

Love is the Music of Our Hearts

by Stefdarin

Filius and Pomona always seem to be off key when it comes to how they feel about each other. Will they be able to find the harmony of love?

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 11

Filius and Pomona always seem to be off key when it comes to how they feel about each other. Will they be able to find the harmony of love?

Chapter One

Sighing heavily as she placed her chin in her hand, Pomona Sprout stared at the short form of her colleague and friend, Filius Flitwick, turned sideways on the podium. People were milling about, moving toward the door after his seminar on Love and Music ended. Filius had given an excellent talk on the aspects of love in music through the ages. He had covered everything from courtly love and the songs of the jongleurs of Medieval Times, to the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic periods of music. He had explained how love was reflected in their notes and phrases, and how the two were interwoven like the threads of a quilt.

Although Pomona didn't know anything about music, she felt she could sit and listen to Filius talk about music and love forever. Exhaling again, she remembered Filius' concluding sentence for his Valentine's Day speech: "Every person who loves contains a symphony of their own, for love is the music of our hearts."

Secretly, Pomona had loved Filius Flitwick since she had been a gawky seventh year and he her professor. Back then, she had never dared to dream he would ever view her as anything but a student. And now, ten years later, the hope that he would see her in another light flickered. It had been burning over the past year as she began her post as Herbology mistress and worked up a repartee with the rest of the staff. She and Filius had hit it off as easy friends immediately, but Pomona knew in her heart she wanted more. She had been working on summoning the courage to say as much to Filius for weeks now. But every time the opportunity presented itself, she flopped.

Pomona's friends and colleagues, Rolanda Hooch, Minerva McGonagall, and Poppy Pomfrey knew how she felt about the Charms professor. And every time she had failed at telling Filius how she felt, Rolanda had given her a shove in the arm. While she gazed at him, her courage withered again, and her arm began to sympathize for the upcoming shove from Rolanda. But Pomona was determined this time. She would not falter this time. No, this time, she would tell him how she felt... as soon as all these people left. Suddenly, Filius looked up, catching her gaze. An easy smile spread across his face as he hopped down off the podium and strode over to her. Pomona's heart leapt in her chest, and she blushed slightly. It was now or never.

"Pomona, my dear," he began in his jovial voice. "Did you enjoy the seminar?"

Nodding enthusiastically, Pomona exclaimed, "Oh, yes! Very much, Filius! I found the last sentence very inspiring," she stated, causing him to blush with pleasure.

"Well, you know how I feel about music, and love seems to flow along so naturally with it. It is so very near and dear to my heart." Gazing into her heart shaped face, Filius' brown eyes softened.

Pomona smiled at him. "Yes, that I do know. Filius, I was wondering..."

A slight crease came to his brow. "Yes, Pomona?"

"Did you have any plans for this evening?"

"Why, yes, I do happen to have plans. I finally gave in to Professor Sinistra. She has asked me to dinner, and she tells me there is a lovely Venus out tonight," he explained rather excitedly. "I have to admit, I am really looking forward to the star gazing. It has been years since I've been to the top of the Astronomy tower."

Looking over at her with a curious smile, he asked, "And what are you doing this evening, my dear?"

Pomona's heart shattered into small pieces at his excited statement. *No*, she wanted to scream at him. *You should be with me, not that cow, Sinistra* she thought vehemently.

"W-well," she stuttered. "I—the girls and I are going to the Three Broomsticks. Madame Rosmerta is having a special Valentine's theme today."

"Ah, no gentleman caller then, my dear?" he questioned, sounding relieved.

Pomona's eyes shifted slightly, but she held his gaze, shaking her head. She put up a good front for him, but inside she was dying. She wondered vaguely if her heart was even beating anymore.

"No, not this time. Rolanda wants to celebrate Singles Awareness Day, so the girls and I are helping her this year." Pomona frowned slightly, thinking about how she would give up a night with her friends in a heartbeat if only Filius showed some interest in her. But he had already made plans, and they did not include her. Better that she was going with the girls, they would understand her need for a drink or two... or more; anything to take this wretched pain away.

Studying her, Filius was about to say something more but seemed to change his mind. Leaning over the desk, he placed his hand over hers in a friendly gesture. "Well then, I am off. I don't want to be late. And you know how Ro gets when she is delayed in her celebrations," he reminded her, causing her shoulder to ache in sympathy once more.

Sighing, Pomona looked at him and carefully tucked her feelings back inside. "Yes, yes, I know. Thank you for the wonderful seminar, Filius. I enjoyed it very much. Have a good time tonight. And tell Celeste I said hello."

Briefly, he squeezed her hand and smiled. A light entered his eyes as he gazed at her, and Pomona's breath hitched in her chest when she looked away, unable to stare into his loving face which held the love of friendship when she wanted so much more. Then, to her startled surprise, he leaned in and kissed her lightly on her cheek. Another friendly gesture from him, but to her it meant so much more, and her heart kicked into overdrive in her chest. Her mind clouded.

How could he be like this? How could he be such a loving friend when it was killing her inside with wanting? Abruptly, she rose, and the desk skittered forward as it caught on her legs. Before he could incense her anymore with touches and caresses he clearly didn't reciprocate in the manner she wanted, she had to escape.

"Goodbye, Filius," she told him shakily.

Turning quickly, she left the classroom, leaving Filius staring after her, a look of worry on his face.

Chapter Two

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Rolanda, Minerva, and Poppy convince Pomona to join them for the evening, and they meet someone new.

Chapter Two

Pomona stared at her ceiling for a moment as she lay on her bed horizontally, then shuffled back to hang her head over the side. Somehow, it made her feel a bit better, looking at the world, and her friends, this way. It also created a buffer from Rolanda's shoves.

Standing in the doorway, Minerva cast a sympathetic look at Pomona, then exchanged glances with Rolanda and Poppy. Poppy simply shrugged, but Rolanda had a glint in her eye. Minerva's lips thinned a bit, and she gave a subtle shake of her head. Ignoring her, Rolanda slapped a huge grin on her face.

"Oh, come on now, Pomona! You did give it a go. I know what you need to comfort you at a time like this. Come on, up you get!" Rolanda exclaimed, reaching over and grasping one of Pomona's arms and gesturing for Poppy to grab the other. Together, they lifted Pomona up off the bed, and once she was up, her eyes landed on Minerva's face which sported a wry smile. "You need for me to buy you a round at the Leaky Cauldron," Rolanda informed, putting her arm around Pomona's shoulders. Pomona halted their forward progress to stare at her friend in open mouthed astonishment.

"But what about Singles Awareness Day at the Three Broomsticks?" Pomona asked incredulously.

Rolanda paused mid-drag of Pomona, then put a finger to one side of her mouth. "Oh, yes! So glad you reminded me!" Looking pointedly at Pomona, one side of Rolanda's lips quirked up in a half-grin. She then stabbed a finger at Pomona's chest and told her, "You need me to buy you a round at the Three Broomsticks!"

Shaking her head, Minerva covered her face with her hand while Poppy just rolled her eyes and made a face.

"But, Ro, I don't think I want to go. I just want to stay here and lick my wounds in peace. Can't you let me do that? I don't want to drag you all down with me. I think I will just dim the lights and enjoy the silence," Pomona moaned, her heart lurching again. She knew what Ro had in mind, and while it appealed to her, she didn't want the pain she knew would come in the morning. No matter how long she forgot her pain tonight, it would always return in the morning.

"I heard Madam Rosmerta has a new bartender, and he is wonderful to look at," Poppy chimed in, looking hopeful.

"Hmm, that is true. Rosmerta was telling me about him just the other day. Distant relative of hers she is helping out for a bit. She was hoping some of the locals would take to him since he is expecting to settle in Hogsmeade," Minerva added, placing a hand under her chin in thought.

"Reeeeeeaaally," Rolanda crooned. "Well, that clenches it for me! We are going, and you are going with us. We have to do our witchy duty and make Rosmerta's er... relative...new bartender...feel welcome, especially since he will be living nearby. And seeing how you need a drink, how can it be wrong? We can save two wizards with one bezoar." Rolanda had a calculating grin on her face. "You get a drink, and we meet a man all at the same time. Perfect!"

Pomona rolled her eyes. She knew trying to reason with Rolanda when something involved a man was like talking to an empty cauldron. So, now she had little choice but

to comply with the Flight Instructor's wishes. "All right, just let me get my robe," Pomona groaned. Minerva, Poppy, and Rolanda shared a knowing smile when Pomona turned her back.

The four witches ambled to the castle gates with Pomona casting mournful glances at the Astronomy tower. She wondered if Filius was up there right now wooing Celeste. Her stomach turned over at the thought, and she decided she was glad she had agreed to get that drink. She had little else to look forward to. She would never meet another wizard she desired more than Filius, and if they couldn't be together, she didn't want anyone else.

She sighed. Maybe things would look a little better in the morning. Maybe, Celeste would fall from the Astronomy tower when she was trying to seduce Filius and thereby leave him to Pomona to take care of. But that was wishful thinking.

Pomona pursed her lips. Such thoughts did not usually enter her mind. *What is wrong with me?* She sincerely hoped she could get past this, because she did value Filius' friendship. If she couldn't have his love, she definitely wanted his friendship. It would simply have to be enough.

Before she knew it, Pomona found they had reached the castle gates. They all Apparated at the same time, arriving with four subtle pops at Madam Rosmerta's establishment in Hogsmeade.

Inside, a row of shrunken heads hung from the rafters above the door, and several tables were already full. On the walls, a hodgepodge of various items such as fishing nets, fishing poles, lighted lanterns, old tin signs, and several framed Egyptian writings hung. In the center of the Three Broomsticks was a polished mahogany bar with collected beer steins lining the shelves above it all the way around. Below, the glassware gleamed in the fading light cast through the windows by the dying sun.

As the four witches made their way to some empty stools at the bar, the shrunken heads over the door greeted them. One even exclaimed over Pomona's distant face. "Why the withered look, deary?" the shrunken head queried in a tinny voice.

Pomona looked up in exasperation. *Are my feelings that readable to everyone?* "Wha-what? Sorry, I was just... lost in thought for a moment. I am doing well, thanks," Pomona explained, trying not to sound annoyed to the row of heads and hurried to catch up with Rolanda.

They all saddled up at the bar on the end away from the door. Madam Rosmerta, a buxom, curly-headed, dirty blonde with a snappy attitude leaned toward the staff members from Hogwarts with a smile. "Hellooo girls! It's right nice to see ya in my pub on this fine Singles Awareness Day! My cousin and I are glad ye'r here. Aren't ya, Taurean?"

Rosmerta gestured with her head toward the opposite end of the bar, causing all eyes to focus their attention on the figure wiping down the bar top to a glossy shine. "This is Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Rolanda Hooch, and Pomona Sprout," Rosmerta informed, pointing them out individually when Taurean looked up. Each nodded in turn.

A very distinctive looking man stood at the other end of the bar. He wore a crisp white shirt rolled up at the sleeves which exposed his lean, sun-kissed arms. A white service apron rested on his trim hips with black trousers emerging from beneath. His fingers were long and tapered, just built for caressing the ivory keys of a piano, and he moved with the subtle grace of a jaguar as the muscles played under his shirt with every move he made. His blond hair was short and cropped above the ear, and his nose was aquiline and broad. Taurean's lips were full and curved easily into a smile, bringing out a slight dimple that played mischievously on his cheek. This sultry smile, paired with his build, promised of heated nights to the woman who captured his heart and captivated his mind.

"Oh, yes, we are... so very glad to have you here, ladies," Taurean told them, his rich baritone giving off a slight accent. Laying his polishing cloth on the sink, he strode over to the women and smiled.

"Girls, meet my cousin, Taurean Diggle," Rosmerta introduced, resting against the bar as Taurean nodded. "Oi! Hey, Taurean, do that thing you do," Rosmerta prompted, pointing at him.

Nodding once, Taurean turned toward them. His face turned serious as his blue eyes skimmed the faces of the witches he had just been introduced to. Pomona, Rolanda, Minerva, and Poppy all tilted their heads, frowning for a moment as Taurean examined each of them in turn.

Nearest to him was Minerva. Dressed in a tartan under robe, her raven tresses were pulled back into a French twist without a single hair out of place. Her green eyes studied him meticulously as his eyes slid down to her hands then back up again. "Let me see... Minerva McGonagall: Scottish decent, Transfiguration mistress, Animagus... possibly a cat," he informed, causing Minerva's brows to go up as he moved to stand in front of Poppy.

The cool-eyed blonde admiring him had a face that looked both serious and kind. Her hands were soft, the nails neatly trimmed, and her robes of soft blue brought out her eyes. Cocking his head to the side, he said, "Poppy... or better yet, I should say Madam Pomfrey, healer." Poppy's jaw dropped.

Quirking an eyebrow, Taurean then looked over at Rolanda. Her spiky brown hair framed a round face as her yellow eyes studied him, and her body suggested fine tone beneath her purple and white robes. "Hmm," he said rubbing his chin. He looked thoughtful for a moment and then his eyes lit. "Flight Instructor and Quidditch referee." He gave her a half grin as she narrowed her eyes at him.

Last, his gaze landed on Pomona. His lips curved in a smile as he looked at her heart-shaped face and light brown eyes. Her chestnut hair was a mass of haphazard curls piled on her head which softened her features. His eyes slid down, studying her supple curves hugged by yellow robes with a brown over-robe and rested on her hands for a moment. "Pomona Sprout," he said softly, then seemed to shake himself just a little. "Herbology professor," he said as his gaze traveled back to her face slowly, causing her to blush.

Rolanda looked at him pointedly, but directed her question to Rosmerta, "Taurean, did you say? I must say, it is very nice to meet you." Rolanda hopped down off her stool and made her way to sit nearer to him. She plopped down in the empty seat on the other side of Minerva, and Pomona moved over a chair to sit next to Poppy as it seemed Rolanda had vacated her seat for more rewarding territory.

Looking at Taurean, Poppy asked, "How... how did you do that?"

"Well," he began. "It is simple deduction, madam." He smiled in a knowing way, then looked over at Rosmerta when she gently shoved his arm.

"Right, deduction," Rosmerta chimed in, disbelieving. "That is what he tells me, but I am sure it has more to do with his burgeoning profession. That is why he is here, girls. My cousin has been studying to become a Curse-Breaker." She smiled with pride at him.

Giving her a short nod, he looked back at them. "I simply use the information I am given, then pair it with what I observe... and what I know," he added, looking over at Rolanda.

"Take Professor McGonagall, for instance. Her under robe is tartan. And given her last name, I believed she was Scottish. I know she works at Hogwarts. Also, her hands are long and elegant, built for caressing a wand so I figured she would be the Charms or Transfiguration professor. But then I noticed her eyes. They remind me of a cat, and it makes sense that if she is an Animagus, she is more likely to teach Transfiguration than Charms," he explained.

"Oh!" Poppy exclaimed. "How did you know about me?"

His dimple stood out when he smiled at her. "You, Madam Pomfrey, have a serious but kind face. All your movements as you came in tonight were graceful but pointed. These are two very distinct features I often see in healers. The school needs someone to run its hospital wing; therefore, I concluded you are in charge of that wing."

"You are good," she told him, out of breath.

Nudging the air with her nose, Rolanda tugged lightly on his sleeve, and he looked at her. "And me? I can imagine I was a bit more difficult," she told him, giving him a

cocky grin.

"Ah, yes. Madam Hooch. You did at first, but then I remembered your face. You were the youngest female to join Puddlemere United a few years ago. All your movements contain a bit of flair, and I can tell you are rather well-toned beneath those robes of yours," he said as she raised one eyebrow.

"And what about Pomona?" Poppy asked, nodding at her friend.

Taurean's glance traveled from Poppy over to Pomona where she sat with her chin in her hand. Taking two steps, he stood in front of her. His eyes seemed to warm as he looked at her. "Professor Sprout," he said, the sound of her name on his lips pulling her from her dismal thoughts of her aching heart.

"Yes?"

"You have a healthy glow to your skin as I have seen on those who have spent many hours outside, and there is a slight callous on her right hand. My family runs a plant nursery in Portugal." He picked up her hand tenderly, turning it over. "I can imagine these hands carefully tending even the most fragile plant," he finished, looking up at Pomona and holding her hand in his for a moment. Coloring, Pomona tugged her hand from his and looked away.

Rubbing his hands on his trouser legs, Taurean clapped them together and rubbed. "So... what can I get for you lovely ladies this evening? Any red drinks are on special, and firewhiskey shots are 2 for 1 in honor of the holiday. We," he began as he looked over at his cousin, "have deemed them a spirit to light your heart on fire." He flashed a grin at Rolanda but his eyes remained on Pomona who looked down shyly. Minerva and Poppy exchanged glances between the trio.

Rolanda sat staring audaciously at Taurean with her chin on her hand. As he announced the specials, she perked up and wove her hand in a circle. "Well, I'm buying the first round. Firewhiskey for the lot, two shots each," she finished with a smile and wink to the man behind the bar.

Taurean nodded. "Very good choice, madam!" he exclaimed and Levitated shot glasses before each witch. With a flourish of his wand, a bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey floated over and filled each glass. Once their glasses were full, Taurean left the bar to wait on a witch and wizard who had taken a table on the far side.

Rolanda picked up her first shot and motioned for the girls to follow suit. Minerva and Poppy smiled in turn, raising their glasses. Pomona, her heart still lurching from earlier, tried to smile but it ended up as almost a grimace. However, she raised her glass as the others did, and Rolanda declared rather loudly, "To Singles Awareness Day!"

"Hear, hear," exclaimed Poppy and Minerva while giving their shots a gentle nudge in the air then throwing the whiskey back.

