his bride on their wedding night.

As should be no surprise when dealing with his rampaging tempest, she pulled it all down around them, her hand slipping from his back, now slick with sweat, and snaking between them to that spot where their bodies were joined. He could not see precisely what her fingers did, but the result was a happy one. Her body bent beneath him, arching spectacularly upwards, and the onset of her cataclysm brought about his own. She screamed, a fierce, unearthly cry of completion that triggered the sudden release of the unbearable tightness in his bollocks. All that mattered was the slick friction of his sex in hers, and the first jet of hot seed burst forth, seeking its ultimate destination.

When he had caught his breath a bit, his head was sagging, his chin almost touching her forehead. Her legs were locked about the small of his back as his erection softened, and his arms trembled in protest at the continued support of his weight. He slid to one side and collapsed beside her, hearing her sigh of protest as their bodies uncoupled and smiling to himself with smug self-satisfaction. She had *liked* it, by Merlin...he was a cocksman of no mean accomplishment.

She rolled immediately against him, and though he was hot and sweaty, he made no objection. She pressed an open-mouthed kiss upon his lips, and he responded languidly, reflecting that this must be the post-coital afterglow of which he'd read but never personally experienced. His unwanted bride had been transformed in the last hour to an exquisite treasure, and her doubtful acquiescence to their marriage had been vindicated by an hour of first-class passion...success by any standard.

He cupped his hand about the back of her neck and enjoyed their kiss, overcome with an almost narcotic sense of well-being, revelling in the taste of her mouth, the softness of her nape, and the way her smooth legs tangled with his. He could imagine nothing that would dispel this enchantment.

Hermione broke their kiss, rising up on an elbow, her crazy hair beginning to escape the confines of her ravaged wedding up-do, now falling about her face in untidy curls. Her brown eyes glowed, her face almost pretty...certainly beguiling...with an expression of wondering awe.

'My husband,' she murmured sweetly, touching his face.

Severus felt his lips curve in a real smile. 'Wife,' he drawled lazily, lolling beneath her caresses.

She smiled in answer. 'I never thought ... but how could I? Did you?'

He took a chance and shook his head in the negative, unsure what she was going on about; he desperately needed a bit of a rest, and his thinking processes were not at their best, by any means ...

'If I'd had any clue, I never would have swallowed that silly potion,' she said, tracing the angle of his jaw as if it were a sculpture she wished to learn by touch.

But wait...what the fuck was she *saying*?

She pressed a kiss to his jaw, just beneath his ear, then gently bit his earlobe before whispering, 'Shall we go now to the castle to brew the antidote, before I sleep? I don't want to forget a thing about tonight.'

Severus' mind swung wildly into top gear, his languorous afterglow dissipating like fog before a breeze. Brew an antidote? *WHAT* antidote? Merlin's beard, what was she going to say when he told her there was none?

Taking charge of the moment in the only way to suggest itself to him, he flipped her neatly onto her back and caught her hands in his, lacing their fingers together as he looked down into her questioning face.

'You talk too much, little tempest,' he informed her before silencing her with kisses.

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6 July, 1998

Hermione woke up, thinking that she had knocked her pillow on the floor and was sleeping on the hard mattress...but when she opened her eyes, she found herself with her cheek nestled on her husband's rather bony upper leg, her nose nearly touching the crotch of his trousers. Good grief, had she been nuzzling his ... privates in her sleep?

She shot upright and found herself looking into his dark, half-lidded eyes, an expression she seemed to remember from last night, just before he...

Before she could form a coherent thought, he dragged her into his arms and covered her mouth with his, almost as if to prevent her from speaking a word aloud.

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A/N: Today's song is one that had lots of radio play when SubHub and I were engaged, so it carries happy memories for us. I give you *Somewhere in the Night* by Barry Manilow: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y15vjqyx\\_F0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y15vjqyx_F0)

# Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 26

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.



Transcendent Quality of Remembrance

Chapter 12

The people ask me how

How I've lived til now

I tell them I don't know

*And I Love You So*

6 July, 1998

Severus held her to him with near violence, the combination of memories of their wedding night and her nearness overcoming him. Would she want to talk about things...talk about the intimacy they'd shared the night before? About the memories he possessed that she did not? About the secret she was harbouring from him behind guarded brown eyes? Well, she was out of luck. He wasn't going to talk about it...about any of it...but if she wanted *him* ... well, that was another matter entirely.

She smelled of her shampoo and tasted of bitter coffee, overlain by the tart sweetness of the apple she'd eaten. Kissing Hermione was like striking a flint to dry kindling...her ready response to him was intoxicating, and the chemistry they created together was compelling. She pressed herself against him, twining her hands in his hair, all flash-fire passion and simmering need. She seemed voracious, as if it had been weeks since they had touched, rather than hours, and in short order, her fingers were scrabbling at his shirt buttons, as if she meant to have him naked on the stream bank in broad daylight.

He broke their kiss, hands against her shoulders and holding her slightly away from him. She was a vision to change a man's mind, all kiss-swollen lips and slumberous brown eyes, her crazy, curling hair tumbling down her back like that of the first woman to make her man forget practicalities in favour of momentary insanity.

'What, precisely, do you have in mind?' he asked her gruffly, the back of his mind scrambling to determine the risk of discovery if he were to enjoy his bride beside this forest stream.

She evaded him by the simple expedient of dropping her shoulders from his grasp, ducking beneath his guard and slithering up his torso with a pout. 'Not a thing in the world,' she murmured before kissing his throat and releasing his top button to nuzzle his collarbone, tasting the triangle of chest thus revealed.

The touch of her tongue tracing the notch of his clavicle thrummed through his cock like a call to action. 'You're a menace,' he informed her, pressing her back onto Molly's red tablecloth, following her down for an aggressive kiss, his hand sliding beneath her tee-shirt in a retaliatory fashion, palm passing over the curve of her ribcage to the lace-covered breast above it.

Her mouth opened to his, her moan of pleasure filling his throat with an answering desire, and he shifted atop her, seeking that haven in the cradle of her hips fashioned as the perfect receptacle for her man's accommodation. Her denim-covered leg hooked about his woollen-trousered hip, and through the layers of their clothing, he was positive he could feel the welcoming heat of her sex.

He had the ever-vigilant state of his nerves to thank for his awareness of their loss of privacy. More than hearing an intruder...and why would he wish to hear anything other than the soft, whimpering murmurs of Hermione's response to his kisses and caresses?...he was aware of a disturbance in the space to their right, over the streambed. Turning his head slowly to the side, feeling Hermione's lips slide moistly across his cheek, he sent his deadliest glare at the figure hovering inches over the water surface on a racing broomstick. Ginevra Weasley physically recoiled from the impact of his annoyance, and even Hermione turned to look when the ginger-haired girl splashed into the shallow water.

'Sorry, Hermione!' she called impishly, ignoring her Potions teacher as she brandished the struggling Snitch in dripping fingers. Then she was zooming skyward again, the light trill of her girlish giggle trailing behind her.

Severus swore beneath his breath and rose stiffly to his feet, the state of his arousal somewhat impeding his freedom of movement. Hermione blinked at him owlishly from her sprawled position, and he forced his eyes away from her, turning his back to adjust himself and his clothing so he wouldn't be tempted to rejoin her

'Severus?' she said, sounding plaintive. 'Where are you going?'

He turned his narrowed gaze to her face. 'To the house...to our room, should you care to join me.' He extended a hand and was heartened by the way she shifted at once to her knees to clasp his fingers. He pulled her to her feet, keeping her at arm's length when she would have swayed into his embrace. 'Come...pack up.'

She sighed but thrust the thermos flask and leavings of their lunch into her knapsack and stood, freeing him to shake the crumbs from the cloth and fold it neatly. Hermione stowed it in her bag and offered her hand, her eyes sliding shyly from his as their fingers laced together. With a satisfied smirk, Severus led her back the way they had come.

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Hermione paced at his side, hurrying a bit to match his long strides, supremely conscious of her slightly sweaty palm clasped in his dry one. Ginny had seen them grappling on the ground, kissing and groping through their clothes like sixth-years in the Astronomy Tower. Even one week previously, that knowledge would have decimated Hermione with embarrassment, but today, it was a matter of indifference. Perhaps Ginny would share what she had seen with the others, and they'd stop whispering about how the Snapes never touched one another.

It didn't matter what they thought of her and her husband. The only thing that mattered was what ~~he~~ thought of her, and though he had verbalised nothing, his actions at least demonstrated that he had sufficient interest in her to want to take advantage of their physical intimacy. There was nothing wrong with that...she desperately wanted to take advantage of it as well, for as exciting as her dreams of him had been, they were nothing in the face of the real thing. The very memory of him the night before, the way he had kissed her, touched her, *filled* her ...

She stumbled stupidly over a tree root, and he steadied her with a frown. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Sorry,' she muttered, staring at his chest, afraid to meet his too-discerning gaze. 'Wasn't paying attention.'

He said nothing further but maintained the arm about her shoulders with which he had steadied her, and Hermione slipped an answering arm about his slim waist, her heart singing at the increased bodily contact. Would he march into the clearing before the house with a husbandly arm about her, allowing the others to see them in a semi-embrace? Perhaps it was childish, but the idea of others seeing them in such a couple-ish pose pleased her enormously. She couldn't imagine a more splendid situation than to be seen...*known!*...as Severus Snape's witch in practice as well as fact.

But she was destined for disappointment in that area. When they heard voices, he released her, and she could only drop her arm; she could scarcely cling to him if he didn't wish for it

He urged her forward with a brief touch to the small of her back, and as the others came into view, he said quietly, 'Don't dally for conversation.'

On another day, she might have bridled at this peremptory command, but she was as anxious to be alone as he was. Who would want to pass the time of day chatting nothings with school chums when there was sex to be had behind closed doors?

The Quidditch players had completed their game...no doubt when Ginny had caught the Snitch and interrupted Hermione's ravishment on the stream bank! They sprawled about around Hermione's favourite boulder, looking windblown and jovial, chatting loudly, with much laughter. Arthur and Molly had dragged chairs outside and were sitting with Bill and Fleur, who had apparently woken from their 'nap'. As Hermione skirted them to reach the steps up to the door, Arthur halted Severus with a word.

'All right, Severus?' he asked kindly.

Severus paused, darting a glance at Hermione which she read clearly as *Go on!*

'Hermione is a bit unwell,' he lied smoothly.

Hermione didn't know whether to be indignant or amused, but either way, she did not slow her steps.

'None of us are getting enough sleep,' Molly said staunchly, giving them all good reasons to slip away for 'kips' as necessary.

'I'll see her settled in,' Severus said.

Hermione heard Arthur's next question with a quickening of interest, and her pace slowed so that she might hear her husband's response.

'Ah, and don't you wonder how you ever got on without her?' Arthur asked in an indulgent tone.

There was a beat of silence, and then Severus spoke quietly...hesitantly...sending Hermione's pulse into a tripping rhythm.

'I ... I honestly don't know.'

There were the sounds of fond chuckles from Arthur and Molly, but it was Bill Weasley's voice that rose above the others.

'I'm right there with you, mate.'

Then Hermione heard Severus' tread upon the outdoor step and she hurried past Padma, Parvati, and Luna, who sat together on the sitting room sofa with an old magazine.

'All right, Hermione?' Parvati inquired chattily, but Hermione went past them without a glance.

'I'm fine,' she replied, starting up the staircase.

She charted Severus' progress past the young witches by their sudden, complete silence, but she was on the first floor landing, with Severus mere steps away, when she heard Parvati exclaim, 'Did you see the looks on their faces?'

'Just like any couple in love,' Luna said matter-of-factly.

But it was Padma's sighing comment that followed Hermione up the stairs with the ring of truth.

'Jammy cow, our Hermione.'

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Severus stood with Hermione behind the closed door of their attic room, their bodies striped with wide bands of light as the sun angled in and filtered through the filmy curtains. Was there a more wonderful luxury than undressing one's lover in the light of day, revealing every glory, every flaw, to the eye of the beholder?

She was like a fluttering faerie, kissing every scar, every blemish, and running her hands down his chest and his belly to his erection with reverence and wide-eyed appreciation. To his surprise...and gratification...she fondled his heavy scrotum and stroked down his shaft simultaneously, the foreskin sliding away, revealing the purplish head of his hungry cock. She knelt before him, mouth gloriously warm and wet about the knob, her tongue making exploratory gestures that sent shocks of pure lust

singing through him. He grasped her elbows and dragged her to her feet to kiss her, thrilling to the salty taste of his body's lubricant upon her lips.

He realised she wanted to take her time with him, but his urgency was like an untameable force. His fingers traced down her tummy and slipped between her legs. She moaned audibly, attempting to twist her hips away, as if to slow him down, but he needed her *now*. There was a houseful of people below who knew she was his...knew very well what they were doing...and he was damned if he would disappoint their expectations.

He backed her to their bed, the first they had shared since their wedding night, and she was compliant, as she had always been, scrambling to the head of the bed as if she remembered that his long legs required the full length of the mattress for him to push into her ready body, to fuck her, as she wanted him to do. He followed her, grasping her hips and moving her where he wanted her to be, pausing to fondle and suckle her full, round breasts before he pressed on, moving forward to enter her, pushing her arms over her head, holding them there, remembering how she had liked it on their honeymoon when he had done so.

And her legs rose to hook heels about his thighs as she arched to meet his next thrust.

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10 January, 1998

She was responsive to his kisses, but two orgasms in a short time period had sated her for the time being; she was not going to succumb to sexual seduction again, not with this bee in her bonnet.

She pulled away from him, a slight frown between her brows, and prevented his descent upon her by pushing to a sitting position.

'It's after midnight,' she pointed out reasonably with a gesture downstairs, where the mantelpiece clock had struck the hour. 'I know you want to sleep, but I'm afraid to fall asleep before I take the antidote.' She gave him an apologetic smile and stroked sweat-soaked strands of hair from his temple.

Severus swung into a seated position, his feet upon the floor, his back to the girl. Why in blazes could *nothing* in his life ever be simple and straightforward? And why did his so-called brilliant notions never quite pan out the way he'd envisioned them to?

'Severus?' she said, her tone questioning and a bit concerned.

'I gave you the book, Hermione. I let you read the formula and the instructions. Did you read anything about an antidote?' He spoke these words tersely, his eyes fixed on the wall, his uncommunicative back to his bride.

He felt a determined tug upon the bedclothes, and he lifted himself accommodately to allow her access. In seconds she was standing before him, wrapped in a bed sheet like a goddess of old, looking like an invitation to unbridled debauchery. Except for her eyes, which were narrowed and calculating...ah, Hermione the student was here now, in place of his delightful bed-mate.

It had been nice whilst it lasted.

'I wasn't thinking about undoing it when I read the recipe,' she informed him tightly. 'I was educating myself about the ingredients...some of which I've never heard of, by the way...and the effects.' She drew a deep breath, her voice rising on each of the next words. 'How could you not *tell* me it was irreversible?'

Irritation and the sheer injustice of the accusation pulled him to his full height, and though he was bare of his robes, he looked down his nose at her and did his best to project superiority and icy disdain. 'You didn't request a *reversible* solution, Madam. You simply wished to be rid of the memory of fucking your ugly old professor, never mind that he was giving up his freedom to become your legally bound *husband*.'

He sneered at her mightily, wishing to wound, to lacerate her sensibilities as she had shredded his, just when he had thought they had got through the most difficult bit with a rather impressive show of panache on his part. He was ready to do battle, to put her in her place, to rip up at her so viciously that she would never dare question him again...until she crumpled at his feet and began to sob as if her heart would break.

Buggering fucking hell.

He looked down upon her pitiful figure, a crying female, adorned with a worse-for-wear wedding wreath and a plain white bed sheet, and his heart lurched dangerously in his chest. Without thought, he hunkered beside her.

'Don't cry, little tempest,' he murmured, and when she lunged at him, wrapping her arms about his neck and burying a wet face in his shoulder, he sat down hard on the wooden floor, his bollocks saved from trauma only by his shirt, which had somehow ended up on this side of the bed.

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A/N: Today's song has been a favorite all my life. I believe Perry Como recorded it first, but my favorite version is by Don McLean. Here he is, singing *And I Love You So*  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZO9Y\\_SjmTE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZO9Y_SjmTE)

## Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 26

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.



## Transcendent Quality of Remembrance

### Chapter 13

Although he may not be the man some

Girls think of as handsome

To my heart he carries the key

*Someone to Watch Over Me*

7 July, 1998

Hermione awoke to an empty room, the single strand of long black hair on the empty pillow beside her testament to her missing lover. Her rumbling tummy informed her that it was breakfast time, but she felt far too good to want to hurry. Last night had been, if possible, even better than his peremptory actions in their afternoon rendezvous—which had been even more exciting than the night before that. She smiled and threw the sheet off, stretching luxuriously. Her naked body felt different than it had done before, full and ripe and *plundered*.

Rising, she gathered her bathroom things and went to the communal bath for a quick morning shower. Had it been only a few days before that she had stood beneath this stream of water feeling ashamed for her dreams about and desire for Severus? Her dreams had been disturbing because of the emotions they evoked, but mostly she had been bothered because it felt so furtive—because she had thought he was indifferent to her. But now—oh, *now* it was mutual. He took her greedily—consumed her like a starving man with bread—and though he spoke little, she could feel the thrum of emotion behind his actions.

She sagged against the wall, her eyes closing, an unuttered gasp on her lips. The cool of the tile contrasted with the heat of the water streaming down her skin, and she pressed against it, visions of their lovemaking filling her mind. He seemed like a man possessed, and though he did not say it, she knew he was possessed of her, just as she was possessed of him. Realising it made her feel overwhelmed—quite literally weak in the knees.

And wantonly aroused, all over again.

She ran palms over her breasts, tender from unaccustomed attention. He seemed quite fond of her breasts, his hands encompassing, gently squeezing their fullness, whilst his lips frequently sought her nipples. He drove her wild with desire when he held her down and toyed with her breasts, neglecting her ever more wet quim—but truly, he never neglected it for long, did he? She slid fingers between her legs, remembering the length and breadth of him as he filled her, shoulders bunching and striving above her.

The water had run cold when she shuddered from her efforts, and she towelled herself briskly to dispel the chill. Staring at her reflection, she plaited her hair and cleaned her teeth, her mind still full of bursting of her Dark, delicious husband. Perhaps she could find some pretence for luring him upstairs again after breakfast. After all, he had yet to permit her to give his body the thorough examination—visual, manual, and oral—that it deserved. Smirking at herself in the mirror, she turned to go to breakfast.

As if to pop her bubble of newlywed glee, a voice in her mind spoke, stopping her in her tracks.

*And when are you going to tell him you're leaving for America next month?*

Hermione felt a sudden, sick twinge of distress. *Why* would he care if she left the country? It wasn't as if she were an important part of his life, she reasoned, but in the next breath she knew she couldn't continue to tell herself he wasn't interested in her personally. He had demonstrated his *personal* interest forcefully and thoroughly more than once in the past seventy-two hours.

'It's just the sex,' she informed the door, her fingers upon the handle. 'It's ... something to do while we're cooped up here.'

She pulled the door open and stepped onto the stairway landing.

*You have to tell him.*

'I'll do it,' she muttered through clenched teeth, 'when I'm bloody well ready.'

And pushing the uncomfortable thought from her mind, she went downstairs.

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Severus sat quietly over his coffee, an apothecary's catalogue open in one hand to protect him from table chatter, but his mind was not on the printed word. He was suffused with an almost buoyant feeling of good spirits, and the phenomenon was unusual enough to be unsettling. This business of having an eager woman in his bed was at once exhausting—she was twenty years younger, for Merlin's sake—and exhilarating. He would fall away from her in a sweaty heap, thinking he would never be able to move again, and within an indecently short period of time she would have convinced him otherwise. Even now, his cock twitched approvingly in his trousers at this line of thought, and he was dismayed. He was far too old for such ridiculous reactions, regardless of the ... provocation.

And she was provocative. There lived in his swotty bride a wantonly sensual woman who required all his attention. It was her good fortune that he had the leisure now to see to her—if it were term time, it would be another story entirely. When school began again in September, she would have to make do with what time he could spare for

her ... only every morning, lunch break, and under the cover of darkness in his—*their*—bedroom at Hogwarts.

He was happily absorbed with these thoughts when the bride in question slipped into the chair at his side, the scent of her shampoo filling his nostrils and triggering a dangerous desire to take her on the tabletop amidst the toast and teacups

'Good morning,' she murmured, darting a teasing glance at him from the corner of her eyes.

'Slugabed,' he replied quietly, enjoying the soft gurgle of laughter with which she greeted this sally.

All around them, Weasleys squabbled good-naturedly over the last bacon butty, the young witches of the Order chatted amongst themselves about plans for a London party before someone or other's wedding, and yet Severus felt as if he and Hermione were in their own private space. Her frequent glances, the occasional touch of her foot to his ankle beneath the table, and her lack of participation with her classmates convinced him that she experienced their isolation from the others as well.

He felt a deep, solid satisfaction that was unfamiliar but welcome. It was as if the things they had said in the cottage on their wedding weekend were—but no, he wouldn't go there. It was dangerously close to sentimentality, and he eschewed such mawkishness. It was for the feeble.

Arthur, who sat to Severus' left at the head of the table, leant towards him a bit and spoke in an undertone.

'We had Albus's Patronus this morning just after dawn,' he said. 'We're to double up on patrols of the perimeter and be on the lookout for suspicious activity.'

Severus frowned, his disciplined mind immediately shifting into business mode. 'What has he heard?'

Tonks, who sat directly across from Severus, on Arthur's left, injected herself into the conversation. 'As usual, he gave us no specifics, but I think it's because he doesn't know anything definite—just rumours.'

Severus drained his coffee cup and stood. 'I'll take the first watch.'

Potter turned from Ronald's boasting story of the previous day's sport, his green eyes riveted on Severus' face. 'What's up?' he asked.

Severus behaved as if he hadn't heard, knowing Arthur would answer the boy's questions. Hermione followed him into the sitting room.

'Do you have to go?' she asked.

He looked down into her upturned face, momentarily distracted from his purpose by the wave of fierce protectiveness that rose in him.

'I think you know I do,' he answered rather more patiently than was his wont.

'I was hoping ...' She let the words trail off, but he was beginning to know her well. He knew very well what she had been hoping.

'Later, perhaps,' he murmured in a tone reserved only for her.

'I could come with you.' She touched his hand but withdrew quickly when Bill Weasley came into the room.

'Not this time,' he told her, and at her crestfallen face, he added, 'I'm afraid you would be too pleasant a distraction.'

She flushed prettily, and he went out into the morning sunshine, berating himself for his newly developed weakness for soft brown eyes.

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He stalked the perimeter with heightened senses, his eyes sweeping in all directions. The preternatural sense of self-preservation that had brought him through innumerable encounters with the Dark Lord and his minions was in overdrive, pushing him to reverse directions and retrace his steps again. What was the headmaster concerned about? Why did he find it necessary, even after the end of their bloody war, to play his cards so close? Did the old man trust no one?

When Severus was certain there were no Dark surprises lurking within their protected area, he found a favourite resting place and sat upon a likely rock, finally allowing his mind to go where it wanted to be. Hermione had been flirtatious with him over the teacups this morning—had even indicated that she wanted to take him back to bed—and not many men would have walked away from such an invitation as that. But duty was ingrained in him, like honour and discipline, and he was thankful that he possessed enough presence of mind not to make a fool of himself over a woman—no, *wife*.

He'd seen men fall into that trap and sneeringly scorned them for it. But he hadn't known—had been unable to imagine—the temptation posed by a woman available not only physically, but emotionally, as well.

He'd never seen it coming.

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*10 January, 1998*

They sat together before the fire in their dressing gowns with glasses of champagne in their hands. Hermione feasted greedily on fairy cakes, and Severus revisited the roast chicken, potatoes, and sprouts. But he didn't really taste the food, though his body registered it as nourishment. He was far too aware of her to be bothered by what he put in his mouth.

She was incandescent, a young woman in a fuzzy pink dressing gown, her hair a messy tangle of curls, rose-strewn wedding wreath, and rapidly unwinding plaits. Her eyes sparkled, there was a dab of pink icing at the corner of her mouth, begging for his attention, and his love bite was beginning to darken at the base of her throat.

'Is this how you imagined it?' she asked softly.

He struggled to orient himself again in time and space, releasing the fantasy of his own personal bed bunny for the reality of his student-wife.

'How I imagined what?' he inquired carefully

Her lips quirked into a half-smile, and he fought the urge to lunge for her and lick the smear of fairy cake icing from her mouth.

'Your wedding night,' she explained with exaggerated patience. 'Why do I have the feeling you aren't truly listening to me?'

Severus averted his eyes, his mind spinning with her ludicrous query. On any other day, he would scorn the question, shame her for asking it, but this was no ordinary day. For the space of these few hours, he had a perfect situation: a woman to whom he could say what he liked, whom he could carnally enjoy as many times as she would permit, who would have no memory of their time together after she slept. In other circumstances, he would never waste a thought on whether he ought to reply—but this night was nothing short of extraordinary, and his impulse was to indulge her—and himself.

'I can't answer that,' he replied truthfully. 'I've never considered it.'

'Never?' she prodded playfully. 'Not even when you were a boy? Or when you had a girlfriend at school?'

He felt a flare of irritation, and a sharp retort rose to his tongue, but one glance at her face told him she was not taking the mickey.

'Hermione, how many boyfriends have you had at school?' he asked in his mildest tone

She had the grace to flush a bit. 'Hardly any at all,' she admitted. 'I had Viktor Krum pay attention to me during the year of the Tri-Wizard tournament. And I had thought Ron and I might ... but Luna is much better with him than I'd have ever been.' She met his eye. 'Why do you ask?'

He held her gaze for a moment. 'Because I had no girlfriends at school.'

Hermione nodded, sitting forward and turning slightly to face him. 'Were you a prefect too? With that and homework, there's hardly *time* for a relationship when you're at school!'

She looked quite earnest, as if she had striven to convince herself that what she said was true. But he had never known a girl her age who did not long for a love interest in her life, and he didn't believe her.

Speaking gravely, he said, 'No, I was not a prefect. I was in Slytherin House, and there was no such thing as a half-blood prefect there. I was not ... popular.'

Hermione snorted in obvious disgust. 'Popularity is overrated. I've never been popular and wouldn't care to be.'

Now, *that* statement held a ring of veracity. She undoubtedly meant it.

He leant forward and picked up the wine bottle, tilting it towards her interrogatively. When she nodded, he topped up her glass and refilled his own.

'In Slytherin, blood status was paramount, closely followed by wealth. I was therefore ... supremely ineligible.'

Hermione sipped champagne and tilted her head to one side. 'Well, no offense to your House, Severus, but I can't say I'm surprised to hear they have such ridiculous standards. So, why didn't you find some nice Gryffindor girl to go out with?'

Her eyes twinkled with mischief—with flirtation, by Merlin—and there was no trace of guile. She didn't realise—couldn't know—how outrageous her words were. Even so, it was time to close down this line of discussion.

'I was under the impression *you* are a nice Gryffindor girl.'

She giggled, clearly delighted with his response, and he marvelled inwardly at how easily she was pleased. It took very little effort on his part to engage her—she met him more than halfway—and it inflamed him in a way he could not stop to analyse. The urgency to have her again, to have her in his arms, skin to skin, precipitated him to close the space between them, wine glasses sent peremptorily to a side table as he swooped.

'You may be a nice girl,' he told her, his breath fanning her cheek, 'but you have a dirty face.'

His lips closed hungrily over the smudge of pink icing at the corner of her mouth. He thrilled to the way her eyes closed in anticipation, even as her lips parted, inviting him to share the taste of sweetness with her. And oh, the nectar of her warm mouth was sweeter by far than the sugary icing, the fragrance of her skin intoxicating, the whimper of her pleasure the headiest elixir of all. At a touch, she yielded utterly, her dressing gown falling open to facilitate their mutual, driving urge to forge again into one being.

So despite his earlier contempt for couch groppers, Severus found himself making love to his wife on the sofa before the fire. The soft pink of her dressing gown cradled her torso from the rougher weave of the upholstery, and the silky wings of his dressing gown covered their nakedness, as they fell into the glorious give and take, the gasps and sighs, of union as elemental as fire and as old as time.

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When he opened his eyes, she sat on the stool before the hearth, patiently bringing order to her impossibly muddled mane, her dressing gown wrapped loosely about her. Her fingers, digits he had seen countless times, handling potions ingredients, chopping fluxweed with a silver knife, grasping a crystal stirring rod, now appeared inestimably delicate as they threaded through tresses transformed by firelight. The nondescript, mousy brown colour morphed under the influence of the tawny flames to innumerable gradations of colour: strands the pale gilt of champagne, the golden of honey, the glint of coppery ginger, darkening to the carmine of Spanish Sangria wine, overlain by the earthy tone of raw brown sugar, with low lights of spicy cinnamon. Ought he to move forward, displace her from the stool and seat her between his knees upon the rug, taking over the painstaking task of restoring some neatness to her divinely unmanageable tresses? Would that service be required before he could induce her to lie with him again, even though his attentions would muss those curls once more into a state of glorious disorder?

He lay prone upon the sofa, one cheek pressed to the hideous yellow fabric, his vision slightly obscured by stringy hair hanging over his face. He hastily straightened to a seated position, trying not to imagine what an unappetising sight he might have been, sprawling nakedly unconscious after ravishing the girl. His only consolation, as he knotted his dressing gown about his waist, was that his skinny arse, rather than his shrivelled todger, had been on display.

Hermione, however, seemed unaware of him and his state of wakefulness. Whatever her thoughts were, they occupied her utterly; she gave no indication that she knew he was moving about behind her. She stared into the fire, her fingertips working snarls from her hair. Would he help her? For in truth, was he not searching for any excuse to be next to her, his hands, however innocently, upon his bride?

Then one extremely distressing thought derailed these plans, and it was enough of a deal-breaker to force him to speak, shattering the silence.

'Have you slept?' he inquired neutrally, desperately wishing he were, if not clean, at least tidy and armoured in his teaching robes, steeled against the accusing eyes of his amnesiac wife.

Rather than answering, she came to him in a flurry of flying dressing gown and bouncing breasts and sat on his knee. He relaxed into the sofa cushions, his arms holding her too tightly against him, and the face she pressed against his neck was damp with tears.

'I h-haven't slept,' she admitted, her voice small, rough—broken. 'I d-don't ever want to sleep again, Severus. How can you even ask?'

He felt frozen, his heart seized in his chest, his breath stopped, blood coagulating to a frozen river in his veins. How was he to answer her? What comfort could he offer, what solution could he provide, to dismantle this choice she had desired, and he had delivered? A burning, like the memory of righteous rage, touched his consciousness, but the soft, clinging weight of her in his arms precluded that sort of reaction before it could properly form. He closed his eyes, inhaling the scent of his woman, feeling her body pressed to his, his wits reeling with the memories of her luscious mouth, her welcoming arms, the perfect heat of her quim—the stunning fact of her unconditional acceptance of Severus Snape

What rose in him instead of anger was desperation.

She cried in his arms, the warmth of her tears scorching his skin like undiluted Hydra venom, and self-reproach roiled through him with the force of a thousand steam engines. Why? Why should he not give in to her entreaties and share his memories of their time with her in the headmaster's Pensieve? Why should he not permit her to record every thought, every action, every memory in writing, that she might read it afterwards and know what they had been to one another? Why should he not return to Hogwarts with the wife he'd never permitted himself to dream of having?

He stroked her hair, he kissed the salty tears from her face, he wiped her up with a hastily Summoned tea towel, all the while gently rocking her, soothing her. She was his responsibility now, this eighteen-year-old witch, his student, the brightest and cleverest of her age, his wife. He had a role to play in her life, one every proper man accepted and embodied from his wedding day forward. Not the loving of her—love was for the weak, the feckless, and the fools. No, it was much more than mere love. He was to empower her, shelter her, protect her, from dangers both without and within. She was a woman—a powerful witch, to be sure, but burdened with the weakness

fundamental to her sex—inclined to be excessively influenced by emotion, particularly in regards to her family and friends, and as her husband, he had just become her primary family member.

It was clear, really. A simple matter of honour, that affliction he had endured from childhood. She had not married him because she had chosen him; any commonly held interests or beliefs, any animal attraction, any powerful sexual chemistry between them, was immaterial. She had married him to prevent the Ministry from forcing her out of Hogwarts, and in so doing she had expressed one wish: that she might not remember the sexual act of consummation by which they sealed their union. She feared it would make things unbearably awkward between them

She had asked only one thing of him. He had offered a solution. She had accepted the out. Therefore, he was bound to honour ~~that~~ that decision, not to enable this flight of fancy, brought on by the temporary pleasures of a sexual encounter.

She took the tea towel from him and ruthlessly scrubbed her face, then lifted her chin, drilling him with determined brown eyes.

'There's no antidote? No spell that might restore my memory after I've slept?'

He longed to pull her against him again, but he had to respect this reckless show of courage against the pain of a breaking heart.

He averted his gaze, unable to trust himself to speak the necessary words, and shook his head in the negative

He could feel her bristling, and he braced himself for an angry outburst, but whatever she felt, it was not directed at him. She spoke again.

'In the literature, are there ... any known instances of a degradation effect of the potion ... over time?'

His reaction was swift and unguarded—but it didn't matter, did it? She wouldn't remember his failure to shutter his expression.

His lip lifted in a scornful sneer, he said, 'There are old witches' tales about this, as about all such potions and spells. But being unverifiable, they have no bearing in the real world, I assure you.'

Her eyes closed for a moment, her lashes dark against her cheek. 'Then I shan't sleep,' she said simply, her eyes opening again, pinning him in place as neatly as an Incarcerous Spell. 'I'll stay awake as long as I possibly can. I know you travel with a potion kit—I'll need all of your Pepper-Up.'

Students had been misusing Pepper-Up as a stimulant for decades, but Severus had never suspected Granger of being one of them. He opened his mouth to argue, but she had risen and was walking up the steps to the loft, no doubt with her sights set on his travel case. It wasn't a horrible idea—he had no desire to end this dream-like encounter, either. So instead of arguing, he rose and followed her up the stairs.

'You can safely ingest no more than two doses in a twenty-four hour period,' he informed her back. 'Therefore, the third dose will be mine.'

She whirled around, grasping his dressing gown in her fists. 'You'll stay awake with me?' she asked breathlessly.

He did not answer her, other than to take advantage of her place on the next stair step, which made her nearly his height. He buried both hands in her god-awful, glorious hair and kissed her fiercely.

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7 July, 1998

An annoying, if technically well-done, trill of whistling brought Severus back to the present, and it was immediately followed by a smiling Bill Weasley, his hands stuffed unceremoniously into the pockets of his jeans.

'Consider yourself relieved, Severus!' he said, and before Severus could recoil, the younger wizard had grasped his upper arm and exerted the power to pull him up. Severus was left with no choice but to return the grasp on Weasley's upper arm and rise to his feet.

'Is it already noon?' Severus inquired, surprised that time had passed so quickly.

'Just past one, mate!' Bill replied. 'I think there's a lunch plate for you in the larder, but the wives have gone up for an afternoon rest.'

'Hermione?' Severus blurted stupidly, his mind having difficulty including her in any category that could be labelled 'wives'.

Bill gave him a meaningful grin. 'Fleur needs the rest now, with the baby and all. But Hermione didn't seem too tired to me.'

Severus did not wait to find out if this bit of impertinence would be capped by a know-what-I-mean wink. He turned from Weasley's knowing grin and hurried back towards the house.

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Someone to Watch Over Me by Sheena Easton is available on You Tube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9p9Aav1KeI>

## Chapter 14

*Chapter 14 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.



## Chapter 14

Tell me now, is it so,

Don't let me be the last to know,

My hands are shaking,

Don't let my heart keep breaking 'cause

I need your love, I want your love

*This Guy's in Love With You*

7 July, 1998

Hermione wandered aimlessly into the kitchen...boredom, rather than hunger, directing her actions. If she went outside, her friends would pull her into some sort of activity or conversation in which she had little, if any, interest. Severus had chosen to spend his day away from her, shunning her offer to accompany him...in a rather uncharacteristically nice way, perhaps, but it was still rejection, wasn't it?...so she was at a loose end. It was ever so much more pleasant to think about the way his endless black eyes blazed when she touched him, but it was just frustrating to imagine seducing him when he was not at hand to receive her attentions.

The lunch things had been tidied away, but the stoneware jug of lemonade Molly had stirred up was on the sideboard. Hermione fetched a goblet and poured the pale yellow liquid, her mind skimming from one subject to the next, seeking a place to light that was not in direct relation to sex with her husband.

She was anxious to receive her NEWTs results. She wasn't worried about them...she was confident that all would be Outstanding...but the Salem Witches' Institute was awaiting the report of her marks. Professor Moneta Muninn, the Head of the Wizarding Mnemosyne Project, had assured her that approval from the Board of Admissions was a mere formality.

She slid into the chair at the head of the long wooden table, the place usually occupied by Arthur Weasley, and reached into her ever-present bag, searching out her copy of *Transcendent Quality of Remembrance*. As always, she was distracted when she opened the cover to see the slight tear on the frontispiece...any damage to a book was anathema to her!...but other than making another mental note to mend it at the first opportunity, she put it from her mind and flipped through pages to find the hidden piece of folded parchment. She smoothed it open, reviewing again the documents required for application to the Salem Witches' Institute. Each item had a tick beside it, save for the final transcript.

'All right, Hermione?'

She slammed the book closed, her heart slamming into an anxious rhythm...but it was only Remus Lupin, standing in the doorway, his head cocked to one side.

'Don't worry,' he said with a teasing smile, advancing into the room to stand over her. 'Severus is still gone.'

Hermione glared at him, pricked by how close Lupin was to the truth. 'I'm not worried,' she snapped.

He sat down beside her, drawing the crumpled parchment from the pages, smoothing the edges smashed by her precipitate closing of the book. 'So you've shared your plans with him?' he asked, perusing the admissions requirements.

'Not that it's any concern of yours,' she said crossly, 'but no, I haven't. I will, though...just as soon as we leave this place.'

She felt badly, snapping at her friend, but she was protective of Severus now, as she had never been in the past when sharing her concerns with Lupin. He was one of the few who knew Hermione had married Severus for no other reason than to remain at Hogwarts. Lupin had been a candidate for her husband, and she had been strongly tempted to choose him...except that she would have been forced to leave school to live with him, and that would have been counter to her main purpose, which was to remain with Harry. Still, six months ago, she had thought Lupin would make a nicer husband than the snarky Potions master.

Now she looked Lupin over with the critical eye of a woman deeply involved with another man and found nothing but fault with him. His hair was shot through with grey, unlike Severus'; Lupin's face was scarred and rather scruffy, whereas Severus was always clean-shaven (although his face did become rather deliciously rough in the night, when it was near time for another shave); Lupin's hands were large, square, and blunt-fingered, in contrast to the Potions master's rather elegant, long-fingered hands. The mere idea of Lupin's hands on her gave her an inward shudder of distaste. How could she ever have imagined she would prefer him to Severus?

