

Libertine

by Southern_Witch_69

Severus resorts to becoming a man for hire to search for his ideal woman. My take on the Gigolo Challenge posted by Betz on WIKTT.

How It Came About

Chapter 1 of 17

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Disclaimer: All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!

Severus watched from the shadows as she made her way out to the lake in the predawn light. He'd told himself at first that he came back time after time to be sure she was safe. This part of the lake happened to be near the forest. There was no telling what could come out to accost her. Not that she couldn't handle herself, mind, but it wouldn't hurt to have someone there to give a hand. It didn't take long for him to realize that it was more than that. He hungered to see her away from the others. Away from her friends. The two idiots. He enjoyed her when she was alone. She just didn't know it, and she likely never would.

She did this every morning when there was no rain. Even when the weather had been cold. He supposed she was trying to keep in shape, but why? He couldn't fathom it. She was perfectly fine as she was. Rounded bum, flaring hips, ample breasts, and stocky legs above average length. He supposed the running had built up her legs. Often, as he passed her in the castle, he found himself hating the robes she wore simply because he couldn't see her luscious limbs.

He'd come upon her by accident nearly three months prior. He'd been out for a night in town and had come home completely frustrated. The chit that he'd been with had done and said all of the wrong things. It had been a turn off, a complete disaster. He knew he was an excellent lover, but it was difficult to relay his talents to the particular dolt that had taken to him that night. The hard on that he'd finally managed had been quickly wiped away when the idiot went down on him. Her teeth had scraped him painfully. He had been near the lake pondering why he could never find someone that he found pleasurable when footsteps sounded. Years of spying had taught him to be alert and to act with stealth. He'd slinked back off the path when Hermione Granger came running by.

She'd stopped only a few feet away and began stripping her clothes. She'd waded into the lake for a light swim. He'd never forget how she looked that early morning. The sky had still been mostly dark blue with touches of pink peaking out over the mountains. It had given her a nearly angelic glow. How she was able to stand the chill of the water, he never knew. She was clever, though, so it was possible she'd placed some sort of charm on her person. She had come up looking like a nymph as she'd waded to the shore. He'd hungrily watched as she'd pointed her wand at her mass of hair, drying it quickly. She had taken her time, slowly pinning it back up once dry, and then eased back into her clothes. He'd watched as she stretched and walked back to the castle at an unhurried pace. That had been the moment that he'd known.

He wanted her.

Someone like her. Someone who didn't take hours on end to glamour herself. With her, what one saw was what one got. She didn't mind asking questions, speaking her mind, debating things that she had a different opinion about, or accepting when she was wrong about something. Eventually.

Breaking away from his reverie, he watched as she made her way back near him. It wasn't every morning that she stopped to have a swim, such as this one, but she always stopped to stretch at least in an attempt to cool down. He'd taken to assuming the same position each morning in wait. The episodes only left him wanting more. Sometimes he fantasized about throwing her down and pounding into her. On those mornings, he would shamelessly relieve himself as he watched her. As she sauntered back to the castle, he began to ponder things.

At some point after he'd begun to watch her, he'd made a decision to find someone like her. He was tired of being alone. The Dark Lord was no more. All he had was Hogwarts and his fantasies of her that left him feeling regret and loss. Most women he saw when he did venture out were once his students, which was wont to happen with so many years of teaching. So, after overhearing a conversation between Rolanda and Pomona, he'd formed the perfect plan to find his own Hermione.

Severus Snape decided to become a gigolo. He put an ad in the *Evening Prophet*, near the back section, stating that he was a man for hire. Of course, he didn't put his true name. He would never reveal his identity, less it bring shame to him and Hogwarts. He only put that the meetings would be discreet, the fee negotiable, and that he would screen all clients prior to meeting them.

No, it wouldn't do to have just any witch. They had to fit a particular criteria. He knew what his perfect woman needed: light, brown hair...long, the longer the better...brown eyes, a beautiful smile, at least some intelligence was a must, and definitely cleanliness. He'd not bed a dirty or used looking wench. An experienced lover was always a plus. His facial expression darkened at this point. How many lovers had Hermione had? Weasley? Potter? It was a pity that he didn't know her well enough. He would have those answers, but did he really want them? He already barely stomached Weasley, and Potter was not much better. Those two always monopolized all of her time. If he knew for certain that they had been her lovers, he would despise them even more.

Vector had been killed in one of the battles early on. Albus had appointed Hermione as the new professor for Arithmancy. That had been when she was only newly graduated, two years prior. For nearly six months back then, they had been on speaking terms. Somewhat. She'd tried to talk to him, and he'd grunted his replies. Sometimes they'd had a small debate at a staff meeting or at the meal table, but they'd never spent any private time together.

In retrospect, he wished that he had taken the time to become her *friend*. The final battle where Potter had lucked up again against Voldemort had come and gone. Hogwarts had become severely understaffed, what with Hagrid and that new bloke Jones, the Dark Arts professor, being killed. Weasley filled Hagrid's spot as Grounds Keeper while Potter slipped into the Dark Arts role. It had been a nightmare come true for Severus. The Golden Trio was together once again.

At that moment, Granger had changed in his eyes. She was no longer just Professor Granger. She had become Potter's friend again. She still sat next to him at meals, but her sidekicks sat on the other side of her. When she ventured to talk to him, he rebuffed her. He wouldn't make conversation with those two about, trying to listen. She sat with them at staff meetings, near them in the staff box at Quidditch games, and showed up with them in tow to any outings the staff had in town. His chance had come and gone. Severus would have liked to have known back then what he knew now. Had he taken the time to get to know her better, maybe something could have happened between them. He just didn't feel as if he had any way to compete against her bloody friends for her attention.

Making his way back to his chambers, he thought about the clients he'd had since he'd begun his business. There had only been four. He had received many pleas for services, but after he'd investigated most of them, he found them lacking in some way or other. He would always send replies to those to inform them that they didn't meet his requirements. Yes, that was cold, wasn't it? What did he care? Some of them had even been former students. There was only one in that category whom he would truly bed. Hermione.

The first client had been a witch of about thirty years. She resembled his little Hermione, but she was about as smart as a troll. He could never see himself with her under other circumstances. She was pleasing in bed, and he had enjoyed their sessions immensely. It would never develop into anything else though. When her owl came requesting him, he made the arrangements to meet with her straightaway. It was a pity that she opened her mouth at all during their meetings. He had finally talked her into playing games where he could bind her mouth. It was very easy then to close his eyes and imagine that the real Hermione was beneath him.

The second client had been a complete disaster. She was a young chit who had moved to the area, and she'd needed someone to show her the area as well as have a night of passion. To make a long story short, he'd never met with her again. He was sure the feeling was mutual. She was a demanding little witch and had tried to dominate him. That would never do. They'd ended up having a massive row, and she'd told him that she would have refused to pay him if he hadn't been the best lay she'd had to date. He smirked. Yes, rough sex at the peak of anger was always enjoyable.

The third client had been someone he'd seen only twice. She had been unhappy in her marriage. Where he didn't mind small talk, all she did was talk. From the moment she got to his room, to the moment he thrust into her, to the time she left, she babbled on and on about her husband. It was hard to remain in the mood when a woman half sobbed and half yelled about another man. When the same thing happened the second time, he had finally given her advice for her marriage. Thankfully, he hadn't heard from the woman again.

The fourth and final client into his venture had called on him a few times. He expected her to be calling on him again soon. This was one he enjoyed as well. She always paid extra, as she had interesting sexual tastes. Her husband didn't like to play in the bedroom. She always felt frustrated. Severus made sure to spank her as hard as she wanted, and he'd never heard a woman that sounded so much like a banshee when she would come.

He had received a promising owl that came in yesterday, according to the description of herself, but he would have to check into this woman. She hadn't given him her real name. He had already tried to look her up that way, so he replied to her via owl, telling her that he would need more information to view her. He would have to be sure she met his specifications. She had mentioned having long hair, being twenty years of age, and the physical description fit what he liked.

With a final glance in the mirror, he smoothed down his fresh robes and made his way to the Great Hall. She was already there, undoubtedly sipping on some juice whilst reading the *Daily Prophet*. He smiled inwardly noticing that her two friends were missing. As he sat next to her, he eyed her secretly, taking in the tendrils of hair that had already fallen out of her clip. She smelled of her usual citrus scent that she obviously bathed with. He inhaled deeply, savoring her scent.

"Good morning, Professor," she said softly, reaching over his plate to grab a bicky. "Sorry," she said, blushing profusely as her breast grazed his arm.

Severus wanted to ask her to do it again, but to allow him the time to pull up his sleeve so that he might feel it against his bare skin. He didn't. Instead, he replied tersely, "Indeed. If you have the need for something, just ask. I shall get it for you." Hermione wouldn't look at him. He could see that her cheeks were still stained from her folly. "Is something the matter, Professor Granger?" he asked cheekily. Without her two friends present, it was easier to talk to her and to poke fun at her.

"No, Professor Snape," she answered quietly. Under the pretense of stirring his coffee, he took a moment to watch her as she chewed on her breakfast. A couple of crumbs remained on her lush lower lip, and he nearly groaned as her pink tongue darted out to lick them away. He started when she began laughing, thinking she had noticed that he was watching her. "Look at this!" She pointed wildly to her paper, showing him a passage.

Severus read aloud, "It would seem that Cornelius Fudge had quite a scare last night as he ate dinner with his partner at the Leaky Cauldron. The ex-Minister of Magic took one bite of a pasty and promptly turned into a Crup. He barked at his partner for a few moments before returning to his own form. After an investigation, it appeared that Mister Fred Weasley had sent the delicacy over to him accidentally. He had intended for his sibling, a Mister George Weasley, to eat the pasty. The pair are co-owners of a joke shop over on Diagon Alley, Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. They claim that the faux pasties will be available as early as next week."

Severus chuckled lightly. He imagined that Fudge had been none too pleased. He also wouldn't put it past the pair of jokers to have done it on purpose. "Too bad they didn't get a photo."

Hermione took the paper back, beaming brightly. Her fingers brushed his lightly. He felt a jolt spread from his finger at the touch, and he noticed that she too seemed to have felt it. She lowered her eyes demurely and bit her lip. He had finally mustered the courage to talk to her again when Potter and Weasley plopped down next to her.

"Read this," she said, handing the paper to them.

Severus turned away to converse with Minerva, ignoring their howls of laughter. He was disappointed immensely. They had shared a laugh together. There had been some

sort of connection just then. Why had those two berks chosen that moment to show up? He added this to another list of reasons to dislike the pair.

Minerva excused herself, and he silently ate his bangers, overhearing a portion of the trio's conversation. "Oh, come on, Mione," Weasley whinged, "you are never fun anymore! Charlie is only going to be in town this weekend. You know he wants to see you, what since you had that date with him last summer. It will do you both some good."

"No, Ron, I have a lot of essays to grade, tests to mark, and I have to prepare a study list for my N.E.W.T. and O.W.L. students. They'll be testing in three weeks. I just won't be going," she said, sounding wistful. "Sorry. Send my regards."

"Ron, if she doesn't want to come, then just let it alone," Potter commented.

For once, Severus could have given the boy a compliment. But, then, the boy ruined it all by speaking.

"Hermione, is just a prude. If she doesn't want to spend the night with a man, so be it."

Weasley started laughing when Hermione scoffed. "What? It's true. Charlie said you froze up on him and ran off last time. He wants a second chance to thaw you out," Weasley taunted. "What did he call her? Her-my-icy-woman?"

The boys began laughing anew.

Severus glared at them indignantly. They shouldn't be speaking to their friend that way. "Excuse me, boys," he said with a sneer. "I would suggest you lower your voice, unless you actually want the entire staff and students present to know that you are mocking a fellow colleague."

Both looked immediately embarrassed and ducked their heads to eat. Hermione, though, seemed truly hurt. Severus saw her lower lip tremble slightly, and her eyes became suspiciously bright. She threw her napkin in her plate and hurried out of the hall.

"Bloody hell," Ron whispered to Harry. "Didn't think she'd be upset about it. Shouldn't have mentioned that icy bit, eh?"

Severus had heard enough. "You are about as smooth as a prickly stem, and about as bright as a flobberworm, boy. If your brother possesses the same charms, it's no wonder at his stupidity in not seeing that she hadn't iced up, but she merely hadn't been interested in his insipid advances." Severus placed his napkin in his plate as well, exiting the hall with his robes flaring out behind them.

He pondered what this meant? Had she never been with a man, or had she just not wanted to be with Weasley's brother? It would seem that neither Potter nor Weasley had ever had a taste of her, what with their maddening comments. Didn't the dunderheads see that they had truly hurt her feelings? Perhaps she had better taste than he had previously thought. She would make twenty-one years of age in a mere four months or so. Surely, she had made love to someone before now.

The moment he entered his classroom, a large, brown owl accosted him. The idiotic creature was flying about in circles as if not sure where to land. He reached out to snatch the parchment from its leg. It finally flew away. What kind of person would have such an inane creature? "Ah, my mysterious client," he murmured, moving to his desk to read the letter. He gasped in horror as he read the name. Heavens, no. Luna Lovegood.

Severus promptly took out his quill to return a denial of services parchment, but then an idea formed in his mind. This girl was a friend to Hermione. He could use that to his advantage. Grinning wickedly, he began writing his response. As the first student entered for class, he put down his quill and quickly read over the letter, grimacing at the false gibberish.

Miss Lovegood,

I want to thank you for taking the time to show interest in an outing with me, but I find that at this time, I must decline. You are a very witty and remarkably pretty young lady. However, my tastes are different. Please do not be offended, my dear. You have the prettiest blonde hair that I have seen on a woman, and you're eyes remind me of the bright silvery rays of moonlight. I am sorry, but you remind me of my departed sister. I just couldn't see myself copulating with you. It would feel immoral.

If it would not be for that minute detail, then I would have been happy to have obliged you. My tastes are more for a woman with long, wavy brown hair and soft brown eyes to match. Have you any lonely friends? Someone who wouldn't mind talking long into the night before making passionate love under the stars? If so, please recommend me to her. Witches only please, no wizards.

Sincerely,

Mr. R. Libertine

Perhaps the tart would pass this message on to Hermione. He'd taken extra care to sound respectable, and he hoped that it would pay off. He hoped that she would tell Hermione how touching and sincere his refusal had been. Mostly. Could he be with her under the guise of another if she dared seek his services? He wanted to sample her lips, devour her flesh, and indulge in her body in every way. If this was the only way possible, what should it matter? She would never know. His charmed mask and voice-distorting spell would hide his identity.

Severus sighed. Something such as paying a man for services was likely beneath a woman such as herself. He would chalk this up to another fantasy. Hermione could have nearly any man she wanted. It was likely that Potter and Weasley would quickly take up any offer she would make given the chance. Glaring at his class, he pocketed the letter. He would owl it later.

"What are you waiting for? Hand in your assignments!" he barked, enjoying the way most of them jumped before fumbling with their parchments.

One Step Closer

Chapter 2 of 17

Hermione has a night with the girls and thinks about her fantasy man.

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Hermione made her way to her chambers. "Ruddy prats!" she said, flinging herself onto the bed. How could they have said that? Is that what they all called her? Her-my-cy-woman? That was just horrible. She had a mind to owl Charlie and tell him exactly what she thought about him. Disgusting! He'd gone to them and ran his mouth about what had happened between them on their only date. So, the truth had come out, and now Harry and Ron thought her to be a prude.

Was she so worried about being proper and modest that she had indeed become prudish? She sighed loudly. Her parents had raised her by their beliefs. Being Muggles, it was completely different from the views of the Wizarding world. Her mum had always told her to wait until she was married before she had sex. Her dad had always said that she should become educated and follow her own goals before thinking of relationships. Wizards didn't have the same views and were very open about many things. They took things as they came: sex, jobs, and relationships.

She had wanted a relationship badly in the past couple of years, but there was no one who appealed to her in that way. Well, that wasn't exactly true. One man did appeal to her, but she wasn't sure it was on a sexual level. There was just something about him. The urge for a relationship hadn't been so bad when she was younger, but as she'd entered her late teens, it seemed that everyone had someone except her.

Harry had dated first Ginny and then Gabrielle for a while, Ron had dated numerous girls, and she'd dated nobody. She had fancied Ron, and for a while, it seemed that he'd fancied her as well, but he'd never asked her out. Both Harry and Ron were now single, but it didn't stop them from engaging in flings here and there. Last summer, they had told her that she needed to get out of the castle. It was true. She spent most of her time reading, researching, and preparing for her classes, so she never took time to get out much. Ginny had insisted that she accompany Charlie to the Quidditch World Cup.

Reluctantly, she had gone. Out of all the Weasley brothers, Charlie was the one she knew the least. He lived in Romania still, and she'd never really had a conversation with him before that night. It was a disaster. They had all gone together: Ginny and Draco, Ron and Parvati, Harry and Gabrielle, Bill and Fleur, and Hermione and Charlie. Draco and Harry had ended up getting in a row over a bet on the game, causing Draco and Ginny to Disapparate away. Feeling sulky, Harry had urged Ron and their dates to go back to the local pub with him. Charlie and Bill had decided they would not leave. There was only so much conversation she could make with Fleur at any given time. The woman seemed to think it was a sin to not have her tongue connected to some portion of Bill's skin. Charlie had made her feel uncomfortable. The memory came back unbidden.

Charlie snaked his arm around her waist. "Mmmm, you smell good, Hermione." He made a show of sniffing her hair loudly, even as she tried to pull away from his hold. He lightly nipped her earlobe. "England has just won. I think it's time to celebrate, don't you?"

"I'm a little tired. We've been here for sixteen hours. It's nearly four in the morning. Perhaps another time," she said quietly, hoping not to hurt his feelings. He was so like Ron in the face, but he was built sturdier, not nearly as tall.

"Fair enough," he whispered. He then leaned over to tell Bill that they were going to head in. She caught Bill's wink and Fleur's wave, and the next thing she knew, Charlie Apparated them to his tent. "Here we are."

"I'm rooming with Gabrielle and Parvati," she said nervously. "They will expect me back."

"Nah, I don't think so. If the boys aren't mixed in with them, then they are probably asleep by now anyway. You don't need to interrupt or wake them. Not when I have a comfortable bed that you can use." She merely nodded, and he moved in to place a kiss on her lips.

Her mind raced. Charlie Weasley, definitely a handsome man, was kissing her! Did he have feelings for her? How? They'd only spent the day together. The kiss was quite pleasant, but for only a moment. The liquor upon his breath had soured, and his tongue seemed to be trying to make its way down her throat. She pulled away and said, "Sorry, Charlie, but I don't like doing this. Being here doesn't feel right. I'd just like to go to bed please." She hoped that she hadn't offended him, but she hardly knew him enough to allow him such liberties.

"All right," he said with a broad grin. "Just through there." He pointed to a makeshift door. She fled to the safety of the small room. Her things were back in her own tent. Shrugging, she pulled off her cloak and skirt before slipping into bed. Only a few moments passed after she had spelled off the lights when she felt the bed dip. Charlie was getting in with her. "Sorry I took so long. I couldn't find the lubricant."

"L-lubricant?" What the bloody hell did he need that for? More importantly, what was he doing in her bed? He only chuckled in reply as his mouth found hers. This kiss wasn't as repulsive as the one before, so she let him carry on for just a bit. When she felt his hand creeping up her thigh, she stiffened. He meant to have her. She hadn't agreed to this.

'But, someone wants you,' a voice pleaded. How many nights had she fantasized about being in the arms of someone special?

'He's the wrong someone,' another voice said.

He groaned as his lips left hers to assault her neck, and his fingers began to dip into the top of her knickers. "So sweet," he murmured.

Her mind's two halves were at war. One half wanted her to give in to him. To see how it felt to be wanted and loved by a man. The other half wanted to flee. He didn't love her. He only wanted to use her body to fulfill his appetite. He wasn't the one she longed for. His fingers had no right on her body. His tongue didn't belong on her skin. At that moment, three faces passed through her mind: the one belonging to the man that filled her thoughts at night, her mother's disapproving face, and her father's disappointed face. Hermione bolted away from the bed.

Charlie sat up. "Lumos. What is it, Hermione? Are you all right?"

"No. I can't... This... No," she said hurriedly, scooping up her things. "I'm sorry. It's not right." Before he could protest or reach her, she Apparated all the way to the gates of Hogwarts. Why had she let it get that far? The sun was just coming up on the horizon. She dressed quickly and hurried to the lake to cry where no one would see her.

Even thinking about it now, she knew that he hadn't tried to rape her or anything. She just hadn't said no soon enough. She hadn't made her intentions clear, and they had misunderstood each other. He had sent an owl the next day apologizing for scaring her off, and he'd said that he hoped there would be no hard feelings. She had let it go, but now... this angered her. He made her out to be some... tease! The worst part about learning this bit of information was that Professor Snape had also heard it. What must he think of her now?

"Blast!"