"Hear," Pomona stated half-heartedly but also nudged the air and downed the shot at once. The liquor burned a slow trail to her stomach, bringing tears to her eyes. Oddly enough, she hadn't cried over her unreturned feelings yet. But the alcohol seemed to numb the pain in her heart a little, encouraging her to knock the other shot back without waiting to see if anyone else wanted to make a toast. As she downed her other shot, she caught Minerva out of the corner of her eye when she finished her second shot as well. Poppy, however, had only finished half of her first shot before she broke into a fit of coughing.

Minerva quickly put her other empty shot glass down and thumped Poppy on the back in an attempt to help her recover. Rolanda spun around on the bar stool with her second shot in hand and followed Taurean's progress as he wiped down two empty tables and took an order from a third. When her gaze rested on this table, one brow went up. The man seated gave Taurean his order and gestured toward the four witches sitting at the bar.

His hair was dark and fell just above his shoulders. Even sitting down one could tell he was over six feet tall. His dark robes were fitted and displayed a firm physique underneath. He had a square jaw and pointed nose completing a serious face. His dark eyes drifted to Rolanda's, and he nodded in recognition with a slight twitch of his lips. Taurean nodded in affirmation of his order and turned in time to catch who the dark man had been staring at, his mouth quirking up on one side in a grin.

Hopping down from her bar stool again, Rolanda moved back to the other side of Pomona, giving Poppy a thump on the back when she walked by as side assistance to Minerva. With a wicked looking grin on her face, she hopped back up on the stool and leaned on Pomona's shoulder.

"You know... I think he has a soft spot for you." She nodded toward Taurean, and Pomona looked over her shoulder to see who Rolanda was talking about.

"Who? Professor Dearborn?" Pomona asked, looking a bit skeptical.

Rolanda frowned and shook her head. "No no no... Taurean."

Pomona blushed and shrugged. "Perhaps... but, Ro, I don't want anyone else. You know how I feel..."

"And you said yourself that he only feels friendship towards you. Really, Pomona! It's been a year. The man is a Ravenclaw, for Merlin's sake! If he was going to ask you out he'd have done it by now. Live a little. Get a tattoo. Find another man. There are other men out there you know. Very fine wizards, who live in Hogsmeade and have a body like a god, and I am sure they can warm your bed just as good as Fil...OW! What was that for?" Rolanda griped, rubbing her arm and glaring at Pomona who had given her a shove.

"That is not making me feel better, Ro. I don't want anyone else! I..." Pomona faltered as tears came to her eyes. She couldn't figure out what was wrong with her. She didn't shove people when they said things she didn't like. But when Rolanda had made her suggestion, Pomona felt the pain of her broken heart once more. She didn't want Rolanda reminding her of her failings with Filius, and she couldn't think of any other way to make her stop.

Rolanda's face softened into a smile. "There, there, Mona. It's alright, love. What you need is another drink." Rolanda turned back around and called Taurean over.

Taurean set two more shots of firewhiskey in front of Rolanda. "Compliments of the gentleman at table seven," he said, giving a knowing smile which eased as he noticed tears glimmering in Pomona's eyes. "And what can I do for you?" he asked seriously, his gaze still resting on Pomona then reluctantly wandering to Rolanda.

"My friend here adores cherries, but I can't think of any delicious cocktails that taste like them yet have a kick. Do you have any suggestions?" Rolanda asked, batting her eyelashes.

A slow smile lit his face, and Taurean responded, "As a matter of fact, I do. I'll be right back." Turning on his heel, he went to his work station.

"And I need to go say thank you," Rolanda stated, picking up the two shots and sliding off the bar stool.

Pomona followed her gaze, gasping when she saw who it was. "Ro! Professor Dearborn?"

Giving a smug grin, Rolanda saluted Pomona with both of her shots, then turned and sauntered over to Professor Dearborn's table. Swiveling back around, Pomona shook her head and watched as Minerva downed another two shots with relish and gave a sideways grin at Rolanda's target while she watched the Flight Instructor make her way across the room. Poppy had finally gotten over her coughing fit and had managed to finish her first shot. She was now nursing her second shot in teeny, tiny sips, grimacing after each one.

Pomona leaned over toward Poppy and nudged her arm. "So, what do you think about that?" she asked the school's matron in almost a whisper. Poppy put down her glass and looked at Pomona. She wavered a little but managed to stay on the stool while she spun around, then put her arm around Pomona.

Poppy's eyebrows went up when they landed on who Rolanda had wandered over to. "Well, I'll be! That Ro! I jus' hope he likes the love 'em and leave 'em type. He is gonna have his hands full with our Ro," she slurred slightly, then giggled, raising a hand to cover her mouth.

Pomona rolled her eyes. *Someone can't hold her liquor*, she thought. Minerva turned around to join them in their observations of Madam Hooch in action. They watched as

she strolled over and sat down next to Professor Dearborn, then leaned in for some private conversation. He whispered something to her, and she threw back her head, giving a lighthearted laugh. Bending forward, Rolanda said something which caused him to smile and nod. Then, they raised their glasses, saluted, and tossed the amber liquid down their throats.

At that moment, while Minerva and Poppy still watched Rolanda, Taurean returned with a large frosted glass. It contained a deeply red, frozen concoction with a twist of lemon and a cherry garnish. Turning back toward the bar, Pomona's eyes lit as he placed it in front of her. It looked delicious, and she licked her lips in anticipation.

"For a woman who is as beautiful as one, we have a Japanese cherry blossom margarita," Taurean announced low and almost seductively.

Reaching out, Pomona picked up the glass gingerly. Taurean watched as she raised it to her lips slowly and took an appreciative sip. A smile graced his face when he heard her groan a little. "This is utterly delightful," she told him, puckering her lips and enjoying the tang from the combination of cherry and lemon.

At that moment, Minerva and Poppy turned back around, and Poppy picked up her shot glass again. She took a longer sip this time and erupted in coughing once more, though not as bad as before. Clearing her throat, she eyed Pomona's cocktail and asked, "What is that? It looks r'freshing," she slurred.

Minerva grimaced. Pomona saw that face and knew what she was thinking. Minerva didn't like cocktails. She insisted they were too sweet and didn't have enough kick, like whiskey. Minerva was a witch who could hold her drink. She often complained that nothing was better than Scottish whiskey, but firewhiskey was a close second and would do when occasion called for it. Taurean looked at Minerva and set her up with another two shots at her nod.

Glancing down at her drink, Pomona raised it to her lips and took a longer sip, closing her eyes as the flavor swirled in her mouth and danced on her taste buds. It was wonderful. She wondered vaguely if she could figure out how to make it. She would definitely try. Lifting it again, she drank until half of it was gone, and a slow gentle burn slid to her stomach as the ice melted, and the alcohol activated. She decided she was feeling a little better, then turned her head, and the room wavered a bit. Dimly, Pomona remembered she hadn't eaten anything since her encounter with Filius earlier that morning. She shrugged and continued to enjoy her drink. That just meant it would take less time to forget the pain and longing she felt every time she saw him and knew her feelings would never be returned.

This last thought caused her to lift her glass again, and before she knew it, the entire drink was gone. Taurean came back over to her, and his brows rose. Giving a low whistle, he told her, "I feel I need to warn you, the drink you have enjoyed in such a short time does have a delayed kick, Professor Sprout..." His words trailed off as he studied her intently.

"P-Pomona. Please call me Pomona." Pomona interpreted his hesitation, coloring again. Her blush only deepened when his face lit up in a charming smile.

"Pomona," he said softly, the dimple standing out in his cheek once more.

"May I have another?" Pomona asked boldly, bolstered by the kick in the drink.

Taurean seemed to hesitate, but went back to his station to get her another. When he returned, Poppy and Minerva were watching Rolanda again as she worked her charm on the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. They all watched as she strolled around his chair, and his dark eyes followed her. Suddenly, she plopped down in his lap, took his head in her hands and pulled him in for a heated kiss. Poppy began to giggle uncontrollably, and Minerva caught her just before she fell from her bar stool.

Rolling her eyes, Minerva leaned over in Pomona's direction. "I believe it is time for me to assist Madam Pomfrey back to her quarters, as usual. You'll make sure Ro gets back to the castle won't you, dear?" she questioned Pomona, who stared a bit, then focused.

"Yes. I am going to have another, then it will probably be time for me to get back too. We do have classes tomorrow, and I have Gryffindor and Slytherin first thing," Pomona told her with a grimace. "Did you get enough?"

Minerva smiled impishly. "Oh, I think I've had enough. And you have been my friend long enough to know what it does to me. I think I can wait until I get Poppy back to her room, but I do hope that Albus is prepared. He said he was going to rest while I was out. Somehow, I think he knew what I would have in mind when I returned." Minerva shared a knowing grin with Pomona who blushed again and caught Poppy as she swayed towards her. Their eyes traveled to Rolanda who was back to sitting across from the DADA professor and leaning in suggestively.

Pomona sighed. Together with Minerva, she helped Poppy down off her chair. Poppy sniggered again, then ended with a little snort. This caused Minerva to chuckle while Pomona gave a small smile. Some things never changed, and it was comforting. "All right, you two be careful. Ro and I will probably be along shortly."

"We will. Come on, Poppy, time to go home and get a little nap in," Minerva told her friend, and Poppy leaned over to give Pomona a generous hug. Together, they strode over to Rolanda, Minerva holding Poppy up with her arm around her to keep the usually put together school matron from swaggering too much.

Pomona watched as they stopped at table seven and hugged Rolanda goodbye. Ro nodded at something Minerva said, and Pomona figured it was what she always said: Be careful, and I'll see you in the morning. The girls turned to Professor Dearborn as he stood to wish them a good night, then wandered to the door and out. Minerva threw up a hand in farewell to Madam Rosmerta who had piped up a hearty goodbye to the duo.

After Minerva and Poppy's departure, the noise lowered to a gentle murmur among the rest of the patrons. There was a rowdy table in the back, but they were far enough away that the noise wasn't too bad. Pomona let out a breath. Across the room, Rolanda was working the charisma that seemed to pour from her. Pomona sometimes wished she had that. If she did, maybe she wouldn't be sitting at a bar on Valentine's Day, drinking cocktails all alone. Maybe if she had more allure, Filius would be on her arm, and she wouldn't feel terrible about him only wanting her friendship, and not her. Just *her*.

Swinging back around, Pomona noticed another drink sitting there. Reaching for it, she drank it quickly. Even fast, it tasted good. But at the moment, she didn't want to focus on the taste, she just wanted oblivion. Something...anything...to numb the pain she felt every time her heart beat. Resting her elbow on the bar, she put her chin in her hand and played with the lemon twist on the glass. Out of the corner of her eye she caught movement and noticed Taurean making his way back over to her.

"Your friends left?" he queried, and Pomona just nodded. He continued to stand near her, and a tender smile crossed his face. "I was wondering..."

Pomona looked up at him dejectedly. "Yes?"

"What's your sign?" he asked thoughtfully. His eyes searched hers, and she frowned a moment in confusion.

"Sign? Oh!" she exclaimed as it dawned on her what he meant. She reddened and laughed nervously, waving her hand in the air. "I'm afraid I don't know. I've never paid much attention to such things." Pomona was astounded. Here was a very handsome wizard trying to gain her favor, but he wasn't the one she wanted. She acknowledged that he was attractive, but her heart belonged to Filius.

"I-I'm very flattered. Really, I am. But..." she staggered with her explanation, and her face went a little sad. Quickly, she heartened herself and met his eyes.

His eyes stared intently into hers. Reaching out, he caressed her hand with his own in a gesture of comfort. "It is all right, do not worry. I see your struggle. We can be friends, no?"

Pomona smiled genuinely for the first time that night. Hesitantly, she nodded. Looking down, she noted her empty glass and looked back at him. "Could I have one more, please?" she requested and was rewarded with a smile and a nod from Taurean as he waved his wand and another drink appeared before her. Smiling her thanks, Pomona brought the drink to her lips, then turned to monitor Rolanda's progress while Taurean answered a call from the other end of the bar.

When she spun on the stool, the room swayed, and her body began to tingle. Pomona smiled to herself. It was a lovely feeling. Abruptly, her thoughts turned fuzzy, and her head lightened. As she watched Rolanda with Dearborn, she began to feel jealous. At times she wished she could be like Ro. She frowned, then sighed again. It was not her, to love 'em and leave 'em like that. Pomona's heart only belonged to one man, a man who couldn't see her as a woman. Sometimes it felt like he still viewed her as his

student, and that just wouldn't do. Her thoughts were swirling round and round in her head.

Suddenly, an idea hit her. What was it Ro had said? Maybe if she couldn't be like Ro, she could take her advice and live a little. Maybe that would make Filius notice she was no longer a child, but a woman. A woman with needs; a woman who could give him anything he could desire. What was it she had seen on the other side of the street when they arrived? Her lips formed an O as she remembered hazily, and a wicked smile came to her face. She would show him how much he meant to her.

Tipsy, she climbed down from the bar stool. Rolanda was too busy paying attention to her latest conquest to see Pomona as she quietly made her way out of the Three Broomsticks, staggering slightly. At that precise moment, two wizards at the table in the back jumped up and began throwing hexes at each other.

Rosmerta and Taurean instantly moved in to break up the fight. Rolanda and Professor Dearborn, who had been kissing again, broke apart when the argument escalated. Soon, several wizards were involved, and both Rolanda and the Professor moved in to help. It took a while to sort everything out, and Taurean had to physically remove the two wizards from the pub. By the time everything was handled, it was closing time.

It was then that Rolanda realized Pomona was missing. "Have you seen Pomona," she asked Taurean, and he shook his head, his face showing immediate concern.

"Perhaps she is in the bathroom?" Taurean asked.

Striding to the witch's room and back again, Rolanda shook her head. "She isn't there," she informed, worry etching her features as she rejoined the others by the bar.

"Do you think she went back to the castle?" Professor Dearborn asked.

Ro shook her head. "She wouldn't have done without telling me first," she told him, her voice growing thick with concern.

"Ya go on 'en help 'er find Pomona, Taurean. I'll take care of the pub and send for you if she comes back. All right, love?" Rosmerta coaxed.

Nodding, Taurean looked at Madam Hooch and Professor Dearborn. Moving to the door, they went out into the chilly night. Across the way, a figure staggered into the door jamb of a lighted building. Above it, a sign read: *Clyde Wilde's Wizarding Tattoos*. Rolanda immediately recognized Pomona and ran over to her, Taurean and Professor Dearborn close on her heels.

"Pomona love, are you all right?" she asked, gently trying to lift Pomona to her feet.

Grimacing, Pomona took Rolanda's hand from her shoulder. Her eyes were unfocused, and she had the hiccups as she looked up at the Flight Instructor and gave her a wobbly smile. "Now he will know. Now he will accept me...", she began in a whisper.

Rolanda frowned. "What in Merlin's name are you babbling on about, Pomona? You aren't making much sense. Here, what is wrong with your shoulder?" Rolanda asked, moving Pomona's robes aside. "What the..." Rolanda's words broke off as she revealed a heart tattoo on Pomona's shoulder with a banner gently waving across it. Inscribed were the words: *Love is the Music of Our Hearts*. Rolanda snorted, then looked up at Taurean. He nodded and helped Pomona to her feet.

When Pomona swung in an arc on her feet, Taurean put his arm up to steady her. "Thanks," she said breathlessly.

Looking from Pomona to Taurean, a grin crossed Rolanda's face. "Well, I see you are in capable hands, Mona! Would you mind helping her back to the castle, Taurean?" Rolanda asked with a scheming look in her eye.

Taurean smiled down at Pomona who seemed a little out of sorts, then looked back at Rolanda. "No, not at all. Anything to help the lovely ladies of Hogwarts."

"Good! Pomona, love?"

Pomona looked back at Rolanda when she heard her name. She was vaguely aware of what was happening around her, but she smiled when she felt Rolanda envelop her in a hug. "The Professor and I are going to Apparate, but it might not be a good idea for you. Taurean is going to help you back to the castle, all right?" Absentmindedly, Pomona nodded and leaned back against Taurean.

With two sharp pops, Rolanda and Professor Dearborn were gone, and Pomona found herself alone with Taurean as he propped her up. Giggling, and bolstered by the alcohol running through her veins, Pomona looked up at Taurean. Normally, she would be appalled that Rolanda had left her alone with a man she hardly knew. *But he is Rosmerta's cousin. And he wants to be friends. And what else do friends do but help you home when you drink yourself into a delightful, tingling, stupor*, she thought, which caused her to giggle more.

"Okay, let's get you home, cherry blossom," he told her sweetly.

Leaning against him heavily, Pomona let Taurean guide her through Hogsmeade and up the path to Hogwarts. For the time being, granted a reprieve from the pain in her heart.

A/N: I just wanted to say a big "Thank You!" to OSUSprinks for collaborating with me on this story. You are an awesome lady!

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 11

Filius evaluates his feelings and goes on a date.

Chapter 3

Filius stood before his closet, contemplating his wardrobe choices for the evening. He was not normally vain about his appearance, but it seemed he could not focus on even the simplest decisions this evening. His mind was clearly preoccupied, and he knew why. After one last glance, Filius gave up, deciding to wear the robes he had worn for the seminar earlier that day. Celeste had not attended the lecture anyway, so what would it matter?

With a heavy sigh, Filius sank into his favorite armchair and let his mind wander where it would. He was not surprised in the least when his thoughts landed on Pomona. The look on her face as she said goodbye, and then hurried away, would take some time to erase from his thoughts, he knew. She had been biting her bottom lip. He

wondered if she even knew she did that when she was upset. That luscious lip had been held firmly between her straight, white teeth the first time he saw her in her adult years, the first time he really saw her, the woman, and not the student at all.

Albus had sent Filius to collect the candidate "Ms. Sprout" from Hogsmeade Station for her interview that warm summer day. Filius had remembered teaching a Sprout, but Albus had said nothing, so he assumed he would not know the witch. He still remembered his first glance at her and doubted he would ever forget.