Now Lupin watched her with calm hazel eyes, and she felt a flare of irritation. He would sit there and accept whatever abuse she chose to heap on him; he would seldom rouse himself to defence, unless someone he cared for was threatened. No wonder Severus couldn't abide him.

'Have you definitely decided to study with the memory group in Salem?' he inquired mildly, one fingertip tracing down her ticks.

Hermione leant over to see what he was pointing to. Honestly, what business was it of his? All right, she had probably confided in him about it, but couldn't he see that she had no need of his hand-holding now?

'Am I ... interrupting?'

The silky, dangerous voice fell on Hermione like a shock of ice water, and she gasped, sitting back from Lupin guiltily, as if she had been caught out in wrongdoing.

Severus stood in the doorway, menace pouring from him in waves. He was coiled like a cobra, tensed to strike, his left hand repeatedly opening and closing, obviously missing the rowan wood wand he was not permitted to use in this place. His lips were frozen in a snarl, all of his attention focused on the werewolf.

'You...you're back,' she stuttered stupidly, desperate to fill the icy silence, to defuse the atmosphere.

He did not glance at her...seemed as if he had not heard her...for he never took his eyes from Lupin. From the corner of her eye, she saw Lupin fold the parchment...the one she desperately did not wish for Severus to see...and place it carefully in the book, pushing the tome to her before standing.

'Good afternoon, Severus,' he said pleasantly. 'Molly left a lunch plate for you in the larder, I believe.'

Lupin nodded to Hermione and walked toward Severus, obviously intent on departing the kitchen. Severus watched him approach, his eyes narrowed, both of his hands now fisted at his sides, and Hermione wondered desperately if the werewolf would hurt her husband in a physical brawl. Good God, of course he would...surely some of that werewolf brawn resided in Lupin's slightly stoop-shouldered frame! Then, at the last moment, Severus stood to one side, and Lupin slipped through the narrow space allowed him, leaving the Snapes in possession of the kitchen.

Hermione busied herself returning her book with its accusing parchment to her bag, inwardly lamenting her decision to even come downstairs. If she had remained in their room, he would have found her there, and they would be undressing one another at this very minute, instead of being in this awful stand-off, with her guilt and his anger clashing fierily in the air, raining her with sooty regret.

She looked up at him with a tremulous smile, hoping to soothe his prickly temper. It was wrong for him to be so cantankerous anyway, but if she could lure him upstairs...if she could get him into their bed...she could easily distract him from whatever was bothering him now.

'I wasn't expecting you before supper,' she said, rising and approaching him.

He finally looked at her, and the expression in his eyes gave her pause. He was visibly, if inexplicably, incensed.

'That, madam, is abundantly clear,' he replied in arctic tones. 'You need not have troubled to say so.'

She moved forward in spite of his untouchable demeanour. This was just silly...there was nothing for him to be angry about.

'Severus?' she said softly, laying fingertips upon a clenched fist. 'What's wrong?'

He jerked away from her, the snarl once again distorting his lips. 'Why don't you go find your werewolf friend and ask *him*?' he hissed. 'Perhaps you'll catch him before he hooks up with the Metamorphmagus...or perhaps you don't mind a little *threesome*.'

In an instant, Hermione was filled with powerful fury of her own. Without thought, she slapped his face, catching him completely by surprise and knocking him off balance, forcing him to step back to regain his footing.

'I'll make you sorry you said that, you awful man!' she cried.

The imprint of her fingers was clear upon his cheek, his eyes were wide with astonishment, and he reached a hand for her, but for once, she was too fast for him. He missed her arm, and when she flounced out of the room, he stood in the middle of the kitchen, stupidly holding nothing but the strap of her ubiquitous bag.

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Afterwards, he sat at the kitchen table with Hermione's bag before him, ruefully rubbing his face. Merlin, what a mess. He'd hurried back to the house, expecting to find his wife in their bed, waiting for him, and instead, he'd walked in on her with the werewolf, their heads together as if they were sharing confidences. Even now, alone in the room, he felt his lips pulling away from his teeth in a feral grimace at the very thought of his woman in an intimate situation with another man.

He pushed the bag away and stood, fighting the impulse to go, to find her and make her ... What? What could he force her to do or say? He'd *never* been able to coerce behaviour from Hermione Granger. Why should now be any different?

He closed his eyes, forcing himself to breathe rhythmically, feeling his heart rate slowly decreasing. Why had he not done this, calmed himself, before speaking to her and saying such ill-advised things? Because he'd seen her with Lupin...seen her with the man she had very nearly chosen for her husband instead of him...the man he would have happily pushed her off on to spare himself the inconvenience of marriage to a schoolgirl. He'd seen her with Lupin, and the sight had filled him with a blind white desire to throttle the life from the werewolf.

Jealousy. It was puerile, adolescent jealousy, and he had been helpless to prevent himself from acting it out.

As he calmed, his mind cleared, and he could easily see how foolishly he had behaved, though he could not swear similar circumstances would result in a different reaction. Hermione had been at first concerned...*guilty*! his inner adolescent insisted...and then she had been enraged by his carelessly blurted words.

As well she should be.

Fuck. He owed her an apology, but there was one problem: Severus Snape never apologised.

He forced himself into action, but rather than following his wife outside that he might beg her pardon, he walked into the larder and retrieved the plate of food left for him. He settled at the table again, his eyes on Hermione's bag, and began to shovel the fuel into his mouth.

He would eat and consider what he ought to say to her...and *then* he might go in search of her...but *not* to say sorry.

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10 January, 1998

They stood facing one another in the loft, phials of Pepper-Up in their hands. Her hair was completely back to normal now, bushy and brown and free of plaits and pins and petals of rosebuds...he had always thought her hair an annoying feature on an irritating young woman, but now he only wanted to bury his hands in that hair and control her movements as he kissed her, backing her towards the bed. Her eyes were bright, shining with purpose, and she held her phial aloft as if for the toast neither of them had thought to offer with the crystal flutes of champagne.

'To wakefulness!' she said.

He lifted his hand, wondering what he ought to say to her...not that she would remember it, of course. 'To the weekend,' he temporised, and they drank, laughing when steam poured from their ears.

'I hadn't taken that into account!' Hermione giggled. 'Are you sure you want to shag a girl with steamy ears?'

Severus smirked at her and took her hand. 'Don't you know how to make that stop?' he asked, prodding his swotty bride in her sore spot.

She obediently followed him down the stairs again. 'And you call *me* an insufferable know-it-all!' she chortled gaily, as if every ill-natured thing they'd ever said to one another...and he was unquestionably the guiltier party in that area...was now forgiven, in some joyous bacchanalia of reconciliation.

He pulled her into the bathroom and kicked the door closed behind them, anxious to touch her again. The room was square and as large as the sitting room, with a toilet, a rather modern-looking shower enclosure, and an enormous old fashioned claw-footed tub, filled with water, its surface sprinkled with rose petals.

'How pretty!' Hermione cried, her expression softening. 'And there's a Warming Charm on the water!' She glanced shyly at Severus. 'It's so romantic! Did you do this?'

He bit back the acerbic rejoinder that leapt to mind and closed a hand about her narrow wrist, pulling her to him and pushing the dressing gown from her shoulders, fighting the crazy urge to pull her into a crushing kiss.

*Steady on, old man*, he thought, forcing himself to look away from her nakedness and make eye contact again. *Don't overwhelm her.*

'I'm sure the house-elf did it,' he informed her, retaining his hold on her and pulling her to the shower. 'You may bathe later,' he said, releasing her and shedding his dressing gown, inordinately pleased to see his cock making an admirable show of readiness. 'For now, a quick, cold shower will douse the steam.'

*And the erection*, he though regretfully, but he didn't say it aloud.

Without permitting her to think about it too much, he jerked her into the enclosure, ignoring her screeching protests...something about not wanting a cold shower in the middle of winter...and thrusting her ahead of him to block her exit, he turned on the cold water with the wave of a non-verbal spell.

Her screech escalated to a blood-curdling scream as the icy water soaked her, but he was grimly satisfied to see the huffing jets of steam desist. Gritting his teeth, he pulled her tight against his body and bent his head to permit his own ears to be drenched.

When they were both steam free, he warmed the water until it created its own steam in the cold air, and as she warmed, Hermione stopped fighting him and became pliable in his arms.

No man living had grown to adulthood without imagining a naked woman in his shower, but Severus had never thought he would encounter that particular luxury. He made a show of washing her, the soap gliding easily over her warmed, wet skin that became slick beneath his ministrations. He returned the soap to its dish and used both hands to smooth down her breasts, feeling the nipples harden beneath his palms. She gasped aloud, igniting his urge to possess her again.

He backed her against the tiled wall, the perfectly warm water splatting their skin, his thumbs brushing slowly, repeatedly over the tips of her breasts, his eyes hungrily absorbing her passion smudged eyes and then her parted lips, ready for his tongue to invade and begin the inexorable drive towards completion.

Her chin tilted up, no passive participant in this venture, for she gazed into his eyes and her hand closed firmly about the base of his cock, fully recovered now from the brutal, icy cold shower. He drew a sharp, shocked breath through clenched teeth. Before tonight, it had been years since a woman had voluntarily...without the inducement of gold or Death Eater favours...touched his cock. And Merlin, she wasn't simply *touching*...she was giving him a thorough examination, as if learning his thickened, hardened contours by memory.

The decadence of this touch, so *other* than his own, was all but incalculable. His hands closed about the rounded globes of her breasts, gently kneading, and he wondered if, without their anchoring weight in his palms, he would be able keep his feet beneath this assault of abject pleasure.

She grasped him with one hand and with the other, she encircled the head, slowly, almost reverently, stroking downward, foreskin moving with her fingers, until the unsheathed, sensitive head of his cock was exposed to the air...to her eyes...and she was riveted, her fascination evident. His hands ceased the rhythmic compression of her breasts, all else forgotten in the wonder and novelty of this concentrated attention. The stroking hand continued down, completing the downward arc, and then rose again, ever so lightly passing over his most sensitive spot, tightening beneath the flared tip of his penis, and stroking more firmly all the way down.

Severus felt himself becoming boneless, as if all the sinew that held him up was concentrated in the appendage in Hermione's hands. The hand at the base stroked down, through the wiry black hair to his sac, and she cupped its weight, gently hefting, her palm rippling, slightly lifting, and distinguishing between the two orbs contained there, the sensation ringing through him, at once bell clear and deafening.

His hands settled on her shoulders, whether to fend her off or to pin her in place he couldn't know, but the decision was taken from him.

'Here,' she said, as if the word were a full explanation of her intention, and she guided him about with his bits as her leverage, as if that were a perfectly reasonable action to take. When her hands released him, he felt a wave of sorrow, but she was urging him downward, and that shelf where one might settle one's foot when washing a lower leg was beneath his arse, a seat in the shower. Before his stupefied gaze, she sank too, on her knees now between his legs beneath the lovely, warm, raining shower, her parted lips and questing tongue continuing the examination begun by her curious hands.

The dream-like quality of this entire night flowed over him, its course down his body followed by a shudder of pure lust. Not content with trailing the flat of her tongue up the fleshy underside of his cock, she encased his knob in the perfect warmth of her mouth, her tasting, teasing tongue sweeping all around it. He groaned aloud, every notion of dignity or self-control deserting him like vermin fleeing a sinking ship. Before he could stop himself, he threaded his fingers in her sodden mane, wordlessly entreating her not to stop.

His tempest seemed unaware of his lost poise, for she was intent upon her mission, working at it as diligently as she would any project...almost as if extra class credit might be in the offing. The thought, both amusing and distracting, touched his mind and was gone, for his world was swiftly diminishing, until only her enveloping, sucking mouth and his straining, licentious cock existed, and he repeatedly lifted his hips, seeking more and more and *more*.

In a paralyzing streak of triumph, he gave a final thrust, making his only contact with the back of her throat, and he came in her mouth, a gout of his fluids spasming from him, a sound he'd never heard before issuing from his throat at the same moment. He sagged against the tiled wall, his vision somewhat blurred as he strove to catch his breath. Hermione turned her face, adorned with threads of milky white fluid near her lips, into the stream of the showerhead, and hating to see her wash it away, he dragged her up onto his knee.

'Are you proud of yourself?' he asked, his voice at once rough and breathless.

She stared into his face, her eyes unnaturally wide, her pupils dilated. 'That depends,' she said softly, and the puff of her words smelled of his semen. 'Did you enjoy it?'

He kissed her none too gently, teeth scraping the soft flesh around her mouth, and his tongue plunged into a dizzying flavour of pure ~~hermione~~ *hermione*, overlain now by the salty residue of his contribution. Without thought, he tightened his hold on her, warring needs to dominate her and safeguard her clashing in his mind. One arm held her immobile whilst the other explored the body that now belonged to him, squeezing first one nipple then the other, drawing deep moans from her.

Had he shot some of it down her throat? Into her stomach? Why did the mere thought make him wild with conquest?

He inhaled her groan of pleasure and slipped his fingers into her cunt, finding her slick with desire.

Releasing her lips, he fingered her clitoris, watching the blurring of her focus as she avidly slid about upon his hand. 'You liked it, didn't you, little tempest? You liked having my cock in your mouth.'

Her eyes closed, her thighs parting wider, wanting more contact, more stimulation. 'Yes,' she hissed, drawing out the sibilant, her neck arching.

'I had no notion nice Gryffindor girls were so ... naughty,' he murmured, touching her teasingly, moving his fingers away each time she seemed to establish a rhythmic movement of her hips.

'Don't,' she whimpered, eyes open again, attempting to close her legs, trapping his hand where she wanted it. 'Don't tease...wasn't I nice?'

He felt his lips curve into a toothy smile, the type he seldom ever permitted himself. 'You were outstanding,' he assured her, amused by her self-satisfied smirk.

He grasped her waist, propelling her off his knee and up, until she stood behind him upon the bench seat.

'What...' She began to question him, but before she could finish, he made his intentions clear.

With another flick of his fingers, he ensured that the hot water would continue long enough for him to accomplish his purpose. Then he twisted about, parting her labia lips and burying his face in her slick cunt. She was so wet, so *keen*, that his labours were neither intensive nor long-lived. Had he ever been with a woman more ready at the least provocation to be coaxed to completion?

Then all thought of any female save his tempestuous Hermione was swept from his mind, and he was inundated with the aroma, the taste, the texture, and the unmistakeable sounds of his wife, so recently learned yet already a cell-deep memory he would never lose. He lapped at her vaginal opening, his index and middle fingers slipping within to slowly thrust in and out, as the bridge of his nose applied pressure to her pleasure centre. Unhurriedly, he turned his face up, until the tip of his nose stroked her clitoris, only to be replaced by his lips, softly suckling, applying the slightest pressure, followed by lashing from his stiffened tongue.

Alternating between these two manoeuvres, suckle and lick, suckle and lick, he tracked her progress by the strength of her fingers in his hair and the increasing volume of her cries. When he judged the moment to be propitious, he increased the tempo of his digital thrust and latched onto her clit, sucking it firmly between his lips as he swirled his tongue over the nubbin. She pulled on his wet hair, his scalp stinging at the assault, and mashed herself against his face, momentarily depriving him of breath. For a millisecond she stiffened, every muscle tensed, and then she gave voice to her orgasm, her body vibrating against him with the force and violence of her pleasure.

He moved from the bench, crouching beside it as he assisted her to slide down to a sitting position. She did not speak, but kissed him, humming with a certain, sated bliss, and he was overcome by the fusion of her sweetness mixed with the lingering saltiness of his own secretions, their tongues twining with lazy, leisurely afterglow.

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7 July, 1998

Hermione sat alone on the boulder perch at the edge of the stream, the stormy cast of her countenance enough to warn off her friends...she was obviously in a snit about something.

She was in a snit. How dared Severus say such things to her? As if she wanted sex with Lupin? As if she wanted sex, full stop! It wasn't his business what sort of sex life she chose to have. She hadn't interfered with *his* sex life since they'd been married, and she was quite certain he'd had one, unlike *her*.

The image in her mind, of Severus holding Septima Vector...of him kissing her, his black hair blending with Vector's dark brown...gave Hermione a pain-like pang in her stomach. She'd had suspicions of Vector, had been ridiculously jealous of her friendship with Severus, but thinking of them together *now*, after the intimacy they'd shared in this house, made her feel almost ill enough to throw up.

She fiddled with her plaited hair, a bit lost without her bag. What if *he* looked inside it? Saw her book? Decided to remove it and look through the pages?

What if he found out she was leaving England before she took the opportunity to tell him?

She huffed angrily. *Let* him snoop around and find out she was leaving him. She didn't care.

'A Sickle for your thoughts.'

The velvety tones were close...how did he move so silently, sneaking up on her like some sort of spy or something?

Well, never mind *that*.

She turned a stony glare on him, wanting to strike out, to wound as she had been wounded.

He continued, his tone conciliatory. 'What, you won't part with them for a Sickle? When the going rate is only a Knut? It's a bargain.'

He jingled the money in his pocket, as if he actually planned to hand her a coin.

'Better save your gold,' she said tightly. 'You may need it to entertain your women.'

His flaring black eyebrows drew together in a frown.

'What are you babbling about?' he inquired quietly.

Her chest swelled with the indignant breath she drew. '*I* do not babble!' she informed him in an angry under voice, aware that eyes were watching them, their housemates bored and looking for any distraction.

'Not as a general rule,' he agreed with her. 'But this talk of my so-called "women" is inane.'

She pushed her face pugnaciously close to his. 'No more so than your *babbling* about Lupin and me. As if I'd ever!'

His eyes narrowed, and she could almost hear him flipping through the information available to him, determining what weight he would give to her words. After mere seconds, his thin, finely formed lips twisted in a grimace.

'Touché,' he muttered, staring at the ground, as if his black boots were sublimely interesting.

The capitulation took the wind from her sails. When had Severus Snape ever backed down from an argument? When had he ever implied that he took her opinion about anything into account?

'We've been ... close, these last days,' he said, sounding as if the words would barely make it through his lips, so grudgingly were they given. 'I do not ... care to see you in close conversation with any man who is not me.'

Realisation dawned on her like sunshine breaking through stormy skies. He was ... explaining, if not apologising. Had he been jealous? Of her? Oh my God, had they just had their first lovers' quarrel? The very notion flooded her with longing and delight and a renewed wish to lure him upstairs.

'I can't bear to think of you with another woman,' she confided softly, touched by the swift glance he darted at her face, as if to convince himself that she was speaking the truth.

He cleared his throat, plainly drawing a mental line through that conversation, and he began another.

'Perhaps you'd have the time to assist me with an ... experiment,' he said, no longer staring down, but looking out over the gurgling brook and watching her from the corner of his eye.

She gazed at him with pleasure, the sickening jealousy of mere moments before washed away by the delight of having him close, of having him *flirting* with her, giving her

his undivided attention. She drank in the well-known hawkish profile, the breadth of his shoulders, the tightly cinched belt at his waist. She was flooded with the sudden onset of mind-numbing, debilitating desire to have him inside of her.

'I am ... entirely at your disposal, Professor,' she murmured, making no attempt to conceal from him her meaning...or her emotions.

His hands closed about her waist, lifting her to the ground, and she clung to his upper arms, loving the feel of his biceps beneath her fingers.

'I need you in our shower...the one on the landing, outside our door,' he said quietly, his hands lingering on her a moment too long.

Hermione pivoted away from him, throwing a deliberately provocative look over her shoulder at him.

'I feel positively *dirty*,' she said, and went hurriedly toward the house...until she remembered to slow down and swing her hips invitingly.

She knew instinctively that a man follows more attentively if there's a promise implied with ever sway of a jeans-clad bottom.

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This week's song is a little known version of This Guy's in Love with You, by Harry Connick Jr.: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HP4mRfxLItY>

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## Chapter 15

*Chapter 15 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: Greetings, my dears. We're now past the half-way point in our tale. I eagerly await your thoughts and feelings about the story, and ask that if you read, you take a moment to say you've done so. It encourages me more than you can ever know.

The new banner for the story was created for me by TalesofSnape, an author whose talent turns also to the visual arts. Thank you, dear Tales!

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### Chapter 15

I hope someday we remember what was lost here

For if love no longer waits for the broken

Where do we go when it all goes away?

*When It All Goes Away*

*7 July, 1998*

Hermione made it into the quiet house without incident, but Arthur hailed Severus (who was several steps behind her, admiring her bum in her tight jeans) before he could escape. Hermione left him without a qualm, knowing that if anyone in the world could be counted on to take care of himself, it was Severus Snape. So she fled up the stairs to their room, aglow with delight at the promised adventure in the shower.

She stood before the old mirror on the dressing table, studying her reflection as she brushed out her hair. Thank Merlin she no longer had to study her body, wondering what was wrong with her and why he never approached her for sex. His invitation today was the clearest request to share their conjugal delights he had ever made to her...and in the *shower*. She shivered, a wild thrum of excitement beginning to pulse low in her belly. The dreams she'd had of sex with him in the shower were her favourite ones, because she was the aggressor...well, *one* of the aggressors...and because in the dream, he permitted her to take the lead.

Would real life work out as the dreams had done? Would he relinquish control for long enough that she might overwhelm him with pleasure? It was difficult for her to imagine her severely buttoned-up husband allowing her that sort of license with his person, but there was no harm in trying, was there?

Besides, the only reason she even felt she *could* do it was because she had dreamt it so many times in the last several weeks. She wasn't quite clear on how much confidence one could place in actions remembered from a dream...whether they would really work for her or not...but she was fully determined to try them and see how successful she would be.

She turned from the dressing table, pulling her tee-shirt off over her head, and she unfastened her jeans, shimmying out of them with expert speed, so that she was in her bra, knickers, and socks when the door opened to admit her husband.

The predatory gleam in his endless black eyes gave her momentary pause, and she took a step back from him, but he pounced on her all the same, clever fingers finding and working the clasp on her bra in mere seconds.

'Someone has been lollygagging,' he murmured, fanning his thumb across a nipple now hardening beneath his attentive gaze.

'You're not precisely naked,' she pointed out breathlessly, feeling the process of liquefying under his determined hands, lips, and hard, lean body already beginning, presaged by the unsteadiness of her knees.

He did not so much as look away from her as the fingers of his left hand performed a fluttering movement, and he was completely nude.

'How do you manage that without a wand?' she demanded, finding that she was reaching for him, desirous to feel his bare flesh in contact with her own with no delay.

'I could have sworn I had instructed you in the use of non-verbal magic,' he replied in a musing tone, somewhat diminished by the heat and focus of his gaze, driven and implacable.

'But you did that without a *wand*!' she gasped, becoming boneless as he inexorably drew her body against his, thumbs hooking in her knickers and beginning to pull them down her legs.

He stopped with the underpants halfway down, his face now on level with her sex, which he pretended to ignore as he looked up at her. 'We could skip the shower and have a go at practicing wandless magic,' he said, and then he bent towards her, the tip of his nose pressed to her navel and travelling inexorably downward towards regions begging for his attention.

She threaded her fingers through his blue-black hair. 'F-fuck wandless magic!' she insisted, anticipating his contact with the pleasure centre just below his lips.

'I feel quite certain I can fuck you without wandless magic,' he stated.

And her underpants were dragged ruthlessly from legs, her socks dispensed with, and she was being led adamantly to the door and urged through, into the same shower enclosure he conjured each morning on the landing...the one she had never seen before their stay here...the one with the peculiar bench seat built into the wall, which seemed so oddly familiar.

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Severus found that the moment he saw Hermione, his tedious conversation with Arthur Weasley was wiped from his mind, and he was once again back in the moment with her. This vital young witch, his wife, had taken possession of his mind in a way he would have sneered to believe was possible, before he married her. She had fallen into his life, disrupting it and forever stealing his scant moments of peace of mind, leaving in their place a constant, pressing desire to be with her...*within* her. Yet until they had come to this place, he had not touched her as a man touches his wife since their wedding weekend together. Now she seemed insatiable...for *him*...and he found he could match her desire, kiss for kiss.

She turned to him beneath the warm water from the showerhead, and he found himself facing the Siren from his wedding night, a tempest in his arms, blowing through his guard to an agenda all her own.

She was enticing, the water saturating her hair and making it nearly black, the water droplets cascading down her smooth skin, dripping from her erect nipples in a way that held him speechless with the aching *beauty* of her.

Completely unaware of his stricken state, Hermione had fascinations of her own. She grasped his erection, her touch bringing him to full and throbbing readiness. Moving closer to study the organ wrapped in her fist, she brought her other hand to bear, groping him as thoroughly as if she meant to record her findings in a scientific journal. She seemed rapt in her study, as if she had been awaiting the opportunity to give him a proper examination in the light of day...was it possible that she had been thinking of his naked body as often as he thought of hers? The notion seemed ludicrous, but her actions seemed to confirm his hypothesis.

Her eager touch upon his cock reminded him of his reason for suggesting this midday shower. He'd always wondered about the feasibility of fucking in the shower and had meant to attempt it with her...but it seemed she had ideas of her own. Ignoring his attempts to distract her from the object of her fascination, she urged him towards the bench seat. He allowed her to impel him to a seated position, watching as she slipped down between his thighs, her questing mouth finding its way to a most welcoming protrusion. He closed his eyes in stupefied surrender with an eerie sense of echoing *déjà vu*.

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10 January, 1998

Fresh from the shower, a bath towel hanging precariously from narrow hips, Severus stood at the basin, straight razor in hand, glaring at his reflection in the age spotted mirror. Behind him, seated on the closed toilet, Hermione combed her wet hair, the bath towel she wore about her hips in imitation of him leaving her breasts bare, which did nothing to improve his concentration. In spite of the late hour, the Pepper-Up hummed through him like some illicit drug, a buoyant feeling of well-being trailing in its wake. Was that a side effect of off-label use? Why had he never encountered mention of it in the literature?

He applied the lather to his face and stroked downward, leaving a swath of hairless, slightly pink skin through the foamy soap. Methodically, he rinsed the blade and continued the rather serious business of shaving. It was unquestionably important to pay attention when positioning a razor against one's throat, and he had never been the sort to skimp on safety precautions.

When he took up a hand towel to wipe the remaining white foam from his face, his eyes met Hermione's in the mirror, and he saw that she had been studying him as if taking notes for a Potions project.

'I like your face,' she said seriously, resuming the detangling of her long hair.

He cocked a brow at her, wondering what angle she was coming from. 'You are in luck, then, because it's part of the package.'

Seeming not to hear the heavy irony, overlain as it was by the cockiness of a man who's just been thoroughly shagged into submission, Hermione continued in a musing tone. 'You're not conventionally handsome ...'

That absurdity startled a bark of laughter from him, and he threw the hand towel aside as he turned to face her.

She appeared to be unfazed by his reaction. 'But you have beautiful dark eyes, good bone structure, and a rather lusciously shaped mouth. You're better than handsome, Severus...you're *arresting*. I wouldn't change a thing.'

He was human enough to be pleased by her words, however improbable they were. Even so, she had talked long enough. He moved to stand in front of her, and she watched him come, her attitude one of perfect trust and tranquillity. Whatever one might say about his little tempest, she was not afraid of him, and he found that fact puzzling, if pleasing.

'You're all over gooseflesh,' he said, hearing his gruff tone and wishing he sounded smoother...less like a parched man rushing headlong from a long desert trek into a sparkling, clear oasis pool.

Hermione glanced down at her naked torso, crowned by tightly pebbled pink nipples. 'I don't think it's from cold, you know,' she said, raising her eyes to his.

He pulled her to her feet, and the loosely tucked towel fell from her waist, leaving her naked.

'Come back to bed,' he said.

'But I don't want to sleep!'

He couldn't prevent his smirk. 'Who said anything about sleeping?'

Her gurgling laughter brought an answering smile to his lips, but it was the sight of her running naked to the bed, her best womanly bits bouncing like Circe's own gift to man, that created a recurrence of the cresting sensation behind his breastbone. He wondered vaguely if he were having some sort of heart seizure.

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Warm beneath the blankets with Hermione, her softness was curled against the hard planes of his body as if it were comfortable for her to be there. They kissed languorously, time bowing to their wishes and stretching like taffy, making each minute longer than the last. She actively sought his caresses, arching and purring beneath his hands like the most pampered of familiars. His body had not fully recovered from his explosive experience in the shower, and yet feelings stirred in his chest, as if his little tempest were actually inside of him, creating divine havoc.

She pushed herself up, so that she gazed down at him, and the tenderness in her expression nearly unmanned him. Stroking still damp hair back from his face, she said, 'There's so much I don't know about you so much I ought to know, and would, if we had pursued a more ... traditional courtship.'

He snorted, attempting a display of disdain for such a notion, all the while taking care not to dislodge her stroking, soothing touch upon his brow.

'What do you want to know?' he asked, feeling expansive. He could indulge her now...there was absolutely no risk attached to it. It would keep her busy whilst his body recovered the ability to fuck her again...and perhaps it would not be so bad, telling his tempest a bit about himself.

He could always lie, if necessary.

Her face brightened as the prospect of being allowed to ask questions. 'Do you have brothers or sisters?' she asked.

'None.'

She nodded. 'I'm an only child too. It can be lonely...and it is possible to receive too much attention from one's parents.'

He grunted noncommittally, busying himself with twining a bushy brown curl about his finger. He was not going to divulge any details about being the only child of Tobias and Eileen nor discuss the type of attention he had received from them.

'Are your parents alive?'

'They are not,' he replied.

'Oh,' she said, her manner changing. 'I'm sorry, Severus.'

Time to divert her ...

'Did you suspect you were a witch before McGonagall delivered your letter?' he asked, surprised to find that he was interested in the answer.

She chuckled. 'There were loads of times things would happen around me...oh, from about the age of three, I think...and Mum and Dad were very careful to cover for me. I thought I was ... freakish.' Her good humour faded a bit. 'Other kids didn't like me much...in addition to having odd little "accidents", I was the top of my class.'

'... as befits an insufferable know-it-all,' he murmured provocatively, pleased when the haunted look was chased from her face by mock outrage. She punched his arm, inflicting no damage, and he retaliated by toppling her onto her back, his hands imprisoning her wrists.

'Tempest,' he murmured, dipping his nose to her fragrant throat and inhaling the fresh, clean smell of her.

*Hermione.*

She struggled lightly, and when he released her hands, she stroked his shoulders, turning her head until her cheek rested against his. 'Did you have friends in primary school?' she asked.

'My mother was a witch,' he answered honestly. 'I received home schooling before I went to Hogwarts.'

'So there was no one for you to play with? No other magical children nearby?'

He answered automatically, his defences at full rest, his lungs full of her scent. 'Only one friend,' he said. 'A girl my age. We were friends at school, but we ... grew apart.'

He waited for her to ask the identity of his one friend, wondering if he would speak the name aloud into the sanctity of this sacred tryst.

But she surprised him, turning on her side until they were face to face upon her pillow, her modest, perfectly reasonable nose tip gently grazing his outsize one. 'It was harder to leave my toys behind than my schoolmates,' she confided.

He cupped her cheek with his palm, feeling the gentle curve of her jawbone. 'What was your favourite toy?'

She made a little moue of discomfort. 'Just a silly Muggle toy...popular when I was small.'

Intrigued by her embarrassment, he hazarded a guess. 'A doll?'

Her cheeks flushed pink. 'My Little Pony,' she said, her voice almost too soft to be heard.

He bit the inside of his cheek against the urge to snicker. 'I am ... unfamiliar,' he admitted, once the deadly impulse of laughter had passed him by. 'Perhaps you could acquaint me.'

'They were small plastic horse shapes, in pretty pastel colours, with long manes and tails you could brush or plait.'

'You had ... more than one?' His personal belongings at the time he left for Hogwarts had been negligible before his mother had taken him to Diagon Alley to procure his school things... second-hand, but entirely *his*. He had known that other children possessed more things than he, but it was still difficult for him to imagine such abundance.

'I collected them. My favourites were the unicorns.' She laughed, her breath puffing against his face. 'When I came here and found out that unicorns were real ... oh, it was as if some silly dream of mine had come true.'

Through the veneer of sophistication his child-bride had acquired over the last seven years, he could still clearly see the wide-eyed child she had been, and a confusion of emotion rattled through him, the only easily recognisable element of which was possession.

She was his now.

'We have no pastel coloured unicorns,' he murmured, simply for something to say. Why were smooth comments, long one of his chief weapons, deserting him now, when a bit of suavity would have served him quite well?

She rose over him, her hair hanging down, her luscious breasts sliding over his chest, stirring his cock again with her fiendish desirability.

'You have far more alluring qualities on offer, I promise you,' Hermione said, and before he could reply, she kissed him.

It was a novel experience, having a woman in the role of aggressor, and for a while he lay beneath her, touching and kissing those parts of her easily within reach...here an ear, there a nipple...until she dumbfounded him by scrambling astride, her bum grazing his more than adequate erection.

'This is ... possible, isn't it?' she asked, looking to him for confirmation even as one of her hands snaked between their bodies, seeking his cock.

'Yes,' he answered, finding he was a bit breathless, even though she was the one exerting energy. 'You ... guide the way, as it were.'

Her lower lip caught between her teeth in concentration, she grasped his shaft and wriggled down, attempting to place the head of his cock at the entrance to her vagina. It took more than one try, but Hermione was nothing if not a determined woman. She kept after it until she achieved her goal, and when he made an experimental thrust upward, his muffled groan of pleasure was overborn in his ears by her audible gasp.

'Oh, Severus! I ... feel you differently.'

She closed her eyes and rocked back, engulfing him in a passage made entirely new by the angle of her body atop him.

'Fuck,' Severus breathed, even as Hermione found her balance on her knees and straightened her spine, sitting neatly astride him, her vaginal muscles tightening and releasing as she accustomed herself to this new experience.

The oil lamps on either side of the bed cast a golden light upon her, limning her silhouette, the entrancing vision becoming the focus of his swiftly narrowing reality. She was splendid, her quickly drying hair wild about her head like a living organism; her breasts bouncing with every rise and fall of her body, the motion mesmerising him; her arrhythmic, less than graceful movements failing to dim his enjoyment of the amazing occurrence.

'I can't seem to get the knack of ... regular rhythm,' she said, placing her palms on his chest and leaning into him for a moment, trying that angle of penetration and mewling with the pleasure of it.

He stared at her dangling breasts, hanging like fruit ripe for the picking, and he palmed the inviting globes and gave a gentle squeeze.

'Do what pleases you,' he suggested, thinking he could remain in this position with this visual delight for hours without tiring of it.

She did not reply, but it seemed she must have heard him and taken his words to heart, for she made more experimental moves, finding one that pleased her at last, and she proceeded to pleasure herself, her expressive face mapping for him the progress of her journey. Her motions were too irregular to put him in danger of ejaculation, thus ending her fun. He contented himself with stroking her flanks, gently pinching her nipples, and storing this encounter in his memory, swearing never to forget an instant.

She was as lissom as any love nymph, arching her back, her breasts thrust upward towards the heavens, and she lifted her heavy hair from her neck, allowing it to fall again, her crown and glory. Her breath quickened, her hips maintaining a more heated tempo, and her lips parted as her eyelids drifted down, as if her vision were blurring. Severus coated his fingertips with saliva and touched the dark rose petals of her quim, applying pressure at the nerve centric apex.

Hermione gasped, her eyes flying open in comprehension, and her fingers replaced his, moving in firm, sure strokes, completing the circuit of heady pleasure she had pursued so doggedly from her perch atop his bollocks. She gave voice to her completion, her cries seeming to echo about the rafters of the small cottage, and Severus was spurred to new action. Feeling as if he would burst with the surge of blind passion sparked by his lover's abandoned performance, he grasped her hips in a vise-like grip and drove upwards into her spasming muscles, once, twice, thrice...and his ejaculation tore a hoarse shout from his throat.

His muscles were still clenched with the effort of it all when a sweaty Hermione slid from his body onto the mattress beside him, both of them hot and breathless.

In spite of the Pepper-Up, the exigencies of the day fell upon him all at once, an overwhelming, paralysing lethargy, part satiation and part well-earned exhaustion.

'I apologize in advance, little tempest,' he said, turning on his side towards her, hearing the thick slur of his words. 'I must ... leave you for a bit, to sleep.' He forced his eyes to remain open, gazing into her beautifully flushed face. 'You'll stay in the cottage? Close by?'

She kissed his cheek. 'I promise I will be here or in the sitting room,' she said. 'I can read or revise...I won't go outside.'

He was satisfied with that reassurance, and with one last look at his bride, he fell deeply into exhausted sleep.

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The fire in the hearth had begun to die down, and the woman in the fluffy pink dressing gown tended to it, stoking the embers, adding wood, and encouraging it to burn brightly. She hummed as she worked, a dreamy, faraway look in her eyes, as if her thoughts were not confined to the cosy cottage on a quiet side street in Hogsmeade.

From the sitting room she found her way into the kitchen, where she prepared a plate of provisions from those left by the Hogwarts house-elves, who had arranged a honeymoon hideaway with commendable speed and thoroughness. Sitting at the little table scattered now with the petals of pink and white wedding roses, she Summoned her ubiquitous bag and dived inside, producing a sheaf of parchment and a Self-Inking Quill. As an afterthought she also brought out a new-looking book entitled *Transcendent Quality of Remembrance* by Professor Moneta Muninn.

The bushy haired witch seemed to daydream over her pre-dawn meal, sipping champagne, doodling amongst other things her new married name...and the name of her new husband...on her parchment, embellishing the names with carefully drawn, leaf-strewn rose vines. She added one fat, primary-school Valentine's heart with an arrow through, but quickly scratched it out, completely obliterating it with black ink scribbles.

She picked at the cold sliced chicken on her plate, staring at the wall, then extracted a pink rose from the bouquet adorning the table and plucked a petal from it, watching it fall onto her plate amongst the chicken bits. She plucked another, and another, and it became clear she was murmuring to herself as she denuded the rose stem of its pink adornment. When the last petal fluttered to the pile now obscuring the food on her plate, she smirked to herself and took another drink of champagne.

She abandoned the plate on the table, but carried the wine, the book, and her parchment and quill into the sitting room, where she curled up before the fire. Her fingertips passed over lips made puffy by repetitive, emphatic kissing, and she stroked the palm of her hand down her torso, as if remembering another touch. A rather silly smile touched those kiss-bruised lips, to be followed by slowly narrowing eyes and the tilt of her head: a classic ah-ha! moment.

She looked over her shoulder, up to the loft where her companion slept the sleep of the well-shagged. Seemingly satisfied, she took up her wand, tracing it over a small section of the parchment, until she held a scrap no larger than her pinkie finger, with one word written upon it. Next, she traced the wand tip along the inner hinge of *Transcendent Quality of Remembrance*, creating an opening where the endpaper was pasted to the front cover board. Into the opening, she carefully inserted the parchment scrap, pushing it in far enough that repairing the gap between the end paper and the front cover would not leave any parchment sticking out the opening. Another touch of her wand to the inner hinge of the book repaired the rent perfectly, as if it had never been there.