If anything he probably thought her to be a right little harlot, what with the way her breast had rolled over his arm. It had been a complete accident. She'd seen the way he'd looked at his arm after, as if it were tainted. Not in so many words, he had told her to be sure it didn't happen again. She was surprised that he'd shared a laugh with her over the Fudge incident, and he'd even seemed to be on the verge of talking to her when the others had shown up. Each time he spoke to her it was like a rare treasure. When she had first started out teaching, he'd been friendly, but eventually, he'd started ignoring her again. Either ignoring her or treating her like a student. She never understood exactly what she had done wrong.

"Bugger it!"

She decided not to go anywhere near the guys or Charlie, but that didn't mean she couldn't have an evening with the girls. She did deserve some time off. It would only be for a few hours, so anything at the castle that she couldn't get to during the day could wait. What could it possibly hurt? She sat down to owl Ginny, telling her she was ready for a night out, knowing Ginny would set everything up.

Hermione spent the rest of the day working fervently on her essays and tests; she'd decided to put off working on her students' study lists until the next day and had skipped lunch, knowing that Ron and Harry would be there. The last thing she needed was for them to start up again. However, she knew that they wouldn't be present at the evening meal because it was Friday--they always missed those, venturing into town instead.

When her stomach began to growl, she decided to brave a trip to the table. The first person she saw as she walked in through the staff door was Professor Snape, who was having a quiet conversation with Minerva.

As silently as she could, she slipped into her seat and began to fill her plate with a serving of beef casserole and jacket potatoes. He seemed to not have noticed her presence, which was fine by her. She was still embarrassed by what had gone on at breakfast, but she was an adult, wasn't she? She could handle this.

I'm just lucky Harry and Ron aren't here.

"Good evening, Professor. I see you are alone tonight," a silky voice said.

She nodded instead of replying, chewing her bite thoroughly. She prayed that he wouldn't bring up the morning's events.

"Where are your ever-present guardians?"

"You know as well as I, Professor, that they go into town on Friday evenings," she answered softly, feeling his gaze on her. It was bloody hard to eat with someone staring all the while. "Did you need them for something?" she asked, meeting his eyes for the first time. She saw him blink as if being caught at something.

"Certainly not," he scoffed. "I am rather enjoying their absence. Pity they don't miss more meals."

"Right," she said, sipping on her pumpkin juice. "Ron? Miss a meal? Wishful thinking, I say." Good Lord! She could feel her face beginning to burn under his stare. As quickly as she could, she went back to her meal.

"Did you happen to read tonight's edition of the *Evening Prophet*?" he asked, sounding bored.

"No. Should I have?" She was intrigued. It wasn't often that he brought up a topic for conversation first. He simply handed the paper to her. She glanced down at the front page, not noticing anything out of the ordinary.

"Keep it," he said. "I have patrols." She smiled as he wiped his mouth and placed his napkin on the table. With a sweep of his robes, he was gone. She felt a moment's disappointment. Why couldn't she have asked him what he'd found so interesting? Damn it. She always ruined things by letting her emotions get the better of her.

After her meal, she retired to her rooms, declining Minerva's invitation to join them in the staff room. She wanted to scour over the paper to see what the professor had found so interesting. She flipped through several pages before finally seeing an upcoming set of conferences. Both were to be held in the same night. One having to do with Potions and the other with Arithmancy. Was this his way of asking her if she'd like to go? For the first time in well over a year, she had some form of hope. Perhaps he could see her as something other than his former know-it-all student. She'd have to find the courage to bring it up to him. The double conference wouldn't be for another three weeks. The students would have just gone home, so there would be no classes to worry on. Was she misreading this?

Just in case there was something else, she read through the rest of the pages. She laughed loudly at the last pages. They were full of ads. Women for hire. And even... *Men for hire? Good grief!* She had no idea that men hired themselves out. Why? Perhaps there were lonely women out there who needed them. After thinking about it, she nodded to herself. Yes, she could agree with that. Why shouldn't women be able to hire someone for pleasure? Men did it all too often, didn't they?

One ad in particular caught her attention. A Mr. R. Libertine was offering his services for whatever the lady's pleasure may be. Prices were negotiable. Hermione began laughing aloud.

"He requests the right to view the women first?" She supposed that would be in order. It did seem arrogant though. Perhaps he was only making sure they didn't have some disease. No, he was likely making sure they were attractive. Well, he'd never have to worry about her applying for his services. *Arrogant git!*

***** SS ***** HG *****

"Hermione! I'm so glad you decided to meet us," Ginny said, embracing her quickly. "Have a spot. I'll order you a drink."

"Hi," Hermione greeted the girls: Luna, Lavender, Parvati, Padma, and Fleur all greeted her warmly. "Guess it's the right time for me to get out, what with the term nearly over with. I have been a bit stressed as of late."

"Well, you should have come earlier," Parvati offered, holding back a giggle. "Fleur has just talked Padma and me into going over to meet with the guys. I think it will be fun. How about we all make a night of it with them? You can still have your night out."

"No," Ginny answered for her, apparently aware of how she felt. "Go on. We'll stay right here."

"You're making me feel bad about it," Padma said, "but I do want to see Charlie again. He's to be showing us a baby dragon tomorrow!"

"Oh, go on with you," Hermione said with a fake smile. "We'll be fine. I'd prefer not to be around Harry or Ron for a change. I see them enough at the castle."

The three women left quickly. Hermione could sense their excitement. Fleur just couldn't let Bill out of her sight for more than a couple of hours at a time, and the other two were likely hoping to find someone to share their beds.

"Why are you late?" Lavender asked.

"Well, before I could get away, Minerva asked a favor of me. It took a bit longer than I had planned. Sorry."

"Don't worry on it," Luna said dreamily. "We've got all night. I've no man to be worrying about."

"Oi! What happened to that bloke you were thinking about having a romp with?" Ginny asked, handing Hermione her drink.

"He turned me down," Luna said with a laugh.

"The wanker!" Lavender exclaimed.

"What the bloody hell for?" Ginny asked, looking shocked.

"What bloke?" Hermione asked, not following the conversation. She hadn't known that Luna was interested in anyone.

"No, don't be upset. It's quite romantic, actually." Luna patted Lavender on the arm.

"Getting turned down by a hired man is romantic?" Lavender asked incredulously.

"In this case, it is. Here, let me explain." She pulled out a crumpled piece of parchment from her bag. "You should know, Hermione, that my cousin has been seeing a hired man for the past month on occasion. She said that he is a master in the art of sex. Well, I wanted to have a taste of it. I first sent an owl to describe myself, but I gave him a fake name. He wrote back saying that wouldn't do, so I gave him my real name. This is what he wrote to me."

Hermione looked down to the letter in her hand and began to read, Lavender scooting closer to see as well.

"Oh, how sad. Poor bloke lost a sister, and he won't bed anyone who resembles her. I can understand that," Lavender said. "He seems to be particular with his choice though."

Ginny laughed. "You're just mad because you've only recently cut your hair, and it's not wavy in the least. Wouldn't do for you to owl him for services."

Luna hunched over the table near Hermione. "You know, Hermione, you fit this description. Why don't you have a try with him?"

"Certainly not," she said with a frown. "I don't want to have to pay someone to be with me. That just doesn't seem right."

"Well, you've nobody else beating down your door," Lavender commented dryly.

"You're wrong," Ginny defended. "My brother, Charlie, has had a thing for her since the last battle with Voldemort. She turned him down. It's obvious she is saving herself."

"Why?" Lavender asked. Her face contorted with disbelief as she eyed Hermione. "You should live your life as you'd like. Don't worry about waiting for marriage. Life is what we make it."

"There is nothing wrong with not being loose," Hermione said sourly.

"Right," Ginny said. "If you want to wait, so be it."

Luna spoke again. "Hermione, think about it. This guy is such a romantic. What guy do we know that says anything about making passionate love under the stars? Talking softly? He compared my eyes to rays of moonlight! You should think about it."

"Who is this guy? How did your cousin meet him?" Hermione asked reluctantly. She wasn't considering it, but something about this seemed vaguely familiar.

"She saw his ad in the paper one night, and she gave it a try. To hear her tell it, he's brilliant. They play little games while shagging. She said he seems to know exactly what to do, and she has multiple orgasms!"

"Multiple?" Lavender asked, suddenly interested. "I might call on him after all." Everyone started laughing. "What? A good lay is hard to find these days. I've never really enjoyed anyone since Seamus..." She sighed. "Since Seamus was killed."

The table remained silent for a long time. Each girl contemplated on the losses that the war had wreaked upon her. Many friends and family had been lost for the cause. In the end, Harry was able to do his job and fulfill the prophecy.

"What's this bloke's name?" Ginny asked eventually.

"He's always got an ad listed in the *Evening Prophet* just near the back. He goes by the name of R. Libertine, though I doubt that is really his name," Luna stated, eyeing Ginny oddly. "Are you thinking of... seeking him out?"

"Heavens, no! Draco is more than enough for me. I wanted to know how to get in touch with him, so that I could convince Hermione to do it." Ginny grinned impishly at her friend. "Don't say no. Not yet. Just think on it."

"There is just no reason to pay a man to bed me," Hermione scoffed.

"When on a quest for multiple orgasms, I'd say paying someone might be worth it," Lavender replied, standing to make her way to the bar.

"I would have done it. I wanted to experience what my cousin was talking about. Alas, he doesn't like blondes," Luna said, smiling wildly. "He wants someone who sounds suspiciously like you. I'd say you should try him. Who would know anyway?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'll think on it," Hermione said halfheartedly. She knew that she wouldn't contact the fellow. The last thing she needed was someone checking her out and telling her that she was lacking. Besides, in her mind, it would seem a bit like being unfaithful. Not that she had any cause to feel that way, mind, but the mysterious Professor Snape had such a hold on her that it seemed like any hands upon her body that were not his would be a crime.

Hermione was well into her cups by the time she finally Apparated back to the castle. She made her way out towards the lake. She always found the water alluring when she needed to think. She sat down to listen to the sounds of nature surrounding her. The trees swayed in the breeze, night creatures' sounds floated in the air, and the slight waves in the lake slapped the bank lazily.

Hogwarts was her only true home. It was one of the reasons she'd accepted the job so readily. She never felt quite right around her parents anymore. They seemed to disapprove of the choices she had made with her life. They had hoped that she would return to them after she finished her magical training to pursue a career in the Muggle world, but she couldn't. Her place was here, in the Wizarding world. They were proud of her many accomplishments, but they always did badger her about things. Now that she had been properly educated, and had started a career, they were wondering if she would be settling down any time soon. With her parents, if it wasn't one thing, it was another.

"Enjoying the moonlight, are we?"

She jumped slightly at the sound of Professor Snape's smooth voice. "You've scared me, sir," she blurted. "I'm not doing anything wrong, you know. No need to try to take points from me."

He sat down, uninvited, to look out over the lake. After a moment, he said, "It would make no sense to attempt to take points from one who is no longer a student."

She looked at him in surprise. "So, you've finally noticed that I am no student then?"

Hermione saw the odd look that passed over his face before he masked it. "What are you rambling on about, girl? I would be daft to not have noticed that you are part of the staff and have been for the past two years."

"Oh, forget it," she said, managing to stand. "You'll never be nice, will you? I was just trying to make a bit of conversation with you."

He grabbed her wrist to keep her from leaving. "Miss Granger, have a seat. I'm not trying to run you off." He pulled at her harder than he had intended, and she lost her balance, falling into his lap soundly. He grunted at the sudden weight.

"Are you all right?"

Through laughter, she said, "Sorry, Professor. I seemed to have lost my balance." Even she heard the slur in her voice, so it was no surprise when he answered.

"How much have you had to drink tonight?"

She shrugged.

"I might have known you were off to town when you didn't go towards your quarters. Didn't you eat anything solid to help keep the liquor at bay?"

She couldn't think straight because it seemed that his mouth was slowly descending towards her own. And his eyes kept darting between her lips and eyes. Did he want her? Feeling dizzy, and a little nervous, she blurted the first thing that came to mind. "I've read through that paper you gave me. I accept."

His head jerked back. "Accept what?"

She didn't know why he seemed so shocked. Did he not think she had the gall to approach him about the conference? "The double conference just after school lets out. It was your way of asking me to accompany you, wasn't it?" Things were getting a bit warm and foggy suddenly.

His expression seemed to be one of surprise. "Well, to be honest, I was only... Miss Granger? What's wrong?"

She could hear the worry in his voice, but she couldn't open her eyes to show him she was fine. She was just a bit sleepy suddenly. Overwhelmed as well. Hell, embarrassed to boot. It appeared that she'd just made a fool of herself. He actually hadn't meant to ask her to the conference. The last thing she felt before her mind plunged into darkness was the feel of her body being gathered closely to his.

Another Step Closer

Chapter 3 of 17

Hermione and her professor have a talk while Harry and Ron act like berks again.

Disclaimer: All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!

Severus looked down to the sleeping girl on the bed below. It would be so easy to take advantage of this. She'd passed out in his arms. He sat down on her bed for a moment to think. When she had been missing from the evening meal, he'd assumed that she had given in to her pesky friends and had gone out with them to see Charlie. The two berks showed up for the meal and dared ask if he'd seen her. He had felt relieved and assumed that she was up in her chambers, but then he'd seen her leaving Minerva's office later, as he was doing his rounds.

She had been stunning. Her hair had been pulled up in a sophisticated twist, and she'd been wearing a very sexy Muggle dress under a light cloak. Severus had been pulled to her. He'd followed her to the gates and Apparated a few moments after she had. He had found himself in Hogsmeade. His curiosity had been piqued, wondering whom she had a date with. He'd barely been able to see into the pub's windows without being obvious that he was looking. He'd simply waited in the shadow of the alley next to the pub for some sign of her and her date. It was a moment of triumph when he'd heard Fleur Delacour and the twin chits walking past his hiding spot. They were on about Hermione only wanting a girls' night, and they couldn't understand why she never had a man. One even pondered if she had taken a liking to witches instead of wizards.

Severus had Disapparated back to Hogwarts with that thought on his mind. If that was the case, then his quest for her body was a lost cause. How could he compete with another woman? He'd put a charm near the gate to let him know when she came back, and the signal had sounded about four hours later. A once over of the castle told him that she had not come in, so he knew exactly where to look. The lake. It was always the lake. When he'd found her, she had been mumbling something to herself about her parents and the right choice. He hadn't really meant to let her know that he was watching, but before he could stop himself, he'd been sitting next to her. He had been surprised when she'd attempted to storm off because of his comment about her not being a student.

Had she meant to ask if he saw her as a woman? It had seemed like it, so he'd stopped her. How was he supposed to have known that she would lose her balance and land in a most precarious position on his lap? He'd enjoyed the feel of her there. He'd nearly kissed her. The desire, the need, and the pull had been too great. As his lips had descended upon hers, she had whispered that she accepted his offer. He'd nearly bolted away. He'd thought that she realized that the ad in the *Evening Prophet* had been his, but then she'd shocked him. She'd thought that he'd been asking her to attend some conference. One he hadn't noticed.

Just as he'd been about to explain that he had no idea about it, her eyes had rolled back in her head, and she'd passed out in his arms. The truth of the matter was that he'd wanted her to see his ad. He'd wanted her to wonder about it. She never looked over the *Evening Edition*, and that was the only edition where his ad was placed. He'd sat by the lake holding her for nearly half an hour before finally carrying her to her chambers.

Now, here he sat on the bed, next to her sleeping form. He'd removed her cloak and shoes, but he dared not touch her dress. The temptation would be too great. Even now, his fingers were idly entwining themselves in some of her escaped locks. *She wanted to accompany me to that conference.* Was she just into her cups and talking out of her head? Did she mean it? The paper was here, folded next to her bed. Reluctantly, he moved away from her to read what she had referred to.

There it was. Open to the page, and she had even circled it. So, she had decided to accompany him. Why? His eyes narrowed. He'd not given her any reason to believe that he would want her company. Did she simply want to? He wasn't sure that she would even remember their small conversation. How could he broach the subject with her again without looking like an arse? He would have to think on it. Looking back to the woman, he moved closer until his lips grazed her ear. "Sleep well, Miss Granger," he whispered. Before he could stop himself, his tongue came out to lick the skin under her earlobe lightly. To his horror, he realized that his hand had moved to rest just below the curve of her breast. *Damn it!* Severus jumped away from the temptress and fled to his chambers.

What had he been thinking? Merlin, but she tasted so sweet. The feel of the weight of her breast was now imprinted on the top of his hand. He had to have her. He pulled his clothes away from his body and allowed his hand to snake down to his shaft. He was thick and hard with the need for her. He would have her. Somehow. Hell, if she liked witches, he would convert her. He would take Polyjuice Potion. Anything.

As he began to slowly stroke himself, he wondered if Lovegood had told her about the gigolo's response. He hoped so. Perhaps she would be curious about it. He could also use this conference to his advantage, if he had the nerve to approach the subject. Yes, he would do it. His need was too great to be denied for much longer. Remembering his tongue on her throat, her breast against his hand, and her tangy scent, he brought himself to a shuddering climax. If she only knew what she did to him.

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There was a knock on his door just as he was about to head up for breakfast. "Enter," he called out. To his surprise, Hermione walked in, looking completely refreshed from her night's rest.

"Professor? I just wanted to say thanks for seeing me to my room last night," she said softly, biting her lower lip in wait for his response.

"I am going to breakfast, Professor Granger. Surely, you could have told me at the table?" He hadn't meant to sound so rough, but it irked him that she could look so bright on a morning such as this. He'd been up most of the night thinking about what he'd done while she'd slept, and he had been thinking about what he could have done.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I didn't mean to intrude, but I won't be at breakfast. I slept in today, and I've missed my early morning run. By the time I am done, I'll have missed the meal and the chance to say thanks." She started to close the door.

"Hold on a moment, Professor," he said, walking towards her. She'd not slip away this easily. She had come far out of her way to talk to him, after all. "I think after having no dinner last night, then drinking as much as you did, you should have a little breakfast. You can always go out for a run later," he said smoothly. "You may walk up with me, if you'd like."

She smiled. "I suppose you are right. I could do with a spot of breakfast." After a few moments of silence, she added, "You should try running in the morning sometimes, sir. It is so beautiful in the morning. So relaxing and peaceful. It does a world of good for me."

*I am out there nearly every day to watch you.* "That's not really my cup of tea, if you know what I mean. I have other ways of relaxing," he said curtly.

"Sir, about last night... I feel ridiculous," she said quickly.

"About?"

"That... conference. I thought you meant to ask me to go, but if I am remembering correctly, you seemed to not know what I had meant. I apologize for my forwardness," she said, not meeting his eyes.

He paused as if in thought. "Miss Granger, I admit that I had no idea what you were on about at that moment, but after reflecting on it briefly, I think that the conference would be interesting. Both of our fields would be discussed. I would not be opposed to an overnight trip to attend it." He gave her a tiny smile, resembling a smirk. "That is, if you are interested."

"I would," she said eagerly. "Thank you, Professor."

He nodded, opening the door to the hall for her. Weasley and Potter were already there, and their mouths gaped open. Severus smiled smugly, pulled out Hermione's chair for her, and helped her scoot in.

He jovially dug into his kippers, trying to hear exactly what the two idiots were whispering about.

Minerva elbowed him. "Have a good night, Severus?" Her eyebrows wriggled a few times conspiratively. "Or, a good morning?"

He sneered at her audacity. "I would suggest that you not jump to conclusions, my dear. Nothing is amiss, nor shall it be."

Minerva nodded slightly, smirking at him. *What the bloody hell was the woman thinking? What if Hermione had heard her snippy little comment?* He watched in disgust as Minerva leaned towards Albus and began whispering something. He'd have to be very careful around those two. They were meddlesome and would no doubt try to help things along. Sure enough, Albus' twinkling eyes met his own. He smirked slightly before returning to his breakfast.

"Er... Hermione, uh, Charlie was asking after you last night. Seemed a side disappointed that you didn't show up," Weasley said.

"Well, I decided to spend the evening with the girls instead. At least they don't call me horrid little names behind my back," she said sourly.

"Oh, come on. It's just a joke," Harry said. "He didn't mean anything by it. Honestly."

Ron began laughing. "Right. Just a joke you know! He said, 'Where's Hermione? Her-my-icy-woman, after all.' It was bloody funny."

"I don't find it amusing in the least, and I intend to owl him later today. He's being immature. Furthermore, I don't appreciate you two rubbing it in my face," Hermione said hotly. She seemed to be about to leave when Severus put a hand on her shoulder.

"Miss Granger, don't worry about those *boys*. After the binge you had last night, you need to eat something. You've not had a decent meal since yesterday," Severus said, nodding for her to eat.

"You're right," she agreed.

"Oi, Snape! How the bloody hell do you know what she had to drink last night? And keeping tabs on what she eats, are you?" Ron asked suspiciously.