Pomona had come directly from a three year period studying in South America, and her robes, while appropriate for a Scottish summer, reflected it, making her easy to pick out. The turquoise material came to just below her knee as she sat on the bench, revealing shapely calves, slim ankles, and matching shoes on pretty little feet. The cut of her robe was conservative, but could not hide her curves as she bent over the papers in her lap. Thick waves of medium brown hair hung around her face, obscuring it from view, and Filius found himself wanting to know the woman behind that veil of silk.

He had been embarrassed to realize he was staring and quickly caught her attention with, "Ms. Sprout?"

She had looked up at him then, brown eyes anxious, cheeks flushed and pink, bottom lip caught between her teeth. A spark of recognition glinted in her beautiful eyes, and she smiled. "Professor Flitwick!"

Filius felt a now familiar uneasiness settle in the pit of his stomach as it had that day and each day since when he thought about his feelings for Pomona. It was not that he was ashamed of his feelings; he had learned long ago there was little use in that. It was just that he worried for her reaction, if and when he told her, and that of their friends and coworkers. He thought again of her face that morning and knew his earlier conclusion had been correct. Whatever his feelings for Pomona, it was becoming more and more obvious that she did not reciprocate them as he wished. He had known that was a likely possibility all along, but now it was reality, and he had to face the facts. He could leave, find another job teaching somewhere, perhaps America, and try not to think of her, or he could stay. He could remain at Hogwarts in the job he loved and watch as Pomona fell in love, married, perhaps had children, and lived happily, all with another wizard.

Filius shuddered at the thought. He had borne much torment in his lifetime, but even the thought of seeing Pomona in the arms of another man... He would talk to Albus in the morning about any openings and somehow explain his reasons without explaining *the* reason... somehow.

Still, that was a worry for tomorrow, and he had enough for this one day already. He thought ahead to his date with Celeste Sinistra and tried to remember why he had agreed to it. At the time, it had seemed like a good idea. Filius had always made easy friends, and he made a special effort with new members of the Hogwarts staff. Celeste had taken the Astronomy position nearly three years before, and Filius, who had always found the subject interesting, had made his usual effort to make his newest colleague feel welcome. It had taken him nearly the entire school year to realize her flirtations were more than friendly. He had been unsure what to do with the knowledge and had decided to leave it be until the summer. But, then Celeste had gone away for the summer to take some classes on Eastern Astronomy, and by the time she returned, Pomona had arrived, and Filius' attentions, unbeknown to either witch, had been secured... until today.

Celeste Sinistra was a striking woman. Her sharp mind was perhaps her greatest attraction for Filius, but he was aware of her other attributes. He certainly had heard enough about them during Albus' gatherings for the Hogwarts men when Professors Slughorn and Dearborn went too far into their cups. Still, despite her beauty, Filius had never felt any real interest in the woman. They were friends, he supposed, but he never felt quite himself with her. There was always some question she wanted to debate or some opinion she wanted from him. He could not imagine sitting down with her and having a conversation about the Chudley Cannons' chances or the House Cup standings, or even just sitting together watching the sunset. He was not convinced they could ever have a casual relationship, but tonight would be a test of that.

Just then, his clock chimed and it was time for him to leave. With one last comb through his graying hair, Filius went out the door, still unsure what the evening would bring.

Celeste stood at the door in what seemed a practiced stance, to Filius at least. Her leg was bent just so to show off a slit in her dress robes. They were shimmery and looked very soft, though Filius hoped he had no reason to find out.

Suddenly, he knew this was a very, very bad idea.

"Filius, come in." She was wearing heels, and her hair was up on top of her head in a style that put him in mind of a peacock, however he was sure that wasn't the intent. He was also sure she didn't mean to be over twice his height, but she was certainly giving him that impression.

He nodded in her direction as he entered the room, deliberately not looking all the way up into her eyes. "Celeste. Thank you for inviting me to dinner. So good of you to remember my interest in your subject." *And not in you*, he mentally added.

It was the first time he had been in her personal rooms. There was not much to see, and he could barely make anything out in the dim light. Candles surrounded a table set for two in the center of the room.

This may have been the worst idea he had ever had.

"Please, be seated." She made her way to the table, and he waited until she was seated to sit across from her. She poured champagne into her glass, and leaning over enough that Filius could nearly see her navel if he wished, began to pour for him.

"Oh, none for me, thank you. Goes straight to my head. I'll stick with water, thanks," his voice nearly cracked as he rushed to stop her, and he deliberately lowered it to a normal range. "I want to stay awake to see the stars, after all!"

"Oh, yes." Celeste seemed troubled for a moment, but quickly returned to her sickeningly sweet smile. "Wouldn't want you to miss a moment of the evening I have planned for us." The last words came out in a purr that was hard to dismiss.

Filius felt as though the collar of his robes was eating into his neck. He thought of loosening it, but wondered what sort of impression that might give. Obviously, Celeste had already received the wrong message somehow. He had expected a game of chess or perhaps a discussion of the latest duel. This was more than he could have imagined.

Celeste stared at him a moment longer before sighing. With a wave of her wand, her robes were suddenly cut in her standard teaching style, the lights were lit, and her hair was in its usual bun.

"Well hell, at least I tried." She chugged back the bubbly drink in one shot and began to pour again. "Are you sure you want to stick with water? I have a full bar in the corner, and Dearborn keeps it stocked with soda water, grenadine, and cherries among other things if you'd like something else."

Filius could almost not believe the change in the woman. It was almost as if the last few moments had not happened at all. "Celeste, forgive me. I'm confused. Just what exactly is going on here?"

"Are you sure you don't want that drink?" Filius gave a decided no. "Well, I will indulge a bit more if you don't mind." She poured her third glass full to the brim, and Filius wondered if there was much more left in the bottle.

"When I came to Hogwarts, I had imagined it would be like my university days only better." She recognized his look of disbelief. "Oh, not the students and teaching, but the staff. I imagined evenings filled with intense discussion and debate. Albus Dumbledore is the greatest wizard of our lifetime, and I would be working under him! I thought of all that I could learn, and the ways my intellect would grow! I did not think I would have to memorize Honeyduke's entire catalog in order to get in to talk to the man!"

Filius snorted in his laughter. "Yes, that does come as a shock to those who don't know him personally. But what does that have to do with this?" He waved his hand around them to where candles, now unlit, still stood.

"Do you realize that you and Dearborn are the only staff members that really talk to me?" He started to contradict her, but she waved him off. "No, I mean intellectually, not

just in passing. And Dearborn has been obsessed with Ms. 'Love-'em-and-leave-'em Quidditch All-star since he joined the staff!

"That leaves you. And I don't mean I am just attracted to your intellect, though for me that has always been the largest turn on."

Filius was sure he was the color of the Gryffindor flag at the moment. "Celeste, I don't know what to say."

"Oh, leave it." She waved him off as she poured yet another glass of champagne. Her words were beginning to slur, and he worried he may have to call Poppy for alcohol poisoning if she kept it up. "I don't know what happened that summer I was away, but I took one look at you taking one look at *her*..." she nearly spat the word, and Filius did not have to guess to know to whom she was referring. She took a large sip. "Anyway, I should have given up then, but I thought if I could just get some time alone with you, I could convince you..."

She really looked at him then, and he could see how upset she was, even through what remained of her over the top make up job. "I'm sorry, Celeste. I don't know why these things work out this way, but they do sometimes. It probably doesn't help, but in case it should, I am equally as unhappy in my attachment."

"What?"

He nodded.

"I did think it was odd you were free tonight, but I thought you two were together, or at least had something going on. The way she looks at you sometimes, you'd think she was in the middle of the Sahara, and you were her only drop of water to quench her thirst."

Filius laughed. "That's quite the image, but you're mistaken."

Celeste looked at him, obviously unsure if she believed him, but then shrugged. "I know you well enough to know that if it were true, you wouldn't be here." She got up from the table, leaving her glass, but grabbing the bottle. "Let's go up to the tower. Though, to be honest, Venus is in view nearly every night. I was so startled when you agreed to join me; it was the first thing that came to mind." She laughed and slapped him on the shoulder a little harder than he would have liked. With a wave of her wand, the door to her rooms opened to reveal the stairs to the tower.

He smiled. "Quite the accommodating castle, isn't she? My rooms are near enough to Ravenclaw Tower, but it's nice having a special entrance to the common rooms." He let her go up first, partly to be gentlemanly, but mostly so he had time for a Levitation spell should she stumble. Though, now that they were in the cool, fresh air, her drunkenness had somewhat abated.

"I really appreciate it on cold days. I can never seem to get my warming charms to hold well, so I sneak down for a cup of tea between lessons at times." She continued up the stairs as she talked, and Filius was beginning to wonder how many stairs there were.

He was slightly out of breath by the time they reached the top of the tower and decided it was time he started exercising more. It was a moment before he was able to really appreciate the view. The stars seemed brighter than he had ever seen them. This far up, away from the lights dotting the castle grounds, it seemed the sky was filled with stars.

"It's beautiful," he said, feeling it was an understatement, but not sure how else to put it.

"Isn't it?"

"You know, I may be able to help out with the warming charms, if you like." Filius was becoming more at ease with the change between them, though perhaps it was less a change for him and more an understanding. "Though, I suppose the cold air might help keep your students alert during class."

Celeste stood against the stone wall of the tower, leaning out into the open air. "I'd like to think the stimulating lecture is enough, but you probably have the right of it." Suddenly, she propped herself up on the edge of the low wall, swinging a leg over the side so that she was straddling it. "Come up here. You'll get an even better view." She took a deep drink from the bottle she had brought with them before offering it to Filius.

"If I'm going to sit on the edge of the tallest tower, I think I'd rather have all my wits about me." He Levitated himself up to sit next to her, careful to keep a hand on the pillar he was leaning against.

"Oh, that. I suppose I am used to it at this point. Haven't fallen yet! Touch wood." She laughed, and it struck Filius that this was the most enjoyable conversation he had ever had with the witch. It seemed that once she had given up the chase, such as it was, she had also given up the confrontation, at least for the night.

Though it was not how he would have preferred to spend his Valentine's Day evening, he was glad he had taken her up on her offer.

"Is that Pomona?" While Filius had been doing his best not to look down, Celeste had been peering across the grounds. "I think it is, but who is that with her?"

She had grabbed a small telescope and was looking through it at the pair Filius could just barely make out. After a brief hesitation on his part, he let go of the wall and took the telescope as she passed it, seeing in a moment that it was Pomona, and she was very nearly being carried by some brute of a man he had never seen before.

"Perhaps she's hurt?" Celeste said what he was thinking, and in an instant, he was excusing himself and on his way back down the many stairs of the tower to find Pomona.

A/N: Thank you, OSUSprinks, for all your help, input, and cheering. =o)

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 11

Taurean helps Pomona get home and meets Filius during the process.

Chapter 4

As they approached the gates of Hogwarts, Pomona leaned on Taurean while he held her close, his arms around her waist. Every now and then she would giggle, enjoying the pleasant wavering of her surroundings coupled with the tingling throughout her body and the warmth of Taurean's proximity.

Stopping at the gate, Pomona looked up and tried to step away from Taurean to reach inside her robes for her wand. Feeling her pull, he let her go, and she toppled over into the tall grass by the path.

"Pomona! Are you all right?" Taurean asked, kneeling down to pull her up into a sitting position.

Laughing at herself, Pomona dusted herself off with a blowing charm, having found her wand. Unfortunately, she blew the grass and twigs from her body into Taurean's face. Realizing her mistake, her eyes grew wide. "Ohmygosh! Taurean, I'm s-sorry," she said in a rush, reaching out to remove pieces of grass from his mouth.

At the same moment, he reached up to remove them as well, and their hands collided. He grasped her hand a moment, looked into her eyes and smiled. "Quite all right, cherry blossom, I've been hit with worse," he replied, his eyes alight with mirth.

Standing up, Taurean brushed himself off, then turned and reached down to take Pomona's hands and lift her from the ground. "Now, would you like for me to escort you to your rooms? I want to make sure you get home safely. But will I be able to leave if I enter with you?" he asked, examining the fortified gates of Hogwarts.

Snorting in an unladylike way, Pomona replied, "Getting out is no problem. It is the getting in that is difficult." Raising her wand, she cast a silent spell while waving it in an intricate pattern. Mid-cast, she faltered, unable to remember the entire spell to open the gates.

Sighing, she blew a tendril of hair from her face. Suddenly, the wind left her sails and tears rose in her eyes. She remembered now why Filius would have nothing to do with her. She wasn't exactly the brightest witch of her age now was she? Her head fell forward, and her arms drooped at her sides as she rocked back and forth on her feet.

Stepping up to her, Taurean tipped up her head with one finger under her chin. "Now, now, Pomona, do not give up so easily. I imagine this spell is hard even when you haven't had so much as a butter beer. I can help you, if you want me to. If not, my cousin has an extra room, and I'm sure she would let you stay until morning," he told her gently, wiping a single tear from her cheek with his thumb.

"Help me? How can you? I am beyond helping..."

"You don't believe that. I can't imagine a man like Albus Dumbledore would hire witches and wizards with average intellects to teach his students. And I *can* help you. Just let yourself go. Let the spell flow through you. I will add my power to yours, and it should boost you enough to enable the spell to work," he finished.

Looking at him, Pomona nodded. "Show me," she said, a little steadier on her feet now with Taurean's hand at her back.

Moving behind her, his wand in his hand, he grasped the wrist of her wand hand and raised it above her head as he had seen her do just minutes before. Then, his other hand traveled around her waist, holding her closer to him. Leaning in, he murmured in her ear, "Now."

With his prompt, Pomona closed her eyes and felt warmth surround her. Her hand moved as one with his, and together, their wands followed one another in the intricate pattern as Pomona said the spell silently in her head. Abruptly, the clang of metal met her ears, and the gates opened slightly.

Opening her eyes, Pomona stared at the open gate in disbelief for a moment before Taurean's hand urged her forward. In a blink, Pomona found herself supported by Taurean again as they wound through the gates, shutting them once they were inside.

Now that she no longer had to worry about getting into the castle, Pomona found her head spinning faster, even though the cool night air had helped. Frowning, she tried to focus. Her steps faltered again, but Taurean held her firm.

"Don't worry, cherry blossom, I have you. Let's get you up to your room, all right?" he asked, and Pomona nodded.

She sighed when the world tilted and clung more tightly to him. Trying to focus once more, she asked, "Taurean, what do you do for a living?"

Looking at her, one quizzical eyebrow raised, he responded, "And what makes you think I do something other than serve drinks?"

She snorted, then covered her mouth for a moment. Removing her hand, she stopped, and he stopped with her. "Because not many barkeeps look like you do. And I must say, not many would help a witch out like you are," she told him breathlessly. Looking back up at him, she added, "And I don't know many people who could have done that!" She waved her hand at the gates behind them, now tightly closed.

Had there been more light, Pomona would have seen his blush. "I admit I am not your average barkeep as you say. Eventually, I will be a Curse-Breaker when I grow up."

Chuckling, Pomona looked up at him, the alcohol making her braver than she normally was. "Taurean, I like you. Do you know that? I really do," she stated, swaying toward him, and his arms went around her in an attempt to steady her once more.

Looking down at her, blue eyes met brown then traveled to her lips. "Cherry blossom, you are making this very difficult for me, because I find I like you very much too," he told her, suddenly serious.

Gazing up at him, Pomona swallowed nervously. *I wonder what it would be like to kiss him. It has been so very long*, she thought. Hesitantly, Pomona slid her hands up around his neck, absently moistening her lips as she leaned toward him. Throwing caution to the wind, Pomona tugged at his neck, and Taurean did not resist.

Their lips met, and Taurean's hands reached around her, pulling her body closer to his as the kiss deepened. Pomona found his lips warm and welcoming, but no wands went off. However, Taurean was solid and human and warm. And Pomona found herself craving those things given her heartache. The alcohol was making it very hard to resist wanting more from him. How easy it would be to just let him love her. But she knew, somewhere in her, she knew it wasn't fair to him.

Her thoughts were interrupted when a bright light blinded her, and Taurean tensed, immediately pulling away to shield his eyes with one arm while supporting her with the other.

"I suggest you unhand her this moment, you brute!" Filius exclaimed, his wand pointed directly at Taurean. His stance suggesting he was ready to duel or hex if needed. "Pomona? Are you all right?"

Pomona leaned further into Taurean, hiding her face. *Oh, Merlin! Of all times for Filius to be available, why now?*

"Sir, I would appreciate it if you would lower your wand. I assure you I am only escorting Pomona to her rooms, nothing more. I just want to make sure she arrives safely," Taurean explained, his arms around Pomona in a protective gesture.

"Safely? Is she all right? What's wrong?" Filius asked, still holding his wand aloft as he moved forward.

"She simply had one too many, and Rosmerta asked me to accompany her to Hogwarts."

Pomona wanted to sink through the ground. But she also knew she couldn't stand up without falling over, so she stayed next to Taurean, hiding her face. Abruptly, her body jolted, then again. Taurean pulled her away from him to see what was wrong, and Pomona let out a very loud hiccup.

Gathering her courage, Pomona turned to face Filius. "Hellooo, Filius!" she exclaimed a bit too loudly, then hiccupped again. She laughed nervously at the situation. This was the absolute last thing she had wanted Filius to see. The man was supposed to be with Celeste in her bloody tower.

"Lovely evening, don't you think?" Pomona asked, raising her arms up and moving them in a circle to encompass the night which removed her from Taurean's support.

Suddenly, she lurched to the side, and Taurean shifted in an effort to catch her, but Filius was faster. With a swish and flick, he cast a Levitation charm to shield her from falling to the ground.