But still she seemed dissatisfied. She opened the hidden space again, this time mending the tear less perfectly; when she was finished, there was the tiniest rip of the endpaper. Not enough for anyone to notice ... anyone, that is, who was not a died-in-the-wool, perfectionist bibliophile.

Contented at last, she set aside all but the wine and sipped whilst staring into the fire, as if she had all the time in the world...as if time were not the enemy ticking away every last second of any chance she had for lasting happiness.

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7 July, 1998

Comfortable beneath the sheets with Hermione draped across him as if he were her personal body pillow, Severus had the taste of her quim still upon his tongue...the residue of his ejaculate was dried upon her cheek, a flaky white spot he would kiss from her face before escorting her downstairs to dinner. Her performance in the shower had been a near perfect re-enactment of the one on their wedding night, but she had been oblivious to his amazement: to her, it was all brand new.

How could it be that she evidenced perfect recall of events he knew for a fact had been purged from her mind by a Dark potion he had brewed with his own hands? What could it mean? The old witches' tales that told of a remedy for the Lethe Elixir were naught but fantasy...such a thing would never happen.

She stirred in his arms, rolling away from him to the cooler side of the bed. He permitted her to go, studying the delicate curve of her impossibly soft-skinned back...and then he spooned behind her, burying his face in her damp, clean-smelling hair.

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A/N: This week's song, with the heartwrenching lyrics I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, was on my playlist for almost all of the writing period of 14 months. It is David Hodges singing *When It All Goes Away*. Another delicious line is, "I will keep what we've started in my mind, love/ Yet I can not help but be brokenhearted and undone now." You may listen to it on YouTube here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OU6qCbdaNM>

## Chapter 16

*Chapter 16 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.



Chapter 16

Somewhere in the night we will know

Everything lovers can know

You're my song, music too magic to end

I'll play you over and over again

*Somewhere in the Night* Barry Manilow

9 July, 1998

Hermione woke in an empty bed in a room flooded with bright sunlight. Her lover was gone, and save for the lingering scent of musky sandalwood upon the pillow, the only evidence of his existence was the neatly organised bag of his soiled laundry on the floor by his travelling case and his shower kit on top of the chest. The presence of the kit meant he had already showered and gone down for the day. She registered all of these things before looking at her wristwatch and discovering that it was after nine o'clock. She had slept late but exceedingly well.

Rising naked from her bed, she stood before the dressing table mirror and admired the dark bruise of the love-bite on her breast. How many times had they made love after dinner? First there had been the tryst in the shower, then a delicious nap, then coming a bit late to the dinner table and enduring the puzzled, speculative glances of her school mates. Had it been twice? Thrice? She giggled, remembering Severus' groan at the last, when he had informed her that he was *not* a teenager and that she would be the death of him.

*But you won't,* her ever helpful inner voice informed her. *You'll be in America, and he'll be at Hogwarts, and you may never see him again.*

Hermione felt suddenly rather sick at heart. 'That's not true!' she informed her reflection, turning away to find her shower things and shrug into her dressing gown.

She *would* tell him, and soon. And they were adults, not squabbling teenagers. He would accept her decision, and they would work out how they would handle their marriage, going forward. Going away to school did *not* equate to leaving him.

Twenty minutes later, she entered the sunny kitchen to find it a hive of industry. Molly laboured over a bright blue bowl, stirring a thick concoction with a heavy wooden spoon. Ginny was busy with numerous round cake tins, smearing them with butter and dusting them with flour. Cho and Luna were in charge of a bowl of a glossy white substance, giggling together as they spooned it into what Hermione recognised as a pastry bag.

'What's going on?' she asked Fleur, who sat at the far end of the kitchen table with her knitting needles and yarn.

'It's Bill and Fleur's first wedding anniversary!' Molly said, answering the question before Fleur could open her mouth. 'We're making a cake the Muggle way, without magic...and I must say it's rather like reinventing the wand!'

All of the girls laughed appreciatively and agreed with Molly.

'There's tea in the pot and a plate in the oven for you, Hermione,' Molly added distractedly. 'You can get it yourself, can't you?'

'Of course, thank you,' Hermione murmured, feeling a bit out of place and uninvolved, as she had done from the beginning at this place. She had never been ~~so~~separate from her friends in Dumbledore's Army and the Order...not since before she had married Severus in such a god-awful rush.

'When you've finished eating, you can help Cho and me with the fondant icing flowers for the cake,' Luna said kindly. 'It's rather fun...you get the icing all over!'

Hermione smiled tightly and retrieved her plate of warm breakfast food.

'Are the men outside?' she asked nonchalantly.

'They scattered like cowards when the baking tins came out,' Ginny informed her sourly. 'It's amazing how stupid they become the moment there's a hint of domestic chores to be done.' She twisted her face into a mask of horror and said, in a fair imitation of Harry's voice, 'Gosh, Gin! I don't know how to stir batter with a spoon!'

Even Hermione had to laugh, if for no other reason than that she was fully aware of how helplessly Harry and Ron always behaved when confronted by kitchen duties, although she knew the Dursleys had used Harry like slave labour all through his childhood. He certainly knew how to cook, but if it comforted him to pretend Ron's ignorance was his own, who was she to tell his secrets?

Hermione prepared a cup of tea and carried her breakfast outside, hoping to see her husband, but there was no one in sight. It appeared that all the men had dispersed as described. With a sigh, she sat down on the doorstep and began to eat.

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Severus sat amongst Weasleys, hearing their conversation on the edge of his consciousness, but largely ignoring them. The twins and their twin girlfriends had set off together for a stroll through the wood, and Lupin and Tonks had crept away, hand-in-hand, for Merlin only *knew* what. Potter and his sidekick were flying their brooms, but Arthur, Bill, and Percy sat with Severus at the periphery of their Secret Kept location, purportedly keeping watch, but mainly keeping out of the way of the party-organising witches.

Severus had left Hermione sleeping in their bed, the tangled sheet revealing one plump breast...the one he had deliberately marred with a strong, suckling kiss, branding her as his. She had made no protest, and he had considered leaving one on her perfect, creamy skinned throat...one she could not hide from their housemates...but the thin veneer of his adult mind overrode the adolescent impulse to mark her as his where everyone could see.

She was busy being the perfect lover: eager, passionate, adventurous, responsive, and occasionally aggressive. He had fucked her hard, adorned her inside and out with his seed, tasted every orifice of her dewy-skinned body, internalised every sigh, every gasp, every cry of orgasmic completion...but he had failed to fully penetrate her, for all that. She was hiding something from him...something essential, deliberately withheld...and the knowledge was tearing him apart. He was of two tortured minds about his desirable young wife: to immerse himself in her on-going sexual revolution and bask in the glories therein, or to wriggle further into her confidence, work harder on her emotional connexion to him, and somehow convince her to confide the secret she was hiding. The perfectly understandable masculine desire to do the first had thus far kept him from pursuing the second choice, but the continuing knowledge that she withheld something *vital* was beginning to gnaw at his mind, to the point that he only stopped thinking about it when he was in extremis...when he was inside her body, penetrating it with his cock as he seemed unable to penetrate her mind with his own.

Or perhaps he was wrong about Hermione...perchance his suspicions were nothing but the product of years of finely honed paranoia...mistrust that had saved his life, time and time again.

He sighed and allowed his head to rest against the tree trunk at his back, his eyes drifting shut, miming sleep in the hope that the Weasleys would leave him out of their dull, tedious conversation.

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10 January, 1998

He woke from his unavoidable nap as the rays of dawn crept into the cottage loft around the edges of the window curtains, the aromas of tea and toast filling his nostrils. His eyes came into focus, and he saw a womanly shape in a pink dressing gown bent over a tabletop adorned with a teapot, a rack of toast, and a vase of pink and white roses.

'That smells like heaven,' he said, and the figure turned, revealing to him the soft, hopeful countenance of his wife. At the sight of her his morning erection twitched to full attention, and he wanted her with a hunger far outweighing his transient desire for the sustenance on the tray. 'Come here, little tempest,' he said, throwing the covers back to invite her in...and to reveal the glory of his rapier cock.

'Oh!' she said, her gaze sliding from his face to his rigid member. 'Should I ...' She put a hand to the belt of her dressing gown.

'Without delay,' he affirmed, and she dropped the garment to the floor, climbing into the bed and slightly dampening his ardour with her cold body.

He quickly covered them both with the bedclothes and held her close, suffusing her with his body heat, covering her mouth with his and kissing her hungrily. She moulded

herself to him with enthusiasm, suckling his tongue as if she were ravenous too, her hands touching his face, his shoulders, his chest, his arse, and his bollocks in quick succession. He sought and squeezed a full breast, delving into the champagne-sweet taste of her mouth, thrusting into the fist wrapped now about the stiffness of his prick.

'Good morning, Professor,' she teased when he broke their kiss to look into her flushed face.

He gave her a mock professorial glare and burrowed beneath the blankets to wrap his lips around a nipple, his efforts rewarded by her tiny mewl of pleasure. He suckled her, feeling the ridges forming beneath his tongue as the nipple peaked, and he replaced his wet mouth with a gently pinching hand as he moved to the other breast.

She relaxed beneath his attentions and allowed him to play with her body, yielding to his nipple sucking as if she had all day to indulge him ... as she bloody well did. The realisation that he had this whole day to enjoy his bride filled him with euphoria, which he celebrated by cupping her vulva, feeling the dampness of her curls. When had a wizard ever had a witch more receptive to his sexual overtures? He scraped his teeth lightly over her erect nipple, and as he did so, he slipped a finger through her slick folds, drawing a moan of mindless acquiescence from her.

'Severus,' she breathed, parting her thighs that he might have full access to her warm, wet cunt.

He took full advantage, sliding down her softness like the serpent of his House, trailing open-mouthed kisses down her torso, her belly, until he reached the fragrant promised land of her slick folds. He'd experimented very little with cunnilingus in his life, but he'd found in the last several hours that he had quite a taste for it ... a taste for *her*. And she was very accepting of his efforts, neither bossy nor demanding but compliant and appreciative...and sweet *Circes* responsive.

Working as he was in the dark beneath the covers, he could navigate only by smell and touch, and the Siren call of her symphonic sighs drove him to further industry. He spread her open with his fingers and devoured her like a ripe, succulent peach, all nibbling lips and probing tongue. She writhed beneath him with abandon, losing herself in the pleasure of his mouth on her clitoris.

When she cried out, he pressed a cheek to her damp curls, breathing deeply of her scent, content to nestle between her thighs in the warm cocoon of their marriage bed. She allowed him to remain there undisturbed for a short time, but soon she was reaching for him, and he joined her again upon the pillows. She stared into his eyes as if she were seeing him for the first time, pressing her palms to his cheeks.

'Who are you?' she whispered, but before he could frame an answer, she kissed him, hungrily sucking at his lips and tongue, as if greedy to taste herself in his mouth.

The question gave him pause...what did she mean?...but her tongue against his wiped his consciousness of the words, leaving only the desire behind. Something in her eagerness inflamed him, made him want to enter her, to hold her down and fuck her. A distant part of his mind reminded him how he had wanted to take her slowly, to bring her to orgasm again as he moved in and out of her...but the urgency was upon him now, and she was willing, rolling onto her back and wrapping her legs about his upper thighs, pulling him in, tight and deep.

She gasped at the strength of his thrust, and he saw lights behind his eyelids, bright and blinding and true. He opened his eyes to see her beneath him, her breasts bouncing with every thrust, her lips parted, huffs of pleasure escaping with each impact. In that moment he saw that she was everything...hazard and harbour in one entity...Siren and sanctuary. He wanted to give her his soul...to keep her from harm...to fuck her, just like this, for the rest of his life.

And then she opened her eyes, huge, beautifully brown and *burning*. He felt her look to the depths of his being, a connexion sparking between them like a link falling perfectly into place with a nearly audible *click*. He was stricken, but not unwilling, and he held her gaze, his body continuing its inexorable plunder of hers. It was as if their minds brushed, one against the other.

Her hands clutched at his back, and she began to strive beneath him. Their movements were not perfectly in synch, but he was too far committed to his course to be diverted. Already the coil was tightening, then the overpowering *rush* of completion began, seeming to come from his very core, a deluge outpouring from him into her.

His movements were slowing as he endeavoured to catch his breath, but his tempest was still whirling. She bucked beneath him, her legs clamping over his bum, and she cried out wildly, a raw, wordless shout of ecstasy.

He collapsed, winded and spent, and she trembled beside him, whimpers of emotion succeeding her primal cry. He turned his head and was horrified to see tears on her lashes, and brushing aside his desire to cool his perspiring flesh with a moment of repose, he gathered her to him just as she began to sob.

'Hermione?' he said holding her against him, one hand soothing her impossible hair.

She cried in his arms, her sweaty face now becoming red and blotched, completely lost in herself. He rocked her against his torso, petting and murmuring, wondering how on earth he had harmed her and what he could do to atone.

'Why are you crying? Did I hurt you in some way?' he said, after a moment had passed, when her sobs seemed to be abating. 'I didn't mean to be so rough ...'

His voice trailed away into uncertainty, but she answered him quickly.

'N-no!' she hiccupped, lifting her tear-streaked face to look at him. 'I'm n-not hurt, Severus. I'm ... overcome.'

He expelled a breath he had not realised he was holding, and his muscles relaxed from the panic of fearing he had injured her in some way. His normal response would have been to remonstrate with her for alarming him, but everything normal was out the window today. She was his bride, and this was their honeymoon, and he had just brought her to orgasm twice in mere *minutes*.

Damn, he was good.

'I see,' he murmured, pressing a kiss to her temple. 'Is that ... a good thing?'

Her watery chuckle reassured him immensely, and he fully sagged against his pillow, a stupid, self-satisfied grin pulling at his facial muscles in an entirely unfamiliar way.

She wriggled upward a bit, until she was on the pillow too.

'You don't need to look so proud of yourself,' she told him, fingers moving over his cheek.

'I bloody well do,' he told her, and gently kissed her lips, now salty from sweat and tears.

When he had Summoned a handkerchief and properly dried her face, she attempted to explain.

'When we were ... doing it,' she began, and he nodded his understanding of her meaning, 'I felt as if I were in two places at one time. On the bed with you on top of me, and at the same time, in some separate sphere, completely ... *enmeshed* with you.'

She stopped and studied his expression warily, as if fearful that he would laugh or mock her. Severus merely returned her gaze and lightly stroked her arm, a gesture of reassurance. He had felt it, too, though he would never have admitted it had she not verbalised it.

She added, 'I don't understand it, quite, but it was ... something very special.' And she averted her gaze as if she were suddenly shy.

He pulled her against him again, trying to honour her confession with body language, if not with spoken words. In truth, he was dumbfounded and more than a little shaken.

This was not what he had bargained for.

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9 July, 1998

The men returned to the house, predictably, at lunchtime. Hermione seemed quite removed from the frantic buzzing about the remarkably fancy homemade cake, and she had been coerced into organising a casual lunch on the ground by the stream. She had spread two large rugs (*not* including Molly's red, second-best table cloth, Severus was amused to see) on the ground, held down by two sizable hampers of sandwiches and bottles of Butterbeer.

It was not difficult to persuade her to join him upon her favourite boulder perch, and they sat side by side, legs dangling, eating cheese and pickle sandwiches. He watched her covertly from behind the curtain of his hair, wondering what she was thinking as she stared out over the burbling stream, her brown eyes slightly narrowed against the noonday sun.

He was not to enjoy a tête à tête with his bride, though, for Arthur soon ambled over to stand companionably by the Snapes.

'I asked her why she was going to such a fuss for a wedding anniversary party,' Arthur confided quietly, 'but you know Molly when she gets a notion.' He chuckled affectionately, and Severus only nodded as a courtesy.

Thankfully, Severus had no first-hand knowledge of Molly Weasley with the bit between her teeth, though he'd heard some amusing stories about her butting heads with Sirius Black over the nurturing of that delicate little prince, Harry Potter.

'She says the kids are going stir crazy with nothing to do, all cooped up here,' Arthur added thoughtfully. 'Putting on a party will give them something useful to do ... the girls, at least.'

George Weasley appeared at his father's elbow...or was it Frederick?...with his echo at his heels. 'I object, Father,' the twin said, and Severus was sure then it was George, using his "posh" voice. 'The *boys* are making themselves useful as well!'

Fred Weasley produced an old-fashioned wireless...not unlike the one Dumbledore kept in his office...that was surely a relic of the war years. 'See what we found in the big cupboard off our room?' Fred said. 'If we can get it working, Bill will be able to have a dance with his bride to celebrate.'

Severus snorted. 'Providing you can find something other than consumer programs and Quidditch scores to listen to,' he said.

George touched a finger to his nose, nodding to Severus. 'Right you are, Professor,' he said. 'But we've fortunately remembered...'

'It's Thursday,' Fred continued. 'Mum's favourite singer has a programme every Thursday night...'

'And who wouldn't want to listen to Celestina Warbeck to commemorate the old nuptials?' George finished triumphantly.

Severus cocked a doubtful brow. 'And you two are experts at manipulating old pre-war Muggle relics?'

George turned to his twin with a tragic sounding sob. 'He ... *hedoubts* us, Fred.'

Fred gave his brother a bracing one-armed hug. 'He'll eat those words, George. Come along now.'

The two whirled away, both talking at once, and Severus was treated to the sound of Hermione's gurgling laugh...and Arthur's chuckle, but it was Hermione's glee that lifted his heart. He tilted a glance to her face, and she met his eyes, her lips parted, eyes sparkling with enjoyment. Something turned over behind his breastbone, and he wondered if some fragment of sandwich was caught in his throat.

'So there'll be dancing,' Arthur said cheerfully. 'The young people will enjoy that...I think we've got more than one new romance brewing on this little enforced holiday.'

Severus thought it would be a miracle if Arthur didn't have a rash of grandchildren come next spring, but he kept the thought to himself. He had other things to worry about.

Dancing? In front of all of Dumbledore's Army and half the Order as well? All of them watching him with Hermione, spying, waiting for some show of husbandly emotion? Of wedded bliss?

That was bloody well not going to happen.

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A/N: This week's song was a popular one in the months of my engagement to SubHub: *Somewhere in the Night*. More than one artist recorded it, but the one we loved was sung by Barry Manilow: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y15vjyxF0>

## Chapter 17

*Chapter 17 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: This is an enormous chapter - as long as 2 chapters in 1! - and I hope you'll review it two chapters' worth! It is the moment we've been anticipating/dreading ever since we learned about the Lethe Elixir. If you need a hand to hold, I'm right here, and the professor has loaned me a stack of his freshly laundered handkerchiefs, if you have need.

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## Chapter 17

Wake up, it's time, little girl, wake up

All the best of what we've done is yet to come

Wake up, it's time, little girl, wake up

Just remember who I am in the morning

### *Losing Your Memory*

9 July, 1998

Nothing was left of the lunch but bread crusts, which Hermione had strewn about for the birds, and Butterbeer bottles, which she returned to the hampers. The other housemates scattered, some to painstaking wandless cake decorating, some to hilarious wandless wireless repair, some to after-lunch Quidditch, and a few to post-prandial repose. Hermione watched Severus, who had remained with her, assisting with tidying up the lunch detritus...but he was strangely uncommunicative, and had been ever since the exchange with Arthur and the twins about the wireless. Was it about the dancing? Was it because of ... last time?

It was true that there had been a rather unfortunate occasion when he had felt the necessity to dance with her publicly, but they hadn't been ... close, when that happened. Surely they need have no scruples about it now, when things were going so well between them. And of course, there was the *dream* about dancing, but that had nothing to do with Severus...it was another of her sex dreams, and it only *began* with dancing.

He darted a swift, calculating look at her as he bent to lift the two heavy hampers from the ground, and Hermione turned away, bending to collect the rugs. She shook one free of ground debris and began to fold it, determinedly staring at the ground. Would they go upstairs for a 'nap'? Or would he disappear again? What was he thinking?

'Let me help you.'

She turned in surprise, the blanket bunched in two fists...what did he mean? But he made it clear by prying two corners of the blanket from her and walking backwards, until they stood the length of the blanket apart from one another, the four corners stretched out in their hands. It was odd, for some reason, seeing her famously withdrawn husband poised to do something as homey as sharing in the folding of the wash.

He walked towards her, the length of the blanket folding between them, until they stood very close, their fingers meeting in an awkward tangle as they brought the blanket corners together. Hermione looked into his face, memories of the previous night and their activities beneath the blankets flooding her mind, causing colour to flush her cheeks and her heart to trip into a quicker rhythm. It seemed as if his thoughts were in concert with hers, to judge by the half-lidded, burning quality of his eyes.

When she thought they might drop the blanket in the dirt to grapple with one another over its crumpled shape, he bent at the waist, allowing her to retain ownership of the blanket corners whilst he took hold of the newly made doubled edges, and after moving a few steps away to smooth the creases, he came towards her again, bringing the blanket corners he held to her clutching fingers, until she held the quartered blanket before her, and his hands were empty...only the air between them thrummed with the sexual tension, their awareness of each other's nearness and the desperate acts of intimacy they had shared beneath their blankets as palpable as the bed covering she now held, neatly quartered.

'You can manage from there, I think,' he murmured, his tone making it clear to her that he was fully aware of her state of sudden, aching need.

'Of course,' she answered, her voice a whisper, and she folded the blanket one last time, until it was the perfect size and shape to lay atop one of the hampers.

Then he turned to her again, the second blanket in his hands, and a challenging lift of his brow brought her resolutely forward to claim two corners and begin the folding process again. She would not be intimidated by his implied sexual aggression...not when all she wanted was his hands on her again.

'Do you suppose you can assist me with this task, Miss Granger?' he taunted in the tone of intimacy she heard from him only behind the closed door of their bedroom. 'Who would have thought folding the bedclothes would be an act of such erotic promise, hmm?'

The ache between her legs was near the point of physical pain, but she backed away from him, pulling the blanket taut of creases before walking towards him again, bringing the four edges together in his hands.

'Shall we complete the job?' he asked, his silken voice both a torment and a promise. 'Or shall I take you here, on top of a half-folded blanket in the great outdoors, where Meriin knows who'll watch us fuck?'

'Stop,' she whispered, embarrassed, but her voice sounded unconvincing even to her own ears.

He took the halved blanket from her and completed the folding with three quick, decisive snaps of his arms.

'Why don't *you* stop issuing half-hearted commands and go upstairs and disrobe.'

She stood irresolute, half wanting to repudiate his assured assumption of what she wanted, half relieved to have him understand it so completely and take charge.

'I'll deliver these to Molly,' he said, his black eyes watchful. 'And then I will come to you and ...'

He left the sentence unfinished, as if he knew that she would complete it for him...that her mind would be all too ready to fill in that particular blank.

'All right,' she whispered, and it felt as if she was barely able to force the words out through a throat strangely constricted with emotion.

'Good girl,' he replied and turned to the house, a hamper in each hand, the folded blankets neatly stowed on top of them.

Hermione remained where she was, oddly thrilled with his praise, and watched her husband walk away from her, his posture rigidly upright. The sunlight glinted on his blue-black hair, and the width of his shoulders made a nice contrast to his slim waist...and the tight bum showcased in his black trousers, nicely on display without the veil of his enveloping teaching robes. He was a bit of top-shelf totty, this husband of hers, and she felt almost light-headed with desire as she hurried into the house, anticipation of pre-nap festivities thrumming through her blood.

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He had wanted to go off after lunch, away from the low-level buzz of the party preparations...away from Hermione, to show his independence...but just watching her move about, bending to load the hampers, twisting to scatter the bread crumbs, made him want her in bed again.

Offering to help fold the blankets had been inspired of him. It had left him with an almost mindless desire for her, a determination to have her naked before him, ready and willing.

He came into their room to find just that, his wife in a shaft of sunlight, nude and waiting. She came directly to him, as if unable to wait for him to discard his clothing. She wrapped her arms about his waist, pressing her breasts to his chest, and he watched them flatten against his shirt front. He liked having her naked and *wanting*, her hands shamelessly at his belt buckle, and he had the perverse desire to take her without disrobing, aroused at the mental picture of his clothed power thrusting into her naked vulnerability.

She succeeded in unfastening his flies, and she had his swiftly hardening cock in her hand, far more proficient at handling it (*handling me*, his inner voice supplied) than she had been just a few days before. He tangled a hand in her hair and tugged lightly, pulling her head back for his kiss. She tilted her chin and opened her mouth, welcoming the invasion of his tongue, her lips closing greedily as she suckled it. Her clever hands fondled him, hefting his bollocks, gently pumping his shaft, making him ready to thrust into her body...her warm, wet, welcoming cunt.

He heard a sound issue from his throat, a growling groan, and his hands covered the globes of her breasts, massaging, feeling the pretty pink nipples harden against his palms. How many times had he touched her this way...and how could it be that it felt so *new* every time he did?

She murmured against his lips, and her smooth leg rubbed up the outside seam of his trousers, her knee bending as she hooked a foot briefly about his lower leg, the motion parting the lips of her vulva, causing the scent of her arousal to rise to his sensitive nostrils, inflaming him further.

He walked her backwards a few steps to the end of the bed, until her back was against it, and he urged her up to sit at the edge of the high mattress. She cupped his arse cheeks, squeezing, and leant forward to nuzzle his bobbing erection, her tongue extended, seeking the sensitive knob, still partially covered by his foreskin.

'Behave,' he told her gruffly, and she darted a gleam at him from beneath her lashes, the picture of a naughty, pert little minx.

Desire thumped in him, a heavy, demanding urge. 'Lie back,' he instructed her, amazed by her obedience, that she would let him direct their sexual encounters, simply eager to add a new experience to her amatory repertoire. She complied, languidly reclining, her breasts sitting atop her rib cage with youthful firmness, pebbled pink nipples inviting all sorts of mischief. But he had a specific goal, so he coated two fingers with saliva and parted her labia lips, lightly rubbing her clitoris before inserting his fingers into the channel his cock yearned to inhabit.

'Are you in a hurry, Professor?' she inquired playfully, her hips rising to rub against his fingers. He was reminded of how she had teased him with the title on their wedding weekend, evoking images of naughty teacher/student scenarios. He was opposed to such things...always had been...but this was his wife, and she was lying passively with spread legs, deliberately seductive in her manner. It was all right to be a bit titillated by the fantasy she conjured.

'In a hurry to fuck you,' he said, probing her opening, making sure she was ready for him. He teased her with the ball of his thumb over her clit, then with his other hand he grasped his erection, exposing the engorged head of it, casually stroking himself as he pleased her, enjoying the drugged expression of lust that came into her unfocused eyes.

'Then I wish you'd get on with it,' she said, cupping her breasts tantalisingly, her lips parted, her tongue just visible between her teeth.

He didn't reply to her, but stepped closer, lifting her legs and holding them up, her heels nearly to his shoulders. He indicated to her to keep them there, then reached down to insert himself into her slit. The movement was strange to him; it was difficult to achieve much of a rhythm, but the sensation was both peculiar and wonderful, and the view ... well, the view was incomparable.

Her eyes were wide now, intent, and she held her lower lip between her teeth with an air of intense concentration. He watched her breasts wobble with his every movement, particularly attentive to the one marked with his love-bite bruise, and the rapaciousness he felt brought a lip-curling sneer to his face.

She was as wet as he could ever want, and the position was one he'd never tried, with her legs so close together, constricting her opening, making it tighter and full-on *amazing*. But there was no contact for her pleasure spots, and he wanted her to enjoy this as much as he did.

'Touch yourself,' he ordered her, knowing he sounded peremptory but too intent on fucking her to care

He half expected her to object, but she surprised him by reaching down, fingers slipping into her pink slit with the ease of familiarity, and she began rubbing, a glazed, pleasurable look coming over her face.

Seeing her that way cranked up the arousal for Severus to almost unbearable levels. He glanced down at himself, booted and fully dressed, save for his cock poking out his open flies, sliding in and out of the naked cunt of his wanton little wife. His tempest, he had called her then, and she still was a rampaging typhoon of sensuality, but he never used the endearment now

Almost never.

Not content with rubbing at her clit, Hermione began plucking roughly at her nipples, the erect and elongated protrusions popping up and snapping back into place with each pull she gave at them. Severus watched her, his mouth going completely dry at the fierce, abrupt treatment she dealt her breasts, accompanied by the increasing tempo of the fingers in her quim. She uttered a strangled gasp, her legs jerking on his chest as she climaxed, and he felt himself cresting the wave of completion unexpectedly, managing to hold his shout to a loud grunt as he came, his fingers gripping Hermione's trembling legs like a white-knuckled vise.

He released her and watched as she rolled away to crawl to the head of the bed before collapsing upon her pillow, her heavy-eyed gaze upon him. He cast a wandless Cleansing Charm and tucked himself away, doing up his flies.

'You ... you're not *going*, are you?' Hermione said, a slight note of panic in her voice.

He sat on the mattress and stroked her hair back from her face. 'You should have a bit of a nap,' he said. 'You look sleepy.'

She grabbed his hand and held it, as if to prevent him from going. 'You should have a rest, too,' she said persuasively, indicating the other pillow. 'I'll even promise not to bother you.' She said this with a small, hesitant smile, her youth and uncertainty suddenly very clear to him.

'I'm not tired,' he lied, feeling the urge of flight too strongly to be swayed by her neediness. He had to ~~ge~~away.

'You ... you don't have to be worried about the dancing,' she blurted, and when he went cold inside, horrified that she had read him so bloody well, she looked contrite, as if she were sorry she'd spoken. 'I know you don't like to dance ... with me.'

He pulled his hand from hers and stood, behaving as if he'd not heard her...as if she'd not spoken at all.

'Have a good rest. I'm sure I'll see you at dinner.'

He pivoted and strode to the door, feeling a greater need to escape from her than he'd done since ... well, since the aftermath of the incident in the dungeons.

'Severus?' she whispered, but he went out the door and closed it firmly behind him.

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Although sleep seemed to be a long time coming, Hermione at last drifted into an uneasy doze, and soon, she was dreaming.

*She entered the room down a staircase, through fiery red light, into warmth and simmering excitement. A song filled that air, a tinkling, music box tune, classic and familiar. He stood before the hearth, tall and perfectly still, watching her. His figure was limned in the red-gold glow from the fire, his face in shadow.*

*She was not conscious of walking, but seemed to float towards him, slowly but inexorably. Her primary emotion was one of ebullience, to be the object of this man's attention, the cynosure of his eye. He was immobile as a statue until she drew near, and then he pulled her into his arms. For an instant he held her to his heart, as the tinkling song came to an end. Then he took her hand, placed his other hand at her waist, and at the downbeat of the song beginning again, he led her into the dance.*

*In her mind, she knew she had always been something of an awkward dancer, because she never had the opportunity to practice, but in this moment, she moved with grace she'd never hoped to possess. She was acutely aware of him, the sensation of fullness in her chest so immense she could scarcely draw breath. She was triumphant in her ability to attract and attach him, jubilant in his willingness to indulge her, on fire with the desire to be physically taken by him. After a mere few revolutions of the rotating dance (one-two-three, one-two-three her mind repeated, the lesson learnt and never forgotten), she wanted to be done with it, to give in to the crushing impulse to merge with this man, body and soul. But he would not be deterred from his determination to dance with her, allowing the tension between them to mount, apparently uncaring that it twisted and towered, threatening to engulf them both in its whirling, rampaging power. It was as if he knew the dance would morph into the deeply invasive fucking she so desperately needed, and he was content to make her wait for it, wantonly wanting.*

*It was not until the music box melody had played through its entire tinny tune that he stopped dancing, and with exacting, decisive movements, opened her robes from throat to ankles, leaving her naked before him.*

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Severus strode through the trees, his jaw set, seeking a haven free of human infestation. He was unfit to mingle with others now...he knew himself well enough to recognise the signs...and he craved a space for solitude. His mind churning, he spotted a familiar place near the stream...the bank where he had shared a meal and a rather steamy kiss with Hermione...and he chose that as his hiding place, trusting that no Weasley Seeker would fall out of the sky in pursuit of a Snitch to disturb his peace.

Slumping to the ground, he allowed his head to sag forward, fleeting thoughts and surging emotion roiling through him, leaving him wrung out and weary

Severus Snape had precious little control in his life these days, a fact he encountered, it seemed, around every corner he turned. He was used to a certain measure of that, after all, the double-crossing spy that he'd been all his adult life; his two masters ordered his days...and nights...with majestic disregard for him. But he'd always retained dominion in his emotional world, heedless of the precious feelings of others he'd lacerated along the way. He'd wielded his *choice* in the matter of all things emotional with ruthless self-interest. Now, however, he had one additional person to consider, and that reality tended to lurk just out of sight, ambushing him at unexpected moments with leering amusement.

For the last several days he'd been swinging wildly between two imperatives: fight or flight. It felt as if he'd done far more of the cowardly latter than the valiant former, and there was nothing that infuriated him more than being tainted with the mere hint of cowardice.

Trapped in a house with party-planning females? Flight. Confronted with his desirable young wife? Fight. Alone with his wife in their bedroom, fully dressed and fucking her naked body? Fight. Dealing with the emotional aftermath of that sexual encounter? Flight.

*Or was it the talk of dancing that made you run, Snivellus?*his inner critic taunted mercilessly.

Fucking *dancing*.

Goddamn Valentine's Day at Hogwarts...the school had been under the control of the Ministry and headed by the despicable Dolores Umbridge. The toad-like headmistress had been desperate to ingratiate herself with the students, so she had decided to throw a Valentine's Day dance...nothing would make the old harpy happier than to splash the school in her favourite sickly *pink*. Valentine's Day had fallen on a Saturday, of all the worst luck...no classes the next day to rein in the fatuous folly...and attendance by the staff had been mandatory. Furious, he'd skulked on the periphery of the wallflowers in the Great Hall, defiantly under-dressed in his oldest everyday robes, scruffy of face and greasy of hair. Somewhere in the crowd was his *wife*, lipsticked and perfumed and wearing her dress robes. She wasn't beautiful...far from it, with her shadowed eyes and slight acne eruption and impossible hair...but she was *his*, even if she didn't remember it.

Keeping the darkened corners empty of snoggers and gropers, he prowled, his most imposing, implacable sneer firmly in place, scattering students like cockroaches running from light. No one was going to find this misbegotten social occasion an excuse for snuggling on his watch...but one eye was always on the dance floor, searching out the soft blue of *her* dress robes, ever vigilant, ready at the least provocation to prevent his wife from making a fool of him before the entire school.

He had lurked in the sitting room of their quarters earlier that night, waiting for her to emerge from her room, tarted up for the evening's festivities.

'Who's the lucky *boy*?' he'd asked her, bodily blocking her way to the door, his voice dripping with the derision he felt for himself and his pathetic wish that she'd make such an effort on his behalf.

Her eyes had closed for a moment, then her chin had come up, and her eyes had opened. 'Don't do this, Professor.'

'I see you made a special effort,' he'd persisted.

'I see you didn't,' she'd replied, brushing past him to the door.

'You'll remember our agreement,' he'd said in a louder voice, as if issuing a command.

'You'll never let me forget it,' she'd muttered, slamming out into the stone corridor.

So he'd watched, waiting for her to do something he could object to, but she'd been circumspect. Moving from group to group, chatting with students from every House...save his, but he could scarcely fault her for that...she'd been an engaged, interested prefect. All any teacher could ask of a student in her position of leadership...but a husband might wish for more...might wish for a wife who'd prefer his company to that of her contemporaries.

It was the end of the night, the end of the dance, for the final song had been announced, when she appeared at his side. 'We should dance this one,' she'd said, looking everywhere but at his face.

'I will not,' he'd returned, longing to hold her in his arms but unwilling to do so with the eyes of all Hogwarts on him.

Bright, burning brown eyes had been turned on him. 'You worry so much about what my behaviour will cause people to think of you, Professor...what do you imagine a husband who refuses even one Valentine's Day dance will cause people to think of me?'

The logic had been damnably irrefutable, and with ill grace, he'd taken his unyielding wife in his arms, holding her for the first time since their wedding weekend, and he'd danced with her, hating the open-mouthed shock on the faces of his students, lacerated with memories of another time...another dance.

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10 January, 1998

Severus emptied his bladder and washed his hands, staring into the mirror. In the loft, Hermione lay propped up on pillows, perusing a book on the subject of memory...she'd brought it in her book bag, almost as if she'd known he would offer to remove her memory of their dutiful consummation sex. The irony was not lost on him. She insisted she had been reading the book all Christmas break, and he saw no reason to doubt her.

He splashed water on his face. The four hour nap he'd taken had revived him in some regards, but he knew he was not thinking as clearly as he ought to be. Immersed with Hermione in this cottage filled with acceptance and passion and wordless emotion, he was completely outside of *himself*, much less the circumscribed life of Dumbledore's spy in the Dark Lord's camp. He was acting only to please his bride...and himself, but he would never have suggested, for instance, that they prolong their wedding sojourn, or engage in more than the required consummation for this mad marriage of convenience. How much longer would they linger here? Hermione still had one dose of Pepper-Up, as yet uningested. When would she swallow it, and how long would she want to remain here after she did? Classes would resume on the morrow, and both of them would need to be in place for that.

He dried his hands and face on the soft hand towel. At the minimum, he had eight more hours in this cottage with Hermione, whose mood was clearly romantic. Severus Snape had zero experience in the matters of romance, but he was not completely ignorant of the subject; he had, after all, lived for thirty-eight years amongst people who indulged in the myth of romantic love. He knew what the children of his wife's generation believed about it. She would want his attention, his interest, and his sexual services. Merlin only knew what more he would be able to manage in the way of erections for fucking, but there were other ways to pleasure a woman, and if he had done little of that in his life, he had at least thought to read up on it when his marriage had become imminent.

He was, in fact, something of a text-pert on the subject.

He tossed the towel aside and climbed the stairs to the loft, loosening his dressing gown as he went.

Hermione looked up from her book and smiled at him, her expression soft and welcoming. He allowed the dressing gown to drop to the floor and slid beneath the covers with the warm, cosy woman waiting for him. She readily surrendered her book to him, and he set it to one side, gazing down into her face with half-lidded eyes.

'I wonder how many orgasms a nice Gryffindor girl can have in one lazy winter Sunday?' he mused aloud, and he felt the foolish grin that split his face as she rolled towards him, her lilting laugh filling his heart as surely as it filled his ears.

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She permitted him to minister to her needs for nourishment as well as her desire for sexual gratification. So after a morning of making love to his wife with his hands and his mouth, they lounged on their pillows, having ingested a meal of the last of their wedding supper chicken and sprouts, quaffing champagne like the most decadent of newlyweds. When Hermione set her wineglass aside, she yawned deeply, her hand rising to cover her mouth.

'I beg your pardon,' she murmured, abashed.