Severus was about to give a scathing remark when Potter waved for Ron to shut up. "Well, they *did* come in together. Probably had drinks in the dungeons before shagging like Pixies."

"How dare you?" Severus bit out. "Never make any assumptions as to what I do in my private time, Potter, and you, Weasley, what I do doesn't really concern you, now does it? Don't make the mistake of questioning me again, or we might find that you may have a little accident whilst out on the grounds." Severus was angry. The nice little repartee that he had exchanged with Hermione was likely now ruined.

Both boys grumbled something about being sorry, but he noticed that Hermione was paler than normal. *Why did those brats have to choose to work at Hogwarts?*

She turned to him suddenly. "Professor, I am sorry about that. I'll have a talk with them."

"I assure you that I am above worrying about what *children* have to say about me, Miss Granger." He wondered if he'd said something wrong, for she seemed slightly put out by what he'd said. Did she think that he thought her a child? Hadn't they cleared that up the night before? Perhaps not. "In saying that, I mean that those two act like children, even though they are adults." He must have said the right thing, as she gave him a soft smile.

"Don't I know it," she mumbled. "Thanks." She finished eating her meal in silence and left the table without a word to her two friends. He watched her leave and longed to follow her. He sighed. This would not do. He'd have to think of something... and soon. Could he wait the three weeks before having her to himself at the conference?

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Hermione didn't know if she should jump for joy or waylay Harry and Ron for being idiots! They'd almost ruined everything... again. Professor Snape had agreed to take her to the conference. Granted, she had ended up asking him, sort of, but they would still be going together. He'd never know exactly how much courage it had taken her to go down to the dungeons to thank him for bringing her into the castle the previous night. Before she had passed out, she foggily remembered his mouth had been lowering to hers, and his eyes had kept darting to her lips. That memory alone had given her the strength to see him. She'd needed to feel out if he was interested in her on some level. He did say that he no longer saw her as a former student.

At first, he had seemed glad to see her, but then he'd retorted with his usual bite. That had disappointed her a little, but when he'd offered to escort her to breakfast, she'd

felt better. She had the need to clear the air, so she'd mentioned the conference. She had waited nervously for his reply, and it was one that made her ecstatic! He'd thought that the idea was a good one. The only thing that puzzled her was the paper. Why had he given it to her if not for that? Perhaps it had only been a friendly gesture. They had been chatting a little more lately, mostly when Harry and Ron were away.

She'd nearly died from embarrassment when Ron and Harry started having a go at her once again... in front of Severus, but he'd taken up for her. Again. He had seemed a bit offended that they would dare to think that he'd spent any time with her, much less having a shag, but at least he didn't hold it against her. He'd even stopped her from leaving. She sighed happily.

"What can I do to get you to really notice me, Professor?"

The conference would be her chance. They would be alone, and he had said it would be an overnight trip. That was to be expected. It was far from the castle, and it would likely end late into the evening. She could use this to her advantage. Perhaps she could ask him to a late dinner. What type of woman appealed to him? Hermione frowned, looking into the mirror. She didn't feel all that attractive most days, but she wasn't all that bad. Running had given her more confidence in her body, but something was still missing. She was young and inexperienced in many ways. He had just made thirty-nine in January. How many women had he made love to? If something of that nature did occur between them, would she be able to please him? The library would have books on this. She made a mental note to check into it.

A knock sounding on her door brought her out of her thoughts.

"Who is it?"

"Harry and Ron."

Her mood darkened as she opened the door and glared at the two boys.

"Hermione, we've come to apologize," Harry said quickly.

"Well, come in then." She directed them to the chairs before her fire, and then she sat down, looking at them expectantly. "Well? Explain yourselves!"

Ron spoke first. "I was just making a joke... about the Charlie thing. Mind, he did say that, but I didn't realize it would bother you so much."

"I shouldn't have let him carry on," Harry said quickly. "I'm sorry for what I said about Professor Snape. I was talking low, didn't think he'd be listening in."

"You knew he was listening! I had just asked him how he'd known about what she'd had to eat and drink." Ron nodded at his logic. "So, this time it is your fault."

"What's done is done," Hermione said impatiently. "I'd just appreciate it if you'd stop saying those things, especially in front of someone else. It does bother me."

"Fair enough," Harry said.

"Out with it. How *did* the git know? We are curious," Ron blurted.

"Not that it is any of your concern, but I passed out near the lake last night when I came back from the pub. He was kind enough to see me to my quarters. I ran into him this morning, thanked him, and we happened to walk into the hall together." Hermione smiled. She'd left out the important bits, but she'd not let them ruin that!

"All right then," Ron said. "Sounds innocent enough. I just don't like how he noses about in our conversations lately. Then, when you left today, the prat followed you with his eyes the whole way. Looked like he wanted to say something, but he didn't."

Harry grinned. "Who cares? Why didn't you come meet us last night? When the others came, we had hoped that the rest of you would show."

"I didn't exactly feel comfortable, what with what Charlie said about me. I imagine you lot had quite a laugh about that," she said, shaking her head disapprovingly. "Just because I'm not a loose girl doesn't mean that I am a prude. Maybe I've just not found the right man yet. Maybe I am waiting until I get married."

"But why?" Ron asked incredulously.

Harry remained silent.

"Well, why not?" she inquired.

"I mean, say you do meet a bloke that you fancy, don't you want to... you know... show him how you feel about him?"

Harry interrupted her rebuttal. "Well, she just said she was going to wait for someone she fancied. Didn't you listen?"

"Yeah, I heard her," Ron said hotly, "but how is she going to show him if she hasn't a clue how? Far as I know, she's not had a boyfriend besides Vicky, and Charlie said she was a right little ice queen in the sack!"

"GET OUT NOW!" Hermione couldn't believe her ears. Ron was such an imbecile at times. "My sex life is not your business, and as far as your brother is concerned, I was lying in bed, minding my own business, when he came barging in. Of course I left! Any respectable girl would!"

"You left?" Ron asked, looking confused.

"Barged in?" Harry asked, equally puzzled.

"Yes. He told me that he had a bed for me, and I shouldn't wake up my mates. So I went to bed, and he followed me in... thinking to share it with me. Now get out," she spat.

"Hermione, I am sorry. I think I'll have a word with the git. He led us to believe that you wanted him to... you know," Harry said softly, looking peeved. "You did the right thing."

"Bloody hell, the lying git! You'll have to stand in line, Harry. Had us thinking you were egging him on, he did! Sorry, Mione," he said sheepishly.

"Look, just leave it. I'll owl him and tell him I don't appreciate his little tales about me. Honestly, though, it was a misunderstanding. I thought he had a bed for me to use alone, and he actually meant I could use his bed with him in it. I've got to get up to the library. I'll talk to you both later," she said, moving to open the door for them.

After they left, she began thinking about what Ron had said. He was right. If she did have some intimate time with Professor Snape, how would she know what to do? What he would like? What he expected?

"There is only so much one can learn from books," she mumbled sorrowfully as she flung herself onto her bed. She turned over and saw the paper.

She shakily took the paper in hand and flipped to the back. Maybe she should contact this Libertine fellow. According to Luna's letter, she fit his description of what he desired in a woman. Maybe she could acquire his services a couple of times between now and the conference. She would be paying him, so if she only wanted a few pointers, he would likely accept her money without worrying about sex. She sprinted to the library for a book. Once she reviewed some of the chapters quickly, she knew what she needed to do. She sat down to write her letter.

Mr. R. Libertine,

A friend has recommended you, and I thought that I might try to seek out your services. I am going to be completely blunt in what I want, so I hope you don't mind my lack of formality. It has come to my attention that men see me as a prude. I don't mean to be this way, but I suppose it has always been in my nature to put my education and career before any relationships.

My problem is this. I would like to have a relationship, but if I am lacking the experience, how could I keep an experienced man happy? I've looked over a book on the subject, and I have found a few things that I would like to try or, in the least, talk on. Maybe I just need a little advice. I'm not quite sure. I am very confused. I know that you are discreet, and I really appreciate that. I am the Arithmancy Professor over at Hogwarts. It wouldn't do for my students and colleagues to know that I have hired someone to give me advice on sexuality.

Nothing need happen between us on an intimate level. I am merely hoping to put things in perspective, and with you being an experienced man, I could get you to teach me about what I need to do to attract someone or please him. I have nobody else that I could comfortably talk this over with. No males anyway.

I would appreciate a reply at your earliest convenience, sir. If you do choose to meet with me, I'll make the necessary arrangements. I see that your price is negotiable, but I would be willing to pay the same amount as a woman that uses your services completely.

Thanks,

Hermione J. Granger

She read over the note. There. No false pretenses, and if the bloke was looking for an easy Galleon or two, this would appeal to him. He had expressed his desire for someone with long, wavy, brown hair, brown eyes, and someone willing to talk into the night. Well, that fit her picture perfectly. Hopefully, she would hear back from the fellow. This man could make or break a possible relationship with Professor Snape. Severus.

She rarely thought of him as Severus. It seemed just too intimate, especially since he'd never called her by her given name. He was such a mystery. Such a gentleman. He hadn't even bothered to remove her dress when he'd brought her back to her bedroom. Other men wouldn't have been so chivalrous. Hermione's cheeks flushed at the remembrance of her sexy dream she'd had. She had dreamt that he was caressing her gently and kissing her softly. When she had woken later in the night, she was disappointed that it hadn't been true.

What if he did try to make love to her the night at the conference? Would she freeze up as she had with Charlie? Would thoughts of her parents chase away what could very well be a night of passion? No. Impossible. This was the man she thought of. This was the man that she would willingly allow to touch her if he wanted to. That was the point to this Libertine meeting. She would learn how to entice him somehow. Picking up her book again, she went back to reading. She would study this thoroughly and talk with the hired man about it. He would know what she needed. Perhaps, she might let him show her a bit as well. She would have to see.

A/N: Well, it appears they will be having a meeting soon. I wonder what Sev's reaction will be to her letter?

One Step Back

Chapter 4 of 17

Arrangements are made, one last meeting, and a little jealousy.

Disclaimer: All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!

Severus entered his chambers, and his eyes narrowed immediately. What the bloody hell was Potter's owl doing there? Hedwig, was it? "What do you want, owl?" he asked suspiciously.

The haughty bird hooted indignantly and turned away from him.

He untied the parchment from its leg and then sat at his desk. "Well, go on. Get out of here," he said. "I think I know where to find Mr. Potter should I want to answer his letter." Ridiculous really. Why send an owl to someone that you see at meals each day? He opened the letter and nearly collapsed. It was addressed to Mr. R. Libertine! Fear clenched his heart.

For a brief moment, he thought that Potter had found out about his new role, but then he realized the writing wasn't Potter's messy, angular scrawl. It was the legible, loopy writing of Hermione. Thank Merlin! All he needed was for Potter to find out about his side job and attempt some sort of blackmail or, worse, for Potter to try to pay for his services. Severus shuddered at the thought. So, his plan had worked! Miss Lovegood had recommended him to Hermione. According to her letter, she wanted to meet with him to get some advice on how to please an experienced man. She didn't really want any intimacy between them, but she sounded confused. She would be easy to take advantage of. She said that it had come to her attention that men see her as prudish. Obviously, she had only been talking to Potter and Weasley and their lot.

No woman that could strip out of her clothes in such an enticing manner could be considered prudish. So, some man had captured her heart then, and there was only one person Severus could think of. *An experienced man.* Charlie Weasley. Why else would she want to know these things? Was it just a mere coincidence that her two idiot friends mentioned the bloke and mentioned a past happening between them and now she wanted instructions with intimacy? *No. She wants to practice for him. That undeserving wretch!*

This was not going the way he'd planned... or hoped. A small glimmer of hope sprang to life in his heart. The conference. Perhaps she wanted to learn these things for him. They had only just decided to go to the conference together. It made sense. There was only one way to find out. He would have to agree to meet with her. It would be hard not to ravish her, if all she wanted to do was talk, but at least he would find out once and for all if she did desire him. It would be easy for her to open up to him—a paid confidant.

The women that he'd met with so far had been easy enough to read and talk to. The only one that he might consider actually seeing on a regular basis was married, and other than the need to play dirty games with a gigolo, she intended to remain that way. He grinned. He might one day find someone for himself.

But he knew that wouldn't be the case. At least not right now. It was all about Hermione Granger, wasn't it? The witch who sat next to him at meals, the witch who went running every morning, and the witch who'd consented to accompany him to a conference... overnight. He grinned wickedly. The gigolo could find out her desires, and he could use them to his advantage when they spent their night together at the end of term. It was a simple plan, but it would work. He could be smoothly seductive when he chose to be. He quickly wrote back to Hermione.

Miss Hermione Granger,

After quickly checking into your position at the school and viewing you from afar, you are indeed acceptable as a client. I happen to have an opening this Saturday night. I hope that will be satisfactory for you. We can meet at seven outside of The Leaky Cauldron, near the Diagon Alley entrance, if you don't mind. From there, I will escort you to my room where we can commence your education.

You have my word that I shall go no farther than you are willing to allow. All I request are honest answers to my questions and for you to listen to what I have to say with an open mind. You will leave my rooms more knowledgeable in any area you choose to discuss. I do hope that you shall allow me to partake in a little demonstration of how a woman should feel when touched by an experienced man.

Tell me, Miss Granger, is there a particular wizard that you fancy? Come prepared to talk about him, and please have enough information on the fellow so that I can make a proper judgment about him. Sometimes, witches attach themselves to the wrong sort of wizard. It's always a pity to see that happen. Hopefully, I can discourage you from making a wrong choice, if you are fancying someone who might not deserve you, or I can encourage you to pursue the correct wizard.

Until Saturday,

Yours truly,

Mr. R. Libertine

There! It didn't sound too eager, nor did it sound uninterested. He hoped that she realized that she would be safe with him, and there was no need to worry about being taken advantage of. He would do what he could to get closer to her, to find out all of her secrets, but he just needed her there, feeling comfortable and confident. Severus began to mentally make plans for the evening when another owl swooped down upon him.

Damn! It was client number four. She wanted to meet with him, on short notice, in just a few hours time! Of all the nerve! He had a mind owl a decline, but the thought of being buried within someone, whilst pretending she was Hermione, appealed to him. It had been two days, and he could still feel the imprint of Hermione's breast on his palm. He did need this. He quickly scrawled a yes to her, telling her to meet him at the normal place. After classes, he would Apparate over to prepare things. For now, it was time for the noon meal, and he would see his sweet Hermione. He made his way as quickly as he could to the Great Hall.

To his surprise, only Potter accompanied her. He idly wondered where Weasley had gone off to. It wasn't like the little swine to miss a meal. He greeted Minerva and Albus as he seated himself.

"Hello, Professor," Hermione said softly.

He nodded and grunted a reply.

"Something must be wrong. I'm off to see what's keeping him," Potter said suddenly.

"All right," Hermione replied.

"Problems?" Severus inquired, nodding at Potter's retreating back.

"Well, Ron hasn't been down yet, and it's not like him to pass up lunch. Harry is going to go check on him to be sure he hasn't taken ill."

He watched as she licked her lower lip before taking a sip of her juice.

"Perhaps he doesn't need his friends keeping tabs on him. He is grown, is he not? Come to that, he has the years behind him, though he does lack the maturity."

Hermione made a sour face and began eating again. He could have kissed her, right there, in front of the entire castle. Her fetching lips were pouting profusely, and her expression was one begging to be soothed.

"What is it?" she asked snidely.

"Sorry?" he asked, unaware of having spoken.

"You keep staring at me. If you've something to say, then please say it," she said hotly. Apparently, she hadn't liked the little malicious remark about her mate.

"I was wondering something, Professor. How is it that you seem to have grown into a proficient young adult when your two closest friends still resemble the students that they once were?" Severus couldn't think of anything else to comment about that would be along the lines of the truth.

"Boys mature at a slower rate. It's a proven statistic," she said with a shrug, looking mollified. "Oh, I meant to ask you about the conference. Do you know where we will be lodging? I could look into the area if you'd like and pick something out."

"I am familiar with the layout, having been there before. In fact, I happen to have some parchment down in my office from my last stay. If you'd like, you'd be welcome to come down to have a look, unless you trust in me to choose," he said smoothly, hoping to put her at ease. There would be no separate rooms for them. Not that night.

"That would be fine. Anything you'd like. Maybe I could come down this evening to have a look," she said cheerfully.

His heart skipped a beat. She wanted to spend time with him, alone. To plan an outing. "I think that would be..." he paused, remembering he had a prior engagement, "unacceptable. I have plans already this evening."

"Oh, well, all right then. Some other time, perhaps," she said, seemingly disappointed.

"Certainly," he purred. He smirked in distaste noticing that both of her friends were approaching them. Why did his client have to pick tonight of all nights to meet? He would much rather spend a few minutes alone with Hermione as she looked over some parchments than to be off rutting with someone.

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Hermione finished the last of her classes with a small headache forming. She made her way down to the infirmary to see if Poppy could give her some draught to get rid of it. She'd been thinking about Professor Snape all day. He had offered for her to go down to his dungeons to have a look at his parchments, and when she had asked to go this night, he had seemed on the verge of accepting, but then he'd declined her offer. Just what did he have planned this night?

Did he have a... date? Jealousy swept through her body. Of course, that had to be it. There was no Order meeting tonight, he had no detentions to administer, according to the sheet in the staff room, and he had even switched patrols for this night with Minerva. That had to be it. As quickly as possible, she took some of the draught offered by the mediwitch and made her way back to her rooms. Hermione decided to take her reading outside. She would see if he left the grounds and if he appeared to be meeting

a woman. It was really ridiculous, but the curiosity was overpowering. She fetched her items, deciding to finish her letter to Charlie whilst there.

Even as she sat down, she saw the dark menacing form of Severus Snape walking in through the gates. He had been gone already? He looked the same to her. He was dressed in his dark teaching robes, his normal black frock coat and trousers were layered beneath, and his slight splash of white at the collar and sleeves were visible. His brow seemed to furrow as he noticed her. He stopped mid stride and made his way to her spot.

"Professor Granger? What are you doing out on the grounds, lying about on a duvet?"

"I decided to do a bit of reading and write a parchment to someone. Why?" she asked innocently. She didn't like his tone. It was as if she had done something against the rules.

"If you will notice, Professor, you are the center of attention whilst sitting here like this. Every schoolboy will be going to bed with fantasies of their Arithmancy professor. I suggest you sit up and act like the professional that you are," he said coldly, eyeing her parchment. "Well, well. Writing love notes to Mister Weasley, are we? And I thought you didn't like what he'd said about you? Trying to rectify things?"

Hermione eyed some of the students that were out on the grounds. The boys did have bright smiles, as if hoping her robes and skirt would fly up to reveal a portion of her bum. She sat up quickly, pulling her feet under her. Why did Professor Snape have to treat her this way? "I'll mind how I sit, Professor, and I assure you, it's no love letter that I am writing, not that it is any concern of yours."

"Very well," he said stiffly. "Good evening." He turned on his heel and swept off towards the castle with his robes billowing behind him in the wind.

*The bastard!* How was he able to make her feel like such a child? He'd just reprimanded her as if she were a student. The only thing missing was the fact that he'd not taken points. Just as he made his way up the stairs to the entrance, the doors flew open. Her two mates, Harry and Ron, nearly knocked him down to speed off in her direction.

"Oi!"

"Hermione!"

She waved at them, smiling broadly. She could see Professor Snape had paused to watch them. Both Ron and Harry pounced on her, tickling her until she shrieked with laughter. She finally managed to reach her wand and threatened to hex them if they didn't stop. Professor Snape was still watching and seemed to be shaking his head in disgust. She looked around and noted that more students were paying attention than before. Smoothing down her robes and flattening her hair, she tried to look respectable. It was hard to do when her two best mates often acted like there was no care in the world.

"What are you out here for?" Ron asked, looking down at her parchment.

"Figured I would finish your lout of a brother's letter," she said. "I still can't believe he led you to believe something completely different than what actually happened."

"Yeah, that was a dirty, rotten thing to do if you ask me. I hope you lay into him real harsh like, Mione. He deserves it," Ron said, throwing a twig in Harry's direction.

"I still say that we ought to pay his arse a visit," Harry said.

"What the bloody hell is that git staring at?" Ron asked suddenly, nodding over to Professor Snape. Filch had come out and seemed to be talking to the man, but his eyes were trained on the trio.

"Looks like he is looking at anything but Filch's ruddy face," Harry commented. "Don't blame him there." Harry shrugged. "Want to come down to Ron's hut?"

She smiled softly. Ron hadn't liked the idea of being given Hagrid's old quarters, but after trying to stay in the castle, he realized that living out away from the rest of the school gave him some degree of freedom that nobody else had. He'd made some changes to the place, but only what had needed to be done. It almost seemed as if Hagrid would come in at any time.

"Not tonight. I think I'm going to finish my letter and read a bit. Then, I'm going to go up for a nice, hot bath."