Sucking in her breath, expecting to hit the ground, Pomona let out a squeak when she felt Filius' magic surround her. "Oh, thank you," she whispered with a sigh.

"Yes, thank you..." Taurean began.

As Pomona was brought upright once more, supported by Filius' magic, she said breathlessly, "Filius, this is Taurean. He works at the Three Broomsticks." She finished this with another hiccup, then giggled at herself.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Filius replied.

Moving forward, Taurean extended his hand. "It is very nice to meet another professor for Hogwarts," he said, reaching up to scratch his arm nonchalantly when Filius did not return his gesture.

"Sorry, chap, my hands are full. Thank you for making sure Professor Sprout made it back to Hogwarts safely. I can help her from here. Have a good night," Filius said with finality, nodding.

Nodding in return, Taurean looked at Pomona and smiled. "Good night, cherry blossom."

Sighing, Pomona said, "Good night, Taurean. Thank you."

For a moment, Filius watched the larger wizard leave. When he had emerged from the castle and fairly stumbled upon the two of them snogging, his heart had turned over in his chest. This was what he had been afraid of all along.

And he had been right. It hurt like hell to see Pomona in the arms of another man. Especially one she had probably just met.

For the life of him, he couldn't remember the last time Pomona had actually been on a date. Or what type of man drew her attention. But he would never have wagered on a man that looked like this... Taurean.

Filius frowned.

His behavior over the whole ordeal had been horrible. He had never before felt what people referred to as jealousy as keenly as he had tonight watching Pomona kiss someone else instead of him. Of course, to be jealous, he would have to consider Pomona his. And now that he reflected on it, he had had her to himself for the whole year.

His frown deepened. Why was that? A young witch like Pomona should be going out constantly. Oh, she went out with the girls regularly, but come to think of it, she had never so much as gone out with or mentioned another young man... until tonight.

He wondered about Taurean. *Who is he?* He had called Pomona cherry blossom. That was rather endearing for someone she had just met, unless they had met before. Looking down, Filius kicked a rock and watched it roll down the hill. Staring after it, he felt just like it: spiraling out of control. *Damn, why did this have to hurt so much?*

A low rumbling sound pulled him from his thoughts. His eyebrows rose when he saw that Pomona was not quite upright any longer, her form having sagged when his Levitation charm lulled slightly while he reflected on his predicament. She was asleep, cushioned by his magic.

Sighing, he waved his wand to adjust Pomona into a horizontal position, and slowly wandered up to the castle with her sleeping soundly in tow.

"Come on, Mona, let's get you to bed," he told her.

A louder snore was her response.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 11

Pomona doesn't wake up alone.

Chapter 5

"Lo there, Taurean!" Hagrid exclaimed brightly, looking at Taurean through the iron gates. Frowning, he added, "I thought I paid me bar tab..."

Smiling up at the giant, Taurean shook his head and chuckled. "Yes, you paid your tab, Hagrid. That isn't the reason I'm here this morning."

"It isn't? I thought it was a bit odd, you comin' up to the school at such an early hour to collect on a debt. Is there anything I can help ye with?"

"Actually..."

"Yes?"

"Your Herbology Mistress..."

"Pr'fessor Sprout?" Hagrid asked, puckering his brow. "I 'aven't seen her this morning, but it is still early. She usually makes her way down to the greenhouses around seven."

"It's six-thirty. Hopefully, she should be up by now. I have a potion for her. Do you think I could come in?" Taurean asked.

"I don see why not, seein' as you are Rosmerta's cousin, and a fine wizard to boot," Hagrid remarked, opening the gate.

"Thanks, Hagrid. I owe you one, my friend!" Taurean clapped him on the shoulder as he walked past. Turning, Taurean asked, "One more thing, where do I find her?"

Pointing toward the castle, Hagrid answered, "Through the oak doors there, right, down the stairs, then left. Her door has a small gold badger in the center."

Nodding, Taurean smiled again. "Thank you," he replied, striding up to the castle.

Pushing the heavy oak door closed behind him, Taurean descended the stairs on the right side of the corridor. At this time of the morning, no students were about. He found Pomona's door just on the left side of the hall where Hagrid had directed him. It was round, and the badger gleamed in the torchlight.

Smiling, he patted his pocket and shook his head. He could well imagine the size of the headache his lovely cherry blossom would have this morning. He had been beating himself up for allowing her to have more than two last night, because he knew the kind of punch it held in the end.

Stepping up to her door, Taurean knocked sharply and waited. Moments ticked by, and there was no answer. He knocked again. This time, he thought he heard a moan from the other side of the door, and something fell. Alarmed, he stood back and drew his wand.

Swinging his wand in an arc and muttering a soft spell in Portuguese, the lock shifted, and Pomona's door swung silently open. Sucking in his breath, Taurean leaned just inside the open door and whispered, "Pomona?"

The room was dark, and he couldn't hear anything. He worried that Pomona had fallen and hurt herself. Raising his wand once more, he turned the torches on the walls up and moved inside. The first room he entered was Pomona's sitting room. There were two rounded armchairs in the corner by the hearth with a maple table between them. A golden mirror hung above the fireplace with badgers bordering it, and several bookshelves lined the walls filled with countless tomes on plants and Herbology.

Taurean quirked his mouth up on one side as he glanced over the room briefly. To the right was another open door. Striding over to it, he peered inside and thought he heard steady breathing.

"Pomona?" he whispered again. "Cherry blossom? I have something for you." He stepped into the room, raising the torches here as well.

Inside, Pomona lay in her bed on her side, still in the clothes she had worn last night. On the floor, next to her night stand, lay a scattered stack of Herbology books. *There is the sound I heard*, Taurean thought, raising an eyebrow.

Leaning toward Pomona, Taurean tried again. "Cherry blossom," he said a bit louder, and Pomona moaned softly. "I have something for you. I don't want you to be late for your classes today."

Pomona shifted to her back, groaning and placing her arm over her eyes to block out the light. "Dad, I don't want to go to school today. I don't feel well," she mumbled.

Taurean's smile broadened, and his dimple stood out. "Well, I have just the thing to make you feel right as rain, buttercup," he told her, moving to sit next to her on the bed. It dipped under his weight, and Pomona groaned once more.

Pulling the cork from the vial and pressing it into her hand, Taurean told her, "Here, drink this and things should be normal again, Pomona."

Sluggishly, Pomona fumbled with the vial, spilling a bit of the liquid before Taurean could reach out and save it. Then, carefully, he guided the bottle to her lips and watched as she tipped it back. Grimacing, Pomona took in a deep breath once the potion was gone and handed the vial back to him.

After a few moments, Pomona sighed again but still hid her eyes from the light. "Any better, cherry blossom?" Taurean asked softly, close to her ear.

Lifting her hand from her eyes, Pomona looked at her savior, and a startled look crossed her face. She then sat bolt upright in her bed, pulling the sheets with her and covering her head. Under the covers, Taurean noticed a lump traveling frantically up and down Pomona's body and frowned.

Disengaging her head from the covers, Pomona studied Taurean anxiously. "Taurean?" Her eyes grew as wide as saucers when he nodded. "W-we? Did w-we? We couldn't have...could we? I mean... Oh, great Merlin, what have I done?" Pomona ended on a squeak as tears filled her eyes.

Leaning his head to the side, Taurean clucked his tongue and brought his arms around Pomona. Tenderly, he pulled her into his arms to comfort her. His hands stroked her back gently, and he began to rock her. "Shh, shh, Pomona, what is wrong?"

"I-I h..v.. dnnn, mthng... sooo rrrnngg..." she attempted, but her words were muffled by his broad chest.

Shaking his head, Taurean pulled her away from his chest. "I'm sorry, what was that, Pomona? I can't understand you when you are trying to burrow into my chest."

Sniffing uncontrollably, Pomona leaned back and wailed, "I have done something so wrong! Please forgive me, Taurean? I am so sorry. I never meant for this to happen!"

Frowning, he grabbed her shoulders with his hands to steady her. "What exactly do you think has happened?" he asked, his face close to hers.

Pomona's tears ceased, and a frown crossed her face. "I... you... we..."

"Oh!" he exclaimed as realization dawned. "You think that we made love, don't you?"

Silently, she nodded and looked down at the blanket.

Placing his index finger beneath her chin, he tugged her gaze up to meet his. "Now, cherry blossom, while I admit that does have its appeal, because I do find you very attractive, I can assure you, nothing happened."

Pomona blushed. "B-but how are you..."

"Here? Hagrid let me in this morning. I had a feeling you might need a hangover potion this morning."

"But, if Hagrid let you in this morning, how did I get here?"

Raising both eyebrows, Taurean whistled. "You don't remember? Remind me you are only allowed two cocktails at a time, no more. So tell me, what *do* you remember?"

Frowning, Pomona concentrated. Rubbing her forehead with her hand, she replied, "Not much after that third cocktail, I'm afraid." She pulled a face at herself when she looked back at him.

Smiling again, he said, "Well, once we got past the Hogwarts gates, I left you in the hands of a professor you introduced to me as Filius."

Pomona looked sheepish.

"Truthfully, I only assumed he was a professor. I got the impression he didn't like me much. But I understand it given he thought I was attacking you... I believe."

Suddenly, Pomona looked up. "W-why would he think that?"

"Because we were snogging..."

"But I thought you said nothing happened..."

"Now, Pomona, nothing did happen. It was a simple kiss. You seemed to want it as much as I did..." Tears rose in her eyes once more, and she looked down.

"Listen, I understood your meaning last evening. I know your heart belongs to someone else. And please know that nothing else would have happened, even if Filius had not shown up." Looking up at him, her tears spilled over, and she sniffed.

"I am so sorry. I never meant to lead you on. That was what I was afraid of. But you are right. Another wizard holds my heart, though I doubt we'll ever be together. But I also can't be with someone when I know I can't give my whole heart. It just isn't right."

"And I respect that, Pomona," he told her seriously. "I could tell you were an honorable witch. That wizard of yours is one lucky man, even if he doesn't know it."

Pomona blushed, glancing away from him. Her gaze landed on the clock across the room, and her eyes widened. "Great gods! Is that the time?"

Following her stare, Taurean nodded and was suddenly being shoved off her bed and out of her room. "I am sorry, Taurean. But I have to get to the greenhouses. Thank you for the hangover potion. I would invite you to stay a bit longer, but duty calls."

"Wait! But..." Taurean attempted to turn around at her threshold.

"I do apologize, but I really must run. I promise I will come see you later at the Three Broomsticks, and you can continue dissecting my non-existent love life if you like. But I have students to teach in less than half an hour," she explained and promptly shut the door before he could get out another word.

On the other side of the door, Pomona leaned back against it heavily and sighed. *How could I be so incredibly stupid?* She frowned. There would be time enough to beat herself up over her thoughtlessness. Right now she needed to quickly shower and get to the greenhouses before she was late for her double Herbology lesson with both Slytherin and Gryffindor. Groaning, she heaved herself up from the door and walked into the bathroom. She was going to miss breakfast; she just hoped that the hangover potion lasted until lunch.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 11

Pomona learns something about herself.

Chapter Six

Slumping into her chair at the head table, Pomona put her head in her hand and rubbed. *That hangover potion didn't last long*, she thought with a scowl. Sighing heavily, she lifted her head, attempting to look normal and not as if her head was about to split in two. As she surveyed the food in front of her, her stomach lurched. The very thought of food at the moment had no appeal at all.

A movement to her right captured her attention. Poppy slid into the chair next to her. Leaning toward her, she murmured, "How are you feeling?"

Letting out a long breath, Pomona replied, "Is it that obvious?"

"Oh, no! Ro just filled me in this morning on what a good time you both had after Minerva and I left last night. How you went home with a certain bartender?"

Turning toward the matron, Pomona's eyes boggled. "She told you? As if it wasn't already bad enough that Filius knows," Pomona grumbled, closing her eyes and leaning back in her chair.

Placing her hand on Pomona's arm, Poppy leaned in. "Filius knows? That explains a few things."

"Like what?" Pomona asked, looking deflated.

"When I saw Filius this morning, let's just say he was less than his usual chipper self. I don't think I have ever seen him so... blue... for lack of a better word, since the man got here."

"That's odd. Why on earth would he be blue? Mmm, Poppy, you wouldn't happen to have some Hangover or Pepperup potion, would you?"

Wrapping Pomona's hand around a small vial, Poppy smiled and said, "I am way ahead of you, dear."

Sighing with relief, Pomona took the stopper from the small bottle. "Poppy, you are a God send, thank you," she murmured, quickly tipping up the vial and emptying the contents.

"Mmm, look what the cat dragged in," Rolanda said, sitting down on the other side of Pomona.

Frowning, Pomona looked over at Rolanda. "Ro, how could you send me home with a man I barely know? W-we barely know!"

Giving Pomona's shoulder a shove, Rolanda laughed. "Aw, come off it! You enjoyed it. Are you saying all that didn't take your mind off your worries last night?"

"What worries? After that last drink it was like I didn't have any or comprehension for that matter. Which isn't me. You know that, Ro," Pomona whispered fiercely. "And to top it off, Filius caught us snogging in the courtyard—"

Rolanda put her arm around Pomona's shoulders and sudden sharp pain shot through her right shoulder. She stiffened and moved away, but Rolanda didn't notice. "You—you mean to tell me, you *snogged* with Taurean on the castle grounds? And Filius found you?" Rolanda held her belly as she gave a hearty laugh. "This is better than a story in *Witch Weekly!*"

Both Poppy and Pomona frowned at Rolanda as she leaned forward, her shoulders shaking with mirth.

"I really don't see what you find so amusing about all this, Ro," Pomona said, rising from the table. "Please excuse me, Poppy. I seem to have lost my appetite," she murmured, turning to leave and bumping into Filius as he stepped up behind her.

"Oh, Filius! I'm so sorry!" Pomona exclaimed, reaching out to steady the shorter professor.

His warm hand covered hers, and their eyes met briefly. Gazing at him, she saw what Poppy had been talking about. "It's quite all right, Pomona. How are you feeling this afternoon?" he asked sincerely, looking from Rolanda to Pomona.

Sudden tears sprang to her eyes, and Pomona looked away, blinking rapidly in an effort to diffuse them. She just needed to get away for a moment to clear her head, try to remember everything that happened last night. And find out why her right shoulder hurt like hell. Clearing her throat, she replied, "Doing well, Filius. Thank you for helping me to my rooms last night." Her last words broke a little.

"Oh, no problem! No problem at all, my dear. You know I will always assist you if I can," he told her, bestowing a smile that did not quite reach his eyes. "Are you sure you are all right?"

"Yes, I just need some air suddenly," Pomona whispered, pushing past him and pulling her hand from his.

Out in the hall, Pomona walked quickly down the stairs whispering a spell and burst through the door to her rooms. Once inside, she leaned against it and slid down as her tears spilled over. *What must he think of me? How I must have disappointed him by throwing myself at a man I just met? The disappointment was written all over his face!*

Pomona sat there for a few moments, feeling sorry for herself and wondering what Filius really thought of her when she remembered her shoulder. Rising from the floor, she took off her over-robe and under-robe. Turning in front of the mirror, she drew in her breath sharply when she caught a glimpse of her right shoulder blade.

She had a tattoo! When had she done that? She frowned. Looking back at it, her brows rose. It was a deep pink heart created from two different musical forms and had a banner of words running through it. The words: Love is the music of our hearts, waved at her every so often. *Is it supposed to look like that?* she wondered. The flesh surrounding the fresh tattoo was an angry red. She had never gotten a tattoo before, and she supposed it would be sore for a few days. Anything that required a needle placing ink under your skin would probably hurt for more than a day.

Funny, Ro had never mentioned it. Maybe no one knew she had a tattoo. And no one needed to know as far as she was concerned. If Filius ever saw it, he would know exactly how she felt about him. If any of the girls saw it, they would probably look at her with that pitiful look they saved for just her and her hopeless love for a man who would never give her the kind of love she needed in return. No, better no one knew about it but her.

Placing a hand over her eyes, she shook her head. *How could I be so reckless?* Drawing in a breath, she strode into the bathroom and grabbed a cloth. Wetting and wringing it out, she washed her shoulder gently, then put her robes back on. With a determined look, she left her chambers. She had one more double class this afternoon with Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw to get through before she could go find Taurean to pick his brain some more about last night.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 11

Pomona intends to see Taurean, but runs into someone else.

Chapter Seven

With a heavy sigh, Pomona fell onto her bed while removing her hat. She was completely exhausted. Her last double class had been a nightmare. Three of her Hufflepuffs had detention as a result of their mischief making, and she had three very upset laughing lilies. She'd had to move them away from the others or they would all end up crying by morning. Hopefully, the plants would brighten up by morning or she would have to separate them and nurse them back to health. Normally, this wasn't a problem. But for them to be restored from crying, you had to tell them corny jokes, and she simply didn't think she would be able to cause happiness when she felt so low. Plants could always tell your mood, even if the students couldn't. And that had made it very easy for her students to get the laughing lilies to cry.

Hearing her clock chime the hour, Pomona glanced at it and sighed again. She felt horrible, and to top off her day, her headache from the morning and afternoon was returning. She should be heading to dinner now, but she didn't think she could face her friends or Filius at this moment. Rising, she strode over to the fireplace and placed a pinch of Floo powder inside. Instantly, the green flames blazed when she called Albus Dumbledore's name. Sticking her head in the flame, his office came into view.

Sitting behind his desk, Albus glanced up as his fireplace turned green. "Professor Sprout! How can I help you?"

"Headmaster, I apologize for the interruption," Pomona told him quickly.

Shaking his head, Albus waved off her apologies. "Think nothing of it, my dear."

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore. I find that I need to go into Hogsmeade this evening and visit the nursery. I have some sick laughing lilies so I won't be able to attend dinner tonight."

"Ah, I see. Very good, Professor Sprout. I heard you had a little trouble in your last class this afternoon. Will the plants be all right?"