He was surprised that it had taken this long for her lack of sleep to manifest. Feeling it was his duty to do so, he asked, 'Are you ready to sleep? I can gather our things, and we can be back at the castle quite quickly.'

They had already agreed that she should wake in her bed in their quarters at the castle.

She looked a tiny bit hurt. 'Don't you ... don't you want me to take the Pepper-Up?' she asked.

Severus swallowed, inwardly glad to hear her mention it. Damn it all, he was not prepared to have her leave him yet. 'That is entirely up to you, Hermione,' he said, doing his best to evince no preference, one way or the other. How infamous would it be for him to ask her to swallow a stimulant so that he might enjoy her company when it had been far too long since she'd slept?

She began pleating the bed sheet with her fingers, her gaze averted from him. 'So it doesn't matter to you, one way or the other?' she asked in a small voice.

He frowned. Didn't she understand how selfish it would be for him to express a desire for her to take a drug? He was unsure how to answer her.

'I will accede to your wishes, little tempest,' he said softly, allowing his fingertips to ghost over her cheek.

She caught his hand and looked into his face. 'Tell me you want it, Severus...tell me you want it as much as I do.'

Her eyes were glistening, as if with tears, and fear clutched at him...was she going to cry again? Bloody hell, this business of negotiating a woman's emotional storms was more difficult than reading the Dark Lord at his most petulant.

'I want you,' he told her. 'I want the rest of this day with you. I want as much as I can have of you.'

Two of the threatening tears escaped her brimming eyes, tracking twin tracks down her cheeks, but her smile was pure effervescence.

'Oh, I want it too,' she whispered, and slipping from the bed, she dug the second phial of Pepper-Up from her book bag and popped the stopper, upending it over her mouth.

Steam began pouring from her ears.

Buoyed by her action, Severus threw the bedclothes from him and grabbed her hand. 'Someone needs a cold shower,' he declared, and her delighted laughter rang in his ears like a sweet melody he ought always to remember.

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He carried her to the bed from the shower, climbing the stairs as if she were weightless. She was wrapped in a thick white towel and clinging to him as if he were her only anchor in the midst of a deluge. His arousal was extreme, after washing her body and allowing her to wash his. She had attempted a repeat of the previous night's shower, but he would not permit her to put her mouth on him. He wanted...needed...to penetrate her and experience that incomparable sensation of being sheathed by her body. Was this the last time he would fuck her? He might, if she were awake long enough, manage one more time before the end of the day, but there was no guarantee. He approached her as if he would never do this again, and she received his attentions in that spirit, hushed and near reverence.

He trailed kisses from her delicately notched clavicle to the tantalising arch of her foot and back up the other side, ignoring her ever more fragrant sex in favour of less often exalted parts of her luscious body. His tongue dipped into her navel, traced the curve of her hip into her waist and the outer swell of her breast. When she reached

to caress him, he gently pushed her arms upward, until they rested above her head, and he buried his nose in the hollow beneath her arm, scrubbed clean and as deserving of attention as the rest of this body he meant to worship with his own.

He urged her over, onto her belly, and he began at the nape of her neck, pushing aside the heavy, waterlogged hair and inhaling her like the fumes of a potent, narcotic drug. She cried out at a nip to the back of her neck, and he took his time exploring her sensitivity, noting that his tongue elicited humming, while his teeth prompted squirming and incoherent cries. He thought he might have been able to spend days playing her body to hear the symphony of her responses, but he didn't have days...he had now, and his need for her was growing with every passing second.

Her back was an expanse of unmarred, milky skin. He tongued down her spinal column, his hands travelling the contours of her sides in tandem, until he reached the valley leading between her arse cheeks. Here, the scent of her arousal was stronger yet, and scent memory provided her taste, as if his tongue was there, in her sweetness. He allowed the tip of his nose to travel down the crease of her buttocks, his hands lightly cupping and massaging the rounded cheeks, until he reached her perineum. She uttered a strangled cry, raising her hips and thrusting back, inviting him to taste her quim, but he denied her. His teeth nipped at the backs of her thighs, he suckled the tender dip at the backs of her knees, and he gazed along her prone form, imagining pulling her to her knees to enter her from behind. He could make it good for her that way, he was confident...but if this was to be his last time with her, he wanted it to be face-to-face.

She readily rolled to her back, reaching for him with eager arms as her legs parted, then rose to embrace him, pulling him fully within her slick warmth. She seemed impatient, but he did not allow himself to be hurried. He moved slowly, deeply, deliberately, pausing to tongue a nipple or nip her throat, so far outside himself that it amazed him to find he felt this encounter more strongly, more completely, than any he'd ever experienced before. She was within him: her voice and warmth, her acceptance and admiration, her hope and vision. It was more, so much more than her enveloping cunt, her scrumptious breasts, her hot little mouth, her grasping, caressing hands

It was harbour. It was beauty. It was affirmation. And damn it all to hell...it was love.

He stared down into the face of this unexpected windfall, his wife, Hermione, and her eyes grew unnaturally round, her lips forming an answering 'o', as she began to orgasm, a soft, feral keening rising to the rafters, growing in voice and volume as the sensation rolled through her body. Severus was not proof against the perfect splendour of her rapture. His completion was upon him, a tide of exquisite euphoria that went on and on, him continuing to rock within the cradle of her body until his limp penis slipped from within her, and he slipped aside, utterly spent.

He turned his head until they were almost nose to nose. She was breathless but not tearful...thank Merlin. He fought the sudden onset of grogginess, but there was no defeating it...if she had no immediate need of him, then he would ...

Sleep.

---

He woke to the afternoon sunset of January in the Highlands. The light on the walls was a deep orange, and Hermione was propped on the pillow beside him, her lovely bare shoulders visible above the bedclothes covering her breasts. She held a book open on her chest, but her eyes were unfocused, gazing at nothing. Her wild hair had dried in bulky, bushy waves, and a teacup on the table beside her indicated that she had been up and about whilst he slept, but here she was beside him again, naked beneath the bedclothes.

He closed his eyes against a sudden, visceral wish that they might remain forever hidden in this place, with no more pressing business about them than to eat, sleep, and make endless, inventive love.

'You're awake,' she murmured, smoothing hair back from his face.

'You're observant,' he replied, and pulled her down for a lazy, tongue tangling kiss.

She scooted against him, warm and soft, and he nuzzled between her breasts, his lips curving into a smile against the unbelievably soft skin when she sighed, murmured, and pulled him closer, twining her legs with his.

'Oh, God, Severus...I don't want this day to end.'

Her voice was small and sad, and it smote him with guilt. How could he mend this for her?

'But it will end, little tempest,' he said, giving up the comfort of her breasts to pull her onto his shoulder and hold her close. 'Tell me what you'd like to do with what's left of the day.'

She stroked fingertips over his ribcage, as if she were exploring the intercostal spaces. 'If we'd had a normal courtship...'

It was laughable, really. There would never have been a marriage if not for the actions of the Ministry...how could she speak of a courtship?

'...we'd have had banns, and a church wedding, and my parents would have been there ...'

He dipped his chin to take a breath of her hair, incapable of feeling impatience with her, wanting only to soothe her.

'What would have happened at this church wedding?' he asked, willing to humour her in the fantasy.

'All my family and friends would have been there...and yours too, of course...and there would have been flowers and music and a huge party after the ceremony.'

Her tone was dreamy, her gaze once again unfocused, and her fingers were tracing the contours of his abdomen, actually raising a bit of interest from his slumbering cock. She had no idea what a nightmare her words conjured for him...socialising with a lot of Muggle strangers?...but he had no need to communicate it to her. She was daydreaming, and it was safe for him to indulge her.

'A party?' he said, to show he was attending to her.

'With a sit-down dinner, and toasts, and for afterwards, a deejay; he would play songs, and everyone would dance.'

He leaned his cheek against her forehead, relishing the skin on skin contact, until he realised he was in need of a shave, and he moved his bristles away from her face. 'Dancing, hmm?' he responded encouragingly.

'I'd dance once with my father, of course, but mostly with you.' She tilted her face up to smile at him, a sweet curve of her lips that seemed to physically pull his heart from his chest, into her keeping. He let it go without a struggle, consigning himself to a life without possession of that stalwart organ. Surely it would be safe with Hermione.

'Well,' he said, needing to fill the void with unimportant words...needing to prevent himself from informing her that she had stolen his heart. '~~What~~ flowers...the ones in your hair...and a sit-down dinner was planned for our guests, though there were only the two professors.' He swallowed past the odd obstruction in his throat and tightened his hold on Hermione, watching the emotion bloom in her beautiful brown eyes and not permitting himself to name what that emotion might be. 'And I'm not entirely sure what a deejay might be, but if that music box on the mantelpiece is in working order, then we can probably manage a dance, here and now.'

She flushed rosy, and he wondered how she could continue to look ever lovelier to him. Was it sex? Did sex make a woman more beautiful? It had never done so with any woman before Hermione, but he was damned if he could work out why she seemed prettier and prettier as time went by.

'Really?' she breathed. 'You'd dance with me?'

He felt his mouth quirk on one side but quashed it before he could make too much a fool of himself with grinning. 'Allow me a visit to the loo, and we'll dance, even if I have to hum in your ear.'

---

The music box, thankfully, was in working order. He wound it gently, standing before the newly replenished fire in the shirt and trousers he'd worn to be married. His hair was combed, and he'd shaved, applying his scented aftershave lotion with a cocky smirk at his unprepossessing reflection, happy to know that Hermione liked the way it smelled. She had called to him not to come upstairs, that she was making herself pretty for him, and he was content to busy himself preparing for her, stoking the fire and winding the music box.

'Are you ready for me?' she called down to him.

'Yes,' he answered. 'Come to me, little tempest.'

He opened the primed music box, and it began its tinkling melody, a waltz more of the nineteenth century than the twentieth. She came down the stairs toward him, her hair ruthlessly plaited and pinned up, wearing what appeared to be her school robes, save for the silvery white colour...she must have charmed the fabric. She smelled of a flowery lotion she'd smoothed over her skin, and when he lightly kissed her mouth, she tasted of peppermint.

He watched her, storing the memory as if it were information vital to the war effort...willing himself to memorise every detail. He would remember it all.

The song began over again in its endless cycle, and he led her into a waltz, thankful for the few occasions that particular grace had been required of him...it would have been sad to disappoint his darling tempest in something as simple as a wedding dance. They rotated in the small space, managing not to trod upon one another's toes, and the swelling, suffocating feeling made itself known again, migrating from his chest to his throat and upward into his head, making it difficult to breathe, much less *think*

She was wearing a glossy colour upon her lips, something she had not bothered with for their wedding ceremony, and he was gratified that she had made herself up for his pleasure. She wanted him...wanted to attract him and please him...was happy to be his wife. The reality of it was more than his brain could process. Just as well, then, that the burgeoning emotion carried in its wake desire like a brushfire, flaring between them and heating their blood, their gazes, and the very air they attempted to breathe.

In the end, all he could do was tear the robes from her body and take her upon the hearthrug, submitting to the imperative of possession. The clock ticked, seconds passing into minutes they could ill afford to lose, marking the last kisses and caresses, moans and sighs they would ever share as husband and wife. Severus was as sure of it as he was that her conquest of him was now complete, for she had taken not only his body, heart, and soul...she was in his mind, a flame he could never extinguish.

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He stood beside her in the small room he had furnished as her bedroom in his *their*...quarters. The candles were lit, and she had changed into thick, flannel pyjamas and heavy wool socks, standard sleepwear for winter in Hogwarts Castle. The covers of her single bed had been folded back invitingly, and the clock in the sitting room began to chime the hour...it was midnight, and Hermione had not slept in over forty hours.

He held up the phial of Dreamless Sleep. 'I want to be certain that you sleep well,' he said, striving to keep his tone cool and even.

Hermione made no such effort. She grasped his robes and gazed up at him imploringly. 'Please,' she begged, her voice ragged and clogged with tears that had yet to fall. 'It's too late for me to write it all down...let me put the memories in a Pensieve, Severus. Don't take *us* away from me!'

He took the handkerchief he had been sure to tuck in his pocket and dried the tears from her eyes before they could fall. 'We had an agreement, Hermione,' he said steadily, as kindly as he could, forcing himself to look after her, heedless of the raging injustice of it all. 'I must honour that agreement.'

The clock completed the twelve bells, moving them from Sunday into Monday, the first day of the new term. He sat her upon the bed and settled beside her, wondering how he could allow her to sleep, knowing that she would wake with no memory of *him*...the man he had become in the warmth of her love.

'Severus,' she whispered, as if she knew he was weakening and meant to find a way through the crack in his defences. 'Severus, don't you know I...'

He pressed a finger over her lips, silencing the words she might have spoken, believing their utterance would have defeated him completely. 'No, Hermione...don't.' He drew a ragged breath, gathering his strength about him again, firming his resolve. 'You won't remember...but I will, you see.'

He granted her a small pained smile, the last glimpse she would have of his humanity. Then he pressed the phial into her hand.

'Drink it.'

She popped the stopper without looking and upended the potion, the fourth she had ingested since becoming Mrs Snape. Then she threw the phial to the stone floor, where it shattered.

She clung to him, and he wrapped her in his arms, the heart he had denied having...the one now in the keeping of this witch...breaking as surely and completely as the crystal phial dashed beneath his feet.

'I don't want to leave you,' she whispered brokenly, yet she lay down upon her pillow all the same, pulling him down with her.

'You never will,' he promised her, covering them both with the bedclothes. 'Dream sweetly, little tempest.'

She curled around him, her face pressed against his chest, her fingers clutching his robes. He watched every breath she drew, drinking in the contours of the face now more familiar to him than his own, waiting as the inevitability of sleep overtook her and all memory of what they had been to one another was lost to her forever.

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A/N: If you listen to no other song alluded to in this story, I beg you to listen to this one. It's called *Losing Your Memory* by Ryan Star. It's not perfect, but it's damn close. I listened to this song every day for months, building up to the writing of this chapter. With tears on my cheeks, having read the chapter with you, I invite you to listen to it with me now. Here's the YouTube link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLVOs0qj1JA>

## Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 26

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic

circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.



## Chapter 18

If this was our last dance, I'd wait in the rain

Just to see your face.

If this was our last chance, I'd ask you to stay

For one last dance.

### *Last Dance*

9 July, 1998

Severus sat upon the bank of the stream in the fading early evening light, long legs stretched out in the dirt, his hands covering his face as the lacerating memories streamed through him. He was usually adamant with himself to not indulge in such sickly fancies, but this week of living at Forest Haven had slowly chipped away at his defences. The more intimate he became here with Hermione, the more memories of their wedding weekend came to him...plagued him...and he found himself looped in the remembrance, as if he were reliving the same slice of life again. And why not? She was the same shining, clever girl she had been the day he married her, and he was still ... the same man. They had history together this time, yes, but why should the same alchemy not work its magic on them again, transforming the bitter bachelor and the earnest young woman into the lovesick pair they had been by the end of their weekend together?

He did not know what change had come over her, that she would seek physical intimacy with him after the months of shunning his very presence...but he was too deeply bewitched and ensnared to question his good fortune too closely. He had longed for her, and she had turned to him at last, as a woman turns to her husband.

What was to say she wouldn't fall in love with him again, requiting the shattering yearning he'd harboured for her these six long months

Six months ...

He rubbed the slight ache above his eyebrows, then pinched the bridge of his nose, laboriously attempting to work out how many days they'd been cooped up here...what the date was. When his calculations were complete, his next move was clear...and stunning in its perfection. Suddenly filled with renewed energy and purpose, he bounded to his feet and hurried through the darkening wood toward the house, driven as much by the memory of his poignant loss as by the promise of a sweet reward.

Hermione sat disconsolately on a wooden kitchen chair, dragged outside for the wedding anniversary party. Her chair was pulled well back from the festivities in the middle of the circle, where Fleur and Bill Weasley cut the painstakingly assembled cake Molly and her minions had stirred up 'the Muggle way'. Dinner had been a spicy chicken curry, and now the mead poured freely from Arthur's generous hand. Everyone's spirits were high, save for Hermione's. Severus had not been at dinner...had not been seen since midday...when he had walked out on their after-lunch rendezvous.

She sighed, tugging at her thick plait, watching the anniversary pair feed one another cake, as if it were their wedding day again. Severus and she had not fed one another cake on their wedding day. They had eaten a meal in the same room, she remembered, and then he had given her the Lethe Elixir to take. There had been pretty fairy cakes included in her wedding supper...the supper she supposed Professor McGonagall had ordered the house-elves to prepare...but she didn't remember eating them. She'd managed some chicken and sprouts, but she'd never made it to afters...at least, not before Severus had provided the Lethe. She wondered now if she would have been better off not accepting the opportunity to forget her wedding night. Clearly, she was very strongly drawn to her husband, sexually speaking. Perhaps they might have enjoyed physical intimacy with one another in those tense months when Hogwarts had been ruled by Dolores Umbridge, and Voldemort had been planning his invasion of the school. Perhaps sex would have been a comfort to them both.

And perhaps it would have kept Septima Vector away from Severus.

She scowled into the middle distance, no longer aware of her housemates and their jolly repartee. How many times had Vector been his partner at meals, talking animatedly beside him whilst he nodded and made occasional replies? How many times had Hermione come upon the two of them in the corridors, deep in conversation...or in his laboratory, where he brewed the potions for the infirmary: Severus in his shirtsleeves, stirring rod in hand, and Vector perched at his worktable, pretending to mark student papers?

Hermione shook her head, as if to dislodge the bothersome mental images. How could she ever hope to attract and attach a man of Severus' calibre with such a beautiful witch as Vector as her competition? Never mind that the woman was older, more sophisticated, prettier, thinner, taller ... just enumerating her many excellent qualities was depressing. Why, when she and Severus had been no more to one another than flatmates...or ships that passed in the night...had she been so bloody jealous of the Arithmancy teacher, who loomed like a catastrophic iceberg, awaiting the passing of unwary vessels.

Or had Hermione been the iceberg, holding Severus at a distance with her cold politesse?

She shook her head stubbornly. No, *he* had been the cold one, rigid and unbending, polite but inaccessible. Clearly, the only reason Severus was intimate with her now was because he was bored and had nothing better to do.

The upraised voice of a Weasley twin attracted her attention...though she was not close enough to discern his words...and with the aplomb of a television presenter, George produced the wireless, and Fred turned the knob with a flourish. Music...of a sort...flooded the clearing, and Fleur clapped her hands in delight. Hermione didn't have to be within hearing distance to interpret the courtly sweep of Bill's bow or the perfectly executed curtsy with which his wife answered him. The two began to dance, and after a respectful few moments, other couples joined them, taking the opportunity to hold one another close in the summer twilight.

Hermione watched them sourly, remembering the dutiful dance her husband had accorded her at Valentine's Day...it was a wonder he hadn't found an excuse to dance with Vector, instead.

'Would you like to dance, Hermione?' Lupin asked, his voice warm and concerned.

Hermione twisted to look and found Remus Lupin smiling down at her. Hermione frowned, feeling almost annoyed that he had interrupted her dire musings.

'Where's Tonks?' she demanded. 'Why aren't you dancing with her?'

He nodded towards the house, and Hermione saw Tonks sitting with Arthur and Molly on the veranda, obviously part of an on-going conversation. Tonks caught Hermione's eye and gave her a thumbs-up.

'Nymphadora is chatting with Arthur,' Lupin said unnecessarily. 'She suggested we should have a dance or two. She says she's too clumsy to dance with me.' He waited patiently for Hermione's decision, his presence and person no more interesting to her than a giant Flobberworm.

Hermione turned to look again at her dancing friends, feeling a stirring of her pride. Already she had endured a pair of pitying glances from Padma and Parvati, and she was sure Cho had directed a sympathetic smile towards her as she danced by, closely held in Percy's enveloping arms. There were many things Hermione could endure with equanimity but being pitied was not one of them.

'Right,' she said and stood. Lupin wasn't her wizard, but he was a willing partner, so he would have to do.

Hermione threaded her way amongst the dancers and turned to face Lupin, resigned to allowing him to touch her. But the warbling voice of Celestina Warbeck ended a song, to be replaced by an advert for Patented Daydream Charms, available only from Weasley's Wizard Wheezes.

George turned to Fred, and they exchanged an enthusiastic high five. 'Nice one!' they said in unison, flashing their matching grins.

Molly's voice drifted to them from her ever murkier spot beneath the eaves of the house. 'You're advertising on Celestina Warbeck's programme?'

Fred grinned. 'We're broadening our target market, Mum!'

The opening orchestral strains of the next song were beginning when Hermione spied a tall, dark figure emerging from the trees. Severus had returned. She felt a tumult of emotions; relief, excitement, hope, and when his eyes locked with hers, a rush of euphoria.

'You'll excuse us, won't you Lupin?' the Potions master said smoothly, never sparing a glance for his old schoolmate as he stepped between Hermione and the werewolf, taking her hand in his. 'It's our six month wedding anniversary, you see, and I'm afraid I cannot share my wife.'

Hermione vaguely heard the murmur of Lupin's acquiescence, but she was really only conscious of the blazing black eyes of Severus Snape. He led her into the dance as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and Hermione moved with him, one hand clasped in his, the other resting on his shoulder, riveted by his gaze as surely as if she were under a spell that would not permit her to look away. She was scarcely conscious of the other dancers, and indeed, it seemed as if they all stood aside for a bit, according the same respect to the Snapes' anniversary dance as they had done for the young Weasleys'. In fact, as Severus pulled her closer, burying his nose in the hair at her temple, Hermione heard Padma whisper to her sister, 'I thought you said she never touched him...look at them!'

Hermione felt a triumphant thrill shiver through her body, and she slid her hand from his shoulder up into his hair, allowing her fingertips to graze the sensitive nape of his neck. He had sat beside her at meals in this house, and they had been conspicuously late to dinner once due to amatory activities, but never had he touched her romantically in the presence of another person. And this was no dance of duty, with eighteen inches separating their torsos and rigid discomfort in every line of his slim body. This was a lover's clasp, his face against her hair, lips close enough to whisper sweet nothings...or naughty *some things*...in her ear, and everyone could see them and know that things had changed between Severus and Hermione Snape.

She felt as proud as she'd done looking at her final marks, knowing her teachers (including her Potions master) had respected her schoolwork enough to award her a plethora of Outstanding's. Being acknowledged as his witch...shown amongst her peers as being capable of attracting a wizard as powerful and compelling as Severus Snape...filled her with a joyous glee beyond mere intellectual superiority. Perhaps it was puerile for her to care for such a thing, but she could not help herself. She was woman enough to feel validated by the public attentions of this man, for his return and public acknowledgement had completely wiped her mind of her earlier grievances and jealousies.

As he held her closer still, she experienced a great, expansive ache in her chest, emotion too intense to express with words. So she pressed her cheek to his chest and slipped an arm tightly about his waist. He gently turned the hand he held until it was clasped to his heart, resting near her face. Hermione released a great sigh of contentment and closed her eyes, relying on him to lead her safely through the summer evening.

When she was in his arms, she never doubted her rightful place there.

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Severus did not pause to feel anger or jealousy when he saw Hermione preparing to dance with Lupin. He had no time for that. This was his darling tempest, the girl he'd loved and lost to the Lethe Elixir. Cradling her in his arms as she fell asleep at the end of their wedding weekend, he would have given anything he possessed to have her wake up with her memories of their love intact. How could he ever quibble over the opportunity to hold her in his arms and dance with her? What did it matter what anyone else thought of him? If she was willing to have him hold her and proclaim her as *his* in the company of her closest friends, he was the luckiest wizard in all the United Kingdom.

Fuck that. He was the luckiest man in the world, Muggle or magical.

He closed his eyes against the horrified faces of Potter and Ronald, the indulgent faces of Arthur and Molly, and the speculative faces of the young witches of the Order. Instead, he buried his face in the familiar, achingly beloved scent of her hair, heard her sigh of trust and contentment, and wished for the night to go on ad infinitum.

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The overwhelming emotion Hermione experienced dancing with Severus beneath the stars did not dissipate, but grew importunate...demanding and all-encompassing...an immense weight that seemed to deprive her of breath and strength. She did not speak of it, and yet it seemed that Severus understood her debility, for they soon made their excuses and went into the house.

They climbed the stairs to their attic room in silence, he leading the way with her hand in his.

Hermione had no doubt that every person they had left below knew precisely what would go on in the attic bedroom this night...her six month wedding anniversary, a concept so alien to her that it only added to the aura of unreality saturating the night...but she found that she was indifferent to their knowledge. She felt no apprehension or shame, for those people mattered very little to her in comparison to the feeling that filled her now, at once oppressive and strangely liberating.

In their room, he flicked his fingers at the candelabra on the chest, the power flowing from him in a casual ripple of magic, an act as erotic as if she'd found him with a fist wrapped about his erect manhood. She wanted him to penetrate her, inhabit her, possess her utterly...and even then, she was not sure she would be sated.

They stood for a moment in the golden candlelight, hands still clasped, and the charged air between them permeated their skin, enveloping them in a unique blend of urgency and utter peace.

Hermione led her husband to the bed and guided him to a seated position, then she knelt and removed his boots, twisting to place them neatly aside. Next were his socks. When his feet were bare, she quickly removed her trainers and socks, aware of his eyes watching her every move. She pushed to her feet and took his hands to pull him up, backing to the open space between the foot of the bed and the little writing desk. The rhythm of the dance still beat in her (*One-two-three, one-two-three*), and she was not through with it...not nearly.

She moved in to wrap his torso with one arm and capture his hand with the other, urging him to join her again in the circling, repetitive dance. There was a faint sound of the wireless from the on-going party outside, but Hermione danced to the music in her mind, and Severus moved with her, seeming to understand without words what she wanted.

Her chin came up, her head tilting back, and she found his hooded eyes watching her intently. His compliance...almost a form of complicity in a secret, intimate act...was further fuel to the ever intensifying inferno in the core of her. His arm about her, the flux and flow of their movement, and the thrumming energy between them gave her a slick ache between her thighs, already slightly damp with the secretions of her desire for him...and he had yet to touch her sexually.

Without halting their circling dance, Hermione tugged his shirt from his trousers and sent a raffle of wandless magic to free the buttons. She drank in the torso now bare to her eyes, hands, and lips: his defined pectoral muscles sparsely dusted with dark hair, his abdominals lightly rippled above a stomach still too concave from his years of living at constant risk...and below his navel, a thicker, darkly defined line of hair disappeared into his trousers.

Wrapping her arm about his naked back, she tongued the flat dark coin of his nipple, relishing the pebbling hardness between her lips, and she nipped it lightly, feeling the provocation as if it were *his* mouth between the lips of *her* labia. A sharp exhalation of breath was his response...that and his hands at the hem of her tee-shirt, pulling it up and over her head.

She stopped then, pushing his shirt from his shoulders so that it fell to the floor, but he would not permit the dance to end. He encircled her bare back with a naked arm as unyielding as an oak branch, and deftly popped the front clasp of her bra. She waited for his hands to grip her breasts...for his lips to seek a nipple...but he was still dancing with her, seemingly content with the hardening of her nipples in the cool night air and the friction of those protrusions against his naked abdomen.

His hand touched the scrunchie holding her plait and it fell away, the sections unwinding until her heavy hair hung down her back, his fingers buried in it. For a time, Hermione ceased her efforts to direct matters, relishing instead this half-naked dance of foreplay with her lover, allowing her internal fire to mount, the vaginal ache to increase, and the viscous atmosphere surrounding them to cradle and caress their circling bodies

When at last she reached for his belt, the ambiance shifted, then changed. He became still, until she had him completely nude, and then he pulled her jeans and knickers from her hips. With one accord, they moved onto the bed, but still the dance did not end...could not...until it had been completed in the only way possible.

He lowered his face to kiss her, and she opened to him, twining her fingers in his long hair, absorbing the taste and feel of him through her very pores. He shifted atop her, and she shifted to accommodate his presence. She felt the slick tip of his penis slide along her thigh and wanted it inside her without delay. It seemed he wanted the same thing, for he rose over her, weight supported on his arms, and positioned himself to enter her. She lifted her hips to meet him, and as he slid into place where he belonged, deep inside her, she sighed aloud, the first sound between them since they'd mounted the stairs.

It felt as if her orgasm began at the very centre of her with his first stroke: a slow and devastating burn. She moved with him, their bodies newly accomplished at matching one another's rhythm, and each time they came together again, his rigid cock sliding surely and deeply into her cunt, the whisper of her pleasure built a tad higher. In some elemental way, they were still dancing, more fluidly and perfectly than they had done in the clearing, and with each repetition of movement, the hint of pleasure grew, her very skin growing hot with the conflagration they created together, their bodies moving in concert. Inexorably, as the roaring in her body built to its towering crescendo, they moved faster, unable to quell the driving force of their coupling. As she topped the summit of her pleasure, he began to gasp his completion: a moment of perfect synthesis. And then she was spinning and falling, clinging desperately, and wrapped up in the arms that would always and ever hold her safe.

As she drifted to sleep the music in her mind faded...dance complete.

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He held her until she ceased to tremble, and then he pulled the bedclothes up to cover them. She slept first, her breathing soft and even, and for a time, he studied her, absorbing the sheer wonder of the night. Then he sent a breath of magic to extinguish the candles and kissed her sleeping face. 'Dream sweetly, little tempest.'

Then he closed his eyes to sleep, one thought ringing through his mind:

*She'll remember this in the morning.*

---

A/N: Today's song is another than I listened to as often and with as much emotional intensity as the song from the last chapter. It's by the group Camera Can't Lie and the song is called *Last Dance*. I invite you to listen to it and think of our couple and their lovely public (and private) dance.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6Yma3Kj5FQ>

## Chapter 19

*Chapter 19 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: Remember how you wondered what happened after the honeymoon and before they were cooped up with all those people at Forest Haven? This chapter, and the next, tell that story. So pay careful attention to the date headings, because they cover several months of happenings.

Once again, I will ask you to leave feedback for me. It means more than you know.

Happy Summer Solstice!



## Chapter 19

I'm in, in too deep

I'm tired of hiding this secret I keep

*Show Me* by Default

11 January, 1998

Severus woke with a numb arm and a pounding headache, as if he'd drunk half a litre of Old Ogden's in one sitting. He quickly saw that the reason for the tingling in his arm was Hermione, who was sleeping like the dead on top of it. How had he permitted himself to fall asleep in her bed? What if she'd woken to find him there? Even now, there was no guarantee he could creep away without waking her, and then he'd have a bloody difficult time explaining his presence, wouldn't he

With extreme care, he extricated himself from her bed. Standing over her in his creased clothing, he saw that she slept on, precisely like someone who'd already been exhausted, then had taken a dose of sleeping draught. He was safe from being discovered in her bedchamber.

When he paused at her dressing table to deposit the folded slip of parchment, he caught his own reflection and understood why his head ached: he bore the unmistakable appearance of a man who had cried in his sleep.

---

He sat unmoving in his favourite chair, an untouched book on the table at his elbow. When the pounding began on his door, the clock on the mantel informed him that it was nine o'clock in the morning. He had no doubt who his visitors were.

He threw open the door and moved forward with arms crossed, completely filling the doorway in his black teaching robes. Potter and Weasley fell back a step, stumbling over one another to put distance between themselves and their most hated professor.

'Where is she, Snape?' Potter demanded, the first of the pair to regain the power of speech. 'She wasn't at breakfast, and she missed Transfiguration...she never misses class, particularly not the first day of term!'

'I suggest that you both begin to accustom yourselves to your friend's new ... status,' he replied coolly.

The Weasley boy's ears had turned an alarming shade of red. 'If you've hurt one hair on her head,' he began in a blustering manner, but Severus cut across him.

'Mrs *Snape* is having a lie in this morning,' he said. 'If you don't see her at lunch, you will undoubtedly see her at dinner.'

Weasley drew breath as if to expostulate, but Severus ignored him, turning his gaze to Potter's face. 'Consider for one moment how she would feel to have you making a fuss about her whereabouts today, calling attention to her ... change of circumstances.'

Severus saw the logic of his statement register with the boy, who readjusted his book bag on his shoulder, as if preparing to go

'She's all right?' Potter asked.

Severus gave a curt nod of his head in answer. 'And don't make a habit of swarming about my door!' he added menacingly, feeling he had shown quite enough consideration for the brats' tender feelings for one bloody year.

---

It was half ten before Hermione's door opened, and Severus made a swift effort to clear his face of any emotion.

She erupted into the sitting room wearing her fluffy pink dressing gown...the one he'd pushed from her naked body more than once in the last two days...belted over her flannel pyjamas, her face bearing a long red mark where she had slept on a creased pillowcase.

'I took my shower gear from my bag, and my homework planner fell out!' she babbled, her tone somewhere between anger and panic. 'It's not Sunday...it's Monday! The planner said so! And I'm late for classes!' She took a step towards him, her fists clenched as if with impotent anger.

Severus set aside the book he had been pretending to read and gave her a level stare. 'Good morning, Miss Granger,' he said pointedly.

Hermione recoiled a step, her expression horrified. Her parents had brought her up carefully, he knew, and the hint that she had behaved rudely would put her swiftly in the wrong.

But she recovered quickly. 'I don't mean to be rude, Professor,' she said tightly, 'but I don't understand how I lost a day!'

He swept past her into her room and plucked the folded parchment from her dressing table. 'You put this here to remind yourself,' he drawled, 'but I suppose it would have been more helpful to put it in your *homework planner*.' He allowed his lip to curl, expressing disdain for her obsessive study habits.

She snatched the parchment from his hand and read the words in her own neat handwriting...the words he had approved and had stood by whilst she copied them out,

vigilant to make sure that she left no hints for herself of what had occurred since she swallowed the Lethe Elixir.

*I decided to stay an extra day in the Secret Kept cottage to rest and revise for my NEWTs.*

She turned confused eyes to his face. 'Did you stay the extra day?' she asked.

'Yes,' he replied. He saw the further questions dart across her mind and waited to have her ask where he had slept and what he had done, but she surprised him. Setting the parchment aside, she retrieved her toiletries.

'And you missed class this morning too?' she asked warily.

'Monday is my half-day,' he said, and spinning on his heel, he left her alone in her room, which undoubtedly pleased her immensely.

---

At dinnertime, Hermione approached the High Table, feeling like a primary school student invading the staff room. All of her professors served their plates and chatted with one another, oblivious to her presence. The teacher she did *not* see at the table was her new husband, whose requirement that she eat dinner with him every night at the High Table had seemed high-handed at best and hopeless at worst. Nervously, she glanced to the Gryffindor table, where she saw Harry and Ron sitting together and watching her tensely, their lips moving as they exchanged comments. The very last thing Hermione needed to put the seal on this god-awful day was for Harry and Ron to make a fuss. Swallowing her anxiety, she strode along the staff table and found two empty seats together. With her head held high, she sat down in one of them.

News of her marriage to the Potions master had spread through the castle like wildfire, as the most lurid gossip always did. She had been accosted, sniggered at, rudely questioned, and outright scorned by such a numerous succession of people that she couldn't properly remember who had done what. She was the only Muggle-born left at Hogwarts, and people whose good mates had been forced out of school due to new Ministry policies seemed to focus all their resentment on her.

She dished rich lamb stew onto her plate and finally spied Professor Snape standing near the doorway behind the High Table. He was conversing with Professor Vector, and neither of them had seen Hermione or acknowledged her presence a few feet away from them. The conversation ended with Vector patting Snape on the arm and walking past Hermione to a seat beside Professor Sinistra, her cheery, 'Welcome to the High Table, Hermione!' doing nothing to quell Hermione's annoyance.

The Potions master sat down in the seat beside Hermione and poured red wine into his goblet before he spoke to her.

'May I serve your cup?' he inquired, holding the wine ewer aloft.

Students were not permitted wine with their dinners, so Hermione was a bit taken aback, but she forced herself to answer with calm assurance. 'Yes, thank you.'

He poured, then dished food onto his plate and began to eat. Hermione crumbled some bread into her stew and sipped the wine, finding that she like it more than the food.

'Did you encounter any difficulties today?' he asked her after a time.

She darted a glance to the empty throne-like chair in the middle of the long table, but the headmistress was not present. 'Not from *her*,' she said, 'I didn't see her. But I'm summoned to her office in the morning.'

Snape seemed to bristle. 'How did you provoke her if you didn't see her?'

Hermione let her fork clatter to her plate, drawing startled glances from several of the teachers, but she didn't look at them. She stared with loathing at Snape's thin, angry lips, his huge, ugly nose, and the dirty hair hanging on either side of his long, narrow face. 'How can you just assume it's my fault?' she said in an angry under-voice.

Snape glared daggers at her, but Hermione refused to back down. If she permitted him to bully her, life would become unbearable very quickly. Instead of making a show of penitence, she took up her wine and drank deeply.

She heard him draw a long breath beside her, and when he spoke again, his voice had lost its accusatory edge. 'You said you'd no problems from her...had you issues with others?'

Hermione took up her fork and viciously stabbed a carrot out of her stew. 'Nothing I can't handle,' she said before inserting the carrot between her lips.

She felt the force of his frustrated stare before she heard him say, 'You will inform me immediately of any problems that arise, Miss Granger. That is as much a part of our agreement as ... dinner at the High Table.'

Hermione did not answer him; instead, she filled her mouth with a large chunk of meat that required a lot of chewing.

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*12 January, 1998*

The meeting next morning with Umbridge was just a taste of the tireless persecution yet to come. Hermione had thought the worst of this last term at Hogwarts would be marriage to Snape, but she was wrong. Being on Dolores' black list was worse by far.

---

Hermione arrived at the breakfast table heavy-eyed and irritable. Harry looked her over closely, but Ron continued shovelling eggs into his mouth, his powers of observation where Hermione was concerned obviously unchanged by her new position as Snape's *wife*.

'What's wrong?' Harry murmured, sending a darkling look toward the High Table, where Snape sat, enduring a monologue from McGonagall. 'Has he been ... beastly to you?'

Hermione poured coffee and splashed milk into her cup. 'Who, Snape?' she said. 'No, I hardly see him. My plan is to stay in the library or the Gryffindor common room until it's time to sleep...we can hardly run afoul of one another if we're never together, can we?'

Harry frowned. 'I hate that you had to do this,' he said angrily. 'The bloody Ministry...'

Hermione cut across him. 'Let's not rehash it, Harry. Snape has done me a favour, and I thank him for it. I am still at Hogwarts, where I can be of use to you, and the Ministry cannot send me away. That's all that matters.'

Ron spoke up thickly from Harry's other side. 'It's bloody well *not* all that matters. You have to slee...'

Hermione bolted to her feet, drawing the eyes of her closest tablemates...and those of her husband, from the High Table.

'Don't leave, Hermione,' Harry said, with an angry glare at his best mate. 'Ron won't talk about it anymore...*will* you, Ron?'

Ron mutely shook his head, his face a mixture of contrition and wretchedness. But Hermione didn't have time for all the emotional storms of her classmates; she had a meeting to attend, and she might as well get it over with.

'Never mind,' she said, shouldering her schoolbag again. 'I have a meeting with the *headmistress*.'