"Suit yourself. We've got a chess game to finish. Been going on for a week now, it has. I still say we need to put a timer on our turns. Harry just doesn't know when to give up. He's getting a bit better. I'll give him that, but only just, mind," Ron complained, leading the way down towards his hut.

Hermione shook her head while watching the pair leave. Her eyes went back to the front entrance. Professor Snape was gone. She went back to work on her letter to Charlie. After she felt that she had tastefully admonished him for the wretched things he'd said about her, she sealed the parchment. It was nearly time to go in for the evening meal.

A large, black owl flew down and landed in front of her. She saw a parchment attached to his leg with her name on it. Could it be from Libertine? So soon? She unfastened the parchment and apologized to the owl for not having a treat to give it. Her knees went weak as she read the letter. He had accepted her as a client.

*We're to meet this coming Saturday! Good Lord!* What had she been thinking to have actually contacted a hired man? He still seemed arrogant. He was practically guaranteeing that he had all of the answers she sought. She supposed that was a good thing, but the explosion of nervous energy in her body seemed to disagree. What if he took advantage of her once she was there? Well, no, that didn't sound right. To hear Luna tell it, her cousin spoke nothing but great things about the man. Surely he was chivalrous and would respect her wishes.

She blindly picked up her things, making her way back to the castle whilst reading over the parchment again. Hermione couldn't believe she was doing this! A delicious scent assaulted her nostrils: some mix of spices and sandalwood. Professor Snape.

"Hello, Professor," she said upon looking up.

"Professor," he said curtly, trying to move past her.

She took in his attire. He had on thick, dark green, dress robes, and his hair was tied back near his neck. She'd never seen him looking so handsome.

"You-you're leaving?" she asked dumbly, dropping her letter from Libertine on the ground. She scrambled to pick up the letter, lest he recognize the man's name. That would be all she needed! She'd never live it down.

"So it would seem," he said, turning back to look at her. "Did you need something?"

She could see that he'd taken notice of her fallen parchment.

"N-no, sir. You look... very nice," she said and scurried inside before he could give her, what she would bet to be, a scathing remark. She ran almost all the way back to her chambers.

Severus stood there in a daze looking down the empty corridor that she had fled through. Had she just paid him a compliment? He smirked to himself for a moment before heading off to his Apparition site. Hermione was such a fetching piece when she flushed as she'd just done. Was it he who had made her color so beatifically? Or was it the panic that she'd almost been caught with that letter from her gigolo?

He'd seen the letter, and he was glad that the owl had waited until she was alone to deliver it, just as instructed. He'd wanted to call out to her friends to shove off when they were hanging about earlier, but that would have only raised suspicions. He hated the intimacy that the three shared. Why should Potter and Weasley be able to touch her and make her laugh? It just didn't seem right.

He'd tried to get her to move inside when he had noticed that she was lying down like a little trollop for all the boys to see. Well, all right. He'd had a long look. There was nothing to actually see, but that didn't stop the little brats from having a look at her. He'd heard what some of the students said about her whilst out on his patrols. They said things such as wanting to be a ranger for Granger and some other nonsense. Most of them fancied her. He hated it, of course, because, most of the time, he felt no better. It was as if he were one of the students panting after her.

Severus made sure that nobody was about when he Disapparated. He quickly placed a glamour spell on his person to change his hair color, and he fixed his mask to his face magically. Lonnie was waiting outside the door for him. He cleared his throat as he stepped up behind her. "Waiting for someone, my dear?"

"Oh! You don't know how glad I am that you were able to come. I've been thinking of you all week. When my husband said he had plans tonight, I knew I had to make my own," she gushed quickly, trying to unbutton his robes.

"Patience, my dear. We aren't even inside yet," he murmured as she attached her mouth to his throat. Once inside the room, he warded the door and pushed her away from him roughly. "You have been a naughty girl, Lonnie. I think you need to be punished."

"Oh, yes, Master Libertine, I deserve to be punished," she said eagerly.

"Disrobe yourself, wench," he commanded. He closed his eyes for a moment to conjure up Hermione's face in his mind. Lonnie would never be as pretty as his Hermione, but their likenesses were easy to see. "Unfasten my trousers and place your lips upon me." It was times like these when her disheveled hair covered her face, he could easily imagine it to be his Hermione whose lips were servicing him.

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Severus felt miserable. Why had he gone to see Lonnie? He could have spent a few quiet moments in his personal chambers with Hermione. For some odd reason, it felt as if he had been unfaithful to her. Hell, she wasn't even his woman, and he felt as if she had some say in what he did and whom he did it with. Lonnie was only adequate this night, but why was that? He normally enjoyed their games. Perhaps it was due to the things she was saying after they'd finished that had his mind speculating. She was saying that she might leave her husband one day and, if she chose to do so, would he be interested in having a few public dates with her. It had been too much!

Yes, he was on a mission to find his own Hermione, but it seemed that maybe there was no replacement for the real woman, the woman whose chambers were only three floors above his own. If he didn't have the meeting with Hermione to look forward to or the conference trip, he might have been happy with Lonnie's admission, but instead, it made him feel guilty. Why? He never had to see the woman again. No, it wasn't guilt for using this woman. It was guilt about Hermione.

Her words played over and over in his mind. *You look very nice.* She had meant it. Her voice had been uncertain. Could it be that she was attracted to him? Was he truly the experienced man whom she sought to please? When he'd seen that letter to Charlie earlier, he had assumed that she was trying to have a meeting with him, but the fire in her response told him otherwise. Whilst with Lonnie, his thoughts continually trailed back to the memory of Hermione's flushed face and her hushed voice as she had complimented him. He should have cancelled his appointment the moment she mentioned looking over those parchments with him.

Too late. What's done is done. He would be counting down each minute in the next few days as their meeting time came closer. This one meeting with Hermione would make or break him. He took extra care in his bath to wash off all memories of the woman he'd bedded. Just having her scent about his body seemed to be a sin. He fell into a fitful sleep.

Severus awoke on time for breakfast. The only good thing about this morning was that he would see his Hermione. He made his way to the breakfast table confidently, and he was in deep conversation with Minerva when the trio entered the hall. He heard a sharp intake of breath and some sniggering.

"Bloody hell! Looks like a Vampire got hold of him," Weasley was saying.

"Might want to budge up, Hermione. Give him some room. I hear a vampire's mate is a right jealous creature," Potter said.

Severus turned to see what they were talking about. To his amazement, they were staring at him. He glared at the three of them. Potter was trying to hide his grin. Weasley was laughing so loudly that tears were trickling down his face. Hermione looked horrified.

"What, might I ask, do you find so humorous?" he hissed coldly. How dare the twits poke fun at him!

Hermione nodded to his neck and pointed. "You've a... bite mark... just there."

Potter lost all control and began laughing as loudly as Weasley.

"A bite mark?" he asked incredulously. His cheeks pinked momentarily as he remembered Lonnie's lips upon him. She'd left a passion mark! He hadn't thought about spelling it off, what with his mood afterward! *Shite!*

"Yes, I suppose you had a date last evening?" she asked softly.

"I suppose you think it to be your business?" he asked acridly.

"No, Professor, I'm just trying to make conversation. We're only friends, after all. I have no say in your personal affairs," she said, sounding slightly annoyed and a little disappointed.

It wasn't her fault that her friends were acting like two fools, sniggering loudly, but he couldn't help but to want to lash out. It was embarrassing enough to be marked like a common possession, but it was equally annoying that she had seen it. "Too right you are, Professor. Just because you are accompanying me on a trip this summer, it doesn't mean you have the right to worry over my affairs."

"As you told me last evening," she said scornfully, pointing her wand at his throat, "you should try showing a little professionalism."

He felt a warmth seep into his neck for a moment before she left the table angrily. Severus didn't have to ask to know that she had soothed the mark away from the public's eye. Deep down, he hoped her reaction was because she didn't want him to be marked by another woman.

He looked to Potter questioningly, and the boy simply raised his shoulders in a shrug. "No idea."

Weasley was finally coming to his senses. "See that, did you? She's bloody scary when she's angry, I tell you," he said with a smile. "Looked to me as if she didn't like old Snape's... oof!" Harry elbowed his mate. "Oi! What did you do that for?"

"Shush, Ron," Harry said, watching Snape uneasily through his peripheral vision. The man looked like he was livid. It wouldn't do to get on his bad side so early in the day. Whatever the hell had just transpired, he wanted no part of it, and if he had to keep Ron's mouth shut by force, so be it.

A/N: Someone seemed a bit jealous, I'd say.

Skiping Forward

Chapter 5 of 17

Sev forces Hermione to admit her feelings.

Disclaimer: All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!

Some woman had spent a portion of the night in his arms! It just wasn't fair. Hermione pouted slightly as she threw herself into the desk of one of her pupils. They would be filing into class shortly after breakfast, so she had a bit of time to ponder on the morning's events before facing them.

Severus Snape had actually had a date the previous night. Not just a dinner date either. Who would have thought that to be possible? The man never seemed to truly associate with anyone. Was it some long-distance relationship? Something serious with a local woman? But, no! It couldn't be. He'd only remembered that he had 'other plans' at the last minute. If it were something serious, he would have never been on the verge of accepting her offer to meet with him in his rooms the night before. *The harlot marked him!* How exactly did she do that? Hermione shook her head sadly. If she couldn't fathom how to mark her man, how could she compete with a woman that could? *Libertine! He would explain things.*

"Professor Granger, we have to have a little talk," a silky voice said, interrupting her thoughts. Her cheeks reddened as she realized he'd caught her acting like a brooding student.

"Please come in, Professor. I was just mentally going over... my first class' quiz," she said, hopefully sounding truthful.

"I think that we need to discuss what just happened at the breakfast table," Severus said, crossing his arms, standing in front of her.

She noticed how angry he seemed. "Sir, if you are disappointed that I removed your... passion mark, I can assure you that it was only out of worry for your reputation with the students. As you so kindly showed concern for my reputation yesterday afternoon, I sought to return the favor," she said briskly. "I suppose it must have meant something for you to have not spelled it off yourself. I fear I have overstepped my bounds, and I do apologize for that."

Severus raised an eyebrow. She sounded very convincing, but he could see the signs. She had been jealous. When he'd come into the room just moments before, she had been brooding over what had happened. He didn't buy into her class quiz rubbish for one second. "I do not appreciate the acrid little comments that your two friends felt the need to make. I realize that you cannot control their tongues, but I do believe that you can control your outbursts."

"I said that I was sorry, Professor. What more can I say?" she asked, raising her hands in question. "Perhaps I did react a bit strongly."

"I would say so," he said with a nod. "You dared to act as if you were... resentful that someone had marked me. I have consented to accompany you on an overnight trip to a conference once school lets out. Do you honestly think that it means anything more to me than just a trip between two colleagues?"

Hermione bit her lip and looked away. The bastard. Why not tell him? The worst he could do is cancel their plans? And if he didn't cancel them, well, Libertine would teach her how to attract him. Because if he didn't cancel their arrangement, that meant that on some level he was possibly interested. Where was her courage to just say it? She could do it. Hermione did it. Now.

"Anything more to you? I seriously doubt it. I admit that I had hoped we could build some sort of kinship with our pending trip. I used to find staff meetings interesting when you would dare sink so low as to pay attention to what I had to say. Then, you just stopped talking to me all together. This morning made me realize why. Maybe I just didn't like the idea that you ignore me now because you are in a hurry to meet someone else."

There! She'd said it. Let him make of it what he would. Hermione held her breath for a moment and looked away. The biting remark would come. Any moment. She finally released her breath and looked up at him timidly.

Severus cocked his head to the side, and his eyes seemed to be penetrating into hers. "I have no one that I meet often enough to be considered a steady distraction. As far as staff meetings, you might thank your chivalrous sidekicks for my fast getaways. I do not care to sit about whilst they tell tall tales. I have detentions to oversee tonight, but if you would like to come down tomorrow after the evening meal, I will be glad to show you the information that I have concerning the area and possible lodgings for our trip. Good day."

She was too stunned to agree or disagree. He left in haste as the first of her students began shuffling through the doors. Hermione noticed how they looked at their feared Potions master's retreat to her place at a student's desk. They probably thought that he'd been admonishing her for something.

She smiled softly. "Come on in, everyone."

As the class began taking her quiz, she thought about what he'd said. There was no steady witch in his life. ~~This woman~~ that he'd been intimate with the night before had to be only a casual acquaintance. She could compete with that... with Libertine's help. She had admitted that she enjoyed his company and hoped they could have some sort of closeness with their pending trip. He hadn't cancelled their trip. Instead, he'd offered for her to go down to his chambers the following evening to look over parchments. He was interested as well, though he didn't admit it. Hermione had found out something else from their brief conversation. All this time she had been thinking that she had done something wrong to turn him away after they'd shared the beginnings of a friendship. She'd never realized that his aloofness coincided with Harry and Ron's appearance.

Hermione knew in her gut that she had to make an impression on the austere Potions master, and it had to be on their time away from the castle. She decided to put together a list of questions for her hired man. Their meeting was only a few days away, but now she could barely wait to meet with him. There was so much that she wanted to learn. So much he could answer for her.

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Severus' smug expression never left his face as he journeyed down to his classroom. If he didn't have to face a class of idiotic first years, he might have even hummed a slight tune. Instead, he slammed into his class and began lecturing for an hour before pausing, sitting at his desk with his face propped up by his hands as if bored. His class likely thought that he felt ill. They would never know that he was in the best mood that he'd been in for what seemed like years.

The best thing that he could have done was to follow her to her classroom and surprise her just as he had done. After her little outburst at the table, it had occurred to him

that it was an opening moment to either go forward with his plans or be forced to put them on hold. Never would he end them. He would have her... somehow. Severus smirked to himself, realizing that he'd still given her no open declaration that he was attracted to her. He'd merely accepted her admission. If she voiced something different at a later date, he could always pretend to have misunderstood, but there would be no need. The seduction of Hermione Granger was about to begin. Starting the next evening.

There was only one problem. Libertine. Damn! Now that she, the real Hermione Granger, appeared to be interested in him, it would seem that he no longer needed his side job. Severus pondered on what to do. He would no longer take any new clients, nor would he see those that he had been seeing, but he couldn't just turn her away. It was in his best interest to meet with her, to *educate* her, of course. What he learned in that one meeting could help him along the ways of winning her body... and her heart. Heart? Did he want her heart? Yes. *Hell yes! All of her.* Realizing that his class was staring at him expectantly, he barked, "Copy your assignment from the board and leave."

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"I'll be down in my chambers, Professor. If you would still like to come look over the brochures and parchments, I shall be waiting," Severus said cordially. It had taken a lot for him to tell her that. Both insolent dolts, Potter and Weasley, were eyeing them with interest, and each even had the audacity to smirk at him knowingly. What the hell had she told them exactly?

"Oh, I'll come now. I've had more than enough," Hermione said with a slight smile, taking a quick sip of her drink. Severus bit back a reply. She hadn't actually eaten anything. He'd been watching her push her food around on her plate for the past half hour.

"Very well," he said, standing up. He pulled back her chair for her and ushered her out of the side entrance to the hall. On the way, he casually asked, "Do your *friends* know of our plans?"

"I've not told them, but they may have overheard us talking about it at the table." She stopped. "Is it supposed to be a secret?"

He had already moved ahead a few paces when he noticed that she'd stopped. Severus gave her a moment to meet him before replying.

"Not at all, Miss Granger. I simply noticed that they seemed to be taking an interest in our conversation. I only wondered how you had dealt with their questions or explained why you would be accompanying such a *git* on an overnight trip," he said smoothly, steering her towards his chambers.

"I don't think you are a git," she said honestly. "My business is my own."

"They think that I am a git. Does their opinion not matter to you?" he questioned, raising an eyebrow.

She shook her head. "Harry, Ron, and I are three different people. We each have our own opinions, contrary to popular belief. If I choose to accompany a most brilliant man to a conference, well, that is my business and only my opinion should count."

Severus could have pulled her to him for a tight embrace. *A most brilliant man.* That was exactly the way he felt about himself at most times, but to hear those words fall from those lush little lips overjoyed him. "We'll use this entrance," he said suddenly, pulling her back to him. He whispered a password and tapped the stones on the wall in a particular succession. An opening formed, and he led her in. It was a dark, narrow passageway that he'd found by accident one day whilst searching for an invisible tapestry. He simply added his own wards and password to make it his own shortcut. It saved him an entire flight of stairs and a long stretch of corridor when he used it. He was used to the steep incline and had learnt a practiced pace, but Hermione kept running into him as her feet would move faster at times.

"Ooh, sorry, Professor," she said each time her body collided with his.

He would merely grunt that it was fine, but he secretly enjoyed the feel of her body upon his, no matter that it was only for a few seconds at a time.

"Place your hands on my back and let my body guide you," he instructed silkily. Hermione placed her trembling hands on his back and allowed herself a brief fantasy of touching his bare skin. Did the man not know that being so near to him made her... well, what? Tingly inside, yes, but something else. Warm? Right. Giddy. Beneath her hands, she could feel his raw strength and solid back. Since Voldemort had been defeated, he had put on a little weight, and he'd never looked better. Her fingers itched to caress his back and feel each inch of the expanse before her. "Just a moment," he said in nearly a whisper. She could hear the tapping of his wand, and then light began creeping into the passageway.

Hermione looked around. They were in his bedchamber. The man was tidy. Not a thing seemed to be out of place. His bed was nicely made. *His large bed.* It was nearly twice the size of her own. She was surprised that there was only one slender bookshelf with books near his bed. She would have thought him to own many books. She allowed him to take her hand to pull her to the next room. On the way, she saw a glimpse of the bathroom. From what she could see, he had a tub the equivalent of a small pool such as in the prefects' bathrooms. She saw that there was even a plant in the corner. *How quaint!* She'd never thought him to be a man that would tend to plants (aside for potions reasons).

"This is my personal study. It's connected to my office through that door there. In that other door there, I have a private laboratory, and just in this one, I have a small kitchen." He pulled out a chair for her at a small table. "I'll be just a moment." He went off into the kitchen, and Hermione took in the impressive room. One entire wall was lined with shelves and filled with books. She grinned broadly. That was more like it. She could see some parchments and open books on his desk. Did the man ever rest?

Severus came back into the room carrying one plate and two forks. "I noticed that you barely had anything for dinner, so I thought you might enjoy a bit of trifle. I made this after my last class today. I wanted to try a mixture of brandy that I recently acquired. I hope you like strawberry jam and whipped cream?"

"I do," she said with a smile, taking a fork from him. There was just something intimate about sharing a dessert with someone, and good Lord! If the man could make something as delicious as this, what other hidden talents did he have? "This is really superb, Professor."

"Thank you. I'm afraid that lately I have a soft spot for desserts," he admitted. "And, please, call me Severus."

"All right then. Call me Hermione, if you don't mind." They slowly savored each bite while mostly staring into each other's eyes. Hermione wondered what he was thinking. Could he really find her attractive? What of the woman that had been with him the night before? Was she beautiful? Older? More mature? More sophisticated? What did she have to compete with?

"Well, now, Hermione, I'll put this away and fetch what we need," he said softly.

She nearly melted with the way her given name sounded falling from his lips.

"Here is the parchment on the building itself and the grounds. It's right outside of Cardiff. There is a small Wizarding section near the beachfront. It's where we can stay." Severus placed a brochure in front of her.

She smiled down at the moving pictures.

"I'm partial to this establishment."

"It's very nice. Pity we only have the one day. I've never been there before."

"I do have the need to replenish my stock of Shrake spines. If I contact the local fisheries, they could gather some. It may take an additional day. Would you be opposed?" Severus nearly bit his own lip, as she seemed to mull this over.

Finally, she smiled. "Not in the least. I've no other plans. I'll trust you to make all of the arrangements since you know the area. Are... are we to dine out maybe? Should I pack something nice to wear?"

You don't have to wear anything. "I hadn't thought about it, but I don't see why not. Perhaps you should bring Muggle clothing as well. Just in case."

She nodded idly as her eyes were drawn back to the changing picture on the brochure before her. Hermione was greeted first by the sight of a spacious sitting room with a cozy fire. Next, there was an alluring table set for two, topped with what appeared to be chilled wine. Then, she saw a large bathroom where the shower was made to resemble a small waterfall. Lastly, the spacious bedchamber presented itself. The open doors to the moonlit balcony appeared to allow a breeze through. The curtains were swaying loftily and the candles were flickering. All of the scenes were really romantic. Was he seriously choosing a place such as this to stay at? How did a man like Severus Snape know of such a place? Had his woman friend accompanied him there already? "It's really beautiful."

"Yes, you are," he said, watching her intently.

"Sorry?" Had she heard that correctly? Her eyes met his.

"You are quite right. It makes a lovely view." After a long moment, he tore his eyes away. Merlin, she was perfection. She would be his. He could see that she had fallen in love with his choice of accommodations. The possibilities were limitless.