Nodding, Pomona answered, "Yes, yes. Nothing a little comedic fertilizer and special care can't cure." She smiled back at him as if she wasn't wishing she could cry instead.

"Very well, Pomona," he replied. "I will let Minerva and the staff know that you won't be in attendance tonight. But I hope to see you in the morning." He looked at her over the rims of his spectacles and raised one brow.

"Oh, y-yes, sir. You will. I hope you will excuse my absence this morning. I overslept. I..."

"Don't worry, Professor. I understand. Is there anything else you would like to talk to me about?" he asked, standing and walking around to the front of his desk.

"No," Pomona replied quickly, shaking her head.

Pausing, Albus looked down and let out a long breath. "All right, Pomona. Have a good night."

"Yes, sir. You too. Thank you," Pomona said hastily and ended the floo call.

Frowning, Pomona thought Albus' last question was odd but quickly shoved it aside. She needed to get to the nursery before it closed. Afterward, she would make a stop at the Three Broomsticks to apologize to Taurean for kicking him out this morning and for not being able to stay this evening. But she was just too tired to let him pick her brain. In her current state, she may just come right out and tell him who she was in love with. That was a detail few people knew. And given his ingenuity, Pomona didn't doubt for one moment that Taurean was a very intelligent wizard. He may well deduce it even if Pomona was able to keep from telling him.

Breaking free from her thoughts, Pomona quickly put on her hat and over-robe, wincing when her right shoulder ached from the movement. Breathing out slowly, she adjusted her robe and strode to the door, then turned and waved her wand in an arc to secure it once she was in the hallway. Outside, Pomona shielded her eyes from the sun as she walked to the gate, then Apparated.

A loud crack met Pomona's ears when she reappeared in Hogsmeade, and she flinched. She really didn't feel well. *Too many skipped meals and too little sleep in the last two days*, she chastised herself. Looking up, she saw the nursery just on the other side of the street. Ambling over to the door, she stepped inside, and a bell chimed announcing her arrival.

"Ahh, Professor Sprout! It's so nice to see you," the tall, dark gardener greeted her with a smile. "How can I help you?"

Smiling back tiredly, Pomona said, "Hello, Hugh. It's nice to see you again, too. I need some comedic fertilizer delivered to the school in the morning, if possible."

Concern crossed Hugh's face. "Trouble with your Honking Daffodils?"

Shaking her head, Pomona sighed and replied, "No. It's the laughing lilies. Though I think I would prefer it was the Honking Daffodils. They are much easier to coax out of depression than the lilies."

"Oh, dear. You have my sympathies, Professor. I happen to have just gotten a shipment in today. I'll have Ben deliver it first thing in the morning. And why don't you take this too?" He handed her a small book.

"What's this?" Pomona asked, raising her eyebrows as she turned the book over in her hands.

"Newest volume of *Ridiculous Riddles and Tacky Jokes* by Howard Mendy. It's guaranteed to liven up all your jovial plants." He smiled at her.

"Thank you, Hugh. Just add it to my bill."

"Nah. It's on the house, Professor."

Looking at the older man, tears rose in her eyes at his act of kindness. Pomona rapidly blinked them away and smiled back at him. "Thanks, Hugh." Waving, she stepped back into the street, placed the book in her robe pocket, and walked toward the Three Broomsticks.

"Still have a long face, deary?" the shrunken heads greeted her once more as she stepped inside the pub.

"Perhaps. It has merely been a long day," Pomona replied, looking up at them and smiling weakly.

Glancing toward the bar, Pomona searched for Taurean, but drew in a sharp breath when her sight fell upon someone she had not expected to be there at all. Covering the space hesitantly, Pomona stopped behind him and gently touched his shoulder.

When he turned around, she greeted him awkwardly. "Hello, Filius."

"Pomona!" he greeted her with a smile that lit his eyes. Behind him, she saw Taurean leaning against the bar, and he nodded at her, smiling as well. "I was just telling Taurean about your wonderful plants. He used to help his father tend their garden every summer."

"Oh, really?" Pomona asked, sincerely interested, moving to sit down when Filius hopped down and moved a stool out for her. "Thank you, Filius."

"No bother at all, my dear," he said, levitating himself back up to his stool.

It felt glorious to sit down, even though Pomona felt a little out of sorts to be between the two men. She sighed. Her head was pounding now, and she really should beg off for the night. But the fact that Filius was here made her want to stay. Why is he here, anyway?

"I came to see Taurean. I felt like we got off to a wrong start last evening, and I wanted to make amends," Filius explained as if reading Pomona's mind.

"Oh!"

Laughing, Taurean said, "And I told him no amends were needed. I can understand the need to protect the castle and its staff." His eyes landed on Pomona, and he smiled at her again. "What can I get you tonight, Professor?"

"Well, I was actually coming to tell you I need to beg off for tonight," Pomona explained. "I am feeling rather tired, and it has been a very long day."

"Oh, but, Pomona, surely you have missed dinner at Hogwarts this evening. You should eat something here before you retire," Filius pointed out, laying his hand on top of hers.

Closing her eyes at the contact, Pomona swallowed hard. Then, taking a deep breath once Filius had removed his hand, she looked over at him. "I am sorry, Filius, but I'm not very hungry. I was just going to get the House-elves to bring me some tea and biscuits and go to bed."

"That isn't much, Pomona. Please have something here with me? It might make you feel a little better. Just something small," Filius pleaded.

"He is right, cherry blossom. Rosmerta's chef is trying a new line of tapas that might be perfect. Why don't you both move to a table, and I will get you a menu?" Taurean asked.

Sighing heavily, Pomona acquiesced. "How can I refuse when I have you both worried for my health?" She smiled tiredly.

"Wonderful! Thank you, Taurean," Filius exclaimed, hopping down from his stool and moving to the nearest table. Pulling out a chair, he motioned for Pomona to sit down and pushed it in when she did.

Taking the chair across from her, Filius pulled out his wand and Levitated his cherry-filled drink to the table from the bar. Lifting it, he took a generous sip and sighed. "I have to say, Taurean makes a great Italian cherry soda. I'm so glad you decided to stay, Pomona."

Arriving at their table, Taurean handed them both a small menu card. "Can I get you a drink, Pomona?" he asked while they looked at the choices.

"Filius tells me you make a lovely Italian cherry soda. Can I have one of those?"

"Certainly! I'll be right back," he told her with a smile, turning and striding back to the bar.

"Are you all right, Mona?" Filius asked, concern marring his features as he studied her.

Sighing, Pomona looked at Filius and nodded. "It has just been a very long day. I have three laughing lilies that are crying because of my last class. And I did not get

enough sleep last night because of poor judgment on my part. But that is all on me, Filius. That is all. Truly." She reached out and grasped his hand, squeezing it in reassurance.

Turning his hand over, he covered her hand with his other one and patted it. "That does sound like a bad day. I am sorry you had to go through that. What about your plants?"

"They'll be fine. Hugh is going to deliver what I need in the morning."

Placing a short glass filled with pink liquid and cherries in front of Pomona, Taurean asked, "So, have you both made a decision?"

Pulling her hand from Filius', Pomona glanced up, then picked up the small menu and looked at it. "Yes, I think I will try the cheese-filled grape leaves," she replied, handing the menu back to Taurean.

"And I want to try the empanadas," Filius told him.

"Those are very good choices," he said, taking their menus and heading to the kitchen.

"So, how was Celeste?" Pomona asked, trying to think of something to say.

"She is good. The view from the tower is astonishing. But she says it gets rather cold up there, and she is pants at warming Charms. I have offered to show her how to cast a warming Charm that lasts."

"Well, I can't think of a better person to teach her that than you," Pomona said, taking a sip of her drink. "You know, you are right about this soda. I love the bubbles."

Nodding, Filius picked up his own drink and took a sip. "It is good, isn't it? This is the first time I have ever had one. Taurean was also telling me about a Japanese cherry blossom margarita that sounds delicious..."

"Oh, it is. But very potent."

"He did tell me that as well," Filius chuckled. "Ah, here are our tapas," Filius said as Taurean placed the plates in front of them.

"I hope you like them. It is something we have often in my country," Taurean told them, watching avidly as they both picked up a morsel and took a bite.

Pomona bit into a grape leaf, and the flavor of salty olives and sweet, rum-filled raisins combined with the softness of goat cheese assaulted her taste buds. She closed her eyes briefly and sighed. "Mmm, these are very delicious, Taurean," Pomona told him. Filius simply nodded as he chewed.

"Wonderful! I will tell the chef you like them very much. They are something my cousin had while she visited me last year and wanted to add them to the menu. So far, they have been a great success." He grinned broadly before turning away.

"I can see why," Filius said after finishing his bite. "Would you like to try one of these?"

"Only if you try one of mine," Pomona replied, picking up a grape leaf with her fork and placing it on his plate while he did the same with one of his empanadas.

They ate in silence for a few moments. Pomona's headache had dulled a little as she ate and drank, but she could still feel the effects of the last two days. She didn't want this contentment she was feeling at this moment with Filius to cloud her judgment. This wasn't a date, even if it felt that way.

Looking over at Filius, she studied him for a moment. As she watched him, she noticed he did look rather sad as Poppy had pointed out earlier. When he looked up at her and caught her watching him, his sadness seemed to disappear some, and he smiled tenderly back at her. Placing her half-eaten empanada back on her plate, she wiped her mouth with her napkin.

"Filius, how was your day today?" she asked, thinking maybe something had happened in one of his classes as it had in hers.

"Oh, it went well, very well indeed. The Stebbins boy was even able to Levitate a feather on his first try today. I did miss your company at breakfast, and then at lunch, though. My meeting with Albus went well too." He wiped his mouth with his napkin, having finished everything on his plate.

"Meeting with Albus?" Pomona frowned. "Is anything else wrong?" Reaching for her drink, she took a generous sip.

His brows rose. "Oh, no, no. I just wanted to look into the needs of the other magical schools. Albus had mentioned a few weeks ago that Beaubatons was in need of a Charms master, and I wanted to let him know I might be able to fill in until their suitable candidate is ready. I have reached out to a few of my peers and found someone who could eventually take the position, but they have to get their affairs in order. In the meantime, we will do a sort of exchange. She will work here while I work there."

Coughing sporadically, Pomona roughly placed her drink on the table and picked up her napkin to cover her mouth. Instantly, Filius was beside her, patting her back.

"Pomona! Are you all right, my dear?"

Holding up her hand, she continued to cough, but nodded in agreement that she was fine. "I'm sorry. My drink... just went down... the wrong way," she rasped out. He continued rubbing her back. Looking over her shoulder at him, she cleared her throat. "Thank you, Fil. I am good." She gave him a small smile.

Laying his hand on her right shoulder, he squeezed it in reassurance, and she stiffened as hot pain stabbed her back. Sucking in her breath, sudden tears came to her eyes.

Sitting back down across from her, a startled look came over Filius' face as he looked at her. "Pomona?"

Closing her eyes to hide her tears, Pomona shook her head. "I'm sorry, Filius. But I am suddenly not feeling well at all. I think I need to return to the castle and get some rest," she said, looking down and searching in her robes for her change purse.

Sighing, he told her, "Very well, Mona. Don't worry about dinner. It was my treat."

Slowly, she raised her eyes to meet his and noted the sadness there once more. Her own heart was being torn in half at the thought of him leaving the school for any length of time. To top that off, her headache was pounding again, and she was feeling rather sick. A look of gratitude crossed her face. "Thank you, Fil. I am sorry I can't stay. Next time, it will be my turn," she told him, trying to lighten the sudden heaviness surrounding them. He gave a curt nod.

Standing up, Pomona grabbed the table to steady herself as the room spun, causing her stomach to lurch.

"Mona?" Filius rose, placing a hand on her arm. "Please, sit back down. Let me get the bill, and I will escort you back to the castle. I don't think you should go by yourself. Please?" he pleaded, and Pomona nodded.

"Yes, I think that might be a good idea." Pomona sat back down as the room continued to spin.

Taurean walked over to their table and stood next to Filius studying Pomona. "Cherry blossom? Are you ill?" he asked, concern in his voice as he looked at her closed eyes.

"Taurean, can I get our bill? I need to escort Pomona back to the castle," Filius told him.

Looking over at the smaller man, Taurean shook his head. "Don't worry about the bill, my friend. Just get her back to her room so she can rest. I will talk to you both later. Please, feel better, cherry blossom," he said, taking her hand in his and squeezing it in reassurance briefly.

"Thank you, Taurean, we will. Come on, up you go, Mona." Filius took Pomona around the waist and helped her up.

As she stood, the room began to spin once more, but she paused for a moment, leaning on Filius, and it stopped. Sighing in relief, she took a tentative step toward the door as Filius assisted her. Out in the night air, she felt a bit better. The fresh air seemed to clear her mind, but she still felt very run down.

"I'm so sorry, Filius. I..."

"What is there to be sorry for, my dear? You cannot help that you are not feeling well. Might I suggest I give you a side-along Apparition? I think you are too weak to Apparate by yourself. I wouldn't want you to splinch yourself.

Nodding in agreement, Pomona said, "I would appreciate that very much, Filius. Thank you."

Moving closer to her, Filius pulled her into his arms, wrapping them around her, and coaxed her to do the same. They stood there for just a moment, holding onto one another, then Filius looked up at her. For a moment, Pomona thought of kissing him. Just leaning in and throwing caution to the wind, but her mind stopped her. She was afraid of losing his friendship altogether if he didn't see her the way she wanted him to see her. If she couldn't have his love, his friendship would have to be enough...even if it was hundreds of miles away in another city, at another school.

A lump rose in her throat as she allowed her thoughts to travel, but she was pulled from them by the sound of his voice. "Ready then, Mona? Just relax, and I will have us at the castle in no time."

Looking down at him, she nodded, pulling him closer to her and laying her head on top of his. If she could never have his love, she would take as much as she could from a side-along Apparition. Holding onto him, she closed her eyes, and in an instant, with a subtle pop, they were gone.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 11

Filius attempts to summon his courage, and Taurean makes a request.

Descending the stairs slowly to Pomona's rooms, Filius reflected on the previous evening. He had not expected to see Pomona at the Three Broomsticks. But then, why wouldn't she go there to see Taurean? The night before, she seemed taken with him. And no matter his jealousy, Filius could see that Taurean was a good man.

Filius had gone to see Taurean to apologize for his attitude the previous night and found the man very gracious and forgiving when he did not have to be. He could easily see why Pomona would instantly be drawn to him. For one, he was very easy to talk to. Filius found himself even divulging information to the man without a second thought.

"Have you ever done something you have instantly regretted?" Filius had asked, not expecting an answer.

"The better question would be: have you ever not done such a thing? I think you would find not many wizards or witches have not. What is your trouble, my friend? Is it anything I can help with?" Taurean wiped down the bar in front of Filius.

Filius shook his head. "I think I am beyond helping." He stared at the gleaming bar top mournfully.

"Nothing can be as bad as that. Can I get you anything to drink?" Taurean asked, drawing Filius from his dark thoughts.

Looking up, Filius blinked to clear his vision. "What? Oh, I find I don't have the head for something strong," he said, shaking his head. "Pumpkin juice?"

Shaking his head, Taurean said, "We're out until tomorrow. How about an Italian soda?"

Filius' eyebrows rose. "What is that?"

"Fruit and syrup in fizzy water. It is very delicious. Do you have a favorite fruit?"

"Cherry. Can I try cherry, please?" Filius asked, his face lighting with anticipation.

Smiling, Taurean nodded and set a glass with ice in front of Filius. Pulling out his wand, he moved it in a gentle arc. Instantly, two bottles floated over the glass. Tipping over, they filled it while three round cherries skewered themselves on a red toothpick and settled gently on top. A look of delight crossed Filius' face.

Reaching for the glass, he brought it to his mouth and took a tentative sip. "Mmm, this is heavenly," he told Taurean, setting it back down. "Thank you."

Taurean gave him a curt nod. "So what have you done that you regretted recently?"

Sighing heavily, Filius turned his drink with his fingertips on the bar top as he stared at the bubbles. "I fell in love with a friend who does not want more than friendship."

"And you are sure this... friend, she does not want more than friendship?"

Filius nodded, still staring at his drink. "I think she views me more as a father figure. I am twenty years her senior."

"You think? Have you told her you love her?"

Shaking his head, Filius looked up at Taurean as his eyebrows rose. "I couldn't do that..."

"But why not? You cannot say she does not love you if you have never given her a chance to proclaim it one way or the other given your feelings."

"But..."

"Take Professor Sprout for instance."

"Pomona?" Filius asked, his voice an octave higher, afraid the other man had already figured out who he was speaking of.

"Yes," Taurean began, and his eyes softened. "At our first meeting last night, I found her very attractive, and I immediately made her aware of my interest in her. But she informed me that her attentions already belonged to another..."

Gripping his glass, Filius' knuckles began to turn white. "And yet you still took advantage of her on the castle grounds," Filius breathed, his anger at the younger man returning.

Holding up his hands, Taurean shook his head. "No, no. I would never do such a thing. She kissed me, and that is as far as it would have gone even if you had not been there. Had she not been so inebriated, Pomona would not have kissed me. I do know that. I blame myself for her state last night. I introduced her to a Japanese cherry blossom margarita, and I did not realize how it would affect her."

Nodding, Filius lifted his drink and took a longer sip. "I see. Is that where 'Cherry Blossom' came from?" Filius asked, relieved it was not a more endearing term, but feeling it was given Taurean's confession of how he felt about Pomona.

Taurean nodded, smiling, and Filius felt his stomach drop. Pomona had told this man she had feelings for someone else, but who? Filius suddenly felt sick and Taurean frowned at him.

"Are you all right?" Taurean asked, concerned.