She spoke the word with loathing and mockery. Then she straightened her shoulders and checked to make sure her wand was in place.

'What does *she* want?' Harry asked, his brilliant green eyes wide behind his round glasses. 'Let me come with you, Hermione. You don't know the things she can...'

The look Hermione turned on Harry made him shut his mouth, if not change his mind.

'No, Harry. I know precisely the sorts of things she can get up to,' Hermione said, turning to leave. 'And if she believes she can put one over on me, she's wrong.'

Hermione left the Great Hall and began the climb up to the Seventh Floor, not sure if she was unwilling or unable to force herself to hurry. As she made her slow way upward, she considered what she'd heard thus far about Umbridge's new regime.

Not surprisingly, the headmaster's office had sealed itself against Umbridge, just as it had done the first time she had assumed Dumbledore's role. Rumour said that not even the Curse-Breakers loaned from Gringotts had been able to provide Umbridge with access to its hallowed spaces. So the old toad had set up her office around the corner from the gargoyle guarding the stairs up to Dumbledore's office.

As Hermione was passing the gargoyle, the wall parted upon the revolving stair, and Severus Snape stepped into the corridor. Hermione gaped at him.

'You can get into the headmaster's office?' she demanded.

Snape's nostrils flared, and he spoke to her in a hissed whisper through clamped lips.

'Lower your voice!'

He seemed determined to put her constantly in the wrong, as if by those means he could prevent her from ever attempting conversation with him. Hermione resisted the urge to answer him with a rude gesture, choosing instead to turn away.

'Miss Granger!'

She sighed, inhaled, and glanced over her shoulder.

'Sir?'

He took two swift strides toward her, irritation pouring from him in nearly visible waves...which made his next words seem incongruous.

'Shall I ... go in with you?'

Hermione felt her brows contract in puzzlement. Was he offering to help her? Thinking he could shield her from Umbridge by playing the protective husband? The impulse was clearly one of either kindness or control, and Hermione had no difficulty assigning his offer to the proper motive.

'I think not, Professor. She wants to threaten me, and she can't do so properly with a witness. Besides, it's best to begin the way we mean to go on, isn't it? Living separate lives, as we agreed?'

She was surprised by the way he bridled, an expression...*almost of hurt*, she thought nonsensically...darting across his face, then gone. He straightened to his full height, staring down his nose at her, his thin cruel lips twisting derisively. 'As you wish.'

He stalked away from her, his voluminous black robes billowing impressively, and Hermione remembered him in the Hogsmeade cottage, as he had been when he offered her the Lethe Elixir...wearing only his starched white shirt and black trousers. His body had been surprisingly slender and ... well-formed.

She gave her head a shake. What the hell was she thinking?

*Stay on task, Granger!* she admonished herself and approached Umbridge's door.

'Come in,' the syrupy sweet voice invited at her knock.

Hermione marched to stand before the desk, her gaze directed just above Umbridge's head at the appalling collection of commemorative plates, each with its own simpering kitten. The office was much as Hermione remembered from before, two heavy sideboards flanking the desk, draped in flowered cloths and supporting decorative vases filled with dried flowers, each reposing on its own crocheted doily. The usual window coverings had been replaced with lurid pink draperies, and Hermione was quick to see that the fluffy pink cardigan Umbridge wore over her tawdry robes matched the draperies exactly.

'You asked me to come after breakfast, ma'am,' Hermione said woodenly.

'Sit down, Miss Granger,' the headmistress said, her greedy, protruding eyes fixed on Hermione's face.

Hermione perched on the edge of the straight wooden chair, which sat beside a comfortable squashy armchair. She felt sure that if she had chosen the armchair, Umbridge would have sent her to the less comfortable seat. It was important for her to head off as many of Umbridge's power plays as possible, this time around.

'Mrs Snape,' Hermione corrected. 'I'm Mrs Snape, now.'

The headmistress's slack-jowled face flushed, but she continued to speak in a breathy, girlish voice. 'Yes, I heard you entrapped a professor over the Christmas holidays...did you find yourself suddenly falling for Snape when the Ministry decided to expel the Muggle-borns? I suppose he was the better choice, even if he *is* a half-blood...particularly when you consider that Flitwick was your only other alternative, and Merlin only knows what foul, half-human blood *he* has.'

Hermione chose not to answer the offensive question. She had prepared herself for a period of unending insults, so she sat erectly on the edge of her chair, staring at the repulsive pink bow nestled in Umbridge's greying, mousy curls, her expression as blank as she could make it.

'Of course, I would expect no better from a designing, jumped up little Muggle like you,' Umbridge continued. 'Convincing one of your classmates to marry you wouldn't have prevented your expulsion, would it? You had to marry someone who'd already left school as a fully-qualified wizard. I know you would have preferred to ensnare that Weasley boy...his family calls itself pure-blood, though a bigger lot of blood traitors it would be hard to find in all the wizarding world.'

Umbridge paused, waiting for Hermione to jump in with angry, defensive words. Hermione focussed more completely on the pink velvet bow and began to recite Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration in her mind.

Umbridge tittered her irritating, girlish laugh. 'Of course, now that Ronald Weasley is in love with Luna Lovegood, you hadn't a chance of catching him anyway...not even *after* you left school.'

Hermione segued neatly into a mental recitation of the Five Exceptions to Gamp's Law. The overly ornate ormolu clock on the mantelpiece, surrounded by china figurines of improbably frolicking cats, chimed the half-hour. Students would be hurrying from the Great Hall to make their first morning classes. Hermione waited for Umbridge to dismiss her, but the headmistress simply sat at her desk, thick fingers folded together on the blotter, waiting for Hermione to speak.

Hermione moved on from revising her Transfiguration notes, randomly choosing next to do a mental recitation of the Twelve Uses of Dragon Blood.

'The most important thing I want you to know, Granger...oh, don't try to convince me that you want to be called Snape! If you've done more than the bare minimum to make the marriage binding I'll be very surprised! Does Snape think I actually believed his comment about *lurve*?'

Hermione stiffened, her curiosity engaged for the first time since she had entered the room.

Umbridge seemed unaware of Hermione's quickened interest; she continued on as if she liked hearing herself talk.

'At the staff meeting yesterday I teased him about you. "Young love is a flame; very pretty, often very hot and fierce, but still only light and flickering." I expected him to be embarrassed...I remember him from before, of course, and if ever there was a man who disliked having personal attention called to him, it was Severus Snape! But he didn't blink an eye...just completed the quote, as cool as you please.' She deepened her voice now, obviously attempting to mimic Professor Snape's silky timbre. "'The love of the older and disciplined heart is as coals, deep-burning, unquenchable.'"

Hermione felt her body prickle into a mass of tingling gooseflesh. Her ordered consideration of the Twelve Uses of Dragon Blood petered away as if it had never begun. Never mind that Snape as a spouter of romantic words went against everything she knew about the man. Why had he said such a thing?

*To protect you*, her inner voice informed her. *No other reason is needed.*

Suddenly the ugly flowered robes covered by a garish pink cardigan were directly in front of Hermione's eyes...she'd been distracted, and Umbridge had crept up on her!...and the headmistress's breath, reminiscent of medicinal lozenges, was wafting across her face.

'I don't care a bit about your machinations to stay at Hogwarts, Granger. You don't belong here, and you never have done. At the first opportunity, I will have you *out*. Don't imagine for a second that I won't! I have the full authority of the Minister for Magic at my back!'

Ah, this was more familiar ground...precisely the sort of blathering Hermione had expected to hear. She pushed lingering thoughts of 'older, disciplined hearts' from her mind and concentrated instead on the ticking of the clock. She had counted to two hundred before Umbridge moved away from her. Hermione tracked the headmistress from the corner of her eye, and when the squat witch had paced to the windows and back, she stood beside her desk, bristling with wrath.

'Have you *nothing* to say for yourself, girl?' she demanded, her breathy voice rising to an angry squeak.

Hermione pulled a parchment from her bag and put it on the desk within Umbridge's reach, taking the headmistress's quill from its stand and offering it to her.

'I'm late for my lesson,' Hermione stated flatly. 'Would you write a note for my Potions professor so he'll let me into class late? He's terribly strict.'

---

31 January, 1998

'All right, Hermione?'

She turned from the heavy text open on the library table and saw Remus Lupin approaching, a happy smile on his face.

'Remus!' She stood and took his hands, arching on tiptoe to kiss his scarred cheek. 'What are you doing here?'

He sat in an empty chair near hers, and she resumed her seat, marvelling at the lightness of heart she felt just seeing her old friend. Headmaster Dumbledore had mentioned Remus to her as a possible marital partner when the Ministry decree had been announced, but Remus was on assignment for the Order amongst the werewolves; she would have had to leave school to be with him, and that would have taken her away from Harry. She liked Remus...had done ever since he'd been her teacher, years ago...but not enough to marry him and leave school in the middle of her seventh year. Not when You-Know-Who was out there, scheming to kill her best friend.

'Oh, I had to be in Hogsmeade on an errand, so I thought I'd drop by to see you and Harry,' Remus said. He gazed intently into her face and covered her hand with his large, calloused one. 'How *are* you, Hermione? How are ... things, with Severus?'

Hermione flushed and pulled her hand away from his. Remus was sweet, but his question was intrusive. She was a married woman now, and she owed a show of loyalty to her prickly husband, if nothing more. She knew very well that he loathed Remus Lupin and had done since they were boys together at school. It would be bad form for her to speak of private things to someone Snape didn't like...which would include almost everyone.

'I'm fine!' she assured him with her best public smile. 'How are you getting on? Are you able to get...?' she glanced furtively over her shoulder and finished in a whisper... 'Wolfsbane Potion?'

Remus cocked his head to one side. 'You don't know?' he said in surprise. 'I would have thought...but never mind. Yes, Severus brews it for me every month and leaves it with the Apothecary in the village. That's why I'm here.' He patted his pocket, and Hermione heard the distinct sound of tinkling potions phials.

She was stunned. Snape brewed the time-consuming, fiddly Wolfsbane Potion every month for someone he hated? Why on earth would he do it? It didn't correlate with anything she knew about the man she had married.

Remus gave her a rueful smile. 'I think, perhaps, Dumbledore made him promise to brew it,' he confessed. 'But the reason why doesn't matter. I can only be deeply grateful to him.'

Hermione's wristwatch vibrated on her arm, and she immediately began to gather her things. 'Dumbledore's Army has a meeting at three,' she explained, neatly stowing things in her book bag. 'Would you like to come along to the meeting and say hello?'

Remus looked frankly alarmed. 'You're meeting with *Umbridge* in charge of the school?' he whispered, glancing right and left for spies. 'Do you think that's wise?'

Hermione hefted the bag and turned to go. 'We can't be bothered with what's wise, Remus,' she replied as she moved away. 'We have to be ready for war.'

---

Hermione never saw her husband as she hurried out of the library, but Severus materialised in front of Lupin the moment he set foot in the corridor.

'Herding werewolves doesn't keep you busy enough, Lupin?' he demanded in his silkiest tones

He had seen the werewolf pawing Hermione. His right fist was clenched at his side. The boy within him...the one who'd grown up in the roughest part of town, amongst a lot of bullies and brutes...wanted to punch Lupin in the face. His left fist was in his robes, clutching the handle of his wand. The Death Eater in him thought he ought to put the slavering beast on the floor, writhing beneath the Cruciatus Curse. But he couldn't take either action. He was not a free agent, able to order his moves as he liked. No, he had to achieve his desired ends by intimidation and manipulation, and the werewolf had never been a good subject for either method.

Lupin nodded civilly. 'Good afternoon, Severus,' he said. 'I was in Hogsmeade to pick up my potion and thought I'd stop by to say hello.'

'Perhaps the next time you say "hello" to my wife you'll keep your filthy paws off her,' Severus snarled

Lupin frowned as if he were confused. 'Hermione is my friend. I know *you* don't like me, but it would be cruel for me to abandon her.'

Severus sneered mightily. 'It sounds to me as if you're confusing *your* pathetic needs with hers, werewolf. Stay away from her for six months, and I daresay she'd never notice your absence. Miss Granger has *plenty* of friends.'

Lupin withdrew a bit, his eyes wary now, as if preparing for an attack. Severus followed him, stepping offensively close, and murmured, 'You know, Lupin, I'd be sadly unable to brew Wolfsbane if the supply cupboard were robbed of Aconite.'

Lupin straightened to his full height and looked coolly down at Severus. 'I understand you perfectly, Severus...subtlety never *was* one of your strengths...but I won't stop being Hermione's friend, and if she knew you'd asked me to, she wouldn't be happy.'

Severus bared his ugly yellow teeth. 'Then I suggest you do not tell her,' he advised.

Lupin considered for a moment, then clapped him on the shoulder with a slight smile. 'Take care, Severus.'

And Lupin strode away down the corridor, whilst Severus cast a strong Cleansing Charm on his robes.

---

Septima Vector found him fuming in the library corridor

'I just passed Lupin on his way out of the castle,' she informed him. 'I assume that's why you look as if you swallowed a phial of Bubotuber pus.'

Severus glared past her, the way the werewolf had gone. 'He had his hands on Hermione.'

Septima looked doubtful. 'If he did more than kiss her cheek or pat her hand, I'd be shocked to hear it.'

When Severus didn't answer her, she nodded briskly. 'Right, then. I'd say you could use a strong cup of tea, my friend.' She took his elbow, and after a moment, he allowed her to pull him along with her. 'We'll have some warm scones, and you can defeat me again at chess, and you'll feel much better...you'll see!'

---

Hermione only heard the last of the exchange between her two professors...one the teacher of her favourite subject, the other her husband...and she was surprised by the punch of emotion, like a clout to the gut. It was nothing that Snape did...not really, for he seemed as grumpy and ill-tempered as ever...but Vector hooked her arm through his with an ease of familiarity that spoke volumes of their intimacy with one another.

Hermione watched until the two disappeared into a stairwell, and then she continued up to the Gryffindor common room to retrieve the book of spells she'd meant to take to the DA meeting.

---

*15 February, 1998*

In her bedroom, Hermione sat against her pillows, doing unnecessary revision for her Ancient Runes test the next day. She'd tried twice to go to sleep with no success. She couldn't stop thinking about the stupid Valentine's Day ball, and the awful, awkward dance...her *only* dance of the evening...with Snape. Others would have been happy to take a turn with her about the floor, but she hadn't thought Snape would like it...had been fairly certain he would *hate* it...so she'd abstained, out of respect for him. For their so-called marriage.

And his reward for her had been to demonstrate to the world at large that he found her so distasteful he could not even bear to touch her. How else might one interpret his rigid posture...the distance he had maintained between their bodies...the look of antipathy upon his ugly face as they had danced?

A thump from the sitting room reached her ears, and she opened her door to find Snape right outside, wearing a hooded black cloak and holding a horrible, familiar-looking object. She had first seen it years ago, masking the faces of the Death Eaters dangling helpless Muggles in the air at the World Cup; now she saw it in her husband's hand, and the sight sickened her.

'Go to bed,' he said quietly, an odd expression on his face, as if he, too, were sickened somehow.

'What are you doing?' Hermione replied, knowing the answer already, but unable to prevent herself from asking.

'Stumbling over reference books on the floor,' he answered testily, almost as if he were trying to force anger. He nudged a large library book with the toe of his boot. 'Is this the way you treat school property?'

'I left it right outside my room so I wouldn't forget to return it to the library in the morning! What were *you* doing lurking about my door?'

She crossed her arms over herself protectively, staring at him with loathing and defiance. *There's a Death Eater*, her mind screamed, the dreaded fear triggered by the robes and mask. *Defend yourself!*

He did not answer her question, merely tucking the hateful mask away in a capacious pocket and repeating, 'Go. To. Bed.'

Then he turned from her and walked toward the door with heavy steps. His head was slightly bowed, his shoulders slumped, an attitude she didn't remember seeing him in before.

'Sir...be careful,' she whispered before she could prevent the words from slipping out.

'Bed, Miss Granger,' he said again, and then he was gone.

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Hastening along the path from the castle to the gates, Severus tried desperately to purge his mind of the look on Hermione's face when she had seen him dressed in his Death Eater robes. At least he had not been wearing the mask...that was good, wasn't it? Now he had to find a way to integrate Hermione's obvious revulsion into the array of images he would offer up to the Dark Lord.

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Severus Apparated to the gates of Malfoy Manor and hurried to the door, the pain in his Mark throbbing. The door opened when his foot touched the step, and a frightened looking house-elf bowed him inside. He did not pass another human soul as the creature led him through the darkened, deserted corridors to Lucius' library

The Dark Lord sat alone before the hearth, his monstrous red eyes fixed upon the flames. He did not look around as Severus came in. Advancing quickly, eyes averted, Severus knelt to the floor and lifted the hem of the dark green robes to his lips.

'My Lord,' he murmured, remaining with eyes downcast.

'Good evening, Severus,' the high, thin voice greeted him. 'Pour yourself a brandy, if you like, and have a seat.'

Severus did as he was bid, though he had no interest in brandy. Experience had taught him it was dangerous to eschew any of his master's 'gifts'.

'Thank you, My Lord,' Severus murmured, taking the chair across from him.

Severus had no time to pretend to drink the brandy before the Dark Lord was in his mind, riffling through his memories and probing for relevant emotions. Severus surrendered with a show of obeisance, confident in his Occlumency, thankful that he'd been preparing for this encounter for weeks. His carefully selected, cunningly edited remembrances played before his eyes in dizzying succession, and then the Dark Lord released him, settling back with a barking sound...a chuckle.

'How many times did you rape her on your wedding night, Severus?'

Severus now touched the brandy to his lips before answering with a self-satisfied smirk. 'A fair few, My Lord...I may have lost count.'

'That was an artful use of the...what did you call it, Severus?'

'The "Death Eater date rape drug",' Severus supplied smoothly.

'Yes, yes...a clever nickname. Your brothers use that Muggle term for it now exclusively...it amuses them.' The tone of the great wizard's voice changed, jangling along Severus' nerves like the death screech of a Jobberknoll. 'Tell me, Severus. Why did you bother with the Lethe Elixir?'

Severus had prepared for this question.

'I wished to ... have full use of her,' he said with a small wink, as if he were chatting with another man, rather than a self-castrated freak. 'Without the elixir, she would have run with her story to Magical Law Enforcement.' He shrugged and put the brandy to his mouth, this time allowing the fortifying spirit to pass his lips. These interviews with the Dark Lord were very, very trying.

'And what if she falls in love with you?' the Dark Lord asked, stroking his chin as if he retained the human ability to grow a beard. 'If she falls in love with you after taking the elixir, she will remember everything.'

Severus blinked, unable to contain his disdain for the notion. 'My Lord, I have never subscribed to old witches' tales about such things, and if you have ever done so, I am unaware of it.'

The Dark Lord regarded him haughtily. 'Wizards with that attitude also said it was impossible for one to overcome death...and they were quite wrong, weren't they, Severus?'

Severus allowed his gaze to fall, feigning abashment. *Tread carefully, idiot!* he chastised himself.

'Of course, My Lord,' he murmured

The Dark Lord stood, quite suddenly, and Severus immediately rose to his feet. One did not remain sitting if the Dark Lord was standing.

'Of course, what chance is there of the girl falling in love with you if you continue to mistreat her?'

'None at all, My Lord,' Severus answered.

'And has your marriage been productive of the sort of information you promised when you asked for my permission to marry Harry Potter's best friend?' The Dark Lord, not waiting for an answer, flowed into Severus' mind again, and Severus was rocked back on his heels by the force of the spell.

This time his master was less gentle with his explorations, delving deep and scooping great piles of memory, as if he wished to examine every interaction of every day since Severus and Hermione had wed. An impressive array of images flowed by: Hermione angry, sad, annoyed, irritated, and hurt. These true memories were interspersed with created scenes of confrontations, slaps, curses, confessions, pleadings, and tearful misery

This time when the Dark Lord released him, an eerie smile graced the snake-like face. 'The boy thinks he can lure *me* into a trap?' he said gleefully. 'Thinks I can be captured by that old fool? Defeated by duelling *Aurors*?'

The high-pitched, wheezing sound was the Dark Lord's rendition of a laugh.

'Come along, Severus!' he gasped merrily. 'We must wake your brothers and share this news with them. We'll begin our counter plan!'

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*Three hours later*

Dumbledore cast another Warming Charm in the cave, a rocky, comfortless grotto lit only by their wand-tips, and rubbed his wrinkled hands together with real pleasure.

'You see, Severus?' he enthused, sounding more like the Dark Lord than Severus would ever admit to him. 'It's appears to be working...he seems to believe the altered memories you disclosed to him! And the association with Hermione gives your offerings the ring of authenticity we lacked in the past.'

He rose to his feet with an agility belying his age, the long silvery hair glinting in the wand-light

'Let us begin our planning for what we hope may be the end of our friend, Tom.'

Severus swallowed a weary sigh and prepared for his second strategy session of the long, cold night.

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*10 April, 1998*

Hermione took a bite of her homemade Weasley Easter egg and let the confection melt in her mouth, willing it to act medicinally. Surely spending time with Umbridge ranked with being haunted by a Dementor! And by the same logic, eating chocolate should dispel the horrible, inching feeling the toad-like headmistress elicited: inadequacy as a witch, a student, and a woman. Hermione knew better...knew she was being intimidated and manipulated...but the knowledge did not diminish the emotional toll taken by a tête-à-tête with Dolores.

The ceiling of the Great Hall was a crystalline blue, awash with marshmallow clouds, in imitation of the pristine spring day outdoors. It was the first day of Easter hols, and that morning at breakfast, owls had delivered mail...including the elaborately decorated eggs...to a hall remarkably full of students. All of the Fifth and Seventh Years had stayed on to study for their OWLs and NEWTs, respectively...and all of Dumbledore's Army had stayed on, because the holiday would be a perfect time for twice-a-day duelling practice. The Ministry still did not acknowledge the return of Lord Voldemort, the Death Eaters continued underground, doing their evil deeds in secret, and Harry remained convinced that the Dark's ultimate assault on the Light and all they stood for was imminent.

Hermione drank the last of her coffee and stowed her Easter egg safely in her book bag before leaving the nearly empty Great Hall. She tended to dawdle over her breakfast and lunch on weekends and holidays...anything to keep her out of the dungeon apartments she shared with Snape. Three months into her marriage and still she and he circled one another like wary strangers. She could not forget seeing him dressed as a Death Eater...realising that she had bound her life to that of a man with a Dark Mark burned into his flesh...and although he had not been particularly rude to or dismissive of her lately, she could not be comfortable in his presence.

Strange, that though she was thinking of him, she failed to see her husband until she nearly collided with him. In the doorway of the Great Hall, with no one else in sight, Hermione gaped up into the face of Severus Snape.

'Sir!' she gasped. 'Good morning.'

He was looking somewhat haggard, though rather cleaner than usual. His great, fathomless black eyes were darkly shadowed; his face was gaunt, the bones jutting against the skin. The slight tilt of his head sent his apparently clean curtain of hair swaying as he inspected her.

'You had a meeting this morning with the headmistress?' he asked quietly.

'Y-yes,' Hermione agreed.

He waited a moment, and when she did not speak, he continued, 'Was there a specific purpose to it?'

Hermione's gaze skittered from his too-discerning eyes to the strap of her book bag, which she adjusted on her shoulder. 'She has found a way to exclude me from the R. I. Page Prize for Excellence in Ancient Runes,' Hermione said, appalled by the way her voice trailed off into a scratchy...not to say *tearful*...croak by the end of the sentence.

His long-fingered hand came into view as he took her book bag and slung it over his shoulder. 'What was her reason?' he asked, his tone still quiet, but also urgent.

Without her book bag, Hermione was out of excuses not to look at him as she answered. In spite of her effort to control her voice, she could barely manage a whisper past the lump in her throat. 'Some ancient amendment to the Hogwarts bylaws about spouses of teachers being ineligible to compete for school prizes.'

To her amazement...and surging uneasiness...he laid a hand upon shoulder. 'Let me help you,' he said, his voice almost soothing in its calm, steady timbre.

Help her? What on earth could he mean? And why was he pretending to be kind, when she knew very well that he abhorred her?

Backing away, she watched his hand fall back to his side, and avoiding his eyes, she said, 'Would you mind leaving my bag in my room? I think I'll walk by the lake!'

She bolted from the castle, fleeing her unnervingly solicitous husband as much as her bitter disappointment regarding the academic prize she had striven...and *deserved!*...to win. The sunlight was almost warm, and the spring flowers were poking their heads from the wakening earth. But Hermione failed to notice or appreciate these things as she hurtled precipitously along the path, avoiding her second near-collision of the day only because Remus Lupin's hands grasped her upper arms and spun her in a momentum-breaking half circle.

'Hermione!' he cried, his hazel eyes warm with concern. 'What's wrong? Why are you running?'

At the sound of Remus's kind, caring words, Hermione burst into tears and threw her arms around him. And even though he murmured soft questions to her as he rubbed a comforting circle betwixt her shoulder blades, Hermione gave him no answers as she dampened the front of his shabby robes.

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She had fled from him as a wild thing flies from a civilising touch

Severus stood in the castle doorway with her school bag hanging from his shoulder, feeling like a husband whose wife makes him hold her handbag whilst she shops for pretty clothes...clothes she will not wear for him. When Hermione threw herself into Lupin's arms, allowing the werewolf to paw at her...when she had been unwilling to allow Severus so much as a response to his question ... he turned away and stalked down the dungeon stairs, his rage roiling like acid in his veins.

It did not help that moments later, his Dark Mark flared with excruciating pain.

He was being summoned.

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A/N: From the HP Lexicon: A Jobberknoll is a tiny blue speckled bird that makes no sound until the moment of its death, when it lets out a long scream consisting of all the sounds it has ever heard; their feathers are important ingredients in making potions that affect memory.

The quote used by Umbridge...and completed by Snape...is from Henry Ward Beecher (June 24, 1813 March 8, 1887). "Young love is a flame; very pretty, often very hot and fierce, but still only light and flickering. The love of the older and disciplined heart is as coals, deep burning, unquenchable." It is highly unlikely...and that's putting it kindly...that either Dolores Umbridge or Severus Snape would have been familiar with the works of a nineteenth century American abolitionist and preacher. Nevertheless, the quote was so perfect, I had to have it. Chalk it up to that artistic license of mine.

~checks~

Yep, it's still hanging on the wall of my writer's nook!

## Chapter 20

*Chapter 20 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: There is character death in this chapter, but we already know who survived the battle, so it's no one you like. You'll finally learn about what happened with Hermione and the Death Eaters in the dungeon. In other news, Happy Canada Day on Monday and Happy Independence Day on Thursday next. There will be a two week hiatus of story posting, because I am going on holiday! Hope you're having a lovely summer (unless, of course, it's winter where you are.)

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## Chapter 20

You've been the only thing that's right

In all I've done

*Run*

*18 April, 1998*

Hermione slept, revised, ate, had duelling practice, and slept again. Suddenly, it was the middle of the Easter hols, and for the first time, the trio were to be permitted to attend an Order meeting, as representatives of Dumbledore's Army. Harry, Ron and Hermione convened in McGonagall's office, where they were joined by Vector, whom Hermione coldly ignored.

The Floo connexions were too zealously guarded, but travel by furtive, illegal Portkey was still possible, if one were fortunate enough to know someone with the skill to create such a thing.

'Are we ready?' the Transfiguration professor inquired, consulting the old-fashioned watch pinned to her bodice. 'The Portkey departs in thirty seconds!'

The three students and two teachers each placed a hand on the tatty plaid tam-o'-shanter lying upon McGonagall's desk. Fleeting, Hermione wondered about the absence of her husband...they hadn't crossed paths in several days...but in the next instant, it felt as if Molly Weasley's crochet hook was embedded behind her navel, and Hermione was jerked through space to land with a thump on the dusty kitchen floor of number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

'Welcome, welcome!' a familiar voice said, and Hermione looked up to see Albus Dumbledore, resplendent in silver spangled purple robes, offering her a hand up.

'Headmaster!' Hermione cried, grasping his hand.

The three students ringed Dumbledore, peppering him with questions, whilst much of the Order sat at the long wooden table, watching the spectacle. Percy, Fred and George were present, representing the Weasley family, but Ron's parents were in Romania, visiting Charlie during the holiday.

Percy looked disapproving. 'You shouldn't bother a busy man like the Headmaster, Ron.'

'Do strive for a show of patience, Mr Weasley!' Professor McGonagall chided Percy, since Molly wasn't there to do it. 'It's the first time these students have seen the headmaster since he left Hogwarts!'

At length everyone was settled around the familiar old table, bottles of Butterbeer or goblets of mead before them, ready to hear what the headmaster had to say

'We've set the date to spring the trap,' Dumbledore announced, setting loose another several minutes of everyone speaking at the same time. When it was quiet again, Dumbledore continued. 'A contingent of our Aurors will be Polyjuiced to resemble Harry, me, and key others. They will Apparate to the site of the house in Godric's Hollow where James and Lily Potter died.'

A host of sombre eyes turned to Harry's face, and a moment of hushed respect ensued. Harry bore this quite well, but it was Hermione who broke the silence.

'Excuse me, Headmaster, but why didn't you mention a Polyjuiced Snape? And ... where is he? Why isn't he here?'

Now every eye was trained upon Hermione, and the stretch of silence was disturbing to her

Something was wrong.

'We were wondering when you would ask,' Professor Vector said, and Hermione was annoyed to hear a note of censure in the other woman's voice.

Dumbledore rushed to speak, as if expecting a catfight to erupt and wishing to head it off. 'You see, Hermione, Professor Snape went to a meeting with Tom Riddle, and he has not returned.'

Hermione struggled to parse the words. Of course she hadn't seen Snape in a while but ...

'When?' she asked. 'When did this happen?'

Again, it was Vector who answered her. 'He's been gone for a *week*. How could you be unaware of that?'

Hermione shook her head, as if to clear it of bothersome thoughts. 'I've been staying in Gryffindor Tower with Ginny,' she said, looking around at the faces of the Order members...at everyone, save Septima Vector. Hermione didn't tell them it was because Snape had been ... almost *kind* to her, spooking her badly enough that she wished to avoid him at all costs. 'Luna is staying with us too...we're acting as if it's an extended pyjama party, but really we've been planning our defence of the castle and having duelling practice.'

The silence greeting this information was deafening, until Harry spoke up in Hermione's defence. 'We knew Snape hadn't been at meals, but we reckoned he was ...' Harry shrugged. 'Avoiding students...it's not as if he *likes* us.'

Ron had been frowning, his attention focused on his hands while Hermione and Harry talked. Now he spoke up. 'So Snape's finally gone over to them, then,' he said, sounding not at all like a child. His blue eyes were hard, his freckled face grim. 'He's with the Death Eaters.'

Headmaster Dumbledore interrupted with quiet finality. 'I trust Professor Snape,' he said, emphasising each syllable. 'If he's not returned from Voldemort, it's because he's been detained...we do not know why, and it would be fruitless to speculate...unless you have some information the rest of us lack, Hermione?'

Hermione flushed and shook her head. Snape was gone, either having joined Voldemort...did she really believe that?...or been taken prisoner. He could, at this very moment, be dead...or worse. It didn't bear thinking about.

She was filled with a heavy sense of shame. *I am a truly terrible wife*, she thought.

But the headmaster was still talking. 'We will take our places as I've outlined here ...'

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*25 April, 1998*

Severus leant against the cold stone wall of the Malfoy dungeon, determinedly ignoring his many hurts. He'd had no food, save bits of gruel left within his reach by a shame-faced Draco, since the Dark Lord had summoned him from Hogwarts. That had been a Friday, the first day of Easter break...the day he'd offered comfort to Hermione, only to be spurned in favour of the mangy werewolf.

Then the Dark Lord had summoned him, and although he had struggled to suppress his jealous rage, he had ... failed.

The merest thread of out-of-place emotion was all the Dark Lord required to ferret out facts one wished to hide from him. Severus knew this...had known it, to his humiliation, for years...and in mere seconds, a routine debriefing had become his undoing. Once apprised of Severus' depth of emotion for Hermione, the Dark Lord had concluded that Severus was compromised. Severus had begged for forgiveness for his lapse...for having formed an unhealthy attachment to his Mudblood wife...and through the hours of torment, he had continued steadfastly to swear his absolute devotion to his master.

Even Severus 'brothers'...that hideously inappropriate sobriquet given his fellow Death Eaters by the Dark Lord...had tired of using his filthy, befouled, pain-wracked body for spell practice after the first forty-eight hours. He had been consigned to the dungeon, almost as a child is sent to the corner to think about his transgressions.

How many days had he been imprisoned? It was difficult for him to keep count properly. His body could survive on a minimal amount of nourishment, but even he required water. In a dehydrated state, his mind did not function at an optimal level.

Water. Dear Merlin, he needed water. His parched mouth and cracked lips ached for it.

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Hermione slept fitfully in Ginny's dormitory for a few hours, then she dressed and went down to pace the perimeter of the Gryffindor common room, only dimly aware of the rising sun. Today, if things went as Dumbledore expected, the DA would go to war. She would fight with all her heart and soul to keep Harry safe, so that he could accomplish his goal...to kill Voldemort. She would maintain her focus, stay on her guard, and be at the top of her game.

And she would stop obsessing about the fate of Severus Snape.

She closed her eyes, shook her head, and took another turn around the room.

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Bright light pierced Severus' consciousness, and he squinted against the flaming torch.

'Up with you, Snivellus,' a squeaky voice commanded, and a booted foot made contact with Severus' bruised ribs.

Severus rolled away from the foot, curling into a ball with his back to the rat otherwise known as Peter Pettigrew, whose voice he had recognised instantly.

'Get up!' Wormtail insisted. 'Our Master wants you.'

Severus crawled as far from Pettigrew as he could get, then attempted to stand, but his legs were unsteady, and his head swam sickeningly.

'You've really let yourself go, Snape,' Wormtail informed him gleefully, obviously amused by his own cleverness. Then icy liquid splashed over Severus' splayed legs and the grimy dungeon floor.

Severus stared with near incomprehension at the wooden bucket.

'Drink,' Wormtail instructed. 'And be quick about it!'

Severus plunged his face into the water.

---

Hermione went down to breakfast with the boys, and the members of the DA could be seen scattered about the Great Hall, all in their usual places. The castle hummed on as always, and it was important for them to do nothing to alert Umbridge...or any of her spies...that today was different from any other day. Dolores Umbridge was fundamentally irrelevant...she was merely Fudge's stooge, a proponent of Ministry policy and an adherent of neither the Dark nor the Light...but she was a possible impediment to their objective, and she had to be taken into account if their plan was to succeed.

They filled their plates, but even the boys scarcely touched their food. Today was the day they had planned for since their arrival at Hogwarts as scrubby first-years, and breakfast seemed somehow unimportant.

'Hem hem.'

Hermione nearly dropped her spoon into her cereal, and she saw Harry and Ron, sitting on either side of her, freeze for a moment at the sound of Umbridge's voice. Then, with one accord, they murmured indistinct greetings and resumed the pretence of eating.

'Good morning, children,' Umbridge said in her disgustingly sweet voice. 'I just wanted to stop by and let you know that I am aware of Professor Snape's absence. It's been two weeks now, according to the house-elves.'

She tittered, and Hermione's hand clenched on her spoon as she visualised stabbing the old hag with the handle. Harry covered Hermione's spoon-clenching hand with his.

'Of course, bright and early Monday morning, when he fails to return for the summer term, you'll be gone, Granger. If you've got no fully-qualified wizard husband, you'll receive no special consideration as a Muggle-born student...and that will mean no wizarding exams and no qualifications for you...you'll have no existence in the wizarding world. Just as it ought to be, wouldn't you agree?'

And with another nerve-scraping cackle of laughter, the putative headmistress moved away.

Now Ron had hold of her other hand, and Hermione realised she was struggling to get away from them.

'That foul, loathsome old hag!' she sputtered.

'We'll find a way to get rid of *her*,' Harry murmured. 'But first we have to ... do today.'

Hermione sagged against him, and Ron leant over to press his cheek to her hair, the three of them huddled together as if for warmth.

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Severus knelt before the Dark Lord, his long hair wet against his face. He had been allowed five minutes to shower, five minutes to shave, and two minutes to dress. He had donned his boots, which had been returned to him clean and shiny as only a house-elf could make them, with a suit of Lucius' clothes...silken trousers of palest tan, a severely tailored white shirt, and elegant black robes. The clothes hung upon his skeletal frame, but they were clean, covered his nakedness, and he was glad to have them. The porridge he had gulped felt like a lump in his stomach, floating in the sea of water he had drunk...but he had no time for the nausea threatening to overcome him.

'You have been provided with an opportunity to prove your loyalty to me,' the Dark Lord informed him, stroking the head of the enormous snake that lay upon his knees like that of a favoured dog. Nagini eyed Severus, her long, forked tongue darting out inquisitively at regular intervals. 'Whilst I secure the castle, you will simply find the girl and bring her to me. Can you do that, Severus?'

Severus pressed his lips to the hem of his master's robes. 'Yes, My Lord,' he said, eyes averted. 'It will be my honour to make a gift of her to you.'

The tip of the Dark Lord's wand jabbed in beneath Severus' chin, forcing his face up...and the master dipped into the servant's mind, searching out the truth of how matters lay between them.

Weak though he was, Severus was ready for this. He had been strong enough, his first day or so in the dungeon, to prepare for the eventuality of just such an audience with the Dark Lord. He could have been killed outright without another opportunity to redeem himself, but fate had delivered him this chance. So Severus seized it, showing his master how he meant to find, deliver, and slaughter his Mudblood bride...all for the glory of Lord Voldemort.

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The plan devised by Headmaster Dumbledore...and by Professor Snape, the old man insisted...was a textbook double cross. If Voldemort believed the castle were weak, there was a good chance he would attempt to take possession of it. It was an extremely dangerous scheme, though, so Dumbledore had chosen the Easter holiday as the time to attempt his plan, when many students would be gone. A coterie of Polyjuiced Aurors...some of whom were members of the Order, others who were simply sympathetic to its purpose...were seen to be departing the castle, seeming to leave it largely defenceless. Those leaving appeared to be Harry, Ron, Hermione, Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Professor Sprout, and Professor Vector. They met up with a Polyjuiced Dumbledore outside the gates of Hogwarts and Disapparated.

In truth, the 'departed' individuals were in the castle, ready to do battle.

The Polyjuiced Aurors Apparated to Godric's Hollow. They expected to find a small group of Death Eaters there, whose job it would be to subdue and capture 'Dumbledore' and 'Harry' and company. The successful Death Eaters would then return with their captives to Hogwarts, where the victorious Dark Lord would be in control of the school.