"What is that noise?" Hermione asked, looking around. She could hear a faint clawing sound and flapping. "Have you a familiar?"

"I do not," he replied, walking towards the door that led to his office. The moment he opened the door a large creamy owl fluttered in. In a panic, he scrambled after the owl to retrieve the parchment. Sure enough, it was addressed to Mr. R. Libertine. It wouldn't do for her to see this. "Off with you," he said to the creature. He stuffed the parchment into his pocket and turned to Hermione. "It seems I have some other matters to attend to. Allow me to walk you back to your chambers." Most of his owls did come late in the evenings. Perhaps it wasn't convenient to have her there at the present time.

Disappointed, Hermione stood and followed him through his office and out into his classroom. They quietly made their way down the dungeons' corridor and up towards her quarters. Awkwardly, they stood at her portrait for a moment. "Well, thanks," she offered. Should she ask to visit him again? No. That would be too forward. "I had a nice time, Severus. I will see you tomorrow."

He gave her a small smile. She had announced his name perfectly. He took her hand and brought it to his lips. "Good evening."

Hermione stood there, grinning like an idiot, until he was long out of sight. She resisted the impulse to do a cartwheel. Bursting with excitement, she Flooed Ginny straightaway.

"Hi, Hermione," her friend greeted.

"Ginny! Can you come through?" she asked, not wanting Draco, if he happened to be there, or the Weasleys, to overhear anything.

"Sure. Stand back." A moment later, her friend came through.

Hermione hugged her gleefully.

"What's going on?"

She could see Ginny's curiosity. "I'm just happy."

"Spill. There must be more. You look like... you've had sex! Well, who is the lucky guy? Harry? Ron?" Ginny asked.

"No, this is better than sex! He shared dessert with me, planned a getaway with me, walked me to my quarters, and kissed my hand! It was pleasant!" Hermione merrily danced around a confused Ginny.

"Er? Who? And, not to be rude, but that is better than sex?"

Hermione snorted and pulled her friend to sit with her on the davenport. "If I tell you, do I have your word not to say anything?"

"Yes. Always."

"Professor Snape." Hermione grinned. Ginny gave her a look that asked her to explain further. "He and I are going to attend a conference together after this term is finished. We were only going to stay over one night, but now it appears we'll be staying for two. And the resort is simply romantic!"

"You... have a... thing for Professor Snape?" Ginny asked uneasily. "I didn't know that."

"Neither did I," Hermione said quickly. "Well, I thought that I might, but lately, yes. Yes, I do. Is that so wrong?"

Ginny shook her head and smiled. "Not at all. I'm just surprised is all."

Hermione quickly told her about the past couple of days.

"Well, it sounds as though he just had a bit of a one night stand then. I wouldn't worry that he's actually dating someone else. I think you have a chance of starting something here. What next?"

Hermione grinned impishly. "Don't get the wrong idea, but I've hired that Libertine bloke whom Luna was talking about."

"You are going to shag a gigolo?" Ginny asked incredulously. "I know I mentioned it, but I never thought you would actually do it."

"Of course, I'm not. He's going to give me some pointers on how to satisfy an experienced man. I would like to be able to do things that his... other witch is able to do. Like leave a mark if I so choose," she said humbly. "I've already begun preparing a list of questions to ask him, and I've been studying in a book. I just need a bit of guidance."

"Hermione, reading about sex and participating in sex are two different things. This gigolo is going to want to show you. As much as you said you would like to wait for the right man, I am not sure if this is a wise decision. I would hate to see you talked into something that you aren't ready for," Ginny said, concern etched in her face.

"I want to be with Severus. He makes me feel... something. I can't explain it." Hermione smiled. "When have I ever been talked into anything that I haven't truly wanted to do? I can handle myself."

"Well, what is it that you want to know? I can help you out," Ginny offered.

"It's not the same. I want to know what a man likes from a man's mouth. I want to know what he expects from a woman. Then, if things progress between Severus and me on this trip, well, I will be prepared," she said, nodding at her decision.

"I can understand that then, but just so you know, each man's desires are different. Not to gossip, but think on Harry for a moment."

Hermione scrunched up her face.

"Don't look like that! Harry is really gentle and sort of lets you lead the way while Draco... well, Draco takes charge and doesn't mind getting a bit rough. Two different men. Two completely different styles of lovemaking."

"Well, this fellow says that he can give me advice. Hang on. Read his note for yourself," Hermione said, getting up to search for her letter. Finding it, she handed it to her friend.

Having read the letter, Ginny smiled. "This guy really is chivalrous, isn't he? Be careful. You might find him far more appealing than our dear Potions master."

"Ho ho," Hermione said indolently. "That won't happen. So, Ginny... about what he and I discussed tonight, and from what I have mentioned on the quarters we're to share, do you think he means for something more to happen?"

"Well, I would think so, but did he say if you'll be staying together?"

"Blast! I never asked. I only assumed. How ridiculous!" Hermione's face heated. She'd never thought of it any other way from the moment she'd looked through his papers.

"Maybe he is assuming as well. He is handling all the decisions about where to stay and how long to stay. Is he paying for everything?"

"Oh! I hadn't asked that either. Bloody hell! What's wrong with me?"

"Don't be embarrassed. I know that some men assume things. They figure if they are paying for your dinner, for your drinks, and for your room, then they should get something in return for their act of kindness. It could be that Professor Snape is assuming something here, and since you've not voiced reason for him to not believe it, then definitely. He's hoping that something will go on between the two of you," Ginny said confidently. "In this case, I don't think that I would be offended."

"No, I am not. It's what I would like." Hermione smirked. "Now, that idiot Charlie is a different story. Can you believe he had them calling me Her-my-icy-woman behind my back? Bastard!"

"I slipped and told my mum about it. She was furious. Sent him a Howler all about disrespecting women," Ginny said sheepishly. "Hope you don't mind. Seemed to make Ron and Harry feel better as well. They were all set to go out to Romania to have a *talk* with him."

Hermione giggled. "What would I do without those two?"

"You'd probably be in a lot less mischief. What's this I hear about you three jinxing all of Madam Hooch's first years' brooms to take off flying when the students tried to summon them?" Ginny asked, tapping her foot against the chair.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Hermione said innocently. The girls talked for another hour before Ginny made to leave.

"When are you off to see him?"

"Day after tomorrow." Hermione sighed. "What should I wear? I figured I would look normal so he won't think that I am trying to impress him."

Ginny nodded. "Right. Save the dressing up for Snape. You go there with your normal attire, book, and parchment. He'll realize soon enough there will be no shagging, and no doubt he'll feel as if he's joined a study group."

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Severus read over the parchment once more. Client number one was ready for another go. He had to end things, but what to tell her? He hid the parchment in his desk, deciding to answer her the next day. He had other preparations to make. He was most pleased at how the evening had turned out. Things were working out well.

He scribbled a letter to the *Evening Prophet* to cancel his ad. Whilst things were progressing nicely with Hermione, there was no need to keep up meetings with other women. He wrote another letter requesting one private room for three nights and reserving good seats for the conference. He would wait to search out the locals for his Shrike spines once they were settled in.

It hadn't occurred to him that she might believe to be staying in her own room. She had seemed to accept that they would share the same space. Just in case, he decided to mention that it was the only one available. If she had anything to protest about, he could claim that he would transfigure a separate bed for himself. Either way, once he'd had a few hours alone with her, she would not think any more on separate rooms or beds. She would only be thinking of him and how he made her feel.

## The Meeting

Chapter 6 of 17

Hermione Meets Libertine; Snape has a bit of fun.

**Disclaimer:** All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

**As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!**

AN: Just a reminder that this story has "innocent!Hermione" in it. If you don't like that, I wouldn't carry on with it. :)

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Severus watched the nervous woman sitting to his right closely. With trembling hands, she raised her spoon to her mouth. Part of the liquid slipped down from the corner of her mouth. He chuckled as she dabbed its remnants away. "Why, Miss Granger, is something vexing you?"

"Not at all, Professor. Why would you say that?" she asked, looking into his eyes for the first time that evening.

"You seem... disturbed. Why not join me down in the dungeons for a little while after dinner? I happen to have some Calming Draught that you are welcome to use," he said in a concerned voice. Severus had to bite his gums to keep from smirking evilly. He knew she would refuse. She was to leave to meet Libertine shortly.

"Oh, I have a... that is to say, I am meeting Ginny this evening," Hermione blurted. "Just a bit after dinner. Sorry." He could see the regret in her eyes *Interesting*.

"Just tell her that you've had a change of heart and are under the weather. I'm sure, being a great friend, she would understand," he urged. "You really don't look well. You've a shadow under each eye."

"I'm fine," she retorted, sipping her broth again.

"Where did you say you and Ginny were going?" Harry asked.

Hermione jumped. "Er... it's private, Harry. Girl stuff, you know."

Harry looked at her oddly. "Right."

Severus could tell he didn't believe her. He hoped the prat wouldn't try to follow her to see exactly where she was headed. In fact, she'd better get a move on if she was to bathe and dress herself up a bit for their meeting. He wondered if she would wear a Muggle dress as she had that night when she'd gone out with her girlfriends. That would be lovely.

She pushed away from the table. "I must be going. Good evening, Professors."

"Hold on, Professor Granger. I shall escort you to your room. I happen to be going that way anyway," Severus said smoothly. He noted her guilty nod before he followed her out of the hall. "You really should rest tonight, Hermione," he said when they were alone in the corridor.

"Once I come back, I will, Severus. Thanks for your concern," she said politely.

"You seem as if... you are *up* to something." He saw her eyes widen. "You aren't sneaking about in hopes of freeing house-elves or some nonsense?" He raised an eyebrow while waiting for her reply. He heard the sigh of relief.

"Um, you can say that I am doing a bit of research," she said quickly. "Thank you for seeing me to my chambers."

Before she could slip inside, he put a hand on her shoulder.

"I could maybe give you a hand if you'd like." She jumped when his hand lazily trailed down her arm as he pulled it away. "I don't mind research. What are we researching?"

"Er... I shall tell you when I come to something conclusive. Now, I apologize, Severus, but I really must go," she pleaded, backing into her chambers.

*Yes, my dear. You go get ready. It shall be me who helps you along in the way of your research tonight.*

He hummed as he quickly made his way back to the dungeons. Yes, tonight would be productive. He hoped to steal a few kisses as well as a few caresses. He would set her mind at ease. Prepare her perfectly for their trip.

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Severus quickly made his way to his special room. He'd never used the establishment that he'd reserved a room with before. The rooms were large, clean, and posh. She would likely be impressed. He took special care to soak in different bath oils than he normally used. Hermione was a clever witch. It wouldn't do for her to make that distinction. He charmed his eyes to be a dark blue and his hair to be light brown. His enchanted mask would cover most of his face, leaving only his lips, chin, and jaw lines visible. What sort of voice distortion should he use? Deeper? Younger? He flicked his wand and tested his new voice. "Miss Granger." He shrugged, finding he sounded like a younger version of Albus. Pulling his cloak and hood on, he made his way to meet her.

He waited in the shadows just off an alley near the Leaky Cauldron's rear entrance. Right at seven, she Apparated just in front of him. He hungrily took in her appearance, and his mouth dropped open. Hermione looked the same as she had at the evening meal! She'd changed clothes, but her hair was not fixed as when she'd gone out last time. To his horror, she had actually brought a book bag! Swallowing his slight disappointment, he moved forward.

"Hermione Granger?"

She spun around and smiled shyly. "Mr. Libertine?"

He nodded. "I am. Are you ready? I shall have to Apparate us."

"Er... all right then. I suppose," she said uneasily.

He pulled her to him, and being incognito, he felt compelled to press his body tightly to hers. Surely a lingering hold wouldn't scare her off. Severus closed his eyes as he Apparated them to his room, savoring and memorizing the feel of her against him. "Here we are. Please have a seat." He motioned to the settee before the fire.

"I... what do I do?" she asked nervously. "I mean... not do, do, but..." She sat quickly, pulling her bag in front of her protectively.

Hell, she reminded him of a scared student.

"Miss Granger, do not be afraid. As I told you in my letter, I will not do anything that you do not wish for me to do. We're here at your request. May I?" He indicated the spot next to her.

"Yes. Sorry. I'm just nervous. Please call me Hermione," she offered.

"Very well, Hermione. How else may I put you at ease?" he asked, sitting next to her.

"Well, what is your name?"

He blinked. Not one of the other ladies had asked what the 'R' stood for in his name. He should have known that Hermione would ask. "It's Romeo. Romeo Libertine." His eyes narrowed as she began laughing loudly. "Is my name that amusing?"

"Yes, and I wouldn't believe that to be your true name for one moment. Romeo? As in, a man devoted to the pursuit of love? Libertine? As in, one who acts without moral restraint? A dissolute man?" Hermione grinned. "I didn't think of it that way with only your last name, but when you said Romeo, I knew it was a fake. Would you like to tell me your real name?"

"No," he said shortly. "You may call me Romeo." He thought for a moment. "Unless, do you have a name you would prefer to call me?"

"Well, since Romeo is not truly your name, and you won't tell me what is, would you mind terribly if I called you by the name of Sev?" She bit her lip and had a hopeful look in her eyes.

He would not deny her. "Sev it is, Hermione. Is this a potential lover's name?" He watched as her cheeks reddened deeply.

"I don't know," she admitted. "Maybe."

"Fair enough. May I ask why you brought school books tonight?" he inquired politely.

"Oh, well, I told you. I need you to answer some questions that I have. I have been reading in this book, but I am afraid it leaves a lot to be desired. I need answers, but only a man can give them to me."

He moved closer and noticed that she stiffened. "I'm not trying to harm you. I am only getting comfortable. What else can I do to put you at ease?"

"Is this how you truly look?" she asked suddenly.

How much should he tell her? "This is not my voice, nor my hair." He hadn't changed his hair length, but it was tied back and colored.

She nodded.

"What color would you like?"

"That's fine. Your voice. Could you make it... deeper, yet softer?"

He smirked. This would be too easy. He'd already learned that she liked his name and his voice. There were so many things he could do with his voice. He could do anything, ranging from threatening someone to seducing someone, with it. To humor her, he charmed his voice to sound nearly like his true voice. This seemed to satisfy her. "Now, how would you like to start, Hermione?"

She began fumbling with her bag and pulled out a thick parchment.

*What the fuck is this? A N.E.W.T. written examination?*

"I've composed a list of questions that I would like to ask. I thought about putting them in true or false form, but I decided I would rather hear honest answers."

Good Lord. She'd actually composed questions. "Allow me to pour us some wine," he said softly. He summoned the bottle and two goblets to him. This was not how he had planned things. He had envisioned them talking softly near the fire, perhaps some light kisses, a couple of gentle caresses. He handed her a glass and nodded to indicate that he was ready to begin.

"All right. First of all, I'm very much an innocent. I've never taken the time to become involved with anyone. Not really. So, some of these questions... may sound odd."

"Anything you want, Hermione. It's yours."

She took a deep breath. "Which party is responsible for contraceptives?"

"Usually the wizard," he answered promptly. If he had anything to do with it, there would be no potions or enchantments for the two of them. Whatever would be, would just be. Why interfere?

"How long do two people normally see each other before making love?" She looked away from his penetrating eyes, for they seemed to be trying to look into her soul.

"That depends," he said softly. "Relationships differ. Some start off the first night they meet while some start later on."

"Do men like a woman who waits longer? Does that make him respect her more?"

"With most men, no, but I suppose it depends on the man. If I cared for a witch and knew her for a long time, a first date and then a night of passion would not be amiss," he said softly, raising his hand to brush her hair back from her brow. "You can look at me. I won't bite."

"What happens the next morning?" She met his gaze evenly.

This was new to him. What next morning? He was always gone before he'd had to face anyone. Why would he want to? But, yes, he could see her point. How would he like it to be with her? "I would think after the first time, there might be some initial shyness, but more than likely, you would just act as you normally would. Perhaps make love again, this time with the sunlight shining in, touching you on the face and infusing with your hair. I could see every expression on your face and know that I was making you feel pleasure."

She swallowed deeply.

"If you would be with me," he amended realizing what he'd said.

"I've read about... orgasms. How do you know if you've had one?" she asked, turning her eyes away from his.

He pulled her chin back to force her to look into his eyes. "Have you never had one?" he asked softly.

She shook her head.

"Well, I would love nothing more than to show you how one feels. Right here. Right now."

She scooted away.

"Wait, Hermione. There doesn't have to be any penetration."

"I... no, please. I just... my questions," she stammered apprehensively.

"I apologize for being forward." He held her free hand as she read the next question.

"How do you know if a man wants you? Is there some sign that he gives? Do you just feel it?"

"It depends on the man. Some men are hard to read. They are afraid to admit their true feelings in fear of being rejected. If you feel that you might have this type of man, let him know. Touch him." How often had he fantasized about Hermione touching him? Just a light caress on the cheek and a warm smile.

"But what if I am misreading things? Sometimes... sometimes I think he doesn't like me at all, and then other times, it seems as if he is slightly interested. He's never told me," she said carefully. "I would like to hear from his own mouth that he's interested. It would make me feel more secure."

"Do you see each other often? Date? What?" he asked innocently.

"We work together, and well, we've made plans to go on a little trip together."

Severus smirked.

She sighed contentedly. "I think something might happen, but I want to be ready. He's older than I am. I don't know if I will be... enough."

"Hermione, you are more than enough. You are a beautiful, young woman. Never think that you are not good enough or are unwanted."

"I'm afraid to kiss him," she admitted quietly. "It might ruin everything if I do it wrong."

"You can't kiss someone incorrectly," he said in disbelief. This young, vibrant woman worried about such trivial things? At the hint of tears in her eyes, he did the only thing that he could do. He slowly leaned forward and captured her lush lips with his. Severus wanted more. His tongue snaked out to lick her lower lip, and she gasped slightly. When her lips parted, he tasted her mouth for the first time. Sweet. Warm. Wet. His. He stifled a moan as her tongue began mingling with his tentatively. Her hand found his cheek, and she cupped his face softly, fingertips grazing his jaw tenderly.

When he finally pulled back to allow them a breath, he felt lightheaded. If he'd been standing, surely he would have stumbled. "That was amazing," he whispered, leaning forward again.

Breathing heavily, she placed her fingers on his lips. "I... we can't."

He nodded regretfully and waited for her to speak.

"Sev, I really liked that, but I feel as though I should wait for him to experience these things with, if he wants me."

"He would be insane to not want you."

"You don't understand. My friend's brother misunderstood something and thought that I wanted to... have sex with him last summer. He crept into my bed and tried to touch me and kiss me. I just couldn't. I left," she stood up to pace. "I'm prudish."

"How is that prudish?" he asked, masking his anger. He would kill Charlie Weasley the next time he saw him. Weasley's and Potter's words came back to him. "You simply didn't want the man. He tried to take advantage of you."

"Well, it felt wrong to have his hands on me or his lips on mine. I felt like I was being unfaithful somehow... to this guy I'm interested in now. I thought my parents would be disappointed. I wasn't ready. Mostly. I wanted to feel those things, but I couldn't just be spontaneous about it." She sat back down. "What if I freeze up with Sever... with my guy?"

Severus smirked smugly. "If he is anything like me, he'll have you relaxed and ready for anything that he wants to give you." He kissed her hand lightly. "You want him. You are paying me to give you advice for this. You won't be freezing up. You will want his hands upon you." He traced her cheeks with his fingers. "You will want his kisses." He brushed his lips to hers calmly. At her whimper, he pulled her to him to deepen the kiss, allowing one hand to tangle in her mass of hair and the other to cup her cheek. "What do you feel?" he whispered.

"Warm inside. Tingly." She sighed. "Guilty."

He allowed her to move away. His heart overflowed with emotions. She had been longing for him, and he had never known. Last year? All this wasted time had passed. They could have had the entire year together. She was here with 'another man,' but she was far from being unfaithful. She was doing this for him. To better understand him. To please him.

"What do you feel?" she asked softly.

He took her hand and placed it over his erection. When she tried to pull away, he held her hand firmly. "You feel this? This means that I want you. I am feeling many things right now. Desire is one of them." Severus was tempted to throw off his mask, pull her down to the floor, and have his way with her. He knew he couldn't. She would not be able to forgive this. She would think him to be disgusting and feel as if he'd taken advantage of things--just as Charlie Weasley had.

"It's... big," she said, her face shocked.

He smiled proudly. *Well, hell yes, it's big.* "It gets bigger," he whispered confidently.

She almost fell backwards as she backed away in haste.

"What?" Had he said something wrong?

"But... the drawing in my book..." She reached down for her bag, pulling out a rather large, gray book.

He wanted to laugh. A drawing?

"Look, it doesn't seem... wide or like... that!"

Severus scoffed at the picture. Obviously, the picture had been drawn for fact and not admiration. "Hermione, it's just a sketch. I am sure that some wizards may be cursed with such a minute... member, but some of us are blessed with a quite satisfying size. Why should this bother you?"