Closing his eyes, Filius nodded. "Just letting my thoughts run away with me."

"Oh, yes, going back to what we were speaking of: In my country, women often desire an older man. You should not assume she does not feel the same for you as you do for her. You dishonor her by not asking her opinion," the bartender informed, leaning against the bar.

Sighing again, Filius nodded. "I see. But what if she does not share my affections?"

Shrugging, Taurean gave a half smile. "At least you will know. And she will be less likely to do something that you will misconstrue. Because it sounds as if you want to keep her friendship even if she does not share your feelings."

"Oh, I do, I do," Filius agreed, nodding. "I see your point. So, I have told you what I regret, what about you?"

Taurean looked down at the bar for a moment, then glanced up, and his eyes held a faraway look. "I have not spoken to my father in over a year. The profession I have chosen makes it difficult to stay with my family."

"A bartender?" Filius asked, confused.

Chuckling, Taurean shook his head. "No. A Curse-Breaker."

"Ahh."

"My father is what you would call an Herbologist. He runs a well-known plant nursery in Portugal."

Filius frowned.

Holding up his hand, Taurean explained, "He is a Muggle. I used to help him tend his plants every summer. He would prefer that I stay and run the family business, but I am a wizard. I have plenty of siblings who can help him. I want to do something where I feel useful. And that is not a usual feeling when you have seven siblings. My father does not share my feelings," Taurean finished, looking down.

For a moment, Filius saw pain in the younger man's eyes, but it was quickly hidden when he excused himself and moved to take an order from another wizard who sat down on the other side of the bar.

When Taurean returned, Filius said, "It is good that you have a knowledge of plants, being a Curse-Breaker."

"I did take a course on magical plants, but that was some time ago. I admit, most of my knowledge is limited to what my father raised in his greenhouses."

"Professor Sprout has four greenhouses full of magical plants. She was just showing me her new Venomous Tentacula sprouts the other day. She keeps them in the greenhouse that is not for student use. They are for potions," he explained seeing Taurean's eyebrow go up. "Her favorite plant is the Honking daffodil though. She has gotten them to grow in a wide variety of colors they are not usually available in." Filius smiled as he thought of Pomona's love for her plants.

It was at that moment that he had felt a warm hand on his shoulder. Turning around, Filius' eyebrows rose, and his breath stopped as a smile lit his face.

"Hello, Filius," Pomona had greeted him hesitantly, looking somber.

What had followed had been bittersweet. Filius wanted to follow Taurean's advice, but asking Pomona about her feelings for him at the Three Broomsticks had been too awkward with Taurean hovering over them. He reminded himself that what had followed had not been a date, even if it had felt like one.

Besides, Pomona had given mixed messages all evening. She did not feel well, that much was clear. One moment, she tensed every time he touched her, and the next she was holding his hand, giving him hope. And then he had ruined everything by telling her about going to Beauxbatons.

He winced at that thought. He had not been able to think of anything to say, which was odd since they always seemed to have something to say to each other until recently.

Coming out of his thoughts for a moment, he sighed, waiting for the stairs to move.

And then, when he had offered a Side-Along-Apparition, the feeling of Pomona's arms around him was something he would never forget. She had held onto him so tightly, like she might never let him go. For a moment, right before they had Apparated, she had looked at him, and he thought she might kiss him. He shook his head. He was having trouble being able to tell where his fantasies ended, and the truth began. Taurean was right, he needed to tell Pomona how he felt.

As they had approached her door, Filius had tried to muster the courage to say something, but Pomona had been leaning more heavily upon him. "Pomona, I think perhaps you should see Poppy. Do you think you are coming down with something?" he asked with concern when they arrived at her door.

Shaking her head, Pomona wavered slightly when she stood away from him and looked in her robes for her wand. Distractedly, she told him, "No, there's no need bothering Poppy. I am simply tired, that's all. Really." She looked at him and gave him a small smile as she flicked her wand, and her door opened. "I will see you tomorrow, Filius. I just really need some rest."

"Very well, Pomona. I will leave it for this evening." Reaching out, he took her hand and squeezed it. "Pomona, I care for you..."

"And I care about you. I will be fine. All I need is a good nights rest. You'll see," she told him, squeezing his hand back and giving him another small smile.

"Let me escort you to breakfast? Please? You need to eat to maintain your strength." He looked at her, hopeful. And this way he would be sure she did attend breakfast. He

worried about her missing so many meals recently.

Sighing heavily, she nodded. "All right, Filius. I will see you in the morning then. Thank you for dinner," she said, pulling her hand from his and shutting her door behind her.

He had stood there for a moment staring at her door. He had almost told her. Almost.

And now, here he was at her door once more. Steeling himself, he raised his hand and knocked. Today was the day. He would tell her how he felt today. But when?

Shivering, Pomona was startled awake by severe pain in her shoulder. Her entire body felt like it was on fire. During the night, she seemed to have thrashed about, and her bed clothes were all on the floor. Shifting into a sitting position, she rubbed her shoulder lightly, gasping when it seemed to make it feel worse. Her head was pounding again as well.

Sluggishly getting off the bed, she made her way to the bathroom. After

removing her nightgown, she studied her new tattoo in the mirror. The skin surrounding it looked very angry and swollen. Turning, she reached inside her medicine cabinet for some Essence of Dittany and sprinkled a few drops on the area. The pain eased a little, but was not gone completely. Sighing heavily, Pomona turned on the shower and stood under the warm spray for a moment, reflecting on the events of last night.

It had felt glorious to be in Filius' arms, even if it was her own delusions. He had held her so tight, like he had never wanted to let her go. Once they had returned to the castle, it was all she could do to convince him she was fine and did not need to see Poppy. She was simply tired. The only way she could get him to go to his rooms was to accept his invitation to escort her to breakfast. She really hoped today went much better than the last two days.

As she stood under the water, she reflected on Filius' revelation at dinner. Her hot tears mingled with the stream as it ran down her face. She knew it wasn't permanent, but she hadn't been separated from him for almost an entire year. She had grown accustomed to having him near, and at this moment, the thought of him leaving left a great rift in her heart.

Turning off the water, she grabbed her towel and dried off, then wrapped her fluffy Hufflepuff robe around her. Hugging it to her body, her tears started again. Filius had given her this robe. Shaking her head, she tried to get a hold of herself. All this feeling pathetic for herself needed to stop. Perhaps if she felt better, she would not be feeling quite so depressed. Shivering again, she picked up her wand from the nightstand and stoked the fire.

Striding over to her wardrobe, she contemplated her teaching robes. Maybe if she wore something more cheery it would help her mood. Selecting her yellow robes, she put them on slowly and contemplated her day. First off, she would need to check on the sick Laughing Lilies in Greenhouse number three. If they were still crying, she would have to check the status of the comedic soil and the Flutterby bushes before she spent her entire day caring for the plants between classes. Remembering the book Hugh had given her, she plucked it off the dressing table. She was going to need all the help she could get given her current mood.

Tapping at her window pulled her from of her thoughts. Looking over her shoulder, Pomona saw a tawny owl and moved to let it in. Flapping heartily, it flew through the window once she had opened it, then landed on her desk and nudged the place where she kept treats.

"You are a handsome fellow," she told him, walking around the desk to open the silver box. Taking the letter from his beak, she stroked his head as he bent to retrieve his prize, cooing his appreciation.

Turning the letter over in her hands, Pomona studied the bold, steady hand her

name was written in. It wasn't from Filius. She frowned. Cutting the seal with her wand, she took out the letter.

Dear Pomona,

After hearing so many wonderful things about your plants from Filius yesterday, I would like to inquire after a tour of your greenhouses. My father is a Muggle, so I have not had many encounters with magical plants. In my future line of work, I find it would be beneficial to have a working knowledge of magical plants. I am hopeful that I might obtain your assistance in this matter, and then retain you as a consultant in the future.

I would appreciate your help. I am free this afternoon, if a visit is possible. Thank you for considering my proposition.

Yours,

Taurean

Letting out a long breath, Pomona reread the letter. Today was not the best day for Taurean to tour the greenhouses. Sitting down and picking up a quill, Pomona pondered a response. She would ask him to wait until next week. Between incoming shipments over the next few days, sick plants, feeling sick herself, and classes, her hands were full. She wrote a quick note explaining about her sick lilies and asked him to pick a day next week. Folding the note, she moved to the window and opened it. The tawny creature grasped her letter in his beak and flew off into the morning sky.

Watching him, her eyes followed him past the turrets of the castle. When the owl dipped low, her head began to spin, and she grasped the windowpane in an effort to steady herself. Breathing deeply, the fresh air brought her back to her senses just before there was a steady knock at her door. Filius was here.

"Just a moment," she called out, closing the window and going into her bathroom. Quickly, she searched the chest for some Pepper-Up potion. Locating the vial, she noted the date and saw it was expired. It may not give her full relief, but it was better than nothing. And an ease to the pain in her head was what she wanted.

Tipping up the bottle, she downed the contents and threw away the vial, then moved to open her door. Filius stood there, studying the tapestry across the hall.

Filius' eyes grew wide as he turned toward her. "Pomona? You look pale. How are you feeling this morning?"

Pomona frowned. "I do? I am feeling fine. I didn't sleep as well as I would have liked last night," she told him, stepping into the corridor and turning to lock her door.

"Mona, I really think..."

"I promise, if I am still feeling under the weather this afternoon, I will go see Poppy," Pomona said on a long sigh as she turned toward Filius.

"Thank you," he said, reaching out to grasp her hand. "I don't mean to be a bother, I just worry about you. I really hope today goes more smoothly for you, my dear."

"Mmm, me too. Thank you, Filius. You are such a dear to me. I often wonder how I was lucky enough to earn such a wonderful friend as you," she said, squeezing his hand and bestowing a small smile on him.

Turning, they fell into a steady pace along the passageway and walked in silence for a little while.

"When are you leaving for Beauxbatons?" Pomona inquired, breaking the silence.

"Next month..."

"So soon?" Pomona asked, startled.

Stopping in the corridor, Filius faced her. "The school has been without an instructor since Christmas. I admit, it is soon, and I am sorry I did not tell you sooner, my dear, but I only found out myself recently. Pomona, I..."

"There you are!" Rolanda exclaimed, stepping up beside Pomona and scuffing her on the shoulder.

White hot pain shot down her arm, and Pomona closed her eyes as she sucked in her breath. Swallowing hard, she fought for composure as the pain faded. Opening her eyes once more, Pomona looked over at the flight instructor. "Hello, Ro. How are you this morning?"

"Dapper, just dapper, love. Listen, I wanted to apologize for yesterday. It was pointed out that I may have been a little... unfeeling," she began, looking over her shoulder, "and I want to make it up to you."

"There's no need for that, Ro. Thank you, though," Pomona informed her, quietly.

"See, Minerva, I told you," Ro said over her shoulder, and Pomona and Filius turned to see Minerva standing just inside the hallway that led to the Great Hall.

Striding up to the trio, Minerva joined them. "I know, Madam Hooch, but the intent is what matters. Thank you, Filius, for bringing Pomona to breakfast this morning."

"N-no problem, Minerva," he answered, shaking his head.

Sighing, Pomona gave them all a small smile. "It feels like ages since I've seen you, and it's been but a few days."

"I heard what happened yesterday, dear. How are your plants?" Minerva asked with concern.

"They should be fine, but I can let you know more at lunch. I still have to treat them," Pomona explained, turning and walking alongside Rolanda and Minerva with Filius in tow.

"I see. Filius, how have you been?"

"G-good, good. And you, Minerva?"

"I can't complain," she responded, a gentle smile on her lips.

Moving to the front of the group, Filius pushed open the large doors to the Great Hall and moved aside. "After you, ladies."

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 11

Pomona reflects and receives an unexpected visitor.

"There, there, little one. There is no need to cry," Pomona cooed at the white laughing lily in front of her. But by the end of her sentence, her voice had begun to waver, causing the lily's tears to begin anew. This started off the other two at opposite ends of the greenhouse as well.

Shaking her head, Pomona sat down on a wooden stool nearby and wiped her forehead, leaving a streak of dirt. Greenhouse three was humid...much more humid than the chilly February day outside. Her hands were coated with the comedic soil she had lined the new pots with before transferring each lily into a new home. Such a task did not always work, but sometimes it did...not this time.

The tin-like crying of the lilies seemed to fade into a distant droning as Pomona reflected on breakfast. Truthfully, had it been a normal day, all the chaos would not have bothered her. But she had to be honest with herself, she was not well.

After Filius had held the door for them, Rolanda had linked her arm with Pomona's and Minerva's and pulled them toward the head table.

"As I was saying before we ran into Pomona, Minerva, Caradoc..."

"That's Dearborn's first name?" Pomona asked, cutting Rolanda off.

"Yes," Minerva replied. "Like King Arthur's knight of the round table," she went on, looking slightly dreamy-eyed.

"Yes, well, the man does like a table, but I don't think it matters whether it is round or not," Rolanda chimed in in a hushed tone, wiggling her eyebrows at her friends.

Pomona colored slightly, and Minerva sat down, pulling the others with her. "Ro, not so loud! Need I remind you, there are students about?" Minerva chided, frowning.

"Yes, yes, Minerva. I believe we are far enough away at the moment," she said, studying the distance between the head table and the student tables sparsely filled with students at such an early hour. "Caradoc says he wants to initiate a teacher pick-up Quidditch game this weekend. And we were wondering if you would be interested?" Rolanda asked, looking from one to the other.

As she pondered the question, Pomona watched Filius say something to one of his students, then stride across the Great Hall to pull out his chair and sit in his usual place next to her. His nearness caused Pomona's stomach to quiver, and she forgot to answer Madam Hooch.

"I think that would be a fabulous idea!" She heard Minerva exclaim.

"What about you, Pomona? Weren't you a beater when you were a student?" Rolanda asked.

"Um... yes. Though I am sure I am very rusty. But I'm not sure I'll be able to play. It will depend on how my plants are doing by then." *And how I am feeling*, she wanted to add. Closing her eyes, Pomona felt the room spin again.

"Pomona?" Filius questioned, laying his hand on top of hers.

"Oh, here he comes!" Rolanda said, excited. "Minerva, would you scoot over a chair so he can sit here?" she asked, putting pressure on the Transfiguration mistress' arm.

"Do I really have a choice, Ro?" Minerva complained, but moved over anyway.

Opening her eyes after her dizziness had passed, Pomona leaned closer to Filius. "Yes, Filius?"

"Do you think we could me..."

"Ah, my dear Filius, it looks like you are the luckiest bloke in the school, sitting next to all these lovely witches. Do you mind if I cut in?" Professor Dearborn asked jovially.

Startled from his intent, Filius stammered, "N-no. I think there is a seat next to Madam Hooch for you."

Dearborn's brown eyes traveled the length of the table and spotted the chair Minerva had abandoned. "So I see. Rolanda, have you managed to put together a team yet?" he asked, looking at his watch.

"Well, almost. Besides, I still have until lunch."

"Until lunch for what?" Minerva asked, eyeing the flight instructor with a raised brow.

"To come up with a pick-up Quidditch team. Cary thinks there isn't enough interest on the staff to create one, and I think there is. It's Quidditch, after all!" Madam Hooch finished, her voice rising.

"Quidditch? I could say a thing or two about the use of Defense Against the Dark Arts spells during the last game. My infirmary was filled with Griffindors last Saturday. The poor dears...victims of a Shield charm. I'm sure of it!" Poppy exclaimed, walking the length of the table and taking her seat on the other side of Minerva.

Leaning over the table to look at the matron, Caradoc said, "How can you be so sure? Just because I taught that spell the week before doesn't mean they used it. We all know Quidditch players fall off their brooms all the time."

"Yes, but severe head injuries don't occur when the broom is only two feet off the ground. That only happens when force is used to repel, Professor Dearborn."

"But it would depend on the speed of the broom, not just the height, Madam Pomfrey."

"Do you have a way to prove this, Poppy?" Minerva asked.

Pursing her lips, Poppy replied, "Unfortunately, no. But I will be keeping my eye on the Slytherins. Don't you worry, Minerva." Poppy looked over at Professor Dearborn with a frown.

"I am sure the Slytherins did no such thing, Poppy. You have my word, I will look into it," Dearborn told her sincerely.

As Caradoc continued to comfort Poppy, Pomona leaned back in her chair. Rubbing her eyes, she felt Filius bump against her. She was still mourning the loss of his warm hand covering hers when Professor Dearborn had arrived. As she sat there, several voices rose, and the sound of wood sliding met her ears. Suddenly, she felt Filius stand, then heard metal clanging against the cobblestones. Opening her eyes, Pomona saw Filius had his wand in his hand, and about ten feet from her, lay various forks and knives on the flagstone floor. Her eyes widened as they traveled up and saw the Stebbins boy standing, his face flush with embarrassment.

Gasping, she said, "Thank you, Filius."

"No need to thank me, my dear. As long as you are safe," he said seriously, patting her arm. "Please excuse me."

"O-of course," Pomona replied softly, then watched him stride over to Stebbins and say a few words. Immediately, the boy looked down and nodded, then followed Filius out of the Great Hall.

"That was a little close for comfort, dear," Minerva said, leaning over Pomona. "It's not like you not to be on your guard around the students. Thank goodness Filius stopped those utensils. Are you feeling well, Pomona?" she asked, studying her.

"Y-yes, fine. I'm a little tired. I didn't sleep very well last night. But, it isn't anything to be worried about. I am just worried about my plants. Speaking of which, I need to get down to the greenhouses," Pomona rushed on, rising from her seat as Minerva watched her intently.

"Mona, what about Quidditch?" Rolanda asked hurriedly, leaning back to look at her.

Sighing, Pomona replied, "We will see. It all depends on the Laughing Lilies and if I can get them to cooperate, Ro."