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The Death Eaters entered the castle through the Vanishing Cabinet in the Room of Requirement from its twin at Malfoy Manor, just as Snape had reported they would. Peter Pettigrew caught sight of Harry and Hermione ranged along the seventh floor corridor, in position to defend the Fat Lady and Gryffindor Tower, and he recognised the peril at once, making up in self-preservation instincts for what he lacked in intelligence

'It's a trap!' he screeched. 'Snape betrayed us!' Then the wizard was gone, replaced by a rat that darted betwixt everyone's legs and disappeared.

Hermione was horrified to hear the vile Wormtail calling out her husband's name with such familiarity...and such truth...but it disturbed her that Pettigrew was the only one of the battling Death Eaters she recognised. Where were the others? Were they holding back, waiting for the first wave to wear down the castle's defences?

The battle raged through the seventh floor, streaks of coloured light flashing like lightening in a thunderstorm, the air swiftly filling with smoke and dust from spells gone awry

Professor Dumbledore stood at the head of the main staircase, maintaining a wall of pure red light that was thus far unbreached. Professor Flitwick stepped in to hold the doorway of the Room of Requirement, his spells flying like those of the duelling champion he had been in his youth. Professor Trelawney stood in an iridescent bubble of defensive magic, guarding the entrance to the North Tower, whilst Professor Sinistra performed the same office for the Astronomy Tower.

In the first hour of fighting, Hermione cast more offensive spells than she would have believed possible. Downed opponents were disarmed, bound, and levitated to an empty classroom set aside for that purpose. At one point, she was locked in a duel with a podgy female in a Death Eater mask, as beside her, Harry fought with a wizard who seemed to be the podgy witch's brother. Then from the direction of the main staircase, Hermione heard the unmistakeable voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt

'Below!' he bellowed. 'Death Eaters are coming from below!'

Hermione succeeded in Stunning her opponent, used the *Incarcerous* command to bind her in ropes, and spun toward Harry, her mind clicking over so rapidly that she couldn't follow the connexions her brain was making with reasoned thought.

'There must be another Vanishing Cabinet in the castle!' she cried, watching as Harry bound his defeated opponent. 'It's somewhere below! I'll start in the dungeons, search until I find it, and disable it!'

Harry opened his mouth to answer her just as Ron appeared from behind a tapestry halfway down the corridor, his face white as milk beneath his freckles. He had obviously run up the trick staircase from his sentry point on the fifth floor.

'Harry...I heard...' Ron paused, gasping, one hand pressed to his side. 'It's You Know Who! He's on the fifth floor, flooding everything with burst pipes from the Prefect's Bathroom! He has the Lestranges with him and Lucius Malfoy!'

Harry stilled, a manic light in his green eyes. 'This is it. I can feel it.' He squared his shoulders determinedly.

Hermione grabbed Ron's arm. 'Where's Snape?'

Ron shook his head. 'I dunno. But Wormtail came running in whilst I was watching. He told them Snape had betrayed them all to the Order.'

Hermione felt as if the blood in her veins...even her bones...had turned to ice. Voldemort knew Snape had betrayed him. She had to find her husband ... to warn him ...

Harry spoke to her intently. 'Hermione, tell Dumbledore where Voldemort is...where I've gone.'

Hermione nodded, but the errand was a peripheral one...her focus was elsewhere now, and she had no time to waste.

Ron gathered her to his side, pulling Harry in as well. 'You're the best friends any bloke could ever have,' he whispered. 'Let's go finish this, yeah?'

Hermione broke away from them. 'Yeah,' she said and sprinted off.

---

Severus heard Wormtail pronounce his doom seconds after they spilled from the Vanishing Cabinet into the Room of Requirement..*Snape betrayed us!*...so he whisked through a hidden door and disappeared into the Teachers' Labyrinth of shortcuts, watch points, and listening posts

He could use his long-term, intimate knowledge of the castle to hide from the Death Eaters while still moving freely.

*Stop worrying about Hermione!* he berated himself. *Your only duty is to bring Potter and the Dark Lord together...and to make sure Dumbledore is there to even the fight.*

Later. He could find her later.

*But soon.*

---

Hermione reached the main staircase, where she found the headmaster and Kingsley in consultation.

'You Know Who is in the Prefect's Bathroom,' she informed them as she passed. 'Harry and Ron have taken the trick staircase down to find him.'

Then she was flying down the stairs, her wand at the ready, senses on high alert.

---

Severus stood behind the eyes of the mermaid in the Prefect's Bathroom, spying. As he watched, Lucius methodically destroyed the pipes to every faucet, every basin, and every toilet. The Dark Lord waited on one side, his robes protected from the water by a Shield Charm, his lieutenants gathered close about him. Bellatrix Lestrange held her wand on Wormtail, who was face-down on the swamped floor, naked and writhing.

It appeared that Dark Lord had not been pleased with the little rat's news.

Antonin Dolohov, one of the Dark Lord's first followers from their schooldays together, sought permission to speak, and the Dark Lord acquiesced with the flick of a finger.

'Do you wish to have Snape's Mudblood killed, My Lord, or brought to you?'

The Dark Lord's eyes seemed to gleam more redly than ever. 'I want *Snape* brought to me, Antonin! The Mudblood is of no consequence. Do with her as you will, but do not permit Snape to find her.'

'It will be my honour, My Lord.'

Severus recognised all too well the sadistic smile on Dolohov's face as he bowed and hurried away.

Severus gripped his wand tightly, fighting the urge to blast them all to hell. But no, he had to find the boy...find the old man...bring them here, to engage the Dark Lord...to bring it all to an end.

He rested his head against the wall, struggling to calm his breathing. He must not think of Hermione...of how desperately he longed to find her...to keep her safe. She would be with Potter; Dolohov would not be able to strike out at her because the Death Eaters were under orders to leave Potter to the Dark Lord. And Potter, for all his faults, would never surrender Hermione without a fight.

Then two concussive explosions shook the room, one from each end, and when the dust cleared, Harry Potter strode through one side and Albus Dumbledore through the other. Each of them was flanked by numerous companions: the Order with the headmaster and the DA with Potter.

'Hello, Tom,' the headmaster said, taking a step forward.

But Severus did not remain to see what would happen. Potter, with Dumbledore in tow, had found the Dark Lord; Severus' services were not required.

He threw himself into the Teachers' Labyrinth again, his mind racing through the possibilities...for he had seen Potter's lieutenants forming a semi-circle behind him, and Hermione had not been among them.

---

Down, down, down she ran, watching for opposition, but frantic to reach the dungeon. Somewhere in the castle was Severus Snape, her husband, the wizard who had successfully hoodwinked Voldemort for all these years, and if there was a natural place for him to be, that place was the dungeon. There was no logic to this notion...no reasoning behind her belief...but she thought if she reached the dungeon, she might find him. She might see him again, for the first time since he had reached out to her, had offered his help...and she owed him an apology she desperately longed to deliver

She reached the entrance hall, ran the short distance to the dungeon stairs, and headed beneath the school.

She did not see the figure in pink lurking in the darkened staffroom.

---

Antonin Dolohov had no intention of searching the entire castle himself. He would go down to the dungeon, where the most obedient help might be found, and send *them* to search the castle. His only objective was to finish the job he had begun two years before in the Department of Mysteries.

He would kill the Mudblood, Granger.

As he hurried across the entrance hall to the dungeon staircase, a voice hissed to him from a darkened room

'Who is it?' he demanded, holding his wand aloft.

A dumpy little witch in a pink cardigan peeked out at him. He had seen her before...she was Umbridge, the headmistress.

'Are you looking for someone?' she inquired in a breathy voice, her protruding eyes fixed on his face.

He nodded tersely. Perhaps this was going to be easier than he had hoped. 'The Granger girl...do you know her?'

The witch simpered. 'I do, indeed...a filthy little Mudblood.'

Dolohov smiled thinly. 'That's the one.'

Umbridge reached out with stubby fingers covered with large, ugly rings and grasped his sleeve. 'What do you want with her?'

Dolohov shook her off. 'Never you mind,' he advised her.

'I hope you do something ... awful,' Umbridge said, and there was a curious gleam in her eyes...one Dolohov could identify with.

'Count on it, madam,' he told her, patting the hand still extended to him.

'She just ran down the dungeon stairs!' Umbridge blurted.

Dolohov raised the unattractive little hand to his lips.

---

Dolores Umbridge re-entered the staffroom, humming happily to herself. No one could say it was her fault that the Death Eaters had stormed the castle. *She* hadn't let them in. Why would she? After all, the only agenda she supported was that of the Ministry...of the Minister, Cornelius Fudge...and anyone who also supported the Minister and his policies was a friend of hers.

Granger, however, was ... a personal project, and as such ... well, what Cornelius did not know would not hurt him.

She was startled when a section of the wall opened as if it were a door, and Severus Snape erupted into the room, grabbing her robes at the scruff of her neck and dragging her into a dark, dank tunnel.

'What are you doing?' she screeched, pulling her wand, but he slapped it from her hand as if it were nothing but a twig.

Another doorway opened, and she found herself in the middle of a forest clearing...but it was a clearing that was, somehow, located inside the castle. Snape shoved her brutally through the opening. The instant Dolores staggered onto the grass of the clearing, a horrible beast loomed out of the trees...an abomination: half man, half horse.

'Good day, Headmistress,' the monster said, inclining its human head. 'I wondered when you might find the opportunity to visit my classroom.'

Dolores staggered back, alarm clanging in her mind like a bell. She had to get away...if she were away from the terrible creature, everything would be all right again. She saw it speaking with Snape, but the blood was pounding so loudly in her ears, it was difficult for her to understand what they said to one another.

'...and don't let her out until I tell you!' Snape said, spit flying from his lips, his black eyes nearly demented.

'The petty concerns of humans are all of little matter to the centaurs, Professor, but as a courtesy to a colleague, you may count upon me...this time.'

Snape disappeared once again into the tunnel, the aperture closing up and becoming a part of the castle wall. The half-human, half-horse withdrew again into the trees, until Dolores saw nothing but the shadow shape of it. And although she beat upon the unyielding rock until her fists were bloody, Snape did not return, and the door did not reappear.

Dolores began to scream.

---

Hermione ran into Snape's dungeon quarters, but he wasn't in the sitting room. The bathroom was empty, too, so she gathered her courage and threw open the door to his bedroom.

Empty.

She ran into the corridor again and dragged breath into her winded body. Time was running out. She could never explore the entire dungeon quickly enough to find him. She would have to try another way.

Closing her eyes, she reached out with her senses in every direction, and raising her vine wood wand, she said *Homenum Revelio!*

She hurried to the main corridor, spinning in a slow circle...and in the far eastern corner of the ancient dungeon, she found them.

---

Draco yawned and looked around, bored.

'I thought we'd see some action,' he commented, looking to Crabbe and Goyle. 'Didn't you?'

Montague stepped out of the shadows, looming over the three younger boys. 'Shut up, Malfoy,' he said. 'I'm in charge here.'

'Oooh,' Draco taunted, clapping his hands to his face. 'You're in charge of this whole dungeon? All these empty boxes?' He gestured to either side of the Vanishing Cabinet at the cobwebbed, dusty refuse, and Crabbe and Goyle laughed appreciatively.

They were unaware of the intruder until she cast a spell.

The Full Body Bind made Draco snap to rigid attention, unable to move, and as he was falling, he saw Granger...Madam Snape now, he supposed...stepping into the room, her wand raised

*Bad choice, Granger,* he thought, staring at the ceiling and listening as his Slytherin companions prepared to fight. *You don't know it, but I'm the best friend you have in this room.*

---

Hermione disabled Malfoy and rushed in. The Vanishing Cabinet was against the wall, Malfoy was supine on the floor in front of it, and Crabbe, Goyle, and Montague were advancing on her. She had to make a choice: defend herself or disable the cabinet?

There was only one thing to do.

'*Reducto!*' she cried, throwing all her might behind the spell, and the Vanishing Cabinet imploded, shattering to dust.

Goyle stared stupidly at the ruin of the Vanishing Cabinet as Montague turned on her furiously.

'You stupid Mudblood!' he bellowed. 'The Dark Lord ordered us to protect it! And you destroyed it!'

'*Protego!*' Hermione cried, and her protective spell went up just before the red streak of Montague's Unforgivable reached her. Maybe this hadn't been the best idea she'd ever had, to run alone into a room full of enemies...no one knew where she was, and there were three of them still standing...if they flanked her, she would be in trouble.

She struggled to maintain the Shield Charm as she sent offensive spells at them, one after the other. When the Shield Charm weakened, they were able to sneak spells past it, and she was forced to parry them. Unforgivables, Stunners, Body Binds, Gouging and Slashing spells...she countered them one after the other, her wand moving with deft accuracy, all the hours of drilling with the DA paying off in the defence of her life. But it was one against three, and she had already put in over an hour of intense battle before she decided to run to the dungeons. She stumbled, and her Shield Charm flickered.

'*Divestio!*'

Of all the spells to break through, Crabbe's malicious prank Vanished every stitch of clothing from her body. She was naked in the dungeons with a set of juvenile Death Eaters.

'*Petrificus Totalus!*'

Hermione recognised Malfoy's voice, and her eyes locked with his as she began to fall. He'd cast from the floor, not even bothering to gain his feet when her spell wore off him

She lay on her back where she fell, shame at her nakedness quickly overshadowed by wondering how they would kill her and how much it would hurt.

Mostly, she just wished she'd had a chance to see her husband one last time.

---

Dolohov strolled into the dungeon just in time to see the girl...now completely naked...hit the floor. Three of the idiots who'd been left to guard the Vanishing Cabinet rushed forward to stare at her...all except for Malfoy's son. He stayed back, his grey eyes watchful. In Dolohov's opinion, Draco was the only one of the boys who might have made a worthy Death Eater, one day.

'What happened to the bloody cabinet?' Dolohov demanded, and the biggest of the boys turned a gaping face to him.

'Granger did it,' Montague blurted. 'It's not our fault!'

A sound, reminiscent of the rumble of thunder, vibrated through the rock of the dungeons, and three of the boys eyed one another uneasily, save Goyle, who could not stop staring at the Mudblood's breasts.

'What was that?' Crabbe said, staring upward.

Dolohov ignored him. He had come here with one purpose...a purpose approved by his master...and he meant to achieve it.

'You four may go,' he said, withdrawing his wand.

Goyle seemed not to hear him. He knelt down and fumbled at his belt

Crabbe's attention shifted again, and he scowled. 'Whaddaya think you're doing?' he said, advancing to punch Goyle's shoulder.

Goyle looked up at Crabbe, then across at Draco, as if seeking affirmation. 'We always said we'd do her...show her...didn't we, Draco?'

Young Malfoy gave a shudder of disgust. 'I wouldn't soil myself...you oughtn't to either.'

Montague elbowed Crabbe aside. 'I'm in charge here,' he reminded them. 'If we do her, I get the first go.'

Dolohov gave a bark of laughter. 'You can have her body when I'm finished, boys.'

Four sets of eyes turned to him, and Dolohov could almost read their thoughts: *This old man has some use for a naked witch?*

Of course he did.

Lifting his arm, he shook back his cuffs and took aim.

'May all your kind learn not to interfere in the affairs of their betters, Mudblood. Now, where did we leave off last time?'

And with a great slashing motion of his wand, purple flame bisected Hermione's naked form from shoulder to hipbone, and her eyes rolled up in her head.

'Brilliant!' Crabbe said admiringly to Dolohov.

'Really?' Draco drawled. 'Outstanding work, there, killing a paralysed Mudblood...I imagine a bright first-year might have done it.'

Dolohov pivoted, his wand on Draco. 'I've killed fools for less insolence,' he spat angrily, the satisfied glow he'd felt dissipating beneath young Malfoy's disdain.

'Dolohov!' Montague cried. 'Behind you!'

'*Expelliarmis!*'

Even the Mudblood's weapon flew from her slack hand, all five wands arcing high into the air, to be caught by Severus Snape.

---

Severus thrust the captured wands into a deep pocket, his rage fanned to high force at the tableau before him. Hermione looked dead, and he had not far to look for the cause, for Dolohov was present; she had also been stripped naked, and Goyle was on his knees with his flies half undone.

This filth had injured (*Not killed!* his mind screamed. *She's not dead!*) his wife, and they were preparing to rape her.

Though it seemed he had carefully considered the facts, in reality, his second spell followed the first at the speed of fury, and he did it without uttering a sound...no reason to provide the witnesses an incantation they could give in evidence against him.

A blast of magic jetted from him like a shockwave of wrath, slamming the five Death Eaters to the dungeon floor, unconscious. And then he stepped up to Dolohov, his motions fluid and precise, sending a thick stream of scarlet light into the old man's chest, stopping his heart for good.

Without another thought for anyone else, he hurried to Hermione, whipping off the black robes as he went, and when he fell to his knees at her side, the robes settled over her naked body.

Severus searched desperately for a pulse at Hermione's throat. He'd seen Dolohov's victims many times before, and few lived to tell the tale. A swift diagnostic spell revealed a faint life force, but he had no notion of what to do...how to help her

Poppy would know.

Gathering his wife into his arms, her form wrapped in Lucius Malfoy's borrowed robes, Severus stepped over Dolohov's inert body and all but ran from the room.

---

Up and up and up, Severus climbed from the bowels of the castle, cursing Dumbledore's decision to prevent Apparating within the walls of Hogwarts. Cradled to his heart, his precious cargo was warm, and as he climbed, he exhorted her, his voice barely audible.

'Hang on, Hermione. Keep breathing. You're all right...you'll be fine...I won't let you go. Hang on, little tempest. I've got you.'

---

A/N: This week's song is *Run* by Snow Patrol. I've always thought this song is a perfect one for the apocalyptic happenings of the Last Battle, as we in fandom envisioned Harry's ultimate confrontation with the Dark Lord. And of course, there is such a marvelous undercurrent of tragic romance in the lyrics, although as we listen, and even as we're wishing the lovers would run away together, we know our Hero and our Heroine: The will never run away from this fight. You may watch the video on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jS8IZcx7tJY>

# Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 26

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: Greetings my dear ones. I have been away with a group of writer friends, many of whose names you would know. One of the things we did for one another was presentations on different topics. Mine was on using music in your writing process. I used this story and songs from this story's playlist to illustrate my points.

I have missed you and missed sharing my story with you. I will step out of the way now, and allow our heroine and her hero to communicate their story to you. I hope you'll tell me your thoughts when you finish reading!



## Chapter 21

I want to see you clearly

Come closer than this

But all I remember

Are the dreams in the mist

*These Dreams*

*25 April, 1998*

The fall of the Dark Lord filled all of Hogwarts with jubilation, but Severus was scarcely aware of it, huddled as he was over Hermione's unmoving form in the private room he had demanded and been granted in the hospital wing.

'Did you see the curse he used on her?' Poppy Pomfrey asked him, her analytical spells trilling along Hermione's body like bouncing silver balls.

'It's Dolohov's speciality...if there's a name for it, I've never known of it. It's meant to cause internal injuries; purple flame shoots from the wand-tip.'

Pomfrey tutted and looked grave. 'That's the same description her friends gave of the spell that injured her before...when she ran off to London to fight in the Department of Mysteries, just as if we don't have Magical Law Enforcement to take care of such things!'

'It is the same spell,' Severus muttered, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. 'The same caster, the same spell ...'

Pomfrey turned to him and curved a hand about his wrist. 'You look very ill yourself, Severus. Professor Vector told me you were being held prisoner, and I can see they starved you. You must take care of yourself, or I'll have both of you on my hands.' Her manner was scolding, but her tone was gentle. 'We'll have a Healer in from St Mungo's to see Granger. She woke up last time...there's no reason to believe she won't do it again.'

And the matron bustled away as her domain was inundated with wounded from the battle.

*26 April, 1998*

The Healer was a harried looking older wizard whose name Severus heard and promptly forgot.

'No telling if or when she'll wake up,' the Healer stated baldly. 'I'll have Matron continue with the potions that worked last time, and we'll hope for the best, shall we?'

The bumbling fool had no idea how close he came to being hexed for his trouble.

Severus looked down at his wife, her paper white face seeming too thin on the hospital pillow. He touched her hair with the tips of his fingers, then bent so his lips were close to her ear. 'Never mind him, little tempest...you listen to me. There's unfinished homework in your school bag, and classes will resume any day now. Do you want points taken for incomplete lessons? You'd best wake up and get on with your school work.'

But she remained perfectly still, locked in the dreamless sleep of oblivion.

---

27 April, 1998

'Severus, you have to sleep,' Septima Vector insisted. 'You're as ill as she is! What possible use will you be to her if you end up in the next bed?'

He sat at the bedside, holding Hermione's small, frail hand enveloped in his own. She had not stirred since he'd brought her here, but she *should*. She had to. Otherwise, he did not know what he would do.

'Severus, are you listening to me?'

'No, Tima. Go away.'

He bowed his head, his stubbled cheek pressed for a moment to a delicate, blue-veined wrist.

Vector tried again. 'I'll sit with her, I promise you. I won't leave her alone for an instant. If there's any change, I'll send a house-elf for you at once.'

Severus stopped responding to Vector, and eventually, she left.

---

28 April, 1998

The headmaster was more forceful.

'You will go to your rooms, eat, drink, wash yourself, and sleep,' he said, standing at the door and holding it open for Severus to pass through. 'I will stay with Hermione until you return...in no less than eight hours, Severus.'

---

Severus walked through the night-quiet hospital ward, his exhausted, incurious gaze travelling from patient to patient. Many of the injured, including Potter and Weasley, had been evacuated to St Mungo's, but those whose conditions could not be improved by hospital care remained behind.

Here was Alastor Moody, slowly recovering from the combined skills of the Lestrangle brothers, and beside him lay Remus Lupin, the many slashes and gouges from his duel with Death Eaters being slowly mended by the frequent application of Dr Ubbly's Oblivious Unction.

In the last bed near the door was Dolores Umbridge, whom Dumbledore had removed from Firenze's classroom with a tender civility usually reserved for senile mavens of the Hogwarts Board of Governors. Her position as headmistress had been revoked in Dumbledore's favour, and as soon as her voice returned, she would be removing to London once again, to spread her particular brand of cheerful misery amongst her Ministry cohorts.

Severus marched out of the hospital wing to his...*their*...rooms, where he fell into his bed, appointing a house-elf to wake him at first light.

---

Hermione floated in a neverland of serenity, in dreams of silent, somnolent safety.

---

29 April, 1998

Rested, nourished, showered, shaved, dressed, at last, in his own clothes, Severus sat with Hermione, trying to quell the slowly rising dread within. Was it time to face reality? What if she never awakened again?

Her colour had worsened, the pasty white leeching into an alarming grey, and *herbeing* in some way seemed farther from him than it had ever done before. He'd brought her book...the one she carried everywhere, *Transcendent Quality of Remembrance*...to her hospital room, and he'd read to her for a while, but she'd not made any response. The gift he'd brought for her...a trifle he'd had tucked away for a rainy day...sat forlornly on her bedside table, unacknowledged and unloved.

She wasn't breaking his heart...that had been done long ago...but she was frightening him in a way the Dark Lord had never done. After all, what could the Dark Lord do to him? Humiliation, pain, torture, death...these things had an end to their misery, even if that end was the cessation of his life. But this waiting for Hermione to awaken from her second dose of Dolohov's unique, deadly curse was draining him of perseverance and slowly crushing his spirit...because the loss of Hermione would never end. If she were lost to him, the aching void would follow him into the afterlife, unceasing wretchedness for all eternity.

Such pathetic, self-indulgent rumination stirred his ire. Summoning dregs of defiance from the depths of his foundering courage, he moved from his chair.

'Someone's lollygagging,' he said, stretching out at Hermione's side and gathering her against him. 'You've been sleeping long enough, little tempest. It's time for you to come back to me.'

He pressed a kiss to her temple, her impossible hair tickling his nose. Momentary annoyance segued swiftly to wretched longing, and the salt of his tears traced damp trails down her cheek.

'Wake up, little tempest, my love.'

---

She had been in the same position for a long time, and she desperately needed to move...but she was weak...so weak. Still, she could turn her head a millimetre or two, and this she did, breathing deeply of sandalwood and musk. A smile curved her lips, and a feeling of marrow-deep happiness and contentment pervaded her mind.

Elsewhere in her psyche, other things, long dormant, stirred to remembrance.

---

When tapping came at the door, heralding a visitor, Severus woke and bolted from the bed as if he were a student caught in an indiscretion. He scarcely had time to straighten his robes before Remus Lupin's ugly mug peered around the lintel.

'Hello, Severus...how is she? Up to a visitor?'

Severus glared icily.

'She's unconscious, Lupin, and unlikely to be aware of your ... condescension.'

Lupin seemed determined to ignore Severus, for he entered the room and took Hermione's hand, giving it a pat.

'Poor girl,' he murmured. 'Get better quickly, Hermione.'

Severus paced to the wall and stood with his back to Lupin, every nerve straining to cast a hex at the werewolf.

'Let her know I came to visit, won't you, Severus?'

He replied without turning. 'I will deliver your touching message post-haste, should she waken.'

When he heard the door close, Severus returned to the bedside and bent to straighten Hermione's covers, so that when she turned her face and opened her eyes, they were nose to nose.

He stilled, wondering for a moment if he were imagining her wakefulness. Seeing her big, brown eyes open was like having light shine through the fog of these last days of interminable waiting.

She blinked, as if she were trying to clear her vision. After a moment, her dry lips parted and she croaked, 'Severus.'

It was the first time she'd spoken his given name since their wedding weekend.

Unable to translate his immense relief into words, he replied simply, 'Hermione.'

'So thirsty,' she whispered.

Severus reached for the jug Pomfrey had placed on Hermione's bedside table, replenishing it each day, though Hermione had not been awake to partake of its contents. The very sight of the fresh jugs had become painful for him, heralding another day in which Hermione had not awakened. Now he dug into the crushed ice with a spoon and brought it to her lips.

She took the ice between her lips and let it melt. Each time her lips parted again, he spooned more ice into her mouth. Pomfrey had warned him not to give her water when she first woke.

She was thin and weak, but she was herself, fully present behind her tired eyes, and he was weak as well with the gladness of it.

After several spoons of ice slivers, Hermione swallowed and said, 'Harry? And Ron?'

'Are bedevilling the staff at St Mungo's and set to be released tomorrow,' he assured her, pleased now that he had listened to the headmaster's rambling. 'None of the members of Dumbledore's Army died.'

She closed her eyes, her relief evident. After a moment she asked, 'And You Know Who?'

He had flinched so persistently at her attempted use of the Dark Lord's name that she had learnt not to say it to him...though now, he might learn to say it himself without wincing.

'Gone for good,' he assured her

She looked down at herself, then back at him. 'What happened to me?'

He temporised. 'What do you remember?'

'The dungeon and Slytherins...nakedness...and then Dolohov.' She shuddered, and without thinking, he placed a calming hand on her arm.

'Dolohov cursed you with the same spell he used in the Department of Mysteries,' he said quietly. 'But just as when it happened then, you're going to be fine.'

She slowly glanced about the small room, her gaze lighting on his gift, and he knew a bitter regret that he'd brought it here, making such a fool of himself.

'My Little Pony!' she said wonderingly. 'Is it a unicorn?' She reached for it, and he placed it in her hand. 'Where did it come from?'

Merlin's beard...how stupid could he be? She had confided in him about the toy after she'd taken the Lethe Elixir...she had no memory of telling him about it. How could he possibly defend his knowledge?

But she did not question him further; even something so minimal as holding the toy tired her, and she allowed it to fall to the bed. Her eyes fluttered, as if she were fighting off sleep. He didn't want to tire her, but he was afraid for her to sleep before Pomfrey examined her.

He had turned from her to fetch the matron when he heard her voice again, barely audible, and had to turn back.

'You spoke to me so sweetly,' she murmured, with a heartrending curve of her lips.

Desperate to distract her, he flung the door open. 'I'll tell Madam Pomfrey you're awake,' he said and walked away from her.

---

She recovered slowly, but surely, from that time on. Severus could no longer spend every waking moment at her bedside...how could he possibly explain such behaviour?...so he threw his energies into helping Dumbledore and the other teachers repair enough battle damage to recommence classes, and he resumed his teaching schedule, visiting his wife every morning and every evening to see how she did. More often than not, he stumbled over Potter and Weasley in her room, or some other contingent of DA members, which was, he knew, precisely how it ought to be.

---

After ten full days, Hermione chafed to be released from the hospital wing, but Madam Pomfrey was a dragon when it came to patient compliance

'Not until you're taking no more than three potions per day,' she informed Hermione. 'Until then, you're stuck with me.'

So Hermione alternated between sitting in a chair and lying in her bed. She revised relentlessly for her NEWTs, forcing Harry and Ron to search out any books she wanted from the library. She kept up with her school assignments. (Why did she have such an anxiety about unfinished homework in her school bag? She'd searched through it thoroughly, and she was sure no such incomplete assignment existed.) And of course, she helped the boys with their essays

---

*9 May, 1998*

Snape stood barely within the door, as if the merest provocation would cause him to leave...as if he could not quite commit to entering her hospital room completely. He was always this way when he visited, although Parvati and Ginny had told her how he had carried her out of the dungeons, how he had refused to leave her bedside when she was unconscious. Why was he so aloof now?

She studied him curiously as he loomed in the doorway in his voluminous teaching robes. During the two weeks of her hospital stay, his face had begun to fill out a bit, and his eyes were not shadowed as they had been

'I've been meaning to ask you,' she began, averting her eyes to study the unicorn pony figure in her hands. 'When I was waking up, you talked to me ... told me it was time to ... come back to you.'

Now he regarded her with raised brows, his manner polite but distant. 'It sounds very much like a dream, to me,' he said quietly.

She remembered as if it were yesterday his response when she had asked him, before their wedding, if he thought he could ever be attracted to her *Don't be ridiculous!*

And even with that embarrassing memory ringing in her mind, she could not prevent herself from asking the next question.

'And ... the My Little Pony? Did you give it to me?'

He sighed and responded in a way that implied she was really wasting his time. 'Have you asked your friend Lupin these questions? Perhaps he's been whispering to you and bringing childish playthings to divert you.'

She swallowed her embarrassment and said in a small voice, 'I thought it was you.'

He cleared his throat. 'If you've no requests for me tonight, then I shall leave you to your revision.'

He exited the room in a swirl of black robes, leaving Hermione with her thoughts.

---

11 May, 1998

On Monday, when Severus made his morning visit to his wife's sick room, Madam Pomfrey informed them that Hermione was to be discharged that afternoon.

'I've got classes all afternoon, followed by a staff meeting,' Severus informed the matron with some asperity. 'I can take her now, or I can do so this evening.'

'Not before I've completed her final examination, Severus,' Poppy answered tartly.

Hermione spoke up quietly. 'Harry and Ron can help me gather my things and make sure I arrive safely in your rooms, sir.'

It was obvious that she heard her mistake immediately...*your* rooms, instead of *our* rooms...for the flush in her cheeks broadcast her awareness. Even so, it riled Severus. She made him ridiculous when she behaved as if he were her teacher rather than her husband.

*And how do you behave towards her, Snivellus?*his less-than-kind inner voice asked, but he ignored it.

'Do as you like,' he snapped and swept out of the hospital wing to attend breakfast.

---

They were a merry party departing the hospital wing that afternoon. Two house-elves had happily transported Hermione's collection of get-well gifts and cards, along with her books, to her dungeon quarters, so all Harry and Ron had to do was walk with her down the steps. She felt a little weak, still, and not perfectly steady on her feet, but she was very relieved to escape the sickroom.

'... and now there are reporters from the *Daily Prophet* hanging around the school, covering the reconstruction and repair work,' Ron explained.

Harry rolled his eyes. 'Yeah, and you're always happy to give them a new interview with forgotten details about the battle,' he said dryly.

Ron grinned. 'I can't help it if the press loves me,' he replied.

They reached the entrance hall, where two older wizards were milling about; one carried a camera, the other a Quick Quotes Quill.

'Look, it's Hermione Granger!' the photographer said and immediately began taking pictures.

Hermione had not exactly primped for a photography shoot. 'Don't do that,' she protested, turning her face away.

'But people want to know how you're doing, Hermione!' the reporter said excitedly. 'How does it feel to survive the Victory Over Voldemort?'

Ron scowled. 'She doesn't want to talk to you right now, all right, mate? Wait until we've got her settled in, and I'll give you something for tomorrow's edition.'

But the reporter ignored Ron in favour of Harry Potter's other best friend, with whom he had not yet spoken. 'Let's sit down in the Great Hall for a chat,' he suggested. 'You're looking a wee bit peaky, Hermione.'

To be honest, her head was swimming a bit, and she desperately wanted to sit down.

'I'd like for you to leave me alone,' she said crossly, and giving a tug to Harry's sleeve, she set them in motion, crossing the entrance hall to reach the dungeon staircase.

'The public is dying to hear from you, Hermione!' the reporter coaxed, following closely behind her. 'How you married your professor to remain at Harry's side! How you single-handedly fought the Death Eaters in the dungeon!'

The photographer hurried around the trio and blocked the dungeon staircase, his camera clicking repeatedly, taking pictures of the three war heroes.

A shot of red light streaked from overhead, slamming the photographer onto his back, his camera falling from his hands and clattering to the floor.

'Hey!' the reporter cried, spinning around to see who the attacker was. 'You can't do...'. But he stopped talking when he saw who it was.

'Move your friend's body out of my way,' a silky voice commanded, and Hermione had never felt such relief at hearing her husband's voice.

Snape scooped her from between Harry and Ron, with one arm beneath her knees, the other supporting her back, and she wrapped her arms about his neck.

'Did you forget how to use your wands?' the professor demanded, glaring at the boys. 'If you two dunderheads can't do any better than this taking care of my wife, we can dispense with your company.'

Hermione turned her face into her husband's robes to hide her smile. It was nice, when she wasn't feeling well, to have someone step up and speak for her.

The professor began to walk, and as he went, he spoke to the men from the newspaper.

'If you ever harass my wife again, you'll answer *to me*,' he said icily.

'S-sorry, Professor Snape,' the reporter said, and Hermione could only surmise that he had moved the Stunned photographer out of the way, for Snape was carrying her down the stairs in the next instant.

Hermione revelled in the strength of his arms, in the solidity of his bulk betwixt her and the bothersome newspapermen, and she was moved to speak.

'Thank you for rescuing me from the reporters,' she said, darting a sidewise glance up at his face.

He met her eyes, a rare instance of intimacy between them. Hermione tried to categorize his expression, but she was stumped, for though she identified a touch of surprise, the strongest component seemed just beyond reach of her understanding.

'That is what I'm here for,' he informed her, his voice a rumble to the ear pressed to his chest, a silken caress to the other. 'You may always count on me to shield you.'

With a murmur of thanks, Hermione clung to her husband, feeling safe, and in spite of past indications to the contrary, somehow *cherished* by him. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply of his distinctive scent.

---

And that was the first night Severus Snape entered her dreams, a faceless figure fraught with unutterable passion, fragrant of sandalwood and musk.

---

A/N: Today's song is *These Dreams* by Heart. The very soul of the song fits this story, but one set of lyrics particularly resonate for Severus:

*In a wood full of princes*

*Freedom is a kiss*

*But the prince hides his face*

*From dreams in the mist*

You may view it on YouTube here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7ULxzVbNrY>

## Chapter 22

*Chapter 22 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: We're back from our three chapter sojourn in the past, with Severus and Hermione at Forest Haven. But it's only a wee chapter, I fear...there's certainly more to come, next week. I bid you a happy Friday, and I will breathlessly await your thoughts!

---



Chapter 22

So many dreams to wake

And we've so much love to make

*It Might Be You*

*10 July, 1998*

*'Dream sweetly, little tempest.'*

The words sang in her mind, an endless loop, at once sensual, comforting ... and loving. The one she desired...the one who named her *tempest*...lay at her side, and she flowed against him like water to a dam, adapting her soft body to the hard lines and angles of his. She was in a twilight-state, neither sleeping nor awake, a being of motion and emotion, searching for that which she craved like the sweetest, deadliest of dependences.

She reached for him, the palm of her hand finding and cupping the prize she sought. He murmured in his sleep, and the soft tissue below her fingers twitched and began to harden, lengthening and stiffening beneath the cover of her hand, until its length surpassed the breadth of her palm...and she grasped it.

With her first gentle compression, her companion murmured again, and he shifted beside her. She lightly pumped her hand on her catch, pressing herself against his side, one of her legs slowly inching across his thighs. She was already aroused, had stirred from sleep in that state, and between her legs there lived a warm, wet ache in need of filling.

When his soldier rose stiff and proud, at a sharp angle from his flat belly, she slipped astride him. She was sorry to disturb his rest, but how could *she* rest with this throb of aching desire bubbling away within her, like a potion in a hot cauldron?

Reaching between them, she positioned herself at the tip of his sword and plunged down upon it, her breath escaping in a loud sigh. Yes, sweet *Circe*, this was what she had craved. She leant forward, bracing herself upon his torso, and his hands found her dangling, bouncing breasts, his clasp none too gentle, his thumbs repeatedly stroking over her rigid nipples.

She heard her soft, whimpering cries of rapture, but the sounds were of no matter. All that mattered were his narrow hips between her thighs, and his rhythmic driving up as she slid down, their bodies meeting and parting in thrusts and gasps of pure pleasure.

She licked her fingers and rubbed her clitoris, needing the extra rush of sensation to spur her on to the completion she required. Slick pressure upon her pleasure centre was her immediate undoing. She was coming, her breath a high, whistling noise in her throat, and the hands upon her breasts deserted for her hips. Strong fingers grasped her arse as he drove upward, pistoning beneath her like a feral, driven thing, and his harsh, muted cry had scarcely died before she slumped to her abandoned pillow, sated and pleased with herself.

Sleep came quickly, engulfing her in the velvet blackness as he spooned behind her, one arm possessively about her waist.

---

Severus buried his nose in her hair, breathing deeply of sleeping Hermione before he spooned against her back, holding her close. She had reached for him in the night and begun their lovemaking without ever truly waking up. Indeed, he had thought it an erotic dream until she braced her hands upon his chest, bringing him to a state of drowsy wakefulness. He had not known, before the advent of Hermione in his life, that one could make love in one's sleep.

'Dream sweetly, little tempest,' he murmured for the second time that night, and then he was asleep, almost before the words left his lips.

He woke as the first rays of light filtered into the attic room where he lay abed with his wife. He felt remarkably refreshed for a man whose sleep had been interrupted by his greedy lover...but what wizard could fail to feel like a million Galleons when a young, vibrant witch sought his sexual attentions time and time again?

He sat on the side of the bed and glanced behind him, but Hermione slept on, undisturbed by his movement. Her hair was loose upon her pillow, crazily kinked and curling, her face as smooth and innocent as that of any witch her age...but *she* was his, and in his eyes, she was beautiful.

He gathered his shower things and conjured the bathroom on the landing outside their door. With the hot water sluicing over his body, the scent of soap filling his nostrils, he considered the immediate future. He'd never expected to survive the end of the Dark Lord, and ever since the passing of Tom Riddle, he'd been bound up in Hermione's recovery from Dolohov's curse...and her ordeal in the dungeons. They'd scarcely got through the end of the summer term and the sitting of her NEWTs before Dumbledore had bundled them off to this place...and now, with their renewed intimacy, *everything* had changed

It was finally time to plan for the future.