"How does that fit in here? Look at this picture on the next page!" she said, pointing to her midsection.

Severus stood up and moved behind her. "Relax. I shall explain it to you." He placed his hands on her shoulders and began to firmly massage her. He lowered his face near her ear and softly said, "Close your eyes. Pretend that I am your lover for a moment. There you are." He kissed her cheeks softly. "The first thing I would do is to be sure that you are completely comfortable. Imagine lying on a soft bed, silky sheets sliding along your naked body, and think of me next to you. My hand softly caressing your flesh, making it tingle and burn. Making you want more." At this, Severus glided a hand down her spine. "I would kiss every bit of flesh available to me. My lips and tongue would wreak havoc on your body, making those sensations build. Making you hot and making your desire flow through your veins."

His tongue lazily licked along the nape of her neck, and his lips sucked her skin. He felt her take in a sharp breath and lean back into him. "On the surface, in your bones, and deep within the folds of your essence, you would ache for me."

He brought a hand around to her chest and slowly moved down, allowing his fingertips to linger on one plump breast momentarily before moving across her abdomen, then stomach, and finally reaching her core. He wished her damn clothes and robes would vanish, but it was too soon. She wasn't quite ready for that. As his hand moved to cup her mound, he was surprised at the heat he felt radiating from her.

He smirked proudly before saying, "You would be well lubricated by your body's juices, and your body would open in welcome to accommodate my girth as I inched into you slowly, savoring the feel of your virgin flesh. Possessing you. Making you mine."

"Oh," she gasped.

"You are all woman. I feel your need even now, Hermione. There is passion lingering there, and it is longing to get out. Let me touch you," he whispered.

For a moment she appeared to give in. Her shoulders leaned back, her breathing increased in anticipation, and her legs shifted apart minutely. Then, she pulled away in surprise. "I need to leave."

"But you have more questions," he blurted in panic. *Damn it!* He'd gone too far this time.

"Sev, I just need to clear my head. I almost wanted..." She shook her head sadly. "I nearly betrayed him."

He wanted to say 'to hell with Severus Snape' and point out that he was not her actual lover just yet. Instead, he said softly, "It's not betrayal, Hermione, if there is nothing to betray. You and he aren't lovers yet, correct?"

"I know it sounds odd, but I just want to have him be my first. My first everything. If things don't go past that eventually, so be it. But, it is my desire to lose myself to him. Only him, if anyone." She smiled. "That sounds ridiculous, doesn't it?"

He shook his head. "I'm sure he will appreciate the gift. I won't touch you like that again. Perhaps I did go a tad too far. I apologize."

"Well, it's my fault, really. I'm the one who allowed it," she said softly. "I think it's time for me to go. I need to think, and with my body feeling like this, I won't be able to concentrate."

He nodded sadly. He wasn't ready for this to end. Not yet.

"When is your trip?" he asked quickly.

"Not next weekend but the one after," she said as she placed her parchment and book back into her bag. "Why?"

"Come back to me next Saturday. Same time. Apparate here. We'll start again, and I will keep my hands to myself," he said, hoping she would accept. He could not wait two solid weeks before having her in his arms again. If only he had the courage to approach her as himself. Why couldn't he just do that? He could, but he wouldn't. "We can go over everything that you've not had the chance to ask tonight. I could give you advice on attire, how to touch him, anything." *Just please say you'll come.*

"I'll think about it, and I'll owl you. Is that fair enough?"

He could see that she wanted to come back, but her blasted conscience was trying to dictate her actions.

"Yes. I want to thank you for tonight, Hermione. No woman has ever been as satisfying as your company," he purred. "May I kiss you once more?"

She bit her lip to look away for a moment. "Well, all right. I suppose it will be..."

His lips cut off the flow of words. Severus would be sure to give her something to dream about this night. With one hand on the small of her back and the other tangled in her hair, his mouth expertly molded itself to hers, and his tongue seduced hers in a series of gentle dances. Severus groaned as he felt her press into him. He didn't care if his erection was plowing into her stomach. He just wanted to feel her. His lips left hers to kiss a fiery path along her neck towards her ear. He suckled and licked her lobe before whispering, "You are flawless. Immaculate." He was rewarded by a small moan and tender hands that began caressing his hair and cupping his face.

Before he realized what was happening, she pulled away, and with a CRACK, she was gone. She'd Disapparated away from him, and he felt the loss immediately. If she didn't owl him by Wednesday, he would owl her and ask her to meet him again. He needed to see her. Severus sat down before the fire to contemplate the night's events and to polish off the rest of the wine. "She'll be back," he whispered confidently. He'd see to it.

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**A/N:** I just loved the idea of her showing up to a meeting with a gigolo as if it would be another class. Hahahahaha! Hope you enjoyed this one. Next up...

We'll see how Hermione felt about Mr. Libertine!

## Contemplation

Chapter 7 of 17

We see Hermione's thoughts on what she learned, and Severus has a close call.

**Disclaimer:** All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz (kind of). The other stuff belongs to me!

**As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!**

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A frazzled Hermione sat in the chair before her fire. Libertine had made her feel things she'd never felt! That voice, those lips, those hands! She would never forget the feel of his lips on hers or the way his tongue glided lazily into her mouth, savoring her taste, cherishing her. A conflict welled up within her. She wanted to be with Severus *and* Libertine.

In a fantasy world, she could almost imagine that Libertine really was her Severus. When he'd changed his voice to a deeper one, it took on the sexy quality that had her heart fluttering wildly when talking with Severus. He had told her to close her eyes and to pretend that he was her lover. Good Lord! Pretend, she had. That last kiss, she had pulled his hair free of its binding, and her fingers had twined with his locks. It had been a fantasy come true. She had often dreamt of sliding her fingers through Severus' hair.

Actually, for the evening meal before she'd gone to meet Libertine, he had been so attentive and caring. Offering to help in her research *if he only knew it was about him* wanting to give her a Calming Draught, *if he only knew how much she truly needed it* and that lingering caress. She'd nearly melted. He, apparently, could read her so well that he'd known instinctively that she was 'up' to something. This could only mean that he had taken such an interest in her he'd learnt her moods. This meant that he cared more than he let on.

Confused. This word could definitely describe the way she felt. She'd contacted Libertine to learn how to attract Severus. Severus seemed interested, and they had made plans to go to a conference together. If she hadn't been misreading things, something would likely happen between them. Meeting with Libertine had left her feeling alive and confident. He had reached inside her body and pulled out her worst fears, making them disappear. Was he just saying those things because he was trying to get into her knickers? Was he just saying those things because she was paying him? Couldn't be! He knew her knickers wouldn't be coming off, and she was paying for honest answers. It almost seemed as if... as if he truly wanted her. But how could that be? He didn't actually know her. Hermione wasn't one who believed in love at first sight either. What was it about Libertine that had her feeling this way?

Morals or not, if she hadn't been interested in Severus when she met Libertine, she would have allowed him to touch her in every way that he wanted to. His hands and mouth and words were just too great and had a way of seeping into her subconscious. He was very good at what he did. Hermione frowned. He probably told his other five hundred clients the same things. She sighed. Not sleeping with him had been the right choice. She needed to save herself for Severus. "Damn!" she screeched suddenly. "I didn't pay him! We didn't even talk about money. I just Disapparated!" Bloody hell! What if he showed up at the school demanding his money? Severus, Harry, and Ron would have individual fits. Not to mention, Minerva and Albus might want to sack her for lewd conduct.

Hermione quickly scribbled a note to the gigolo.

*Sev Libertine,*

*Lord, but I am so sorry! I didn't mean to leave so abruptly without paying you. Please, let me know what I owe you for our meeting, and I promise to send the money straightaway. I feel horrible about it.*

*Hermione Granger*

She sealed the parchment, scribbled Sev on the outside, and ran for the owlery. With any luck, he would get it this night, and there would be no visits or Howlers from him the next day. "Hedwig! Pig!" Hermione squinted in the darkness, trying to see the two owls that normally handled her mail. They must be out hunting. "I need an owl to deliver something," she said. A large tan owl swooped down to her arm. "Hello, friend. I need this to be delivered to Sev. It's important that he gets this right away." The owl hooted and flew off into the night.

Feeling pretty dumb, she made her way back towards her chambers. What had she been thinking to leave a loose end like that? That would give him a reason to confront her. However, he seemed to worry about hiding his identity, so she honestly doubted that he would embarrass her publicly. Just in case, though, she felt better about thinking quickly and sending the owl.

A hand reached out and pulled her against the wall. "Ahhh!" she screamed before a hand closed over her mouth.

"Shhh, it's Severus, Hermione. Calm down," he said silkily. He removed his hand from her mouth but kept her pinned against the wall with his other hand and his body. "What are you doing out this late? Are you not feeling better? I thought you had plans?"

"I just came back and remembered that I needed to owl something to someone. I feel much better, and what are you doing out so late, Severus?" she asked, looking around to see if anyone was about. The corridors were dark and only a bleak candle was lit every so often to give light.

"I decided to make my rounds, and I saw someone walking from the owlery. I thought you to be a student. I was trying to scare you a bit when I realized that it was you, not a child," he said, trying to look into her eyes. He'd just come back on the grounds after spending time contemplating their meeting. He wanted to kiss her again, but he feared that she would realize his kiss was the same as the ones she had experienced just before. He released her abruptly and moved away. He still reeked of Libertine's oils. He didn't want her to place his scent. "I bid you a good night, Hermione."

Suddenly an owl came out of the darkness and swooped down on him. "What the hell? Who would send an owl to me in the middle of the night?" he asked in an annoyed voice before freezing. She would. But it would be addressed to Libertine! Damn! She would know the truth. He took the parchment and turned to face her. He was nearly knocked to the ground as she pulled the letter out of his hands.

"Er... it's me," she said nervously, stuffing the parchment into her robes. "I wanted to tell you something, but I have just realized that I need to add a little something. I'll just slip it to you at breakfast tomorrow. It concerns the... er... research that I am doing."

He narrowed his eyes. Did she know? Why was she looking guilty? He was the one who had just been busted. Hadn't he?

"I saw the name Sev on there. Why would you call me that?" he asked, feigning puzzlement.

"I thought it would be funny," she said with a nervous giggle. "I'll see you." Hermione bolted away, leaving a stunned Potions master in her wake. *Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God!* She slammed into her chambers and ran to her bed, plopping down shakily. Then, realizing she still had her clothes on, she jumped up and pulled off everything except her underclothes. She pulled out the parchment.

What an idiotic owl! She should have waited for Hedwig! The stupid, school owl that she'd used had tried to deliver her letter to the wrong man! What if she hadn't been there to intercept the letter? He would have known that she owed a man money for his services. A man named Sev Libertine, according to her parchment. If he would have mullered over the name, surely he would have come to the conclusion that it was the same Libertine who was a man for hire as seen in the *Evening Prophets* ads section.

Their weekend would have been ruined! He would never see her as a respectable woman if she paid men to bed her, which she hadn't, but he would have assumed she had. The letter would have been condemning. As he'd held her against the wall, she'd nearly leaned in for a kiss. What was wrong with her? She couldn't be forward like this with Severus. Not yet. She had realized that the smell of Libertine was in the air. The man's scent had been on her clothing still. What if Severus had noted another man's scent about her person? Surely, he would be disgusted or believe her to be a right little harlot!

She went to sit at her desk to fix the parchment. On top of Sev, she scribbled the name Romeo Libertine. She supposed she shouldn't have told the owl to bring the note to Sev. The poor creature had probably delivered letters for Severus already and simply assumed that was whom she had meant! It had been a close one. Hermione pulled on a fresh set of clothes and crept back to the owlery. This time, she instructed the owl to send the letter to Romeo Libertine.

A tired Hermione sat down at her desk to pull out the notes from her bag. She needed to go over everything that Libertine had told her. He had said that some men were afraid of rejection and would never openly admit to having feelings about someone, fearing the person would ridicule him or turn him down. That could possibly be the case with Severus. It was apparent that Libertine felt that way. Instead of making a move, the man hid behind a mask to feel confident. If he were wounded by words, the person doing the wounding would never know, thanks to his disguise. Severus masked his feelings as well.

Libertine had said she needed to tell him. She had done that. Mostly. She had hinted at wanting a kinship of sorts with him. Surely, he'd caught on to what she'd meant. Also, it wasn't exactly a conference anymore. It was a real trip. They were staying an extra night to see the sights while waiting for some ingredients to be gathered. He did want to spend time with her. He hadn't said as much, but she could tell. Tomorrow when she gave Severus a fake parchment, she would be sure to let her fingers linger upon his. She would also compliment him. Maybe that would lead to a bit of conversation... or something else.

Contraceptives. It didn't seem right for the wizard to have sole responsibility for this. What if things progressed quickly? It seemed like something easily forgotten. In fact, after Libertine had begun to kiss her earlier, she'd not thought a thing about contraceptives or, honestly, anything but the kiss. She would see Madam Pomfrey for a potion in the morning. There had to be different types. Some that lasted more than a few weeks. Hermione smirked. Severus would never forget a contraceptive potion! He didn't seem to like children very much as it was, so she knew that would be a top priority on his list.

How did she feel about that? She'd always dreamt of having at least two children. She had been an only child, and she'd always longed for a sibling. She'd vowed that she would one day be a mother of two. If things worked out with Severus, could she deal with never being a mum? That would be some soul searching she would have to do when the time came.

Libertine had made great sense when he'd told her about sex and relationships. The man said that if he cared for a woman and had known her for a long time, sex on the first date wouldn't be amiss. She and Severus had actually known each other for over nine years now. She was his former student, fellow Order member, and a colleague. Those were grounds for sexual relations if anything. In her seventh year, she'd shamelessly had a crush on him, but she'd never thought it would amount to anything.

When she'd accepted the position at Hogwarts, she had pushed aside any feelings, wanting to make a fresh start and devote herself to her work, but eventually, the feelings had come back. The little debates they'd had during meetings had sparked the interest again. She really thought about him after he'd begun to snub her when the others had come back to work at the school. He'd explained why, and she understood. He didn't like Harry or Ron. They were a bit overzealous at times, so she couldn't fault him for choosing to not stick around after the meetings were finished.

Back to subject, if she and Severus made love when they took their trip, it would not be immoral or disgusting. They would be two adults engaging in pleasurable activities by choice. Lavender was right. Ron was right. Why wait for marriage? If a person cared for someone enough to have sex with him, she should do it. It wasn't like she would

owl her mum and dad with details. They'd never know about it. She had feelings for Severus, and she could think of no better way to show him than to give her body and heart to him. She hoped that he would readily accept her heart along with her body. It was a package deal after all.

What had he said about there not needing to be any penetration for an orgasm? How the hell was that possible? Perhaps she should go to the library. There were bound to be books about orgasms and how to self-inflict one. Would Severus be as good as this Libertine? Something in her gut told her yes...he was every bit as good. Severus exuded sexuality. His voice, his hands, his arrogant confidence in himself, his movements. She would find pleasure with him, and if she didn't, she really didn't care. This wasn't really about having an orgasm. This was about being with the man she loved. Loved? Well, maybe. She certainly felt strongly about him. She could love him. She could envision a future with him, complete with the two kids she'd always wanted. She cared enough to give herself to him, so, yes, love it was then.

The most worrisome thing had been to kiss him. She had been afraid that she would do something appalling, like slobber on him or bite him. Libertine had given her an excellent bit of practice. From the way he'd moaned, the gruffness in his voice, and the hardness of his penis, she knew she had done something right. She only prayed she would have the same effect on Severus. Perhaps she should meet with Libertine once more. She would make sure that he would keep his hands and those lovely kisses to himself, but she would listen to his stories of the perfect seduction. It would be intriguing, and it would give her an idea on how to go about seducing Severus if he wouldn't make the first move on their trip. She would see from his reply if he was still interested in meeting with her as he'd requested, *pleaded*.

She grinned, remembering her hand pressing over his penis. He had been hard, and the impressive mass seemed to overflow under her hand. She had seen the pride shimmering in his dark blue eyes when she'd commented on it. He'd even had the arrogance to say that it could get bigger. Part of her hoped that Severus wouldn't be so large. No matter what he said, it seemed unlikely that something such as the size of that would fit inside of her without tearing her apart. However, his words and actions had her resolve weakening and thinking about trying it.

"Damn it, Hermione! Get some sleep!" she chided herself, throwing the parchment down. She would get up in the morning to go for a run. That would help to put things in perspective.

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"I need a drink," Severus said, hoping to calm his nerves. Apparently, she hadn't figured out that he was actually Libertine. But how could she not have? The owl was addressed to the man she thought to be Libertine. The owl had done its job and found him straightaway. Unless... perhaps she'd thought that the owl had misunderstood her and brought the parchment to the wrong 'Sev'? That had to be it, and if so, he thanked any gods listening for allowing her to remain so naïve. It wasn't long before he heard a screeching coming from his classroom. He checked and found another owl waiting for him.

It was the same parchment. He could see where she had written his full name on top of the Sev name. So, it was true. She didn't realize that he was the man she sought. He replied immediately, but only after sending the pesky bird away. There would be no more mistakes or mishaps when corresponding with her.

Hermione,

I admit that payment slipped my mind as well. I was fascinated with you and your beauty. I never even thought about the Galleons owed for my time. We can discuss payment arrangements when you come to see me this Saturday night. Don't forget. Same time. Same room. I shall be waiting for you.

Feel free to bring your parchment and book again, if you'd like. I didn't mind the questioning, and I will answer any questions you have. As with tonight, it's all about you. I do apologize if I overstepped my bounds, causing you to leave so abruptly. You just intoxicated me to no end.

Your beau is a very lucky man, and I believe that he will be deeply honored to learn that you care so much for him that you have saved your feelings and body for his touch only. I respect that. No return owl is necessary. If I hear nothing, I expect to see you this weekend.

Cheers,

Romeo "Sev" Libertine

Severus smirked. "I can be such a gentleman when I choose to be, can't I?" Little Hermione wouldn't know what hit her if chose to seduce her this coming weekend. But could he? He now knew he had a chance to be with her as himself. She wanted him. Had wanted him, and only him, for at least the past year.

Guilt wrenched his soul. It wouldn't be right to take advantage of his beloved that way. If she would ever find out about his true identity, he would lose her forever, especially if he'd taken advantage of things. He'd just have to be sure that she never learned of his secret identity. Severus decided to owl his parchment before dawn. A few hours of sleep would clear his mind and lighten his heavy heart... hopefully.

The next morning brought a heavy fog upon the grounds, but Severus didn't mind. It was easier to leave the castle undetected by the watchful eyes of students. He had to make his way into Hogsmeade to pay one of the owls there to deliver his letters. It wouldn't do for a gigolo to send out a letter with a Hogwarts owl. As he made his way out of the owlery, something shocking caught his eye. Potter and Weasley... Ginevra Weasley, sneaking out of an alleyway. That was Draco's woman! What the bloody hell was Potter playing at? They each went separate ways without so much as bidding each other farewell.

Weasley walked down towards the shops while Potter made his way towards the castle. No wonder Potter had known the truth about Hermione not meeting her friend. Outraged on Draco's behalf, Severus stalked after the prat who lived. "Potter, odd meeting you here at a time such as this," he hissed as soon as the boy was within range.

He smirked as the boy jumped. "Sir, Professor Snape! I was just in town... er... shopping," Harry stammered.

"Is that so? Does Miss Weasley always accompany you on your overnight shopping flings? I'm sure that Draco wouldn't mind if she did," Severus said, glaring at the adversary before him. "I shall take great pleasure in asking him."

"Wait," Harry said quickly. "You don't understand, and if you do that, you'll just start trouble for no reason. It's not what you think."

"Not what I think? Really? I saw you two together. Seemed pretty suspicious if you ask me. I'm sure Draco will know exactly what you've been up to," Severus prodded and began walking towards the castle.

"Stop, Snape," Harry spat hatefully. "You're going to keep your mouth shut! It's not your business. When things aren't your business, then you just don't say anything."

"Why would I worry about keeping my mouth shut?" Severus said, narrowing his eyes, crossing his hands in front of him. "I think that you feel like you can just go about having your way with any woman you choose, even those belonging to someone you supposedly call friend, all because you are Harry Bloody Potter!"

"It's not sexual! She just needed me to do something that Draco couldn't, all right? If you say something, it will mess everything up. Just shut up!" Harry exploded. "You know, I never told anyone about your dirty little secret. Maybe I should, eh?"

"What? I have no secrets!" Severus' voice was barely a whisper. What did Potter know? Had he figured out his other job after all? *Damn it!* Hermione's angry and disappointed face passed through his mind. Potter would not mess things up for him.

"Oh, no? Don't you though?" Harry taunted. "I ought to go Floo Hermione right now to let her know all about it. Keep your mouth shut, and I'll do the same."

"What exactly would you be telling Miss Granger, Potter?" Severus stepped forward and caught himself reaching for his wand. He couldn't hex a fellow colleague without just cause. Albus would never understand.