"You know that isn't really an answer. Her answer still counts even if it is after noon," Rolanda told Caradoc.

"I suppose I could spot you one answer, given that Pomona might have been mortally wounded by Stebbins if not for Filius. That boy *is* a handful. Are you sure you're all right, Pomona?" Cary asked with concern.

"Yes. I-I just need to get to the greenhouses. If you all would excuse me, I'll see you at lunch," Pomona stammered, turning away from the table before anyone else could ask after her again.

Upon entering greenhouse three, she could hear the squeaky crying of the lilies. She sighed. They had not stopped. Glancing over at the clock above her desk, she noted she only had long enough to water them and see if that helped.

Filling a green watering can, Pomona funneled a generous amount of water to the roots of each plant. For a few moments, they all stopped, and Pomona breathed with relief. But the next moment, they all began again. Rolling her eyes, she strode out of the greenhouse and down to greenhouse two for her first class of the day. Ravensclaws made for a nice, quiet first class. Today was a light day for her anyway. The main part of her Thursdays was for tending the plants in greenhouse three, taking in supply shipments, and working on her lesson plans for the following week. Therefore, she only had one class in the morning, and one in the afternoon.

After all the Ravensclaws had left greenhouse two, Pomona had gone back to greenhouse three to find Ben had delivered her comedic soil. Moving with well practiced expertise, Pomona proceeded to transfer the lilies from their existing pots to new yellow pots and added the fresh soil. She had hoped the yellow would brighten their spirits as well as the new soil.

Their crying seemed contagious. She felt like crying herself. Her entire body ached, and her head was pounding once more. *That is the last time I use expired Pepperup potion.*

"There you are, cherry blossom!" Taurean said from the doorway.

Startled from her thoughts, Pomona grabbed the table in front of her before she fell off her stool. Looking up, her eyebrows rose. "Taurean! W-what are you doing here?" she asked breathlessly.

Smiling sheepishly, he spread his hands out in front of him. "I am sorry. I did not mean to startle you. Hagrid let me in and said you would probably be here. I know you said

this week was bad for a tour, but I was hoping I might be able to help with the lilies. And I admit... I wanted to check on you. When you left with Filius last night, you did not look well."

Bestowing a tired smile, Pomona told him, "I am fine. I'm sorry I worried you so much you felt you needed to come up to the castle."

"You sound as if it is a bother to me. I wouldn't be able to consider myself a friend if I did anything less."

"Thank you for your concern, Taurean. But I really am swamped for the next few days," she explained, trying not to sound irritated.

His face fell slightly as he strode down the aisle between beds of Venomous Tentacula, Wolfsbane, and Snargaluff trees. "Like I said, I was really hoping to help you with your lily problem."

"Do you have much experience with magical plants?" she asked, remaining on the stool as the room spun once more. She had not eaten much breakfast, but what was there was suddenly churning in her stomach. "Please be careful walking down that aisle," she voiced, concerned.

Stopping halfway down, Taurean looked around him. When he stopped, one of the Venomous Tentacula slithered toward his leg. Just as it was about to curl about his ankle, Pomona pulled out her wand. Waving it in a low arc, a white shaft of light appeared, hitting the plant and causing it to retreat back to the garden bed.

Taurean's eyebrows shot up, and he gave a low whistle. Slowly backing toward Pomona, he said over his shoulder, "It's that obvious, is it?"

"Yes," Pomona replied, smiling a little.

Upon reaching Pomona, Taurean turned and grinned at her. "I mean well. And I really do want to help you. It would be very helpful for my field. I have a very vast knowledge of Muggle plants, but it is the magical ones I need on my resume'," he told her with a hint of pleading.

Shaking her head, she acquiesced. "You are a charmer, there is no doubt," she told him, her mouth pulling up on one side. "As it happens, I could use your help." His smile would have warmed her heart if it didn't already belong to Filius. "I have tried a couple of remedies on the lilies all ready, but as you can see, they are still crying. There is one more thing to try. I hope it works, because otherwise I will have to prune them, and I would hate to do that. They really are lovely."

"What is that?"

"Over on my desk there is a book." She pointed to the other side of the greenhouse.

Striding over to the far wall, Taurean found a very large tree trunk that had a smooth top and drawers carved into it. On top lay a book. Leaning forward, he picked it up and scanned it. "A joke book?" he asked incredulously, eyebrows raised.

Nodding, Pomona said, "Yes. Sometimes plants require the same thing a human might in these instances, especially when they have several human traits."

Shaking his head, Taurean walked back to Pomona as he thumbed through the book. "I suppose that makes sense," he said, distracted. "Ah, here is a good one. Why is the mushroom always invited to parties?" he asked the lily in front of him.

Looking over at him in puzzlement as the lily stopped crying and looked at him, Pomona held her breath. "Because he's a fungi," Taurean finished, and after a moment of hesitation, the lily burst into laughter.

Smiling brightly, Taurean looked over at Pomona to share his accomplishment, and she gave him a small smile in return. "Now, you need to tell him another to keep him laughing and reinforce the treatment."

"Ah," he responded, thumbing through the book again. "You know, Pomona, I had also hoped to discuss the wizard who holds your affections today. I think I may know who he is. I hope you won't think I am prying, but I observed a rather bittersweet meeting yesterday..."

Taurean's voice sounded like a muffled murmuring as Pomona held the table in front of her tightly when her headache suddenly increased. The room traveled in a mad carousel, and she closed her eyes in an effort to still the motion. But when she did, a steady buzzing began in her ears, getting louder and louder.

"Pomona?" Taurean questioned, moving toward her.

Trying to stand, Pomona gripped the table, willing the droning in her head to stop. When she stood, her breath was stolen as intense pain shot through her shoulder and up to her head. In the distance, she could hear Taurean calling her name, but darkness took over, a sweet oblivion that took her pain with it.

"Pomona!" Taurean called, trying to retrieve his wand and cast a Levitation charm to cushion Pomona's fall. He just managed to stop her momentum before she hit the cobbled floor. She then floated gently down the last few inches.

Striding over and crouching down, he checked her pulse. It was fast, too fast. Looking around frantically, he searched for someone walking by the window to help him.

"Pomona?" Filius called from the doorway, hesitantly.

"Filius!" Taurean shouted from the floor, his head popping up over the table.

"Taurean?" Filius frowned. "What on earth are you doing here?"

Blowing out a frustrated breath, Taurean said, "We need to get Pomona to the hospital wing! She's fainted. She's here, on the floor."

Filius' eyebrows rose. "What?" he exclaimed, his voice an octave higher. Running toward Taurean, Filius stopped short at the end of the aisle as his eyes fell on Pomona's inert body. "Pomona?" he said shakily, leaning down to caress her face.

Suddenly, all the plants in the greenhouse began to move. The lilies began to cry again, and the dangerous plants started wavering menacingly, sensing something was wrong with their mistress.

"We have to get her out of here! Can you help me?" Taurean shouted, looking at the malaise surrounding them.

Shaking himself back to reality, Filius looked at Taurean and nodded. Quickly, he cast a Locomotor charm on Pomona, and with Taurean's help, they gently guided her toward the door before the Venomous Tentacula could reach them.

"Quick, shut the door," Filius told Taurean once they were outside. "We have to get her to Poppy," he continued when Taurean turned back around.

"Lead the way," Taurean said, stepping next to Pomona.

Nodding gravely, Filius turned and hurried to the main hall, Taurean pushing Pomona behind him. Once inside, they ran down the corridor, Filius physically moving students out of the way with his magic until he skidded to a halt in front of the infirmary.

Bursting through the door, Filius ran into the hospital wing, leaving Taurean and Pomona in the hall. "Poppy? Poppy!" he called frantically.

"Yes, yes, what is it?" she asked, emerging from her office, scanning Filius, then looking beyond him when he turned toward Taurean now pushing Pomona's inert body

through the door.

"It's P-Pomona," he gasped, trying to reclaim his breath.

"Bring her into the examining room. Quickly!" Moving across the infirmary in two strides, she pushed a hanging curtain aside to reveal a large white bed.

Taurean followed Poppy, pausing when she turned to him. "Help me lift her onto the bed," she said, raising her wand.

Nodding, Taurean followed her example.

"On my count, Filius?" Filius also raised his wand and nodded.

"Three, two, one..." Together, they raised Pomona and lowered her to the bed. Poppy instantly ran her wand over Pomona and diagnostic images appeared above her. After a moment, Poppy sucked in her breath.

"What? What is it?" Filius asked.

"This doesn't make sense." She cast another spell and more images appeared.

"Poppy, please..."

"She has blood poisoning. But that makes no sense. She would have been too sick to even think of walking around the last two days. Do you know if she has a cut or open sore anywhere? I can't find one."

"She has only been complaining of headaches the last couple of days. No cuts or anything. Can you heal her?" Filius asked.

"Not without knowing where the poisoning is coming from, no," Poppy replied, concerned.

"What about a tattoo?"

They both looked at Taurean who had remained silent until now.

"Come again?" Poppy questioned.

"Would a tattoo cause blood poisoning?" He looked over at the matron.

"It would if it was infected," she said, nodding. "Pomona has a tattoo?"

Nodding, Taurean said, "She got it the other night. It's on her right shoulder."

Stepping up to Pomona's shoulder, Poppy made a slashing motion with her wand, cutting the fabric of Pomona's robes away to reveal the tattoo beneath. The skin surrounding it was red and swollen, and darker lines traveled toward Pomona's neck.

"Oh, dear," Poppy breathed.

Turning toward her office, Poppy pointed her wand at the cabinet, and the doors flew open. A flick of her wrist sent a bottle of clear potion sailing toward her outstretched hand. Plucking it from the air and uncorking it, Poppy gently lifted Pomona's head and poured a single drop into her mouth.

"Poppy, that's not..."

"Draught of Living Death? Yes, Filius, I'm afraid it is. It is Pomona's only chance. We need the time the potion will give us to get her to St. Mungo's," Poppy told him grimly.

Tears rose in his eyes. Blinking, he tried to stem them as he wrung his hands around each other, then moved toward Pomona. A warm hand on his shoulder reminded him Taurean was there. He nodded at the younger wizard.

Inching closer, Filius looked at the tattoo on Pomona's shoulder. "Love is the music of our hearts," he said softly, reading the banner that waved at him.

He had to close his eyes tightly. He felt as if someone had just hit him in the solar plexus. Hard. It was at this moment of all moments he realized...Pomona loved him.

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 11

Will Filius get the chance to speak with Pomona again?



Chapter Ten

The room was quiet, too quiet. Over the past week, Filius had had time to reflect on everything that had transpired between he and Pomona...every look, every touch, every misconstrued message. Why did Pomona have to be here for him to suddenly realize what a fool he had been? That he had been too blinded by his own fear that she would never see him as more than a friend? Lowering his head, he brushed his hand over his face in frustration and grief.

The tears would no longer come. The pain and emptiness he felt inside consumed him, and he heaved a long sigh as he again reached for Pomona's limp hand. Raising pain-filled brown eyes to search her pale face, he brought her hand to his lips. "Please..." He closed his eyes again as he swallowed.

"Mona, please," he breathed her name softly against the back of her hand, willing her to heal.

A gentle hand warmed Filius' shoulder. "Filius?" Ascending from his despair, Filius looked up into the cool blue eyes of Poppy. "I'm sorry to barge in, but I need to run a diagnostic spell."

Nodding, Filius sat up straighter in his chair, giving Poppy room. As she cast her spell, images floated above Pomona. Filius watched as the patterns rose and fell until Poppy turned back to him and shook her head. "I'm afraid there is no change, Filius. Why don't you go get something to eat? I'll stay here a little while. Also, Albus and Minerva said they would be coming by after classes ended for the day."

Letting out a long sigh, Filius nodded. He had not realized he had been holding his breath while Poppy ran her test. Turning away from the matron, he headed for the door with his head down. Stepping into the hallway, he put his hands in his pockets and ambled toward St. Mungo's dining room.

"Filius?" His name was called from behind him. Pivoting around, he looked up to see Taurean at the other end of the hall. Filius waited while the younger wizard strode down the corridor to him. Extending his hand, Taurean asked, "Is she any better?"

Reaching out, Filius shook Taurean's hand, glad for the strength it seemed to give him. Shaking his head, he said, "No. Not yet. Poppy is with her. I was just getting some lunch."

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"No, not at all," Filius told him as they entered the dining hall. Stepping up to the queue, Filius took a tray, placing a thick sandwich on it with a cup of tea. "Do you want anything?" he asked, looking back at Taurean.

Grabbing a bottle of pumpkin juice, Taurean placed it on the tray as Filius gave the cashier several sickles. Choosing a table overlooking Diagon Alley, they sat down. Taurean grabbed his bottle, removed the cap and took a generous swallow. Placing the bottle on the table, he rolled it between his hands.

Looking over at Filius, he watched as the smaller wizard opened his sandwich, set it aside and took a sip of tea. Filius looked forlornly out the window after placing his teacup back on the table. "Filius, I'm sorry."

Frowning, Filius looked back at him. "Whatever for?"

"About Pomona..."

"How could you know? No one knew her tattoo was infected. There was little anyone could do," he informed, resting his chin on his hand. "Only patience and time will bring her back to us. Poppy said her body has to heal, and once it does, she can wake up."

"It pains me to see you like this. You need to eat. I am sure, if Pomona were able to tell you so, she would say the same thing."

"You were right, you know."

Raising his eyebrows, Taurean frowned. "About what?"

"About telling Pomona how I feel. Had I been forthright with her, she would not be here now..."

"You can't know that..."

"Still, I can't dismiss it either. Had she known how I felt, she would not have hidden her tattoo...she may not have gotten it to begin with, and then she wouldn't be here," Filius told him, guilt causing his voice to thicken.

"Stop this! Just stop. Blaming yourself won't help her. Just be there when she wakes up. From what I have learned of Pomona, she will more likely wake blaming herself for your pain." Taurean raised his bottle to take another long swallow.

Nodding, Filius closed his eyes for a moment, then picked up his sandwich and took a bite. Chewing twice, he swallowed, then washed it down with his tea. "I should get back," Filius said, rising from the table and waiting while Taurean got up.

Together, they walked to Pomona's room and went inside. Poppy sat in the chair Filius had vacated, and Taurean traveled to the bed to stroke Pomona's hand lightly. After a moment, he turned to Poppy.

"I tried to visit the establishment that gave Pomona the tattoo, but they are no longer there. Do you think they placed any enchantments over the tattoo that might cause her to stay like this?"

Shaking her head, Poppy replied, "No. I doubt they had any intention other than to make money without following the proper channels. All of the potions Pomona took following her... evening... masked the progression of her infection. I'm so very glad you were with her when she fainted. Had you not been there, we would have surely lost her." She reached out and took his hand, squeezing it.

Nodding, Taurean looked down. "How much longer does she need to be like this?"

"It's hard to tell. Her body has had the time to heal, but there is a hint of infection still lingering. We can't administer the Wigenweld potion until it is completely gone. The Draught of Living Death I gave her could have slowed down the process. But without it, she would have died before we could have treated her properly."

Standing, Poppy looked over at Pomona's pale face, then back at Taurean and Filius and sighed. "I'm afraid we just have to wait a little longer." Turning, Poppy walked toward the door, but turned back. "Filius, let me know if there is any change. I need to get back to the school."

Filius nodded, sitting back in the chair at Pomona's side.

"Do you mind if I accompany you out, Poppy?" Taurean asked, stepping next to the matron. She shook her head.

"I will be back later in the evening, Filius," Poppy told him.

"You know where to reach me, my friend. If there is any change or you need anything, please let me know?" Taurean asked.

Picking up Pomona's hand once more, Filius looked over at Taurean and nodded. Then, looking at Poppy, he said, "I will see you then."

Poppy and Taurean stood there a moment observing Filius sadly, then Taurean pulled open the door to usher Poppy out.

Leaning forward, Filius brought Pomona's hand to his lips and kissed it, then gasped when he felt her hand twitch.

"Poppy! Her hand! It twitched!" he exclaimed, jumping up from the chair.

Poppy and Taurean turned back around at Filius' shout. And as they looked at Pomona, her entire body shook slightly, and the color of her skin changed. Her face took on its usual sun-kissed glow as Filius raised his eyebrows and looked at Poppy in question.

Sucking in her breath, Poppy strode across the room looking hopeful. "That is a good sign," she breathed, moving quickly to Pomona's side and taking out her wand.

Running her wand over Pomona's sleeping form, Poppy cast another diagnostic spell. Filius and Taurean waited patiently while the images rose and fell. When they stopped, Poppy let out a loud breath and turned back to Filius.

"Well?" he questioned, wringing his hands and shifting from one foot to the other.

With a small smile, Poppy said, "The infection is gone. All that is left is to administer the Wiggewald potion to counter the effects of the Draught of Living Death."

"When will you do that?" Filius queried with Taurean standing next to him, looking hopeful.

"I'm not going to."

Filius' face fell. "But how..." he began, frowning.

"Because you are," she told him, taking his hand and placing a small vial of bright green potion into it.

Startled, Filius looked up at Poppy. "But I'm not a physician. I don't know the first thing about administering an antidote."

"The dose and instructions are on the bottle. I trust you, Filius. I really need to get back to the school. I have several students to discharge due to Hagrid's Herbology classes." Poppy spun on her heel, heading back to the door.

Looking down at the vial, Filius read the instructions. Quickly, his head snapped up. "Poppy?"

Stopping at the door, she faced him. "Yes, Filius?"

"The potion dosage is a kiss?"

"Yes. Which is why I am leaving Pomona in your capable hands. I will be back in the morning to check on her. Just administer the potion and tell her not to do too much moving about," she informed. "Taurean, are you coming?"

"What? Oh. Yes." Taurean nodded at Filius and strode over to Poppy. "After you." He held the door open for her.