---

He was surprised to find no one but Arthur in the kitchen when he went down for his morning coffee. The older wizard gave him a distracted smile and motioned towards the coffee pot and rack of toast on the counter.

'Molly's having a lie in after the party last night,' he said apologetically, 'but I managed coffee and toast.'

Severus poured the black brew into a cup and raised a sardonic eyebrow in reply. 'It looks to me as if *everyone* is having a lie in.'

Arthur chuckled. 'True, but I promised Molly I'd manage some sort of breakfast for the early risers.'

Severus took the chair to Arthur's right and studied him over the rim of his coffee cup. 'Any news?' he asked.

Arthur ran a hand through his thinning hair. 'No, and it's beginning to bother me, Severus. Why haven't we heard from Dumbledore? What's going on in the outside world?'

Severus was surprised to hear his phlegmatic friend give voice to such sentiments. Arthur Weasley was one of the least critical men of his acquaintance. 'Is there a particular reason for your concern?' he asked.

Arthur sat back and pushed his uneaten toast away. 'Molly is bothered about leaving the Burrow untended...and about the twins' shop without them there to supervise...and about Fleur being cooped up here during her pregnancy.'

Severus nodded. 'Molly is fretting,' he said, summarising Arthur's words succinctly. Enough said.

Arthur sighed and removed his spectacles, rubbing a palm over his face. 'One's wife's concerns tend to become one's own...don't you find that to be true, Severus?'

Throughout their sojourn in this house, Arthur had been wheedling Severus, trying to ferret out how things were betwixt him and Hermione...he'd also been full of unsolicited marriage advice. But in the last few days...since Severus' interrupted love affair with his wife had resumed...Severus had found he didn't mind the interference nearly as much as he'd done before.

'Indeed,' he murmured in agreement.

Arthur stood and replaced his glasses. 'The headmaster told us to stay put, but I don't believe I can go another day without knowing something of where we stand.'

Severus was intrigued. How odd it was to see Arthur fired up for action when he, Severus, felt quite content to wait it out. 'What will you do?'

Arthur straightened himself. 'I'm going to pop out to Hagrid's hut,' he said with resolution. 'All of our mail deliveries were directed there, which will include the newspapers. I should obtain a good bit of information from that alone, I would think. I shan't be long...and I'll bring everyone's mail back with me.'

'And what will I tell your wife of your whereabouts?' Severus inquired quietly.

Arthur gave him a shrewd look. 'I believe you'd be best off not being here when she wakes up,' he said. 'I imagine the perimeter could do with a good patrolling.'

Severus swallowed the last of his coffee and grabbed a handful of toast from the rack. 'I shall play least-in-sight until your return,' he said. 'You'll come to find me then?'

Arthur gave a terse nod, and the two wizards went out into the sunny summer day to perform their assigned tasks.

---

*'Dream sweetly, little tempest.'*

Hermione's eyes cracked open, the words echoing in her mind, strangely evocative. Some vital fact...incontrovertible truth...lay just beyond the edges of remembrance, and she relaxed again with eyes closed, inviting the revelation with lazy, tranquil acceptance.

*'You're like a tempest in a teacup.'* His voice, sultry and seductive.

*'Teapot!'* Her, breathless and too distracted to be a proper know-it-all.

*'Teacup.'* His voice again, accompanied by a wash of arousal so intense that the following words were coloured with raw passion. *'More fragile than a teapot, and a far better vessel for such a tempestuous temptress.'*

Hermione sat straight up in bed, suddenly and completely awake.

*'Accio my bag!'* she cried, and when it flew into her hand, she reached within and withdrew *Transcendent Quality of Remembrance*, her fingers going unerringly to the slight rent in the endpaper of the front cover board. With a silent apology to the book gods, she worried at the tear with a fingernail and was entirely unsurprised when it parted easily for her. As if re-enacting an oft-dreamed sequence, she scraped with the tip of her nail and pulled from the hole a strip of parchment, on which was written one word.

*Tempest.*

In an instant, it all came flooding back, a torrent of remembrance so richly detailed and emotionally charged that she sagged back on her pillow again beneath the fraught weight of it all.

*'They aren't dreams,'* she murmured aloud, staring at her hidden, handwritten clue, *'they're memories.'*

---

A/N: Today's song is *It Might Be You* by Stephen Bishop. Those of you who are old enough may remember it as the love theme from the movie *Tootsie*, in the 80s. When SubHub, a great Stephen Bishop fan, suggested this song for this story, I knew in an instant that it was perfect. It was one of the first songs on the playlist...in fact I added it at our cabin, a very romantic spot...but one at which it took me over a year of writing to arrive. You may view it at this link...and I hope you like it.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrofYIAmI5s>

## Chapter 23

*Chapter 23 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: We are drawing nigh to the end, my very dear ones, and then our journey together will be complete. Three more chapters after this one will bring us to the end of summer (or winter if you're south of the equator!) and the end of my story. Group hug?

---



Transcendent Quality of Remembrance

Chapter 23

Hold on to the past tense tonight

Don't say a word, I'm OK with the quiet.

The truth is gonna change everything.

*Lie*

*10 July, 1998*

Severus sat beneath what had become one of his favourite trees and relaxed, his duties of patrolling the perimeter of their Secret Kept hideout complete. It was amusing to consider his 'favourite' of anything, as he was not wont to think in such terms, but indeed, the world seemed a more benign place now, with the Dark Lord defeated and Hermione once again behaving as she'd done on their wedding weekend.

He tilted his face to the sky, the morning sun streaming through tree branches, his hopes rising mercurially, escaping his customary firm grasp on the grim reality that had been his for all his life. There was a giddiness in such freedom of thought, and unaccustomed though he was to such flights of fancy, he recognised them for what they were.

'She wants me.'

He said the words to the slivers of blue sky visible through the branches, to the gently wafting breeze, to himself, the unlikely auditor of all

What did people do at such times? They planned their futures together, obviously, but what sort of template did he have for such formulation? There were the dimly remembered notions of marriage he had gleaned in childhood as the prisoner of Tobias and Eileen Snape, but he had no desire to revisit those horrors on any part of this new life with Hermione. As an adult, he'd had little intimacy with other adults to observe their family lives. He knew with a certainty that he could take no pointers from the Malfoys and their icy approach to family life. And the Weasleys had always welcomed him just as if he were someone other than Severus Snape...as if they were unaware of the ostracism he deserved for the way he had lived his life...yet he could not imagine patterning his home life after the child-cluttered chaos favoured by Arthur and Molly.

Becoming aware of the trend of his thoughts, his lips twisted in sardonic self-mockery. Had he lost his entire mind through his obsession with an eighteen year old witch? Did he actually believe she would want to plan some sort of sickly happily-ever-after life with him?

And his soaring spirits took a nosedive; his face slowly lowered until he was staring not at the limitless sky, but at the dusty boots upon his feet.

'She doesn't know any better,' he muttered. 'She thinks she can free the house-elves and defy the Dark Lord and reason with *me*.'

And slowly, very slowly, his head fell against the trunk of the tree, a bark of laughter rolling up from his belly, dispelling the darkness in one sharp crack of sound.

'Two out of three's not bad, little tempest,' he said, feeling his irrepressible optimism slip its leash once again.

---

Hermione began to dress haphazardly, her hands trembling so much it slowed her down. She remembered everything from her wedding night; how Severus had relaxed after she swallowed the Lethe Elixir, their first kiss, her shaken demand to know what had just happened.

*'I believe it is called good chemistry.'*

Good God! He'd been smooth, sexy, seductive, and she'd melted in his arms like candlewax, hot and malleable, quickly reduced to a pool of wanton heat by the touch of his lips and stroke of his clever, devastating tongue.

She sank to the floor, one sock on, the other hanging limply from her hand as she remembered. He'd known just what to do with her...how to touch, caress, inflame...and in mere minutes she was gasping in his arms, begging him to fuck her. Oh, not in those words...not just then...but she'd been so hot for him, the tops of her thighs had been dewed with the excess moisture of her quim.

Even that first time, when his possessive cupping of her sex had resulted in the vanishing of her wedding robes, her modesty had been instantly overborne by her need for him. He'd buried his face between her legs, using those ravishing lips to send her to orgasmic bliss, and she'd been wicked enough to suckle her essence from the length of his tongue.

When he plunged into her heat for the first time, it was as if accelerant had been added to an already raging firestorm. Her very blood was aflame with him, and as he moved in her, the fire consumed her...consumed them both...and they were refined and reformed by immersion in the conflagration of their passion.

She groaned aloud at the power and force of the memories, so many she could scarcely contain them all in her once well-ordered mind. Now she was overwhelmed with the sheer number of intimate, decadent acts they had performed together in the two short days of their wedding weekend.

She'd asked him to reverse the potion...of course she had! Her cheeks flamed, just remembering how fatuous and lovesick she'd sounded. But he hadn't minded...had told her with actions, if not with words, that he felt precisely as she did. He'd said there was no antidote...no reports of a reversal of the potion's effects over time...but he'd been wrong! She was living proof that the Lethe Elixir could be subverted, and she had to tell him, without delay

She ruthlessly pushed her bare foot into its sock. She couldn't wait to see his face when she told him how very much she loved him.

---

She scrambled down the staircase in a frantic state, her eyes darting everywhere for Severus. He wasn't in the sitting room...no one was...so she burst into the kitchen.

'Good morning, Hermione,' Molly said brightly. 'Did you sleep well?'

Hermione took a quick inventory of the room's inhabitants. The table was crowded with breakfasters, but Severus was not amongst their number.

'Where's Severus?' she asked Molly, successfully keeping her desperation from her voice.

'He and Arthur were gone when we came down,' Molly informed her, popping sausages on a plate and handing them to her. 'I'm sure they'll be along soon enough. Now, sit down and eat while your food's warm.'

Hermione hesitated. If Severus was patrolling or discussing things with Arthur, he probably wouldn't welcome her intrusion...even for something as momentous as this. In fact, he would undoubtedly prefer to have their discussion in private. Besides, the food smelled delicious. She would sit with her friends and share a meal, and when Severus returned she could tell him what she remembered of their time together in unexpurgated, blushing detail...tell him *everything*.

---

Arthur came through the trees with a large, bulging cloth sack hanging from each hand. Severus rose and went to him.

'What news?' he asked, taking one of the sacks from Arthur, noting the plethora of *Daily Prophet* copies within it.

Arthur frowned. 'I'll have to read through all the papers to be sure, but it looks as if there's some talk in the Wizengamot about investigation into paramilitary organisations.' He shook his head. 'It's a load of codswallop, but you know how the newspaper loves to make much out of little.'

From the sack he held, Arthur pulled out a stack of envelopes wrapped about by a copy of the *Hogsmeade Weekly* and a glossy apothecary catalogue. 'Here's your and Hermione's mail,' he said. 'I'll take the rest of this lot back to the house and start reading.'

Severus accepted the bundle, his eye caught by the loose page inserted in the folds of the *Hogsmeade Weekly*. It was the wizarding village's version of classified adverts, where one might find such things as a cottage to let...the perfect place for a newly married couple to begin their married lives ...

'Coming, Severus?' Arthur asked, taking the sack of newspapers into his empty hand again.

'Not just yet,' Severus replied distractedly. 'I believe I'll stay here for a while and look through the post.'

Arthur gave him a nod and set off through the trees for the house.

Severus quickly perused the small section of accommodations available in Hogsmeade. Perhaps Hermione would want a home of her own, away from the castle. Or perhaps they would leave Hogwarts altogether, strike out to begin their new lives somewhere completely different. Now he wished he had kept a copy of the *Daily Prophet*, because its adverts would show openings at the Ministry, as well as flats to let in London.

He smirked. Knowing Hermione, she would want to make her presence known in the seat of British wizarding government. If she didn't follow Potter off to Auror training, she would be campaigning to set up an office for House-Elf Relations in the Beast, Being, and Spirit division of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

His lips still twisted in a smirk, he flipped through the envelopes in his hand: professional affiliates advertising their summer lecture series, employment reference requests for former students, invoices for potions ingredients that he would surrender to the school bookkeeper...the usual claptrap he received, nothing of interest.

And here were Hermione's letters: a handwritten missive from her mother, an advert from Flourish & Blotts (trust his wife to be on their individual mailing list) about new summer releases, her N.E.W.T. results (that should please her!), and a thick, creamy envelope addressed in flowing, ostentatious typeface from ...

He stared at the imprint in the upper left corner of the envelope, his mind frozen, as if in stasis, and with the tip of one long finger, he traced back and forth over the raised, engraved type, unable to process the words he read.

---

After she ate her breakfast, Hermione declined the offer of a game of Quidditch...Harry was only being polite, because he knew very well she never climbed aboard a broomstick if she could help it!...and wandered upstairs to her room. She loved her friends...loved the entire world, actually...but she found that she wanted to be alone with her thoughts.

She tidied up the mess she had left behind, in her hurry to go downstairs, and straightened the bedclothes, lovingly pulling the counterpane over the pillow where ~~his~~ head had lain next to hers these last nights of rediscovery. Then she took up her book again, opening to the tear in the frontispiece and smiling fondly. As much as it pained her to see a book in disrepair, she was tempted to leave this one in its current state, so that she might always remember hiding...and finding...the key that unlocked the door to her memories.

She sat upon the edge of their bed with her book in her hands and allowed her thoughts to drift. How gallant he had been, and he'd allowed her to love him...he'd seemed to need it, to feed off it, to want it as much as she did. She had felt in those short hours that she had finally found the place she belonged, and it was all in him. She was ready to embrace life in all its glorious wonder...the life one could have when lived by the side of a partner one truly loved and admired.

---

Arthur Weasley called out to Molly from the clearing, and all the household...save for Hermione...poured out into the warm day to claim their accumulated post. That was where Severus Snape found them when he came striding from the wood, and the expression on his face was such that every one of his former students fell back with lowered eyes to allow him passage, like flotsam in the wake of a roiling, mounting wave. Arthur and Molly Weasley exchanged worried glances, but when Molly would have called out to Severus, Arthur stayed her with a hand to her wrist.

*Let the man alone*, his eyes seemed to say.

And Snape entered the Secret Kept house without speaking a word to anyone; through the window, Arthur saw the Potions master take the staircase two steps at a time.

---

Hermione startled guiltily when the door was thrust open; she dropped her book and jumped to her feet, but when she saw who it was, she started forward with arms outstretched.

'Severus!' she cried, rushing toward him. 'Severus, I ...'

But then she saw his face, and her words of greeting died upon her lips. His scowl pulled his coal black brows into a V of fury, his eyes glittered dangerously, his monstrous nostrils flared wide, and his lips peeled back from his unattractive teeth, showing how they ground against each other between his bunched jaws.

'What?' he demanded, his tone barely above a whisper, a silky, lethal purr. 'What were you going to say, Hermione?'

Something was wrong...very wrong. He didn't look right...he didn't *seem* right. In his angriest moments with her, all through their pre-nuptial negotiations and his occasional flares of annoyance after their marriage, he had never looked as unapproachable as he did now. But she had news...had something amazing to tell him...so she licked her suddenly dry lips and took another hesitant step towards her bristling husband.

'Something wonderful has happened,' she said, her voice sounding small and not at all happy to her ears.

If possible, his eyes narrowed even more. 'Pray tell,' he said.

She drew a deep breath, gathering her courage. She didn't know why he was angry, but regardless of the reason, it could not stand against the news she had to impart.

'Severus,' she said, looking up into his face, '*remember*...I remember everything!'

'You *lie*!' he spat, and advanced towards her with such purpose that Hermione scrambled backwards.

'I'm not lying!' she cried, coming to a stop when her back was to the far wall.

His voice was a roar...a tidal wave of sound and fury pouring forth upon her. 'The only way you could remember, wife, is if you were in love with me...and we both know that's impossible, don't we?'

He jerked his arm up, a violent flick of his wrist, and something flew into her face, smacking her forehead and then falling to the floor. She stared down at the missile, an envelope, bearing a familiar logo:

*The Salem Witches' Institute, est. 1631*

*The Mnemosyne Project*

Office of the Director

Salem, Massachusetts

U.S.A.

He spoke again, and it seemed as if the tsunami of fury were spent, for his voice was devoid of emotion...as if the words were being spoken by a dead person.

'If you were in love with me, you wouldn't be secretly planning to leave me.'

---

A/N: I know I left it at a distressing place, and I apologize to you with all my heart. In recompense, I offer you this song, which made me ache for Severus every time I listened to it - and believe me, I listened to it **often**. I could see this as the way he would think about things with her, being so swept up in the renewal of their love affair, yet with that niggling doubt in his mind that something would go wrong. This is *Lie*, by David Cook. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLiMyt7ZIMY>

## Chapter 24

Chapter 24 of 26

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.



Transcendent Quality of Remembrance

Chapter 24

I pretend that I'm alright that you're leaving me

Wherever you go, I will always long for you

Wherever you are, I wish I was there

If you're running away, do you want me to chase you?

Tried to move on but I couldn't erase you

*Wherever You Go*

10 July, 1998

Severus thrust open the door of his dungeon quarters and stalked into his sitting room, black eyes sweeping side to side and floor to ceiling, but he saw nothing to alarm him. He marched into his room and took up his wand, feeling the completion of his magic as he had ever done, simply by holding it. That, at least, soothed him in some measure. But he was not here to be soothed.

He dropped his travelling case upon his bed, forcing his mind away from its immediate connexion with the bed in the attic room where he had lain these last days with Hermione. He would not think about that now...not ever, if he could help it.

Thrusting his wand into its sheath, he strode through his rooms and into the corridor again. He had business here, and he would conduct it with no further delay.

He began the long climb from the dungeons to the upper reaches of the castle, but his grimmest determination could not prevent the day's events from playing out again in his mind.

He clenched his teeth and continued to climb.

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He was gone, unmoved by her words...indeed, she wasn't sure he'd even heard her. He'd said he was going, and he'd gone. She sagged to the floor and picked up the letter from Salem...the letter that had betrayed her secret to him...and she was unsurprised to find it open. Of course he'd read her post. He had been enraged...she wasn't even sure she could blame him for it.

He'd also looked at her NEWT results. With nothing more than idle curiosity, she saw the straight line of her subjects marching down the page, *Outstanding* written next to each one. She had hoped for these results...would normally have been ecstatic to receive them...but the news left her unmoved

Next she pulled the neatly folded parchment from the Salem envelope, and she smoothed the pages open.

*Salem Witches' Institute*

*The Mnemosyne Project*

*Office of the Committee on Admissions*

*July 2, 1998*

*Dear Miss Granger:*

*With sincere regret, I must report that the Committee on Admissions has completed its selection of the class entering in September 1998 and has not been able to offer you a place.*

*We were most grateful to have received application from so many students like you with excellent intellectual and personal qualities. Although you may be disappointed, my personal wish for you is that you find fulfilment studying at another fine wizarding university.*

*Sincerely,*

*Professor Moneta Muninn*

Hermione stared at the words on the parchment, her eyes scanning the short communique over and again, as if another reading would render a different message. Then she closed her eyes and allowed her head to fall back against the wall. Severus didn't want her because she wanted to go to school in America to study the phenomenon of memory, and now the American school did not want her, either.

She closed her eyes, acknowledging the black irony of the situation.

A piece of the parchment seemed to fall from her hand, and she glanced down to see a smaller note that had been folded in with the larger rejection letter. Oddly enough, it appeared to have been written in the same hand.

*Miss Granger,*

*I knew your year-end marks would not be available until July, and I could have approved your application if that were the only missing requirement, but it was not. You also failed to provide the requisite number of teacher recommendations. I am very sorry that you will not be joining us this autumn, but I sincerely hope you will apply again next year, for I would dearly love to work with you.*

*Best,*

*M. Muninn*

Hermione felt a dull thud of frustration. Of course she had provided the teacher recommendations! She had chosen her three best subjects and provided the necessary forms to McGonagall, Flitwick, and Vector before Easter! They would have told her if there had been any problem.

She allowed the papers to flutter from her fingers. Oh, how could she worry about something as incidental as education when her marriage was crumbling beneath her?

What did it matter at all?

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Dumbledore looked up when Severus walked into his office without knocking, and the old man had the temerity to smile at his Potions master, as if his appearance was not only welcome, but also expected. 'Hello, Severus! You're looking very well. How is Hermione?'

Severus ignored this inane babbling. He did not wish to think about Hermione, so he certainly would not *chat* with Dumbledore about her.

'What are you playing at, Headmaster?' he said instead, stopping in front of the desk and glaring down into the twinkling blue eyes.

'Playing?' Dumbledore repeated. 'Do you mean to say that you're not enjoying your stay at Forest Haven? It's very restful there, as I recall.'

Severus made no attempt to contain his snarl. 'Restful? I recommend that you spend a week cooped up in an enclosed space with the Weasleys and their assorted significant others before you say so.'

Dumbledore chuckled. 'But Hermione was there, wasn't she? Haven't you enjoyed a little second honeymoon with her?'

Severus slapped the palm of his hand down upon the desktop with enough force to wake the phoenix, and Fawkes trilled a low tone of greeting, sending a thread of unwanted serenity into Severus' mind. 'Don't talk to me about things that are none of your bloody business, old fool!' he shouted. 'Tell me why in blazes you sent us there in the first place!'

Seeing that the younger wizard was not to be distracted, Dumbledore sat back in his chair, his eyes growing sombre behind half-moon spectacles. 'You may as well sit, Severus,' he said quietly, and when Severus grudgingly flung himself into a chair, Dumbledore nodded his appreciation.

'You know that Madam Umbridge was ... unhappy with the outcome of her short stay here?' the headmaster inquired.

Severus replied with a snort.

Dumbledore's lip quivered, but he repressed it and continued. 'Precisely. I believe she is the one responsible for the Wizengamot's decision to investigate the paramilitary organisations operating at Hogwarts, including,' he picked up an official looking document from his desk and read, "'the so-called Dumbledore's Army and the Order of the Phoenix.'"

Severus stared at him. 'You cannot be serious,' he said.

Dumbledore dropped the document as if it were a dirty rag. 'Oh, but I am, dear boy. More than a week ago, the Wizengamot issued an order for Magical Law Enforcement to take all members of the DA and the Order into "protective custody." So I bundled all of you off before they could execute the instructions.'

Protective custody! The Ministry had been on the cusp of imprisoning the very people who organised the battle to defeat the Dark Lord! Severus scowled out the window and pondered the problem. At length, he asked a question.

'How can they justify such action? What is their reasoning?'

Dumbledore smiled thinly. 'Although their reasoning, as you call it, has not been set down on parchment, I have had numerous discussions with persons of influence at the Ministry on this subject. They tell me that Tom Riddle's Death Eaters were a paramilitary organisation that he was able to use to attack the heart of wizarding Britain. Therefore, all paramilitary groups must be apprehended, disbanded, and re-educated, for the safety of the wizarding world at large.'

Severus felt the fury spiralling within him, and ruthlessly, he contained it, funnelling it, as he had always done, into planning with the headmaster. 'That's preposterous! The Order of the Phoenix was formed to fight the Dark Lord, then was inactive until the Dark Lord rose again. The Order was never a threat to the wizarding world in peacetime!'

Dumbledore nodded. 'Yes, I have expressed those points as well, but someone has an axe to grind with us and will not back down.'

Severus paced to the window and stood staring out at the Forbidden Forest. 'Who, Headmaster? Please don't tell me that Dolores Umbridge has the standing in the Ministry to be able to marshal that sort of persistent asshatery.'

Dumbledore gave a dry chuckle. 'It's a good question. I've been working my way through the layers of adherents, searching for the source.' He rifled through his papers and said, 'Look at this.'

Dumbledore held up a scroll of parchment, and Severus turned from the window to take it from him. There were columns of names written in the headmaster's fine copperplate, and each of the names had a tick beside it. The names were grouped beneath members of the Wizengamot or heads of Ministry departments, and some names appeared more than once, if the person had connexions to more than one group. Severus did not know everyone listed, but he was surprised to see how many of the names were familiar to him. He ran his finger slowly down each column, allowing his mind to range free, making associations, and when he came to the bottom of the list, he met the headmaster's eyes.

'Where's Cornelius Fudge?' he asked.

Dumbledore cocked his head slightly to one side. 'You'll remember that Fudge was unseated within a week of the fall of Voldemort,' he said, clearly confused by the question. 'Our friend Kingsley was chosen as his replacement.'

Severus waved this away impatiently. 'I know all of that,' he snapped. 'But I do not see Fudge's name anywhere on this list.'

A frown appeared between the headmaster's brows, as if he were puzzled by his protégé's lack of understanding. 'Cornelius was discredited, Severus. He's living retired at this time; he doesn't go out in public, and he's certainly not a leading light in wizarding society, much less wizarding government.'

Severus dropped the parchment on Dumbledore's desk. 'You're making a mistake, discounting Fudge's influence,' he argued. 'Umbridge worshipped him...save for her personal prejudices against ... particular students, she upheld Fudge's authority and his policies with the passion of a zealot. She wants her revenge on us, but she doesn't have the personal magnetism to create adherents on her own...Fudge *has* to be behind it.'

He saw the moment when his reasoning struck a chord with the headmaster, for the formerly sombre blue eyes began to blaze with fire.

'Ah,' Dumbledore murmured. 'Obviously.' It was apparent that a new plan was already beginning to form in that brilliant mind. Fawkes sang a note of triumph, filling the hearts of his human auditors with Light. 'It all makes sense now...that's the missing piece of the puzzle.'

He came around his desk and enveloped Severus' hand in his own. 'Thank you,' he said with great sincerity. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, there are some matters requiring my attention.'

Dumbledore turned away to don his traveling cloak. 'Off to the Ministry,' he announced briskly. 'I imagine we'll be able to send for our friends to come home by tomorrow at the latest.'

And taking a pinch of Floo powder from the box on the mantel, the headmaster stepped into the fireplace and cried, 'The Ministry of Magic!'

Severus watched him go with no feeling of vindication or victory. So what if Hermione was able to leave Forest Haven? She still wouldn't come back to him...not for longer than it took for her to pack her trunk and leave Hogwarts for good.

---

A knock on her door stirred Hermione from her glum reflections, and for a wild instant, she believed Severus had thought better of his departure and returned to her. But the voice that called a quiet 'Hermione?' was her best friend's, not her husband's.

'Come in, Harry,' she replied, and the door opened, Harry's dear face peering around its edge.

'All right, Hermione?' Harry asked, coming into the room. He plopped down on the floor beside her as if they were in the Gryffindor common room, puzzling out the latest question of how to defeat Voldemort. His shoulder pressed against hers, and he took her hand in a comforting grip.

Hermione accepted his presence gratefully, leaning her head against his.

'Bad NEWT results?' he asked cautiously.

Hermione handed him her report, and he gave her hand a squeeze. 'Yeah, I didn't reckon that was the problem.'

She sighed but did not speak. It was too raw, this open wound where her heart had been, and she couldn't bear to speak of it now. So she leant on Harry, his hand anchoring her in time and space, and she allowed hot, miserable tears to fall onto their clasped hands, as the shadows on the wall lengthened from afternoon into evening.

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Severus followed the winding staircase down from the headmaster's office, and as the gargoyle moved aside to allow him to exit, he came face to face with Minerva McGonagall.

She let out a small shriek. 'Severus! I didn't know you were here! I was just returning these ledgers to the headmaster's office.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'I thought you were in hiding, Minerva, with the other teachers.'

McGonagall's lips thinned. 'We spent two days on some godforsaken island, bored out of our minds, and then the headmaster said it was safe for us to return to the castle...that he could protect us here perfectly well.' She straightened her tartan trimmed hat. 'How have you been, Severus? And how is Hermione?'

Now Severus sneered at her; he had no intention of speaking of Hermione. 'Is Timia here, as well?' he demanded.

McGonagall moved past him toward the staircase and began her ascent. 'Professor Vector is in her office,' she said, much in the tone she might have used with a less than bright first year. 'The replacements for her desk and bookshelves have been delivered...you know her office was destroyed in the battle...and she's organising her things.'

Severus turned on his heel and marched off to Vector's office. If there was one person in the world to whom he could speak about the state of his life, it was Tima.

He found her shelving books, her arms raised, wand outstretched, directing the heavy Arithmancy texts onto the handsome new wooden bookcase behind her matching desk. The pieces were made of a dark wood...he thought it was black walnut...and he knew a moment's envy for her refurbished office. But no, she'd lost everything in the fire resulting from the skirmish that took place here. He wouldn't wish to give up his book collection or his files, accumulated over the years of his teaching career, just in order to obtain new furniture.

'Do you require assistance?' he asked, and when she turned to him with a happy smile, he felt the veriest sliver of his misery dissipate.

'Welcome back!' she cried, coming forward with hands outstretched to him. 'Did the headmaster call for you? Is everything settled, then?'

He clasped her hands in a strong grip. 'He didn't call for me; I just came...and no, everything is not resolved, but perhaps we will have a successful resolution by this time tomorrow.'

His old friend looked him over with a shrewd eye. 'I think we should have a cuppa,' she declared, and tucking her arm through his, she led him to her living quarters and put on the kettle.

Over the comfort of a hot cup of tea made just as he liked it, Severus was able to vent some small degree of his concerns, giving Tima a broad sketch of the last several days.

Her eyes softened when he spoke of the renewal of his love affair with his bride, then hardened to flinty disapproval as he described the letter from the Salem Witches' Institute.

'The most ironic part of it all is that she wasn't accepted,' he said. 'She failed to provide the requisite number of teachers' recommendations...I cannot believe Hermione would be so disordered in her planning. It's quite unlike her.'

And Tima's teaspoon dropped with a rattle onto her saucer, her lips formed into an 'O' of horror. 'Oh, no.'

She placed her cup and saucer on the table and wrung her hands. 'Severus, I've done something terrible.'

He abandoned his half-drunk tea. 'What are you on about?' he demanded.

'Hermione gave me a form to complete for her application just before Easter...right about the time you went missing,' Septima began. 'I put it aside, intending to come back to it, but you were gone, and then the battle took place, and the papers were destroyed along with everything else in my office.' She closed her eyes in dismay. 'I forgot all about it, Severus. I never sent her recommendation letter.'

Severus couldn't believe his ears. Vector forget a student's recommendation? Such a thing was unheard of

'Why would you put it aside?' he demanded angrily. 'Why didn't you complete it immediately?'

At his accusatory tone, her chin rose. 'Don't rail at me!' she cried. 'I was going to discuss it with you, of course!'

He stood, his fists clenched at his sides. 'Why would you need to discuss it with me?'

She stood and squared up to him. 'Because she's your wife! You hadn't mentioned anything to me about Hermione going away to university. I wanted to make sure you knew about it!'

'I'm her husband, not her keeper!' Severus shouted. 'It's *your* job to complete a student's recommendation letter based on your knowledge of that student's character and academic record! Discussing it with any member of the student's family is a ... a breach of confidentiality!'

He could see that his friend wanted to shout back at him, but the truth of his words prevented her from doing so. She placed a hand over her eyes and drew an audible breath.

'You're completely right, of course,' she said, unable to meet his eyes. 'There's no excuse for it...none at all. I'm so sorry, Severus.'

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand away from her eyes. 'That's all fine and good, but it does not fix the problem,' he informed her, dragging her to the hearth and slapping the box of Floo powder into her palm. 'You're going to make this fiasco right for Hermione. Who do you know at the Salem Witches' Institute?'

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When the shadows in the attic room darkened to indistinct murk, Harry lit the oil lamp and coaxed Hermione up from the floor. He went away for a few minutes, returning with a damp face flannel, and Hermione wiped her tear-streaked face with it. Ginny came in a bit later with a tray from dinner, and Hermione thanked her for it.

'You should go down with Ginny and eat your supper,' she told Harry. 'I'm fine, now. I'll just eat a bit and go to bed; crying always gives me a headache.'

Ginny pulled a phial from her jeans pocket and put it on Hermione's tray. 'Mum sent up a headache potion, too,' she said. Harry took Ginny's hand and began to lead her to the door, but she shook him off and squatted down before Hermione, brown eyes to brown eyes.

'Professor Snape loves you, Hermione,' she said staunchly. 'Everyone could see that, after last night...the way he danced with you. He *loves* you. It'll be all right...you'll see.'

Hermione managed a wan half-smile. 'Thanks, Gin,' she said. And she took up her fork, pretending to take a bite of the shepherd's pie.

When the door closed behind her friends, Hermione put the tray aside and lay down on the bed, too empty to cry and too weary to sleep. Severus was the love of her life...she had discovered that on her honeymoon, only to have the knowledge taken away by the Lethe Elixir. Now she remembered everything, never mind that he insisted it was impossible. That must have been the old witches' tale he spoke of: That the only way to recover one's memory after swallowing the Elixir was to fall in love with the giver of the potion. What did that say about the nature of the mixture with the black seal on its stopper? And how could he refute her love, knowing what he knew about their time together in the Hogsmeade cottage? Did he have such a low opinion of her? Or of himself?

She rolled to one side, remembering the subtle but definite change in his manner after she had swallowed the Lethe Elixir.

*He relaxed. He believed that I would never remember what happened after I took the potion, so he put away the mask he wears every minute of every day to shield himself from the eyes of the world and allowed me to see him as he really is. I fell in love with the real Severus Snape, and for some reason, he doesn't believe that's possible.*

She had never believed such a thing was possible, either, but here was an irrefutable truth: she valued her husband more highly than she valued her continued education. She had to convince him of her love, because she would never survive losing him. Gaining admittance to Salem and losing the love of her life as a consequence of that was not an equal trade.

With a new resolution, she carried the oil lamp to the writing desk in the corner of the room and took up a quill.

*The Story of Our Love*, she penned at the top of the page and immediately beneath, *A Memoir*. Then she dipped the quill in ink and began to write.

Tags: [tqor posting](#)

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A/N: This week's song is a heartbreaker that always followed *Lie* and *Last Dance*, the songs from the last two chapters. It's called *Wherever You Goby* Sleeperstar. One line says, "If I'm honest with myself, I knew that we never had a chance", but the one that always kills me is him asking, "If you're running away, do you want me to chase you?" Poor Severus. You can hear the song here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdGM4JUxpKA>

## Chapter 25

*Chapter 25 of 26*

A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: I feel almost tearful as I post this, the penultimate chapter of our story. This project has been a part of my life for nearly two years now, and knowing that I have no plans to write more fanfic at this point (other than, in the future, to finish *Owned*), it feels like the looming end of something. I have enjoyed more than you know sharing this story with you all, and your comments are my reward for the hours and hours of writing.

Now, let's get on with it!

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Transcendent Quality of Remembrance

Chapter 25

Stay, tell me the story again

How it all fell apart in the end

*Hard to Believe* by David Hodges

10 July, 1998

Evening darkened into night, and the oil lamp set before her on the desk burned on. Hermione wrote her heart, every memory she had been denied by the Lethe Elixir, and this pouring out of remembrance, tinged as it was with her emotions, was truly a labour of love. As she wrote, in rich, evocative detail, she became more convinced that her husband's behaviour with her, so gallant and unguarded, so receptive and unrestrained, had been a direct result of his belief that she would remember nothing. The realisation tore at her, making her want nothing so much as to tell him...convince him...that she loved him utterly, would love him always, would be bereft without him.

She wrote; she stared at the wall as she considered how to phrase something; and when her hand began to cramp, she crept down to the kitchen and brewed a pot of tea, carrying it back to her room and resuming her project, fortified by the contents of the teapot. Even so, when the rays of dawn filtered into the attic room and she wrote her final words, it was with a weary hand, and she was able to fall onto Severus' pillow and sleep, knowing she had written all the truth she knew about her love for him.

She would worry later about how to see to it that he read it.

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11 July, 1998

Molly looked worriedly at the scarcely-touched dinner tray that had been on the counter when she'd come down that morning. 'I'm worried about her, Arthur,' she said quietly, not wanting to attract the attention of the young people a few feet away at the breakfast table. 'She's just the sort of girl to fret herself into a fever over something like this.'

Arthur put a comforting arm about his wife. 'Hermione's got a good head on her shoulders,' he said. 'Let's give her some time to ... gather her thoughts. She'll be down when she's hungry.'

Molly shook her head. 'I warned her not to keep secrets from him,' she said. 'It's a bad idea in any marriage, but a man like Severus would be bound to take it harder than another sort might.'

Arthur sighed. 'I tried to speak with him when he came out of the house looking like a thundercloud, but he was in no mood to chat. We'll have to let them work out their troubles.' He gave Molly's shoulders a squeeze. 'Let's eat our breakfast, love. No use in worrying.'

---

Hermione woke with a start, the sun now high enough in the sky to shine directly into her face through the attic window. She glanced at her wristwatch and saw it was just past noon. Her stomach rumbled loudly. As much as she didn't want to answer any questions about the absence of her husband, she was hungry and couldn't continue eating in her room like an invalid

She gathered her shower things and a change of clothes and trudged down to the communal bathroom to make herself presentable.

When she reached the kitchen later, her housemates were gathered about the table, passing platters of sandwiches from hand to hand. Hermione smiled wanly and nodded at the greetings she received, slipping into the empty chair between Harry and Ron, wondering if they had kept it for her on purpose.

'Lemonade or water to drink?' Harry asked her, nodding towards the two pitchers in the middle of the table. 'We're out of Butterbeer, and there's only enough milk left for cooking.'

Hermione asked for lemonade and began to eat her sandwich hungrily, concentrating on the taste of the food and trying not to think of the empty chair across the table.

'Hagrid had best get here soon, or we'll be berry-hunting for breakfast tomorrow,' Molly said. 'I know Dumbledore has us here for a good reason, but we cannot continue on without replenishing our supplies.' She gestured towards the larder, which was rather bare.

Ron leant in close to Hermione from one side and Harry from the other. 'Feeling better?' Ron murmured

When she nodded, Harry patted her shoulder. 'I'm glad. There's some stuff from the *Daily Prophet* that you should see...you won't believe what the Ministry's been getting up to while we've been here. It's ridiculous.'

When the lunch things had been cleared away, Hermione allowed herself to be led out into the warm afternoon sun with a stack of disordered copies of the *Daily Prophet*, which were much the worse for wear for having been passed hand to hand. The boys waited whilst she read through the main page articles, although their impatience was almost palpable. The more Hermione read, the more incredulous she became. It seemed unreal, like a confusing, bad dream. After scanning through the last article, she looked at Harry and Ron, and their faces showed their fury and betrayal...emotions she knew she ought to share. She did feel those things, but in a dim way, as if from a distance.

'How could they?' she whispered. 'We gave up everything to work out how to fight Voldemort because they were too complacent to do it...and now they want to put us in jail?'

'Yeah, we're probably going to use all our "paramilitary expertise" to be terrorists now,' Harry said bitterly.

'Serve them right if we did,' Ron said darkly.