"That you saw her undressed! I saw you watching her. About two months back," Harry said angrily. "Dirty, perverted spectator! Liked seeing her body without clothes, did you?"

"How dare you, Potter?" Severus drew his wand and leveled it at the boy's throat. "I happened upon her by accident! What did you want me to do? Make myself known and make her feel worse?"

"Well... I don't know," Potter admitted, not seemingly fazed that a wand was pointed at his throat. "But you still are no better than me. I may have been with Ginny this past night, but at least I didn't see her naked!"

Severus lowered his wand. "Then what happened?"

Harry looked around uneasily. "She's pregnant, all right? Draco doesn't know. When they split up a couple of months ago for that week, well, we... you know." Harry made a suggestive expression with his eyes and hands. "We went to another country last night to have a test done to be sure the child isn't mine before she tells Draco the truth."

Severus was shocked. "Another country? Pregnant?"

"Yes, where people wouldn't talk about the famous Harry Potter and put it in the papers. That was the last thing I needed," Harry admitted. "It would have destroyed Ginny and Draco, not to mention my friendship with him."

"Well, some friend," Severus bit out. "Couldn't wait for them to split so you could creep into her bed, eh, Potter?"

"Shut the fuck up, you arse! Why do I even bother?" Harry stalked away angrily.

"Hang on, Potter! If you saw me watching your young friend, then that means that you too were watching her. What exactly were *you* doing out for a walk?" Severus sneered at the insolent brat.

The boy's cheeks reddened. "I was in my Invisibility Cloak. Ginny and I had spent some time out near the Western cliff. I happened to see her, and I tried to avoid the entire thing. Then, I saw you squatting in the bushes to my far left. I couldn't move or you would have known I was there." Harry sighed. "I guess I didn't want my presence known either, to save further embarrassment."

Severus could have breathed a sigh of relief. Potter only thought it a chance happening, and he apparently hadn't seen Severus in a state of undress, if he had been on that particular morning. He nodded. "I can understand that as well." The two men stood there eyeing each other.

Harry finally spoke. "I know you like her, you know. I see you looking at her. You should just talk to her," Harry said.

"What? I am a grown man, Potter. I don't go about fancying several girls, as you apparently do. Watch your back where Draco is concerned. I'm sure he would hate to learn of your near miss with his intended," Severus said with a nasty smirk. He Apparated to the castle gates before Potter could respond. Was he so transparent that even Potter knew of his interest in Hermione? No, he guarded his secrets well. Potter was just perceptive... and nosy where his friend was concerned. Severus nodded. Right, then. Nobody else knew.

He made his way to the Great Hall for breakfast. *Last night had been so beautiful, but after...* Nearly being caught by Hermione with that ruddy owl and then having Potter point out the things he felt had Severus slightly annoyed. As he scooped some eggs onto his plate, Hermione sat next to him. Being very early on a Sunday, hardly any students or any staff were present yet.

She leaned over to whisper, "Good morning, Severus. Sorry about the mishap with the owl last night. I hope you didn't dwell on it for too long."

Severus replied, "Not at all. I had a nice sleep after I returned to my chambers. I even woke for a trek into town this morning."

"Here," she said, holding out a parchment. "Please read it later."

Severus reached for the parchment. As his fingers enclosed around it, her other hand came up to caress them briefly.

"Have a nice day."

Not knowing what to say, Severus blurted, "Aren't you eating any breakfast?"

"I have the need for a run this morning. There are some things that I need to think about. I'll nick something later from the kitchens if I can't wait until lunch." She smiled softly and quickly exited through the side entrance.

With nobody in the vicinity to spy on his note, he broke the seal upon the parchment. Severus smiled more brightly than he'd known possible.

Severus,

I am sorry about last night, but I felt the need to revise my letter. I lied to you. It wasn't about my research. Not exactly. I just wanted to let you know that I am looking forward to our trip down to Cardiff.

The time that we aren't spending at the conference or arranging to gather your ingredients, I wonder if you'd mind escorting me through the town and take a walk with me along the beach.

I want to spend time with you, Severus. Time alone. I can only hope that you feel the same way. You don't have to reply to this if you don't want to. I just thought maybe I should be honest about my ulterior motives.

Hermione

Proof in hand that she wanted him. *Him*. Libertine's talk had done some good. She'd followed the advice about touching him and talking to him to express her feelings. Though she hadn't said it aloud, the declaration in her own handwriting was suitable. He would always treasure the letter.

A/N: Up next, Hermione talks to Ginny about things, Sev flirts, and the boys talk. Libertine has a little ex-client trouble.

If anyone uses Live Journal, feel free to add me if you'd like. I've mostly just been rambling on, but I enjoy chats!

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/southernwitch69/>

Decisions

Chapter 8 of 17

And now we see a scuffle, a date, a threat, and more.

Disclaimer: All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!

Severus frowned at the parchment in front of him. It was Lonnie. She was angry that he had called off all future meetings. Apparently, she and her husband had decided to go their separate ways for a couple of months to see if they could be happier. She had hopes of seeing more of Libertine. Lonnie seemed to not care that he'd found someone else. She thought that continuing their affair was appropriate. He crumpled the letter and threw it to his fireplace. He never noticed that it didn't go into the fire. Instead, it had hit the stone and rolled under a chair.

He was too occupied with his other parchment. It was from client number one. The one who had reminded him of Hermione until she opened her mouth. Severus decided to try a different tactic with this one. He'd been blunt with Lonnie and said that he'd found a permanent lover. This one though... she deserved a bit more than that. He scribbled a short, meaningful letter quickly. It was Wednesday night, and he'd heard that Potter and friends were heading into town for a drink to celebrate one of the Weasley brothers' impending fatherhood. Severus smirked. He'd love to accidentally spill the news that their only sister was pregnant and unsure who'd sired her unborn child...just for spite. Well, no, he wouldn't. That would just be more trouble for Draco and the girl. She had always been nice to him. There was no reason to ruin her just to spite Potter.

Hoping to catch a glimpse of Hermione wandering about Hogsmeade, he quickly made his way to the front gates to prepare to Apparate. "Good evening, Severus," Hermione said jovially. "I'm just off to Hogsmeade. Where are you off to?"

"The same," he answered. They'd not had a chance to talk alone since she'd given him the little note on Sunday morning. He'd not replied to her, but he knew he should have. He decided to make a bold move. "Would you like to just walk down with me? It's a nice night."

Hermione was taken aback. She'd poured a piece of her soul onto a parchment Sunday morning, and she'd not heard from him. Of course, there had always been someone about when they'd met up, but maybe this walk would enable them to clear the air. "I would love to walk in with you." She snaked her arm under his.

He hadn't been expecting that, but he loosened up, allowing her to keep her hand upon him.

"What is bringing you into town?"

"I have the need to visit the Apothecary," he lied quickly. "You look... nice. What brings you to Hogsmeade?"

"Percy and Penelope have finally found out that she is with child! They've been trying for a long time. Just a couple of rounds for Percy, and then we'll come back to the castle." She smiled and stopped. "Severus, would you... like to come? With me?"

His first impulse had been to decline flatly, but the hopeful look in her eyes changed his mind. "Maybe after I am finished attending to my errands, I could meet you."

"I could just come with you," she offered. "I'm already late anyway. A little longer won't matter to me, and at least I'll have someone to walk in with."

Severus needed to mail his letter, but this was more important. He would just double back later or wait until the morning to mail the letter. "It won't take long."

Hermione beamed for the entire walk to Hogsmeade. Severus kept her arm in his and guided her proudly through the streets. He met the gazes of some witches and wizards that he knew straight on, daring them to comment or act rudely to the beauty at his side. His beauty. He had only hoped to catch a glimpse of her this evening, and now he was escorting her to a pub. Was this a date? He was unsure.

"I'll just wait out here, Severus. You can order your things in peace."

"Very well. I shall return shortly," he said, moving to the entrance of the Apothecary. Hermione sat on a bench to wait for him. Was this a date? She smiled broadly. How had she mustered up the courage to ask him to accompany her? She'd seen the look of refusal in his eyes before he'd surprised her by accepting her offer.

"Hello, Hermione," a male voice said. She looked up into the eyes of Charlie Weasley. He was stockier than ever, and his hair was neatly cropped. "I wanted to talk to you about your owl."

"I wasn't aware that you would be here this night," Hermione said uneasily.

"Well, Bill told me about it. I was quite shocked that I hadn't been invited. I would have thought that Ron or Harry would have wanted me to come." Charlie sat next to her. "What happened between us was a misunderstanding, you know. I never meant to hurt you. Mum was right. I shouldn't have gossiped about what happened, and I shouldn't have called you those names. I guess it just bruised my ego a little."

Hermione nodded. "Apology accepted, Charlie. It took a lot of courage for you to talk to me about this. I'm sure you must understand that I was shocked to learn what you were calling me."

Charlie snorted. "Well, you did freeze up suddenly, but you're right. That was our business. I shouldn't have told them about it."

"Freeze up?" she asked incredulously. "No one asked you to sneak into my bed in the first place!"

"Hang on," he said with a laugh. "I told you I wanted to take you to bed, and you nodded your agreement. Once things heated up, you froze up. It's all right. I should have taken a little more time with you."

"You're disgusting. I told you I thought you had a bed for me to use, not share. I would suggest that you be sure that your attention is wanted next time," she said haughtily.

"Next time I'll be sure not to ask a frigid, little girl to my bed. One that won't back out when I'm an inch from delving into her knickers. One that won't freeze up, and then try to run... oof!"

Out of nowhere, Severus had come before them and his fist landed on Charlie's face, knocking him back off the bench. Hermione jumped up to hold Severus back while a stunned Charlie collected himself.

"What the...?"

"Never speak to a lady that way, boy," Severus growled. "You owe Miss Granger an apology. Now."

"Professor Snape! I didn't know you participated in Muggle dueling! As far as Hermione and I, well, we were just discussing..." Charlie gulped as Severus took a step forward. He looked hastily to Hermione. "I apologize for being rude, Hermione. My blunt tongue runs away from me at times." They stood in silence as Charlie brushed off his robes and wiped his bleeding nose. He walked away quickly.

"Severus, I'm sorry," Hermione said.

Feeling like a jealous fool, Severus nodded briskly. "I think I would rather return to the castle. I shall escort you to the pub before I go."

Fighting back tears, Hermione said, "I think I've changed my mind as well. Bill invited him. I would never have agreed to go if I'd known he was going to be there."

Severus smirked and extended his arm to her once again. He glared at the few people who had gathered around to see if anything else would happen. The trek back to the castle was a quiet one.

Finally, Hermione mustered the courage to speak. "Did you... hear what we were saying, Charlie and I?"

"Mostly," he said, not looking at her.

"It's true. I hadn't known he wanted... anything. I thought he offered me a place to sleep without having to wake my friends. I didn't know..." She grimaced. She must sound ridiculous to a man such as Severus.

"Hermione, you have nothing to explain to me. I fear I should not have struck him, but he was practically begging for it. There was no reason to say all of those things. Not to a woman," Severus said. His hand ached, but he didn't want her to know. He would slip off to see Madam Pomfrey when they returned to the castle.

"All the same, thanks. I really appreciated you taking up for me," she said as they entered the grounds. "I think I'll be off for a walk." She reached up and placed a kiss on his cheek. She turned to walk away when he pulled her back.

"Hermione, I'm not used to... *this*. It will just take a little time, but I've read over your letter numerous times. I liked what you had to say," he admitted softly. He wanted nothing more than to kiss her, but he feared suddenly that she would realize he was Libertine. Severus needed to put some time between the scorching kisses they'd shared already and the ones they would be sharing on their trip. This weekend would be hard for him, being with her but not touching her.

He pulled her hand to his lips, kissing each fingertip softly, allowing his tongue to briefly glide out on each. "There is nothing more that I would like than to spend time alone with you." He smirked when she shivered. Yes, he did have that effect on women, didn't he?

Speaking of women, he had to owl that letter. As soon as she went off to the lake, he would double back to take care of that. It wouldn't do to not give the witch some closure. She might never stop owling him if that would be the case. Caressing her face gently with the backside of his free hand, he said, "Have a good evening, Hermione."

She nodded and scurried off towards the lake. Once she sat at her favorite spot, she brought the fingers he'd kissed to her mouth. His tongue had been there! His lips! He'd read her note over and again and had liked it. Anticipation for their trip collided with anxiety. Charlie's words had bothered her more than she let on. *Next time I'll be sure not to ask a frigid, little girl to my bed*, he had said.

But Severus didn't seem to mind, and he had heard what Charlie had said. He must realize that she'd never made love to anyone. The memory of his mouth expertly kissing her fingers came back to her, and her insides tingled again. Libertine. She had to talk to him. Saturday couldn't come fast enough.

Where Hermione couldn't see Libertine until the weekend, she could talk to Ginny. She hurried to her quarters, and Flooed her friend. "Can you come through?" she asked hopefully.

"Sure, just let me see Draco out," Ginny said softly, disappearing from the grate. Moments later, Ginny stepped into her room. "What's wrong? You seem upset."

Hermione quickly told her about Charlie and then Severus. Ginny plunked down into a chair. "I cannot believe that idiot had the audacity to say those things to you. I am so sorry, Hermione, but at least Professor Snape was there to defend you. It sounds as if he is really taken with you."

"I think he might be, Ginny. That is what has me worried. What if we are together and it happens? What if I mess things up somehow?" Hermione bit her lip while thinking. "I mean, I really don't want to give him a bad first impression."

"Hermione, he is an experienced man. I am sure he'll have you excited and ready to go. You'll not think of leaving. You want him in a way that you never wanted Charlie. It will be different. You'll see," Ginny said wisely. "Think about it. He heard what Charlie said and still snogged your fingers."

The two laughed for a while before Hermione spoke. "I'm going to see Libertine again this weekend."

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "Really? Didn't you learn enough last Saturday night?" The redhead howled with laughter for a few moments while Hermione smirked. "I mean you gave the man a test after all. What is left?"

"I've come to a decision," Hermione said quietly, as if fearing someone would overhear. "I am going to ask him to let me touch him. I want to make sure that I will be able to please Severus. By doing this, I'll know."

"I see," said Ginny. "Hermione, cancel your visit, and just go ask the professor for a night out. You said that he accepted your invitation tonight. Get a little tipsy, then snog him senseless!"

Hermione giggled. "He said it would take a little time, and I won't push it. I think he is waiting for our weekend to truly kiss me because we will be away from here. No prying eyes. Just us. And Libertine is going to help me to be ready."

"Did you get a contraceptive potion like you said?" Ginny asked.

"I've not had the nerve to approach Poppy for one," Hermione admitted. "Libertine did say that the wizard worried about it. Perhaps Severus will whisper some little enchantment."

Ginny's face had taken on a serious look. "It only takes one time, Hermione. Sometimes neither of you think about it. If you decide on a recurring potion, just remember to take your doses on time."

"I will. Ginny? What's wrong?" Hermione hurried over to her friend and hugged her tightly. It had been a while since she had seen the always happy, always strong Ginny, reduced to tears. "Talk to me, love."

"Please, please don't tell anyone," Ginny said, sniffing loudly. "I'm pregnant."

Hermione smiled warmly. "Oh, Ginny, congratulations. I'm sure that you and Draco will make great parents. What has you so upset? Aren't you ready?"

"I don't mind having a baby. I love Draco with all of my heart. This just rushes us a bit, and then, there's Harry..." Her friend hastily wiped her eyes and looked away.

"Harry?" They had been broken up for a long time. Ginny had been with Draco since.

"Remember about two months ago? Draco and I had an argument? We split for about a week. Well, during that week, to spite me, he had a date and kissed another girl. I did one better. I seduced Harry."

Hermione stepped back quickly and tripped. "Harry?"

Ginny giggled at Hermione. "You look funny all sprawled out like that on the floor. Get up." She held out a hand to help her friend up. "Yes. I came to see Harry, needing some advice, and I decided I needed him. I've told you before, Harry is such a tender and concerned lover. It happened to be what I needed at that time. We both knew it was for only that night though. So, when Draco and I worked through things, we decided to act as if it never happened."

"I can understand that then. I'm just surprised. I had no idea at all, and you never told me that Draco had a date with another witch. Who was it?"

"Daphne Greengrass. His old girlfriend." Ginny smirked. "It was that date and kiss that had him crawling back. He said that another woman would never touch him as I had. I told him that I had to think about it. That's when I came here for Harry."

"Ginny? The baby?"

"I'm keeping it. Harry and I spent last Saturday night in Egypt at a private hospital. They did a blood and magical test on the fetus. Harry and I are going to sneak off tomorrow evening again for the results." Ginny smiled softly. "I hope it's for Draco. I love him, Hermione. I do. Sleeping with Harry was a mistake."

Hermione hugged her friend. She knew that Harry likely needed a hug as well. This had to be eating away at him. She would seek him out the next day before he snuck off with Ginny to get the results. "For all of your sakes, I hope it's for Draco as well." Whether she would be embarrassed or not, she'd have to see Poppy for a vial of potion. It would be horrible to become pregnant the first time that she made love to Severus. He'd likely never speak to her again.

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"Potter! What are you doing down in the kitchens at this time of night?" Severus asked, surprised to see his nemesis sitting at the table with his head in his hands.

"Thought some food and tea would make me feel better," the boy replied without looking up. "Join me. I'm sure they will make enough for more than just me. They always do."

"What are you having?" Severus had come down for a snack as well.

"Rice pudding," Harry said, finally looking up. Severus raised an eyebrow. The boy's eyes were bloodshot, either from crying or drinking.

"I suppose it would not be amiss to share a portion," Severus said, taking a seat. "How did your little get together go tonight?"

"Fine until Charlie showed up. I might say," Harry said with a smirk, "you put a number on his nose. He was angry about it for a little while."

"Only a little while? Damn," Severus said sarcastically. "I hoped the tosser would have gone on to have a bad night. He was quite rude to Herm... Miss Granger."

"You can say Hermione in front of me, you old prude," Harry said, accepting a large bowl from Dobby. "Thanks, Dobby. I think it was good what you did to him. I only wish that you could have been there after Ron was finished with him."

Severus began serving himself. "Oh? What happened?" He couldn't keep the curiosity out of his voice.

"Ron said that you hitting Charlie was probably the best thing you'd ever done. Then, he hit him. Charlie's nose will never be the same again," Harry said with a laugh. "Next thing you know, they were all fighting with each other. All the Weasley brothers. I finally had to use the Immobulus on them."

Severus chuckled, imagining the fray. "I guess it's a good thing that Hermione and I decided to not go then." Realizing his slip, he looked to Potter. To his credit, the boy said nothing about it.

"Ginny and I... we find out tomorrow evening," he said softly. "I appreciate you not telling Draco about it. I think that is her place to tell him, if ever."

Severus nodded and remained silent as he polished off his pudding. He hoped that the child would be for Draco. The boy would be devastated to find out otherwise. It seemed as though Potter didn't mind that he had an interest in his friend. Severus wondered what the other member of the Dream Team would have to say about it. He stood up to leave and noticed the boy had his head in his hands again. "Potter, I have some potions that might rid you of any impending headaches or calm you if need be."

The boy stood. "I would really appreciate that. I didn't want to go bother Poppy at this time. I think it might be more nerves than anything, but I am sure the Firewhisky might have had a hand in it."

Later, a blasted owl assaulted him just as he began to ward his door after Potter left. It was a quick reply from Lonnie. He opened it with some trepidation. Severus would not put it past the woman to lace the parchment with Bubotuber pus if she were still irate.

"*Incendio*," he whispered after he read the parchment. She'd vowed to reveal his identity to the world if she ever found out who he was. She'd called him an interesting amount of names and hoped his genitals rotted away. Severus subconsciously adjusted his crotch as he walked back to his chambers from his office.

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**A/N:** Next up... the next meeting with Libertine.

## Another Meeting

*Chapter 9 of 17*

Hermione has another meeting with Libertine.

**Disclaimer:** All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

**As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!**

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"Harry, would you mind coming to have a talk with me in my office?" Hermione asked softly. She could see that he was puzzled. "It'll only take a few moments. I promise."

"Sure," he said, putting down his bag on her desk in the classroom. "What's wrong?"

She hugged him tightly. "Harry, I am always here for you if you need me. I wish that you would have come to me."

Harry raised an eyebrow, but allowed his friend to hug him. It did feel comforting to have Hermione's arms around him. She'd been one of his closest friends since his first year at Hogwarts. They'd endured everything together. That said, he had no idea what she was on about. "Er... right then. What is it I should have come to you about? If this is about the fight last night, I had things under control. Honestly."

"Fight?" Hermione asked, confusion etched on her face. "Did Charlie tell you what Severus did to him? And why?"