As the door shut behind them, Filius stood there staring at the potion bottle.

Walking beside Poppy, Taurean asked, "A Kiss? Is that the only way to administer the Wiggewald potion?"

Looking over at Taurean, a knowing smile crept over Poppy's face. "No."

"I see," he said, a smile curving his lips too as they continued down the hall.

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Filius read the instructions once more: Place one drop upon administer's lips. Kiss patient. Wait one moment. \*\*If first kiss does not work, repeat.\*\*

Filius frowned, then looked up to ask Poppy another question only to find that she and Taurean had already left the room. Sighing, he sat back down a moment. If Pomona was ever going to wake, this was his only choice. And he did want her back. He had missed her terribly. Other thoughts and doubts tried to invade, but he shoved them aside. All that mattered was this moment and that Pomona was well.

Uncorking the potion, Filius placed one single drop on his finger, then smeared it over his lips. Replacing the cork, he stood and placed the bottle in his pocket, then took a small step up to the bed. Climbing up next to Pomona, he studied her serene face for a moment. She looked like bliss, her sun-kissed skin gleaming, and her chestnut curls cascading over the pillow. His mind instantly thought of sleeping beauty as he leaned over to gather her in his arms.

Taking a steadying breath, Filius pulled Pomona closer and lowered his mouth to hers. Closing his eyes, he covered her lips with his and kissed her, lingering for a moment. Then, pulling back to look at her, he held his breath.

Pomona took in a deep breath as she lay in his arms, then her eyes fluttered open. Filius smiled, and Pomona smiled back. "Thank Merlin, Mona!" he told her, pulling her to him, and hugging her tightly.

"Filius? Is everything okay?"

"It will be... now."

"I don't understand. Where am I?" Pomona frowned, her arms coming up around Filius to hug him back, enjoying his warmth.

Squeezing her tight once more, he released her reluctantly to sit back. "Mona, you are at St. Mungo's..."

"St. Mungo's? How on earth did I get here?"

"Poppy, Taurean, and I brought you." Pain entered his eyes as he remembered that day. It was hard to believe it had only been a week. It felt like a lifetime ago.

"Taurean?" Pomona's eyes widened, and she put a hand to her head. "We were in Greenhouse three, and he was telling the lilies jokes... I felt horrible. The last thing I remember was a loud buzzing sound." She looked back at him.

"You fainted, Mona. Your tattoo was infected."

"My...you know about..." she trailed off.

"Yes, I know about your tattoo," he told her, and she looked away instantly, color rising in her cheeks. With a finger under her chin, he pulled her back around to face him. "Mona, protecting your secret wasn't worth your life. We nearly lost you," he told her, his voice becoming rough as he looked at her.

"Oh, Filius, I'm so sorry. The last thing I would want is to cause you pain. Honestly, I didn't realize I was so ill," she said, taking his hand and squeezing it.

Sighing, he closed his eyes for a moment. Opening them, he said, "For a week now, I wasn't sure I was going to see you again."



"A week? I've been here for a week?" Pomona asked, her eyes widening. Filius nodded. Beginning to rise, Pomona pushed up out of Filius' arms, but he held her back.

"Mona, where are you going?"

"My lilies..."

"Are fine. Taurean spoke with Hugh and treated them. They are all back to normal, though I wish I could say the same for your classes."

"What? Why?"

"Albus has Hagrid giving Herbology lessons until you return."

Pomona's eyebrows rose. "What?"

"Please, sit back, Mona. Poppy said you still need rest to recover completely," he informed, and Pomona settled.

Looking over at him, she covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a yawn. "I suppose I am a bit tired. Before I woke, I was having the strangest dream."

"You were?"

"Mm-hm. I dreamt that you kissed me," she said. "But that is silly, isn't it?" she rushed on.

"But, Mona, I did kiss you," he told her softly, looking at her.

"Oh." She sat looking ahead for a moment, stunned. "But, why..."

"Mona, I need to ask you something."

She gazed at him. "Yes?"

"D-do you love me?"

Looking away for a moment, then glancing back at him, Pomona nodded. Opening her mouth to speak, she paused when he spoke first.

"I mean as more than a friend." He picked up her hand, studying it instead of looking into her eyes, afraid of what he might see. She loved him, didn't she? Even though she had commissioned her tattoo in an inebriated state, the fact that she would remember the last sentence of his recent presentation enough to preserve it indefinitely on her flesh had to say something. Didn't it? Scrutinizing the facts, he looked at her and caught her staring at him with her wide brown eyes.

Swallowing, Pomona nodded. Nervously, she pulled her lip between her teeth.

Closing his eyes, Filius let out a breath. "I have been such a fool, Mona. You were trying to ask me out on Valentine's Day, weren't you?"

She was silent.

Opening his eyes once more, he noticed she still held that supple lip of hers between her teeth.

"It's all right, Fil. I hope we can still be friends. I... I didn't want to tell you because I was afraid I would lose your friendship."

His eyebrows rose. "Are you telling me you love me but don't want to be more than friends?"

She frowned. "I thought that is what you want. I...I knew it might make you uncomfortable if you knew I love you that way. But I can..."

"Shh, Mona, you have it all wrong." He sighed, placing a finger in front of her lips. "You misunderstand; we seem to be plagued with misunderstandings." He slid down on the bed to lie next to her, his face level with hers. Looking into her lovely brown eyes, he said seriously, "Mona, I love you. I have loved you from almost the moment you returned to Hogwarts."

"You have?" she asked, sucking in a breath and holding it.

"Are you holding your breath?" She nodded. He frowned. "Why?" Reaching up he brushed away a stray wisp of hair from her forehead, then took her hand in his, and played with her fingers.

"Because I'm afraid this might be a dream," she told him, her voice trembling.

"Like when I kissed you before?" She nodded again. "Then, if you don't mind, how about we try it again now that you are awake?"

Pomona's lips parted, and she moved her head up and down. Slowly, Filius moved forward, sliding his hand up around Pomona's neck and gently pulling her to him. His head tilted up as his lips covered hers in a kiss that began feather light, then grew with intensity.

Pomona closed her eyes as his mouth claimed hers, tenderly nudging her lips at first, then seeking every contour of their depths when she opened to him. Her hands roved the muscles that played over his back when she embraced him, attempting to pull him even closer. Their fervor had them gasping when they pulled back, ending the kiss.

Looking at Pomona, Filius noted the way her pupils were dilated with desire...desire for him. And he knew he would never doubt how she loved him again. Touching her face, he smiled at her, and she smiled back. In this moment, he realized that today was the beginning of a very beautiful love story: theirs.

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**A/N:** Thank you for joining us on our couple's journey to find love. The epilogue is soon to follow. =o)

## Epilogue

*Chapter 11 of 11*

Filius gives Pomona a gift.



## Epilogue

### *Three Months Later*

Pomona sat at her vanity table studying her reflection as she brushed her chestnut hair until it shone. A smile flirted with her lips as the butterflies started again. She could not remember a time in her life when she had been so happy, and it was all because of the love she shared with Filius.

Today was her birthday, and even though they were not spending it alone as she would like, they would still be together. Closing her eyes, she sighed contentedly as her thoughts traveled back to the day they had confessed to each other. She had been so afraid. But then, so had Filius. Fortunately for them, they had some very good friends working in their favor.

"Filius?" she had asked as she lay with her head on his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat while they held each other after he had told her he loved her and kissed her.

"Mmm?" he replied.

"What about Beauxbatons?" she had asked quietly and felt him tense. At that moment, there had been a knock on her hospital room door, and Albus had popped his head inside. Quickly, Filius rose to move away from her, blushing profusely.

"Ahh, she is awake, Minerva!" he said over his shoulder, pushing the door open further and allowing Minerva past him to enter the room.

Hopping down from the bed as they entered, Filius took his place in the chair next to Pomona's bed once more, looking guilty.

"Oh, Filius! I didn't see you there!" Albus exclaimed, reaching out to clasp the smaller wizard's hand in a hearty handshake when he stood up from the chair.

"Hello, Albus. Minerva." Filius nodded at the Transfiguration mistress, and she smiled back.

Turning to Pomona, Minerva asked, "How are you feeling, dear?"

"Right as rain, Minerva. Filius tells me Poppy said I need to stay here until morning. Once she comes tomorrow, I find out when I can come home," Pomona replied a little forlornly, gazing at Filius with longing.

Albus and Minerva exchanged a look.

"Oh, speaking of the school, that reminds me, Filius, I spoke with Madame Olympe earlier. She said to thank you for helping them find a suitable replacement for their Charms position. Professor Conrad is on her way there now," Albus informed with a smile.

"But, I thought..."

"It would seem your colleague was able to get her affairs in order already. Monica found a candidate for her cottage in time this morning to catch the second flying carriage to France." Albus smiled at his diminutive friend.

Filius looked stunned for a moment, but then a slow smile spread across his face. "Oh, that is wonderful!" he exclaimed, relief in his voice.

Minerva moved to the other side of Pomona and took her hand. "Mona, I am so very glad you are better." She squeezed the Herbologist's hand.

Looking up, Pomona smiled at her friend. "Me too," she responded, her eyes leaving Minerva's to find Filius' once more briefly. Gazing back at Minerva, Pomona added, "I am really looking forward to getting back to Hogwarts."

"Well, you just focus on your wellbeing for the moment. Hogwarts isn't going anywhere, Pomona," Minerva informed her, matter of fact.

Nodding, Pomona said, "I know."

"Well, Albus? I think it is that time." She looked over at Albus who had been talking with Filius.

His face fell. "Already, Minerva? But we just got here..."

"And Poppy said Pomona was not to move about too much until she could check her over in the morning, dear," Minerva said, taking two steps to stand beside him.

Sighing in resignation, Albus replied, "Very well. I know our Herbology Professor is in good hands." He smiled at Filius, a twinkle gleaming in his eye. He then stepped up to Pomona's bedside and took her hand. "My dear Pomona, it is good to see you feeling better."

"Thank you, Albus. And thank you for coming," she told him.

"Oh, think nothing of it, my dear. Well, shall we?" he asked, turning toward Minerva and offering her his arm. Moving to the door, Albus reached for the door handle.

Opening it to let Minerva proceed him, he turned to Pomona. "We will see you tomorrow, Pomona, dear. Goodbye, Filius," he said, raising his arm in farewell and following Minerva out into the hall.

Filius stood there looking at the door for a moment after it shut behind them, then looked at Pomona. "I guess I won't be going to Beauxbatons after all, my love," he told her, stepping next to the bed and taking her hand.

Raising it to his lips, he kissed it, then held it to his chest as he smiled at her, and she smiled back.

Sighing once more, Pomona returned to the present as a knock sounded at her door. Raising her eyebrows, she told her reflection, "Well, he's here." Rising, she carefully

adjusted the strap of her peach dress robe, then turned toward the door to open it.

Filius stood on the other side, hovering from foot to foot and clutching a single, long-stemmed, red rose. When she opened the door, he raised it up in front of himself and presented it to her. "H-happy Birthday, Mona!"

"Oh! Thank you, Fil!" she exclaimed with delight, taking the rose from him and Summoning a bud vase with water from her tiny kitchen. Taking a moment to inhale the sweet fragrance of the flower, Pomona placed it in the vase, then sent it to settle gently on her table by the window.

A smile came to her lips as she watched Filius take in her appearance. "Mona my love, you look ravishing!" He twisted his hat in his hands and stepped forward when Pomona leaned down to brush her lips against his, flushing with pleasure at his words.

Taking his hand in hers, she tugged him forward. "Please come in. I have one more thing to do, and we can go," she said, turning away from him to sit in front of the vanity once more. Raising her wand, she swept her hair up off her shoulders into a haphazard bun as Filius laid his hat on the arm of a chair and moved to stand behind her, watching her intently. She could see his eyes alight as they traveled the neckline of her robe, guiding his vision to her shoulder.

"You know, Mona, as much trouble as it caused you, I must say I am very fond of your tattoo," he told her as his fingers nudged the fabric aside to offer him a better view of the musical heart nestled behind the peach folds of fabric. Leaning over and firmly grasping her other shoulder, he kissed her tender flesh. The feel of his touch sending goose bumps over her skin and causing her to suck in her breath. "Do you regret it?" he asked, resting his chin on her shoulder to look at her reflection in the mirror. "Getting it, I mean?"

Swallowing, she looked back at him in the mirror and shook her head. "No. I know you would never bind me to you in the way it represents, but I want you to know that it will never change... how I feel about you." She turned around to face him, and he stepped back slightly. Grasping his hands, she squeezed them. "I was surprised in hospital when you revealed how long you had loved me, but know it is not as long as I have loved you, Filius," she told him seriously.

His eyebrows rose. "But that would mean..." he trailed off as he gazed at her. "Even then?" he asked, unbelieving.

Nodding, she replied, "Even then. You see, I have always been bound to you by my heart. And while I have not always understood music, I do know it is powerful. It can even make my plants flourish. So the day of your presentation, as you explained the intricacies of music, I finally understood how it was all woven together around us. And even though it almost separated us, I am very content with my tattoo. Because it is an ever-fixed mark of the love we share."

"Oh, Mona..." his voice wavered slightly as he pulled her to him, their mouths finding each other and fusing as their eyes closed. Pressing firmly against her, his lips plundered hers when she yielded to him and moaned into his mouth. His hands came up to caress her face tenderly as he pulled her lower lip into his mouth to suck on it lightly. Releasing it, his tongue touched her lips, seeking entrance, then delving inside when she opened to him.

Tentatively, he explored her mouth, and Pomona felt heat rise inside her. Her hands traveled across his back and up into his hair, her tongue dancing with his and following his movements. Her heart was pounding in her chest as he pushed her back against the vanity, the wood biting into her side. Vaguely, she registered something clattering to the floor, and then, a steady tapping at the window.

They both ended the kiss abruptly to look over at the window, breathing raggedly. Filius ran a hand over his face as if trying to Summon a cooling spell, then reached over to straighten her. "All right there, Mona?"

She nodded. "What is it?"

Blushing, Filius cleared his throat, moved to the window, and opened it. A beautiful grey owl flew in carrying a brightly wrapped package. She landed on Pomona's vanity after dropping the gift directly in her arms. Pomona looked at the card and then looked over at him, frowning slightly. "It's from you?"

Filius turned more red, then nodded. "Yes. Truthfully, I am grateful for the interruption. A few more moments there and I think our friends would be missing you on your birthday."

Pomona flushed, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth.

"I-I wanted you to open it before we went out. I hope you like it," he told her as the owl nudged his shoulder, and he reached up to scratch its head. Summoning a treat from Pomona's desk, he fed the bird, then released it again while she turned the package around. After closing the window, he turned to her when she began to tear the paper from the box.

Looking over at him, she said, "Fil, you really shouldn't have got me anything. I have everything I ever wanted from you." She smiled at him then when he moved beside her and brushed her lips with his.

"I know, Mona, but it is your birthday. Just let me indulge you. I have not always been able to, so I wanted to do this right."

Pulling her gaze away from him, she focused back on the box in front of her. Lifting the flap, she heard a faint tinkling, then looked inside. Putting her hand to her chest, she drew in her breath, her eyes opening wide as they landed back on him. "Filius! I have heard of these but I have never seen one. Wherever did you get it?" she asked incredulously, reaching inside to pull out a small pot with a green tendril pushing through the soil. Turning the small plant around, she studied every nuance of the tiny seedling. When she tilted it slightly, it chimed again, taking her breath away. Gingerly, she got up and placed the plant next to the rose he had given her earlier, then turned to look at him once more.

"Taurean and Hugh helped me. During your stay in hospital, Taurean found a Herbology book in greenhouse three with a well-worn page." His eyes twinkled. "I took the book to Hugh, and he knew just who to talk to. I thought a music-box rose would make a lovely addition to your greenhouses. Hugh told me that as they grow, the tune becomes more defined and beautiful, especially if they are given love. I can't think of a better place than your greenhouses for such a plant. I thought, perhaps, we could plant it tomorrow... together."

"Oh, Fil, I don't know how to thank you," she told him as she slid down into a chair, tears coming to her eyes.

Crossing the room, he took her hand. "Mona, there is no need to thank me. It was my pleasure to get you such a gift. W-what...why are you crying?"

"B-because I'm so happy," she told him, her voice wavering.

Tugging on her hand, he pulled her into his arms. "Get used to it, my darling, because this is only the beginning," he murmured into her ear.

"Now, are you ready to go to the Three Broomsticks? I fear they may send a search party if we don't arrive soon," he told her gently, leaning back to study her face once more.

Lifting his hand to her cheek, he brushed away a tear with his thumb as she nodded and smiled back at him.

"Very well then, may I escort the most beautiful witch in the castle to her birthday celebration?" he asked, plucking his hat from the chair and offering her his arm.

His words made Pomona's heart soar with joy. Rising and taking his arm, she nodded. "Oh, yes, Fil, lead the way," she replied, shutting the door and locking it with a flick of her wand.

As they meandered through the castle and out into the courtyard, Pomona couldn't help but think of all they had gone through, and what they now shared. She was looking forward to whatever lie ahead.

Once outside the gates of Hogwarts, they clung to each other, preparing to Apparate. Gazing at the man who had held her love for so long, Pomona reached over and lifted his chin with her finger, then brushed her lips against his.

"I love you, Fil," she told him with love in her eyes, her heart swelling in a crescendo.

"I love you too, Mona," he replied.

A gentle breeze lifted her hair from her neck, rustling the leaves in the trees, and she shivered. "You know, I'm not sure if I hear music playing on the wind or if it is just my heart answering yours," Pomona said, hugging him.

"Actually, I think that may be Stebbins practicing his violin. But I do know you make my heart sing when I am with you, my darling," he told her seriously, leaning back to look at her.

They smiled.

Then, with a subtle pop, they were gone.

~~~End~~~