Lupin and Tonks, who'd been watching with some concern, joined them then. 'Let's not jump to conclusions,' Lupin cautioned. 'Dumbledore is working on it...and Kingsley is the Minister for Magic...we're not friendless at the Ministry.'

Tonks chimed in. 'Yeah, we're best off waiting here until Dumbledore gets it all sorted. He's bound to be making progress...even if he doesn't always keep us very well informed.'

'I don't like hiding while someone else fights my battles,' Harry said, running a hand through his messy hair and making it worse.

Ginny, who'd also been lurking nearby, sat down beside him and captured one of his hands. 'Even so, you're going to wait here with the rest of us until the headmaster gives the all clear,' she said. 'I trust him, Harry. Don't you?'

Harry sighed, his eyes closing. 'Yeah, I trust him,' he muttered. 'But I hate waiting.'

Luna appeared with a bag of Gobstones and a lone bottle of Butterbeer. 'Let's have a Gobstones tournament,' she suggested brightly. 'The winner gets the last bottle of Butterbeer.'

Hermione left them to the game and walked into the house, finding Arthur on the sofa with a book, Molly at his side with her knitting

'All right, Hermione?' Arthur said gently.

'Can I get you anything, dear?' Molly added, putting her knitting needles aside.

Hermione shook her head. 'I'm feeling fine,' she assured them, 'but I'm still sleepy...I think I'll pop up for a nap.'

In the attic room, she retrieved the long scroll she had written from the desk. The Wizengamot and the Ministry were searching for the DA and the Order to put them all in protective custody, but as much as the knowledge upset her, she couldn't give it her full attention. Lupin and Tonks were right. She trusted the headmaster to resolve that issue, but even Dumbledore could do nothing about her fractured relationship with Severus.

She wasn't positive it *could* be mended.

Trying to put it from her mind, she lay down upon the bed and closed her eyes.

---

The smell of roast beef was filling the house and drawing its inhabitants towards the kitchen when a thunderous knock fell upon the door.

'I recognise that gentle tap!' Fred cried, turning to his twin with a grin.

'Hagrid is here!' George agreed, and the two rushed to admit their large friend.

Hagrid came in, stooping to clear the doorframe. His wild hair and beard were as tangled as ever, but his beetle black eyes were alight with glee as he clapped both of the twins on a shoulder, sending them each to one knee with the blow.

Molly bustled into the sitting room, a wooden spoon in her hand. 'Hello, Hagrid!' she said. 'You're very welcome, as I'm sure you know, but where are our supplies?' She glared pointedly at his dustbin-lid-sized hands, which ought to have been clutching two bulging hampers of food.

'Hullo, Molly!' Hagrid replied jovially. 'Sorry 'bout the hampers, but you won' be needin' 'em. The headmaster says you lot can come out of hidin'!

Everyone surged into the room, voices raised excitedly, and Hagrid was mobbed with questions. Hermione listened from the first floor landing, lured downstairs by the noise, but unwilling to join the throng

So, they could all return home. Tears stung her eyes, and she blinked angrily against them. All right, so she didn't have a home right now...she had only Severus' rooms at Hogwarts, and he didn't seem to want her near him. She had meant to leave from Hogwarts to go to Salem, but that plan was in tatters now. She would have to go back to Hogwarts to pack her trunk, and then she could go to her parents' home, she supposed...or perhaps she could stay with Harry and Ron at Grimmauld Place while she sorted herself out.

Harry appeared at the foot of the stairs, and when he saw her sitting on the top step, he came up.

'Did you hear?' he asked her, his tone quiet, but his eyes bright with excitement. 'All charges have been dropped, and Magical Law Enforcement issued a public apology. Kingsley read it aloud in a session of the Wizengamot today, and it will be published in the paper tomorrow.' He grinned his irrepressible, happy grin, and Hermione couldn't help but smile back at him. 'The headmaster did it...made them agree to a public acknowledgment that they were wrong...so none of us would lose face.'

He extended a hand to her. 'Come down to eat with us,' he urged. 'Hagrid brought a couple of bottles of Rosmerta's finest mead from the Three Broomsticks. We'll drink a toast or two.'

It was good news...she just didn't care about it the way everyone else did. She couldn't imagine caring about much of anything, not ever again...not as long as Severus was gone from her life. But she allowed Harry to pull her to her feet. If nothing else, being near Harry was a comfort to her.

The assembled crowd devoured the roast beef Molly had prepared, excitedly discussing plans for leaving. Bill and Fleur would Disapparate right after dinner to return to Shell Cottage, but the new couples...Percy and Cho, the twins and the twins...elected to remain at Forest Haven one last night and go home the next day.

'We have to leave this house even tidier than we found it!' Molly said determinedly as she collected their pudding dishes. 'Every room must be swept and mopped, and if you lot imagine I'm going to do all that work, you can think again!'

Then the bottles of mead were opened, and everyone lifted a glass to toast the headmaster. They adjourned outside with their goblets of mead to enjoy the last night they would share at their Secret Kept house in the forest.

Hagrid had used his pink umbrella to good effect on one of the wooden kitchen chairs, making it large and sturdy enough to hold him, and he dragged it outside when the party moved out of doors. Hermione slipped up next to him in a quiet moment, and he smiled down at her mistily, already a bit the worse for drink.

'Hullo there, Hermione,' he said. 'Yeh've been quiet tonight.'

'Hagrid,' Hermione said, hearing the urgency in her voice and unable to quell it, 'is Professor Snape at Hogwarts?'

'O' course he is,' Hagrid answered. 'Professor Dumbledore says he wouldn'ta worked it all out 'cept fer Professor Snape's help.' Hagrid drank deeply from his goblet, and Hermione waited impatiently for him to swallow and belch discreetly into his hand. 'Brilliant man, Dumbledore,' he said, and then after a moment he added judiciously, 'an' I guess Snape is, too.'

Hermione peered into his eyes, trying to gauge his sobriety. 'You're not sleeping here tonight, are you?'

'No, I'll pop back home in a bit,' he assured her. 'Nowhere fer me to sleep in this little house.'

Hermione pulled the thick scroll from her bag. 'Will you give this to Professor Snape for me please, Hagrid?' she said. 'Tonight?'

He blinked. 'It's late,' he objected.

'I know it is,' Hermione said, hoping she didn't sound as desperate as she felt, 'but this is important.'

Raucous laughter drifted from the stream banks, followed by a loud splash, then Molly's nagging voice. Hagrid was distracted by the commotion, so Hermione tugged on the sleeve of his coat.

'Will you, Hagrid? I need for you to put this directly into his hands before you sleep tonight.'

When the half-giant looked down at her again, he narrowed his eyes and studied her face. 'Had a row, didn' yeh?' he asked quietly. 'This is a make-up letter.'

Hermione released the breath she was holding. This was close enough to the truth, and obviously something Hagrid understood. 'Yes, that's right,' she agreed, and he took the scroll, inserting it into one of his capacious pockets

Hermione decided she would not even wonder what else Hagrid had in that pocket.

'I'll put in his hands before I go to bed tonight,' he agreed. 'Anythin' yeh wan' me to tell him?'

'No!' She took a breath, thinking that had sounded rather abrupt and ungrateful, considering that he was doing her a favour. 'Thank you, Hagrid, but no. The letter says everything.'

He gave a solemn nod and placed a finger alongside his nose. 'Count on me,' he said, and with a final gulp of mead and a resounding burp he stood. 'I'll be gettin' on now,' he said, giving Hermione a gentle pat on the back and moving forward to say his goodbyes.

Hermione picked up his goblet and carried it along with hers into the kitchen. She had overcome the problem of having no owl to deliver her letter to Severus. Now she was faced with a new problem, one for which she had no solution.

Would he read it?

---

Severus sat in his favourite wingchair, a snifter of brandy at his elbow, a volume of Tolkien open in his hands. He had yet to turn a page when a heavy knock fell upon his door, and he was at once alert. He knew only one person who pounded thus upon his door, and that person seldom brought good news.

Severus opened his door to Rubeus Hagrid and stood aside with a gesture. Hagrid came in, smelling of spirits, and Severus wondered if the Keeper of the Keys had come along for one of his nonsensical philosophical discussions. He winced inwardly, remembering their last such conversation.

'How may I help you, Hagrid?' he asked.

Hagrid thrust a hand deep into his pocket and brought out a scroll of parchment bound with a burgundy satin ribbon...a ribbon Severus was sure he had seen more than once, binding up Hermione's bushy hair.

'She asked me to bring it to yeh,' Hagrid said, placing the scroll, which was covered lightly in what looked like vole fur, into Severus' hand. 'She said I was to put it in yer hand before I slept tonight.'

He pulled a large spotted handkerchief from a different pocket and dabbed at his suddenly watery eyes whilst Severus watched, somewhat horrified. Was Hagrid going to cry? Right here, in Severus' dungeon sitting room? How could he prevent it?

'Good man,' Severus boomed, clapping Hagrid on the upper arm, since he could not quite reach his shoulder. 'Terribly good of you to bring it by,' he said, gravitating toward the door and hoping Hagrid would follow. 'Mustn't let me keep you from your bed, though.'

Before Hagrid quite knew what was happening to him, he was standing once again in the corridor. 'Whatever it is, Professor, I'm sure she's sorry,' Hagrid said cryptically, and then with another swipe at his eyes with the enormous, rather grubby handkerchief, he began to weave his way down the stone passage.

Severus closed and warded the door, then ruffled the edges of the parchment scroll with a cleaning charm, because Merlin only knew what Hagrid was keeping in his pockets these days. Holding the scroll in his hands, he resumed his place in the armchair and muttered a string of spells over Hermione's gift, checking for poisons or hex-traps or other harmful things. When he was satisfied that she had not asked Hagrid to deliver some sort of jinxed threat, he sat back and swallowed some brandy, staring down at the obviously long scroll. He had seen school assignments of hers nearly as long, but this was not an assignment, was it? It was a handwritten document of some sort that was important enough for her to have it hand-delivered to him.

Why did he not find that reassuring?

He pulled the ribbon, undoing the simple bow she had tied, and felt a pang of loss in his gut, sharp and galling...she was not his, would never be his, for she couldn't wait to be apart from him. So what was in this scroll?

He breathed in deeply, girding himself with what courage he could muster for this unwelcome task, and he unrolled the scroll, reading the heading:

*The Story of Our Love*

*A Memoir*

He felt as if the air had been knocked from his lungs, and unaccountably, his fingers were trembling as he unrolled the parchment further and began to read.

---

A/N: This week's song is another by the very talented David Hodges called *Hard to Believe*. It's a lovely song in its own right. You may hear it on YouTube here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGor2ShdMeA>

## Chapter 26

*Chapter 26 of 26*

**NOW COMPLETE!** A/U. In a postwar world, members of the Order and the DA are sent together into hiding. Trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, plagued by inexplicable dreams, surrounded by her closest friends - and her most dreaded adversary - Hermione struggles to come to terms with her postwar life.

A/N: Final, humble thanks to my beta, the incomparable Lariope, my Brit picker, dearest MagicAlly, my alpha readers and dear friends, sshg316 and deemichelle, and most of all to my beloved SubHub, whose sense of romance has filled our thirty-five years together with magic and provided the real life inspiration that fuels my fevered imagination.

This is it, the final chapter and the end of our journey together. I hope you will share your thoughts with me, as I have shared this work of my heart with you, an endeavor over which I labored for fifteen months, struggling to perfect the weaving of the past and the present into a seamless whole. I will now devote my writing efforts to some original fiction endeavors, just to see if I can be successful there, as you have made me so gloriously, happily successful here. Check on my Live Journal (subversa dot livejournal dot com) for news of my progress in my new adventures. Thank you for reading *Transcendent Quality of Remembrance*, and in the famous words of Tiny Tim, God bless us, every one.



## Transcendent Quality of Remembrance

### Chapter 26

We will live forever

Love each other

Stay together

Isn't that the way that life's supposed to be?

*Supposed to Be*

11 July, 1998

Hermione lay awake in *their* bed in the forest, her last night at Forest Haven. She buried her face in Severus' pillow, breathing deeply of his aftershave...sandalwood and musk. He had created it for himself...had it been upon the occasion of their marriage? She didn't remember ever smelling any scent on him before that, but perhaps she had simply never been close enough to him. She was convinced that the aroma had been a trigger for her memories of their honeymoon, because her book, *The Transcendent Quality of Remembrance*, had postulated that scent memory was one of the strongest of all.

Most of her friends were still up, the new couples either saying their last goodbyes or making plans to meet up when they had all returned home. Only Hermione was in the house, in her bed, deep in her own mind.

Holding Severus' pillow as if it were the man himself, Hermione wondered if Hagrid had found Severus at home...if her husband was, at this moment, reading the account she had written of their weekend of love. And if he read it, would he believe? Be moved by it? She had no way of being sure. All she could do was hope and pray ... and wait.

---

Severus began to read Hermione's letter, a crease between his brows, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

*You came to our wedding very finely dressed, freshly showered and shaved, smelling very pleasantly of your aftershave. I was terribly frightened, worried that Umbridge would somehow interrupt the ceremony and send me away from Hogwarts, but we succeeded and went to the Hogsmeade Cottage for our wedding night.*

*I was unsure of what to expect from you. I had asked you that morning if you thought you could ever be attracted to me, and you answered, 'Don't be ridiculous!' I understood that to mean that you could not imagine ever wanting me, and I was rather discouraged concerning the possibilities of sex with you.*

Severus shook his head. She had believed he did not want her sexually? What heterosexual wizard with a drop of blood in his body could fail to want a full breasted, round hipped, willing young witch in his bed? He'd had no intention of discussing it with her, that morning before their wedding, but how could she have so misunderstood him? How could someone so clever be so thick?

*The potion was a fabulous gift, then, guaranteeing I would not have the embarrassing memories of intimacy with you to make things awkward between us after the wedding night. It was incredibly thoughtful of you, Severus. Ever since I recovered my memories, I have bitterly regretted swallowing the Lethe Elixir and depriving us both of the happiness we found at Hogsmeade Cottage...but then I remember how you relaxed after I swallowed the potion, and I wonder. If I had refused the gift of the Lethe Elixir, would you have still been so relaxed with me? There was a visible release of tension in your very bearing after I took the potion, and I'm sure your ease of manner helped me to be more comfortable with you.*

*So it's a question worth pondering, isn't it? Would you have been as demonstrative...as sexy and smooth and sure with me...if you believed I would remember our wedding night? Would you have been as receptive to my kisses and caresses? I'm not convinced you would have been the same with me, and in that case, I can't help but be thankful that I took the potion.*

*But ingesting it took us away from each other. It's an endless loop from which I can find no escape and deduce no easy answer.*

Severus allowed the parchment to fall to his lap, his tongue darting out to moisten unaccountably dry lips. Of course it was true...he had been *outside* of himself on their wedding night, outside of the wall he had constructed to keep others away from him...to maintain a safe perimeter even the Dark Lord could not breach. The time at Hogsmeade Cottage had been completely out of context, and it would not have been thus if Hermione had not swallowed the Lethe Elixir.

His lips thinned, and he sent the scroll to the end table, standing and pacing into the small kitchen to put the kettle on. Hermione was right...had seen through to the very crux of the issue, damn her. If she had not swallowed the potion, it would have taken months ... years ... hell, they might *never* have made the transition to fully entranced lovers if he had been forever on his guard against her.

How could such a child intuitively know so much about him?

*Because she's Hermione, you dolt!* his inner voice informed him brutally, and at that, his lips quirked into a grudging smile.

His Hermione was a formidable witch...and an instinctive, natural lover.

And she wanted *him*.

He scowled at the thought. 'We'll just see about that,' he muttered, pouring the water from the whistling kettle into the waiting teapot.

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12 July, 1998

Hermione made one last check through the attic room, looking inside drawers and beneath the bed, but she found no errant belongings of hers...or Severus'...hidden anywhere. Taking up her bag, she stood for a moment in the doorway, looking around the room. Here, he had asserted himself as her husband. Here, they had danced and coupled and merged into one being, wakening her memories of their love. Foolishly, she kissed her fingertips and pressed them to the doorframe, a silent *thank you* to the space that had seen so much that was now ineffably precious in her life.

Trailing downstairs, she found herself in the middle of a throng of Weasleys.

'You'll Floo once a week?' Molly was asking Ron, as Arthur shook Percy's hand and clapped him on the shoulder. The twins and the twins were exchanging good bye hugs, and Harry and Ron were chatting excitedly with Ginny and Luna, who looked less than thrilled at the notion of the two young war heroes on their own in London.

The house was immaculate, as Molly had demanded they leave it. Hermione wondered who the next inhabitants would be. With one last glance around the sitting room, she moved out into the late afternoon light and began the trek through the woods to the Apparition point.

---

Standing before the door to the dungeon rooms she had shared with Severus for the last six months, Hermione felt her optimism flagging, and her courage dropped to an all-time low. What if he wasn't here? What if he *was*? What if he hadn't read her letter? What if he *had* read it and still didn't believe she remembered and that she loved him?

She sagged for a moment against the wooden lintel before her back straightened, her chin rose, and she pushed the door open, entering the space, now as dark as a tomb.

'*Lumos!*' she said, and the candles in the sitting room flared to life...but Severus was not there.

Well, of course he wasn't! He wouldn't be sitting in the dark, would he? She gave her head a shake and went into her room...but it was also dark and empty. She glanced into the kitchen alcove, then moved into the bathroom, where she spent a moment staring at herself in the mirror.

'He's not here,' she informed her reflection, but even as she did, she knew there was yet one room to check. 'He'll kill me for going in there,' she said, but what else could she do? She wouldn't know if she didn't check.

Squaring her shoulders, she knocked on his bedroom door. 'Severus? Are you there?'

When he didn't answer, she opened the door, surprised to find candles already burning. Had he forgotten to extinguish them when he left? That was unlike him.

This was only the second time she had been in this room...the first was the day of the battle, and she'd not had time for a leisurely examination then. There was a highboy on elegantly carved legs, an armoire for his clothes, and a double bed with a Slytherin green cover. There were tables on either side of the bed; she thought the one with a stack of leather-bound books on it must be the side on which he slept. She was turning to go when the item on the other side table registered with her, and she whirled around again.

My Little Pony. A white one, with silvery glitter on its unicorn horn...even its hooves were gilded. It was similar to the one she'd found in her hospital room after the battle, only this one was more elaborately decorated. She'd never seen anything like it. Why would Severus have such a thing in his bedroom? What could it possibly mean?

She went forward to inspect the figure more closely, and at last her curiosity won out over her caution...she had to see if the decorative glitter was rough beneath her fingers.

The moment her hand closed about the unicorn, she realized her error. A sensation like a hook behind her navel gave her a mighty *jerk*, and then she was whirling through space, tightly clutching My Little Pony.

---

The trip was a short one, and Hermione landed awkwardly on the floor of a bright, cheerful room, at the centre of which was a large, squishy yellow sofa and two matching armchairs. On the sofa sat Severus Snape in shirtsleeves, trousers, and boots, her letter in his hands.

She was in the Hogsmeade Cottage.

Hermione scrambled indignantly to her feet. 'That was a shabby trick!' she said, making no effort to control her trembling voice.

He looked at her over the top of her letter, his black eyes mocking. 'You had to go into my bedroom to find the Portkey,' he pointed out. 'You've never been invited into my bedroom.'

'And this ... this *Portkey*!' she cried, shaking it at him, its nylon hair flying untidily about. 'You *did* give it to me! I told you all about my collection on our honeymoon! How could you pretend you didn't give it to me?'

'Is that what you wish to discuss?' he inquired, lowering the letter further, giving her a complete view of his face. 'My Little Pony?'

He managed to make the words sound utterly contemptuous, and she straightened, torn between outrage and anger.

'Don't be such a git,' she advised him, tossing the unicorn into one of the armchairs.

His lips twisted into crooked smile. 'But that's one of my finer qualities,' he said, all trace of derision gone from his voice. 'It's been well-honed through the years...from before you were born, I'm sure.'

Hermione felt her anger fizzle away, leaving her with the realisation that she was where she had desperately wanted to be...with Severus...and she had no idea what he was thinking. He had brought her here...to their honeymoon cottage...and now what?

'I read this letter,' Severus said. 'It must have taken a long time to write.'

Hermione listened carefully, looking for some sort of trap in his words, but she found none.

'All night,' she admitted, thinking it would have been nice to know she was going to be shanghaied...she might have had time to do something with her hair. She tucked an escaped strand of it behind her ear.

'I thought it read almost like ... a script,' he added, allowing the scroll to roll up and dropping it on the low coffee table.

'A script?' Hermione repeated curiously, and suddenly he was beside her, lithe as a panther, his black eyes glittering.

'Yes...or a formula,' he added, tugging the red scrunchie from her messy plait and dropping it to the floor. 'A recipe for a honeymoon.'

He fastened his rapacious gaze upon her lips, and Hermione felt her heart trip into a racing rhythm, whilst the distinctive scent of his aftershave enveloped her in a miasma of memory and desire.

'Severus,' she breathed, feeling her knees weakening, and she swayed towards him, relieved to be pulled against him with arms like iron bands.

'Perhaps you'll forgive me for skipping ahead,' he said, his face hovering over hers, his lips inches from her own.

'To what?' she asked, a banked fire in her blood beginning to smoulder from his mere proximity.

"I believe it is customary to begin with a kiss," he said, very much as if quoting someone else's words, but when he captured her lips with his, it was all Severus: searing heat and breathless intensity.

---

She tasted of Droobles Best Blowing Gum, and in his arms she felt like heaven. He unwound her plait and buried his hands in her hair, holding her hostage to his kisses. When he imprisoned her thus, she trembled against him, all consent and surrender. He slid his hands down her back, cupping her bum and lifting, and in one smooth motion, as if it were ballet and they were trained, practiced professionals, she wrapped her arms about his neck and her legs about his waist. A Weightlessness Charm later, and he was carrying her up to the loft, to the bed where they had consummated their marriage.

Her brown eyes seemed fever bright as he placed her on the bed, and she scrambled to her knees, her fingers sure and quick upon his buttons. When she had his shirt off

him, her fingers already at his belt, her teeth scraping over the discs of his nipples, he restrained the urge to thrust against her, up into her busy hands; instead, he reached beneath her tee-shirt and unfastened her bra. The first swipe of his thumbs over her hard, needful nipples seemed to incapacitate her, for she paused in her quest to make him naked, and he retaliated by stripping her tee-shirt over her head and disposing of her bra, allowing his eyes their fill of her kiss-swollen lips and her lush breasts.

Mere looking seemed to be an inferior choice to Hermione, for she was at his flies now, pushing his trousers and pants down his hips to get at her prize, which ached and pulsed at her touch. He watched in fascinated wonder as she lowered eager lips to the head of his cock. No, it was not the first time she had sucked him, but he was not yet accustomed to the idea of having a wife who wanted him in this way, with this adamant, singular focus on his pleasure.

Her warm lips closed on him, her tongue gently greeting his manhood as if she had been separated from him an age, rather than a matter of days. His eyelids fell, putting him in darkness and leaving him with the sensation of her touch and the sound of his guttural breaths. With one of her hands she cradled his scrotum, fondling his bollocks, and his fingers wound into her hair as he slowly thrust into her mouth, knowing he could not withstand much of this, not if he wanted to fuck her...and Circe knew he wanted *that*.

He pulled away from her, turning to sit upon the bed and remove his boots. She pressed against him, kissing and stroking, distracting him.

'Undress yourself, little tempest,' he told her, reaching for his other boot. 'The sooner you're naked, the sooner I can fuck you.'

Her trainers quickly hit the floor, and when he was ready for her, she was lying back upon her pillows, reaching for him...his tempest, that other half of him without whom he felt like a decimated, broken thing.

He stretched out beside her, intent upon delivering the ravishment she had earned, that she longed for, begged for by the mere fact of her nakedness in his presence. He wanted to take his time with her, make it last and last, but neither of them had the patience for such artistry. She wanted it hot and quick and dirty, and he was just the man to give it to her. So he settled for a taste of each nipple as he probed her quim, finding her slick heat with a groan of pure lust.

'Hurry, Severus,' she gasped, parting her legs for him, and with scarcely a fumble to find his way, he was deep within her, his harbour and his home.

She did not speak again, not in intelligible words, for she thrashed beneath him like a wildcat. Her calves wound about his thighs bringing him deeper, harder, whilst she clawed at his back and sunk her teeth into his arm, a suckling love bite, as if she would punish him for having had the temerity to leave her. Rather than being put off, he was inflamed by her savagery. He rose above her, pausing in his reckless plunging to stare down at her, wild and perspiring, scrabbling at him, as if to force him to enter her again.

'I love you, little tempest,' he snarled, and then he thrust again, resuming his pounding rhythm.

She came quickly then, loudly, and the first cry from her lips tripped his trigger, beginning the blinding, finalising release of his seed.

He sagged above her, held in place by her impossibly strong arms and legs. He was spent, exhausted, with sweat dripping from his body onto hers, but she would not let him pull away.

'You can't possibly love me,' she gasped, still recovering her breath from their exertions. 'You *left* me.'

He fell sideways, breaking her grip on him, and as he fell, he gathered her close, his eyes stinging with tears she could never know of. 'I shall never do so again,' he managed to say, pushing the words through a throat thick with emotion.

It was a July afternoon in a cottage loft; they were both covered in sweat, so it would be impossible to say if tears were shed by either of them. They clung together, whispering incomplete sentences of contrition and rather more complete declarations of love everlasting.

Unsurprisingly, they soon slept, and afternoon darkened to evening.

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Hermione woke in need of the loo, and she rolled off the bed, feeling the delicious ache of having been thoroughly shagged. She attended to necessities and realised she was starving. She padded into the bedroom, where her beloved slumbered on, and grabbed clothing from the floor. Registering from the scent that it was Severus' shirt, she smirked and pulled it on, rolling the French cuffs as she descended the stairs.

Was there food? Would they have to return to Hogwarts to scrounge a meal?

But in the kitchen she found under a Warming Charm a roast chicken, sprouts in cheese sauce, and jacket potatoes...an encore of their wedding night supper. Even the champagne was there, frosty in its ice bucket. She smiled at the pink and white frosted fairy cakes and at the matching rosebuds in their vase, and as she leant forward to sniff them, she spied an envelope propped against the cut crystal...a heavy vellum envelope, emblazoned with the imprint of the Salem Witches' Institute.

How odd! Had Severus kept her rejection letter? But no, she still had hers, and this one had yet to be opened. She picked it up, half expecting it to be a Portkey, but she wasn't transported from the kitchen, which was just as well; after all, she was totally naked beneath Severus' shirt.

Curious, she broke the seal and withdrew a thick sheaf of papers, her eyes quickly reading the top page.

*Salem Witch's Institute*

*The Mnemosyne Project*

*Office of the Committee on Admissions*

*July 11, 1998*

*Dear Miss Granger:*

*I am delighted to inform you that the Committee on Admissions has voted to offer you a place in the class entering in September 1998. Please accept my personal congratulations for your outstanding achievements.*

*I very much hope that you will decide to join us at the Salem Witches' Institute. Whatever your decision may be, you have my best wishes for every future success.*

*Sincerely,*

*Professor Moneta Muninn*

Hermione read through the letter again, trying to make sense of the words. She had already received a rejection letter from Salem...she had it in her bag, which was back at Hogwarts, but it did exist...so how could she also receive a letter of acceptance?

She looked up then and saw Severus lounging in the doorway, wearing naught but his trousers, which were halfway done up.

'Did you read it?' he inquired quietly.

'Of course I did, but it makes no sense!' she said, flapping the sheaf of papers at him. A small piece of parchment that had been tucked in with the others drifted to the floor, and Severus bent to retrieve it.

'Perhaps if you read this one, it will make more sense,' he suggested.

Hermione took it, recognising Professor Muninn's handwriting.

*Miss Granger,*

*It is a true pleasure that I am able to send this letter of acceptance to you. Your Arithmancy professor contacted us with the information that your reference from her had been destroyed in the Battle of Hogwarts, an event which we at the Salem Witches' Institute followed with great interest. Upon receipt of your teacher's recommendation...as well as your impeccable year-end marks and NEWT proficiency scores...we as a committee made a special exception to our rules. Certainly, such events as those of which you were a part this year are of great importance to the entire wizarding world, not only those who reside in the United Kingdom. If we cannot make allowances for an authentic war heroine, Hermione, for whom can we make them?*

*If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time. I am very eager to have you working with me on the Mnemosyne Project.*

*Best,*

*M. Muninn*

Hermione looked to Severus. 'Did Vector do it on purpose? Miss the deadline?' she asked.

'Certainly not!' he replied. 'The letter was lost in the fire that destroyed her classroom, and she forgot about it. She was sincerely sorry, and she did what she could to repair the damage as soon as she realised her error.'

Hermione bit her lip. Should she tell him? In the spirit of full disclosure? 'I have been jealous of her. I thought you were sleeping with her.'

He stepped forward, his warm hands closing over her shoulders. 'Never, Hermione. She is a friend to me, as Potter is to you. There's never been anything else between us.'

She studied his eyes, and she knew it was true.

He cleared his throat, and his gaze wandered from her face. 'I have been jealous of Lupin,' he said quickly.

Hermione touched his face with her fingertips. 'I've never been interested in him that way. I can't even imagine wanting anyone besides you.'

He turned his face into her palm and kissed it.

'It was really very nice of Professor Muninn to go to so much trouble for me, but I won't be accepting, of course.'

Severus tightened his grip on her shoulders and gave her a tiny shake. 'Nonsense. Of course you'll accept. You've always meant to go.'

She gave a stubborn shake of her head. 'No. Perhaps another year, when we've had a chance to plan for it. I won't go, not without having discussed it with you. That's not the way a marriage works.' She tilted her head and rubbed a cheek against the hand on her shoulder. 'I won't leave you, Severus.'

His expression brightened. 'Ah, yes...about that...'

He released her and walked into the sitting room, taking up his discarded black frock coat and removing an envelope from an inner pocket. Abandoning her Salem papers, she followed him, and he put the envelope in her hand.

'What's this?' she asked.

'Well, you might read it and deduce for yourself,' he suggested.

With a roll of her eyes, Hermione extracted the papers and began to read, a frown creasing her forehead. She flipped through the additional paperwork, then gave a shake of her head.

'I can make neither head nor tail of this,' she complained.

He led her to the sofa, sat beside her, and began to explain.

'This one,' he said, indicating the top page, 'is a grant from the Ministry of Magic, signed by Kingsley Shacklebolt, our new minister.'

'But a grant to do what?' she asked.

He put an arm about her shoulders, drawing her closer. 'Your reaction to the Lethe Elixir was a textbook case, precisely what would have been expected ... right up until you began to remember. I had told you the only reported instances of the potion effects reversing were old witches' tales. Those tales said that true love would cause the potion to reverse itself...but that sounds more like something from *Beedle the Bard* than *Advanced Potion Making*, wouldn't you say?'

Hermione twisted around so that she faced him. 'That potion had a black seal on it, Severus...I've never seen a black seal anywhere, and when I asked you, you evaded answering.'

He sighed. 'A black seal denotes Dark potions,' he said. 'One of the ingredients is rare and outrageously expensive, so batches of Lethe Elixir are scarce.'

'You gave me a Dark potion?' she demanded, her voice perilously near a screech. 'I can't believe you would do such a thing! And if it's so scarce, how did you get it?'

He twisted about so they were face to face. 'That potion had the exact effects you wanted, Hermione. You didn't want to remember, but you didn't want selective Obliviation, and I don't blame you. I wouldn't either. So ... I brewed it.' She gasped, but he continued speaking. 'I found the hens' teeth...it can't be just *any* hens' teeth, you know. It has to be a Transylvanian Naked Neck's teeth. You were angry with me for missing the meeting with you the night before our wedding, but I was mucking about in Transylvania, avoiding customs officials...and then the potion had to be brewed ...'

She continued glaring at him, furious that he would use Dark magic at all, much less on her.

Severus slipped a hand beneath her hair, his warm palm cupping the nape of her neck. 'There's nothing harmful in the potion...neither in the ingredients nor in the brewing process. There is nothing in it which would ... taint you. It's considered Dark because of how it was commonly used ...'

She was distracted by his hand upon the back of her neck, and she leant into it a bit. 'How was it misused?' she asked.

'Let me put it this way: It was known to the Death Eaters as a date rape drug.'

Hermione shook his hand off her neck and glared at him. 'I can't believe...' she began, but he cut across her.

'It was effective, you are unharmed, and I'll swear by anything you like...perhaps even your little pony, my tempest...that I'll never brew it again,' he said forcefully. 'I don't want to talk about this...I want to tell you about the grant!'

Hermione struggled with her revulsion. Oh yes, she could see how the Lethe Elixir would be a perfect date rape drug, for the victim would never remember what had happened after she...or he...ingested the potion. And what was the likelihood that one of the victims would then fall in love with their attackers? But Severus had done it as a way to pacify her...to give her the one thing she had asked for...and she believed him when he said he wouldn't brew it again.

Making a conscious decision to let go of her anger, she focused on his face.

'All right,' she said. 'Tell me about the grant.'

He grinned at her capitulation and kissed her once on the lips, hard. Then he took up the papers again.

'The ministry has funded me for the next three years to research other old witches' tales to find out if any of them have a basis in truth. I'm part of the Minister's efforts to bring the British Ministry into the twentieth century...just before we get to the twenty-first. I am the "Assistant to the Minister for Research and Development".' He smirked and withdrew the final page of the stack. 'It's a bit of a pay rise, too...but I suppose I'll need it without the school providing us with room and board.'

Hermione was perusing his papers again, finding they made more sense to her now. 'Will we be based in London?' she asked.

He put the papers aside and took her hands.

'There's no office for this work...I'll set up my own research facilities, but I'll be traveling quite a bit, so it won't much matter where I'm based, provided I make my quarterly reports to the Minister.'

Hermione swallowed, wondering where a wife fit into that particular scenario. 'Can I ... can I travel with you?' she asked in a small voice.

He laughed aloud, a sound still so rare that it drew a smile from her. 'You can travel with me on your school breaks,' he assured her. 'But you'll be quite busy for the next few years. And when I'm not travelling, I'll be with you, in Salem. The Admissions committee didn't assign you to a dormitory...we'll have to go to Massachusetts soon to find a flat.'

Hermione Granger Snape was not an acknowledged Know-It-All for no reason; she had a wondrous brain with marvellous reasoning powers. She processed the new facts, filtering each into its proper category, assimilated all the information, and squealed with delight.

'I can go to school!' she informed him, as if it were news, and she threw her arms about his neck. 'I can go to school, and you'll go to America with me, and we'll have our own flat, and you'll have to travel for your work, but that'll be all right because I'll be busy with my studies...and when I've left uni ...'

He stopped the flow of words with a very thorough kiss that obliterated her stacks of neatly organised facts, leaving only her unbelievable good fortune: to be here, in the arms of her smooth, sexy husband.

When he released her lips, he growled in her ear, 'Do you think we can put off planning the rest of our lives until after we've eaten?'

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They filled their plates and drank cold water, for they were both quite thirsty after their afternoon exertions. Hermione chattered happily, but Severus was perfectly content to watch her every move as he refuelled his body. Her hair was in disorder from his earlier rough handling...but still too tidy...she would definitely require his further attentions to get her hair to the appropriate stage of glorious disaster he envisaged. Her beautiful brown eyes sparkled with delight as she spoke of their plans...and the sight of his witch in *his* shirt...knowing she was naked beneath the white broadcloth, and well anointed with his body fluids...made him want her all the more.

And soon.

'... can't imagine how we'll get it all done in the time we have!' she was saying. 'We'll have to pack up our things and decide what we're going to store here at home and what we're going to take with us to America. And I'll have to contact the Housing Office at Salem to get a list of flats to let so we can begin making inquiries. Oh, and the witches and wizards in America dress more like the Muggles than we do here...you'll need a whole new wardrobe!'

He began speaking quickly, before she could draw another breath. 'Have you quite finished eating?' he inquired silkily, wishing the light behind her were brighter, so he could get a better view of her feminine curves beneath the masculine lines of his shirt.

Hermione looked blankly at her plate, which had little but chicken bones and a pool of cheese sauce remaining on it. 'Finished eating? Yes, of course I have.'

'Excellent.' He stood, took her by the wrist, and led her purposefully out of the kitchen. 'Your presence is required above stairs.'

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Their second time, together in the bed in the loft, was entirely different from their earlier tryst. By golden candlelight, with tenderness bordering on reverence, he made love to her, slowly enough that her pleasurable writhing produced the magnificent disorder to her hair he had hoped for, and thoroughly enough that it could be said in all honesty that Hermione Granger Snape was lacking for nothing.

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In the dark of the summer night, curled together upon the sofa before the hearth, they drank their second honeymoon champagne and spoke of the things close to their hearts.

She was in a glorious glow, delighted and delightful, appealing and completely beautiful. He was marvellously intoxicated, though whether by the wine or the woman, he did not know...nor did he care.

She traced the line of his jaw with a lightly ghosting fingertip and said, 'I still don't understand, Severus, why you never told me what happened on our honeymoon. What would it have hurt?'

He gazed deeply into her eyes, reflecting how easy it would be to slip into her mind...but he would never do that, any more than he would deliberately break a promise.

'I promised you that you would not remember what happened on our wedding night, little tempest. A wizard of honour does not go back on a promise.'

She cocked her head to one side. 'But not even when we were together at Forest Haven and everything was going so well between us? Why didn't you tell me then?'

He placed a finger across her lips. 'Because I gave you my word,' he said again, with finality.

She pursed her lips and kissed his finger before speaking again, this time in a more reflective tone. 'Oh, Severus...how hard it must have been for you to remember everything, believing I would never know what had happened between us.'

She would never know for certain, he thought, because he would never speak of it...but in those words, she hit squarely upon the heart of the matter. He had lived the months between then and now in an agony of hopeless yearning.

He took up the champagne bottle and refilled their glasses, then touched his glass to hers, holding her eyes across their raised hands.

'That's all in the past, little tempest. Let us look to the future: to Salem, to old witches' tales, and to the *Transcendent Quality of Remembrance*.'

Her eyelashes fluttered down for an instant, and he saw the minute tremble of her lips before she echoed, 'Remembrance.'

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A/N: Today's song was the overarching theme song for this story on my playlist for writing TQoR. It came at the end of every disc I made, and I see it as Severus' final, half-defiant anthem for his life with Hermione. "Maybe I'm crazy, but I think for once in my life that the stars in the sky have all aligned" and "We will live together, love each other, die together ... Isn't that the way that life's supposed to be?" - I can see him finally embracing that particular destiny for him and Hermione, improbable though he might have thought such an ending would be, considering the life he lived. I would crank up the volume and blare down the freeway, singing with Default - and with Severus, of course - *Supposed to Be*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJb98LumU7A>.

Thank you for indulging my playlist-sharing compulsion. I hope you have found in it some measure of the inspiration I found.

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Finite Incantatum.

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