"Yeah, he came in all peeved about Snape having a go at him for apparently no reason." Harry chuckled. "The others were angry, but then Charlie said that he'd been having a private word with you. That was all it took to set Ron off. He laid into him as well. Bill and Percy tried to pull them apart, but they ended up at it as well. The twins just sort of shrugged and joined in. Charlie's nose was a bit on the large side, I'd say."

"Good grief! I had no idea. No wonder Ron looked so tired this morning. He must have covered his bruises then," Hermione said with a laugh. "Harry, I was talking about Ginny." She saw his expression darken immediately.

"Told you, did she?"

Hermione nodded. "She just needed someone to talk to about it. I've not told anyone, and I won't. I just wish that you had been able to talk to me about it. This must have been a large burden on your shoulders. You needn't have carried that around alone."

Harry smiled. "Well, I kind of did have someone to talk to about it. I had to tell him at wandpoint, but he at least listened to me."

"Ron knows?" Hermione exclaimed.

Why hadn't they had it out? It seemed unlikely that Ron would not have mentioned something about it. He was never one for subtlety.

"Of course Ron doesn't know. Snape. He's the one." Harry ran his fingers through his hair. "He saw us together and threatened to tell Draco if I didn't explain. I felt I had no choice. Turns out that he... kept quiet."

"Sever... Professor Snape? Well, I must admit that this is a surprise," Hermione said softly. "No matter. I still wish that you would have come to me."

"Well, you know, I'm not the only one who talks to Ginny. You should have come to me as well, Hermione," Harry admonished. "This works both ways, doesn't it? You had your secret, and I had mine."

"S-secret? What are you playing at, Harry?" she asked nervously. She would kill Ginny if she told Harry about Libertine. She had trusted her.

"Well, I've been watching the way he looks at you. I mentioned it to Ginny, and she tells me that you just might fancy our Potions master!" Harry nodded as if to drive in his point. "That's right. Talked to him about it, and I had to hear it from him that you two were going to go to the pub together. What say you on that?"

"Er... I was going to mention it to you, but I didn't know how you'd feel," she said. "I do care about him, you know. I want to get to know him better."

Harry gave her a lopsided grin. "Well, I want you to be happy. If he is what you want, go for it. It might not be so bad, Snape and you. As for me, I'm hoping that Ginny is carrying Draco's child. It's only right."

"Are you sure, Harry? You used to love her so much, and I know that you want a family. Will you be all right if the baby isn't for you?" Hermione asked, tightening her hold on him. She could feel him tensing up.

"I might be a little disappointed, but trust me, Hermione, my joy will overshadow any disappointment that I have. My time will come. I just hope it will be the right time, and I hope it will be with the right girl." Harry kissed her nose. "Are we done here? I have to go off to meet her to find out."

"Yes. I just wanted to let you know that I am here for you. Always will be," she said firmly.

He nodded and hugged her one last time before leaving.

Hermione looked at her calendar. In two nights, she would be in Libertine's room again. In just over a week, she would be with Severus down on the coast. Things had never looked better for her. She only hoped that Harry had a chance to find someone of his own. It would be a pity for Ginny or him to feel obligated to make things work just for a baby.

She suddenly felt guilty about meeting with Libertine. Severus need never know about it, but she still felt the culpable pangs nonetheless. One thing had cemented in her mind what she had to do. Charlie's words came back to her again.

*Next time I'll be sure not to ask a frigid, little girl to my bed. One that won't back out when I'm an inch from delving into her knickers. One that won't freeze up and then try to run.*

Severus's words came back to her as well. The words that she had fallen asleep to the night before. Those words and the memory of his lips tenderly kissing her hands.

*Hermione, I'm not used to this. It will just take a little time, but I've read over your letter numerous times. I liked what you had to say.*

He didn't make her feel like a child. He'd even said that she was a woman. She had worried that he didn't want her when he hadn't replied to her note, but quite the contrary! He'd thought about it since that day, and he'd read over her letter multiple times. This was why she needed to be experienced. She needed to know how to please this man. If she could just have a good first impression with him, then the rest would fall into place for them.

Hermione made a list. First, she would bring some outfits and get advice on them. Second, she would ask what really put a man in the mood. Third, she would ask him to let her touch him. She didn't necessarily care to see it, but she wanted to touch him. Learn how to caress him perfectly, in any way really. Just so Severus approved. Yes, it was sort of like cheating on Severus, but then again, not exactly. Hell, he wasn't her man. He'd had experiences, and she would have this.

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Severus heard a soft knock on his office door. It was nearly midnight. He wasn't sure who would be looking for him at this time of night. "Enter," he called anyway. The door opened, and Potter walked in. Good Lord! He'd made one friendly gesture, and now the boy would show up uninvited? "Yes?" He allowed his annoyance to seep into his voice.

"We're back," he said, sitting down. "It's for Draco. It's not mine!"

"Congratulations," Severus offered dryly, relief sweeping through his body. "I trust Miss Weasley is pleased?"

"Much," Harry said, nodding. "There is another reason that I am here, sir. I wonder if we might have a word about Hermione."

"What about Miss Granger?"

"I had a talk with her earlier, and she admitted to having *feelings* for you. I just hope that you realize that, and I hope that you don't take advantage of those feelings," Harry said firmly.

"Potter! You forget yourself, boy," Severus said with a sneer. "I'll not have you come into my office and suggest that I have less than appropriate thoughts where a colleague is concerned."

"I didn't say they were inappropriate," Harry said hotly. "Just my way of asking for you not to hurt her, and my way of letting you know that I will be watching."

Severus chuckled deeply. "Yes, the ever watchful eyes of the brat who lived are upon me. Get out, Potter."

"Thanks," Harry said, beaming brightly.

What the bloody hell? He'd just insulted the boy, and here he was smiling as if he'd invited him over for dinner. It would be prudent to not extend any pleasantries to the boy again. He'd only given him a bit of draught, and now he was acting as if they were... mates. Severus shivered.

Thankfully, he hadn't heard from Lonnie again. His other client had not replied to his letter either. He had put an Owl Finding Nullification Spell on his person. No one would be able to owl Libertine, save Hermione. He had still been receiving some requests even though his ad had been canceled. Most likely, they were witches who had seen an old ad. The owls were a bit much, so he made Libertine untraceable except to one witch.

If he admitted the truth, only if, he was worried about client number four, Lonnie. She had threatened to destroy him publicly if she found out his identity. Any future owls from her were bound to be hexed, Howlers, or more threats. Just the thought of eating a meal with Hermione near while a Howler exploded in front of them had him worried. She could never know.

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Hermione placed her packed bag on her shoulder while looking into the mirror one last time. Her hair was pulled up in a ponytail to keep it out of the way. She had applied only a light touch of make-up on her face, and she'd dressed nicely. *Libertine, here I come.* She exited her portrait, allowing Crookshanks to enter, and made her way toward the front gates of Hogwarts. She hadn't heard anything else from the man, so she imagined that their meeting was still on. Apparating into the room while others occupied it didn't appeal to her. She closed her eyes, remembering her destination easily, and she Apparated there.

Libertine was sitting on the settee, looking ravishing once again. Hermione noticed that a couple of his buttons on his expensive shirt had been unbuttoned. She could just make out a hint of dark hair on his chest. His dark blue eyes watched her intently, taking in her appearance. "Hi," she said softly. "I am really sorry about not paying you last week. I didn't do that on purpose. Honest."

"I know," he said easily. "Sit with me." He patted the empty spot next to him.

Severus had vowed to not kiss her this night. He would only enjoy her company. There would be no advances made on her. If they kissed too much, she might realize who he was once he had his way with her. Just spending quiet time alone with her was enough. He noted that she had her bag again and smiled faintly. Yes, he would answer whatever questions she had without touching her soft skin, kissing those lush lips, or pulling her hair down to hang about wildly on her back.

*Damn! Stop it, Severus. Relax.*

"Wine?"

"No, thanks. I don't want it to interfere with my potion," she said, opening her bag.

"Potion?" he asked curiously.

"Yes. Calming Draught."

"Hermione, surely you didn't need that. I promised that I would not touch you, and I intend to keep that promise. You are safe with me this night," he said softly.

"But I intend to touch you, Mr. Libertine... er... Sev." She smiled when the man appeared to blanch. "I need to learn how to touch you. I will be alone with him in exactly one week. I have to be prepared, just in case. I don't want him to not want me."

*I do want you.* "I've told you before; there is no way that he would not want you, Hermione. You are perfection." He swallowed deeply as she pulled out something black and lacy from her bag. Good Lord! She wasn't going to make this easy, was she?

"I still want the practice. All right. There is this negligee, which I think is sexy, but it's rather uncomfortable. The fabric makes me itch a bit, and it's not as soft as it looks." She then pulled out a silky red nightgown. It was very short and dipped softly at the neckline, likely to show off cleavage. "I really like this one, and it is comfortable. Here, I have matching knickers as well. Anyway, I know this one isn't as sexy as the other one, but if I would ask to make love to you, which would you want to see me in?"

Gulp. Hell, both of them, nothing. He didn't care. "They are both sexy. I think it would depend on his tastes. Try not to forget that you do not only need to please your partner, but also yourself. Why wear something you feel uncomfortable in."

She pulled out her wand, and with a wave, her current attire was replaced by the red nightgown. Severus groaned as she stood up to model it for him. It reached only a few inches below her bum, and he had been right. Her ample cleavage was outlined perfectly with the low neckline.

"Is this all right? Does it hide my... lumps?"

"Lumps?" He knew there was not a lumpy portion on her body. "I see nothing that would suggest that your body was anything less than immaculate." His groin agreed as he felt himself hardening.

"Thanks," she said with a smile. "I am still nervous about this, even though I drank an entire vial of the potion." She moved to sit back next to him. Hermione pulled out a parchment, read over a few things, and placed it back into her bag. "I'm ready now. I don't want to be seen as a frigid little girl. I want to be seen as a warm responsive woman. What could I do to make you want me?"

*Just be in the same room with me.* "I want you already, Hermione," he said suddenly, moving closer.

"Please, help me," she pleaded. "He is rather distant at times, and I want to get him to focus on me. What can I do?"

"I need the loo. I'll only be a moment," he said quickly, practically bolting to the door. He closed the door and leaned against it, breathing heavily. He wanted her. Now. His vows of not touching her were quickly disintegrating. She was beautiful. Her sweet disposition, her innocence, and her lovely face were forcing him to rethink his plans. How could he do this without her knowing it was truly he?

Next weekend, he would make love to her, over and over if he had his way. Would she know? Could she notice? He would deal with that when the time came. This gift tonight was more than he could refuse. Severus pointed his wand to his bollocks and whispered an enlargement charm, giving them an oddly bulky look. He dared not meddle with his penis, but this one little difference in his bits might throw her off.

If he knew Hermione, she would memorize everything. For good measure, he cast a spell that placed a dark, hourglass-shaped birthmark on his inner thigh. There. That would not go unnoticed. He hoped it would be enough. Opening the door, he slowly made his way back to the temptress in the red, satin nightgown. When he sat, he made sure that their thighs were touching, and he placed his arm behind her on the back of the settee. "I need you to do something for me. Imagine that I am your lover. We've just had a nice dinner and are now chatting before the fire. I'm leaning into you, meaning that I am interested, but I am not sure how to initiate without knowing if you are willing or not. I've made the first move. What do you think you should do now?"

"I... I should lean into you, maybe place my hand on your thigh?"

Gulp. "Exactly."

Hermione snuggled into his body, and her hand moved to rest just above his knee.

Severus found himself leaning closer to her; his lips grazed her hairline softly. She turned to look at him with surprise on her face. His lips captured hers for a soft kiss. He didn't try to deepen the kiss, merely enjoying the feel of her lips pressed to his.

She pulled back after a moment. "So, it worked!" She beamed brightly. "That was brilliant!" The hand on his leg had worked its way up slightly, and she squeezed his thigh in her excitement.

He looked down for a moment. When he looked back up, he saw that her eyes had fallen to her hand as well. It was only inches away from his erection.

She never looked back at his face, but she concentrated on her fingers. Lightly, they were rubbing his thigh in slow circular movements, inching ever so closely to him.

"Touch me," he growled.

Hermione jumped, but she didn't pull away. Timidly her fingers passed over the bulge in his pants. He heard her sharp intake of air as she moved back up to gingerly cup him in her palm. She applied a little more pressure, and when his penis pushed back, she snatched her hand away.

Shocked eyes finally met his. "It moved. On its own."

He bit back a deep laugh, not wanting to embarrass her. "Yes, call it a reflex," he offered softly. "Did you feel how hard I am?" She nodded and bit her lip. "That means that you are successful in making me want you. Your man will be no different than I am. I promise you. Just be yourself, Hermione. Just as you are this night."

"Iwannaseeyou," she said in a rushed whisper.

"Sorry?" he asked, tilting his head instinctively to hear her better.

"I want to... see you," she said. This time her voice had a firm resolve behind it.

Severus' insides began to burn with need. The woman was driving him mad with her innocence and curiosity. "Are you sure?" he asked. When she nodded her agreement, a wave of his hands dimmed all the lanterns. The darkened room seemed to put them both at ease. The less she could actually see of him, the better it would be for their situation. He could feel where this was going. Hermione would be seduced. He wanted to do it. He hated that he was taking advantage of the situation, but her scent, her touch, her everything... being so near. It was too much. He needed her.

To give her one last chance to back out, he manually, slowly, began unfastening the many buttons on his trousers. "Hermione, if you should touch me too much, I don't know if I will be able to stand it. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"I'll... I'll only touch it a little," she said, eyes darting to his underpants.

After kicking his trousers to the side, he pulled her into his arms quickly *CRACK!* He Apparated them to the bed where she gasped and struggled to move for a moment.

"It's all right," he murmured. "Just relaxing." In the dim lighting, he could just make out her relief. "Pull down my boxers, Hermione."

She mentally counted to ten before placing her fingers in the hem of his underpants. She could do this. She was brave. This was for Severus. She just needed this practice to know how to please him. There was nothing wrong with a little looking and a little touching. Not at this stage in her relationship with Severus. If one could call it that.

"Is there a certain way?"

"Anyway you feel comfortable. Slowness builds anticipation while speed brings the pleasure sooner. You decide when you feel what pace your interlude is taking. If you can't wait to get your hands on me, rip them aside and throw yourself at me. If you want to learn my body, savor it, then be slow. Explore. We've all night. I won't object to anything that you do," he said silkily.

She nodded. Slow it would be. She wanted to explore this man. He was so much like Severus. More than he realized. He lifted his body from the bed as she began easing down the clothing. The solid erection that had been tenting his underpants sprang out, begging to be touched. Hermione briefly wished there was more lighting, as she noticed some sort of scar or birthmark on her gigolo's leg. One finger traced it lightly before trailing a path through his thick thatch of dark hair. He kicked off his underpants once they were lowered enough, and Hermione turned all of her attention to the proud display before her.

Anticipation. She allowed her nails to scrape all around his penis and eventually find his bollocks. Good Lord, but they were large. Definitely nothing like the picture in the book. Libertine groaned slightly as her fingers began fondling his bits. Hermione bit back the desire to lean forward for a taste of his skin. Where had that thought come from? As she kneaded the sac and the flesh of his thighs, he began to squirm and arch towards her. Feeling proud to have received such a reaction from him, she rewarded him by tracing the outline of his thick shaft with both hands. She felt it quivering beneath her palms.

"How do I know if I am doing this too roughly? I mean, I don't want to hurt you."

"You... won't," he choked out, arching into her hands. He groaned slightly as she applied more pressure.

She braced herself with one hand, leaving only one to prod, squeeze, and travel up and down his length. "Is this all right?" she asked excitedly. She could see that his eyes were closed, and his head was thrown back in ecstasy.

"Yes," he hissed. Suddenly, his hand reached down to guide hers.

She quickly learnt to apply more pressure and move more rapidly. She could feel some sort of wetness hitting her hand near his tip. "Is that...? Have you just...?" She wasn't sure how to voice it.

"No," he grunted. Not yet. "That just happens when a male is aroused. It's like a prelude of what's to come."

Feeling a bit daring, she grasped him more firmly and increased her actions while her other hand slid down between his thighs to grope his sac.

"Don't...stop. Faster. Harder."

She obeyed, not exactly sure what to expect. All she knew was that she was making him feel good. If Severus were as responsive as this man was to her, then they would get along fine. Libertine began groaning and pumping into her hand rapidly.

She felt some wet drops of liquid raining down on her hands and forearms. "What...?" Then, it dawned on her. She had just given him an orgasm. A real climax delivered by her hands! She wanted to squeal with delight. Unsure of what to do now, she continued to stroke him until his hands reached down to stop her.

"When," he panted, "you feel me orgasm, you may begin to slow your strokes. It will help bring me back down, and I can enjoy it without there being a threat of over-sensitization." He moved to his side to reach for his wand. Cleaning off his member and her hands, he asked if she was all right.

"I'm fine." She sat back on her knees. "I think."

He wanted desperately to pull her down and return the favor, but something had changed. She seemed suddenly distant. "Hermione? What's wrong, love?" he asked tenderly, sitting up to take her hands in his.

Her teary eyes met his. "I feel like a whore."

Holy shit! "Don't you ever think that way about yourself," he chided. "You are no whore. If you were, then you would have..." Blast! He'd nearly went off about the Charlie ordeal. *What a way to blow your cover, idiot!* "You would have made love to me last week, been all over me tonight, and would have had numerous other lovers. You have saved yourself for someone special. That is not a whore."

"But I just... I had sex with someone whose name I don't even know," she said sadly. "My mother would think... I only meant to look and maybe just touch."

"Sex? Hermione, this is a form of sex, yes, but you did not give your body to me. You simply gave me a desired gift. You wanted the experience to please your lover." He hoped his words were making sense.

"But I liked making *you* feel good. You are not Severus. Not really. Only in my imagination. I feel as though I have betrayed him. Do you know how disappointed in me he would be? I just fondled and brought someone that feels nothing for me to an orgasm. It seems like such a sacred act. He would believe I was terrible," she said softly.

Not knowing what else to do, he pulled her face to his and kissed her soundly. Her mouth finally opened after moments of prodding with his tongue.

Time seemed to stand still for both of them. There was nothing but that kiss in the world. No other people. He finally broke away to stare into her eyes. "I love you," he whispered. She blinked a few times.

"What?"

Shit! What the fuck? Damn! Severus tried to smile. "I could love you so easily," he amended. "If things do not work out with your man, I would love to have you and call you my own. You are everything I could ever want in a woman," he said honestly, hoping his voice proved his sincerity.

Hermione hugged him tightly. Apparently, those were the words she needed to hear. The only bad thing, Severus thought glumly, was that damn Libertine had been the one to say them. He knew that he would have to do something soon to wipe away this closeness Hermione felt for her gigolo.

"I hope he feels that way about me one day," she whispered. Lying back, pulling her with him, he began to rub her back slowly. He pulled her elastic out of her hair in order to free her wild curls.

When she didn't pull away, he dared to cup one cheek of her bum with his other hand. "Hermione, I can't control myself. I want you. If you don't want this, please, leave now. I don't want you to regret anything tomorrow."

She pulled away from him. "Sev, I... thanks." She kissed his lips softly before springing away from the bed. He never left the bed as she gathered her things and put her other clothes back on. She fumbled around for her hair elastic, but it was likely in the bed. She didn't want to torture the poor man any more than she had already. Placing an envelope with a considerable amount of money on the table, she Disapparated back to the gates of Hogwarts. Something felt terrible to her.

Had he been serious? Could he have possibly fallen for her in only two meetings? She felt guilty for hurting him, and she felt guilty for betraying Severus. There was nothing that she could do for Libertine except stay away. No matter what happened the next weekend, she would stay away from Libertine. Hermione hurried to her chambers for a hot bath.

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Early the next morning, Hermione awoke to a tapping on her window. It was a large, pale owl. She opened the window, took the parchment, and gave him an owl treat before sending him on his way. Libertine had owled her.

Dearest Hermione,

I hope you can forgive me for the things that I said to you. I had no right to say such things, especially not to a woman in love with another man. My emotions were at full height when I said those things. Please accept my apologies if I made you uncomfortable.

There has never been a woman like you in my life. I meant what I said. Honestly. I know that I will never see you again, so I wanted to give you a bit of parting advice and a compliment. Compliment first, I suppose.

You are a beautiful, sincere, and passionate woman. Your heart is full of love, cheer, and hope. Please never change. That alone will attract the man that you are wanting in your life. It's probably already attracted him.

I've learnt that there is more to a relationship than a sexy body, sensuous apparel, or even sex. It's about companionship and feelings. My advice to you is to be exactly as you were tonight. Do not be afraid to ask questions, even if you are embarrassed. I am sure that this man will be more than pleased to teach you.

Forever Thankful,

Sev Libertine

A teary-eyed Hermione placed the note in a book and hid it on a shelf. She was unsure if she should reply to the man or not. She had left more than enough money for him, so there was no excuse there. If she responded to his letter, then he might feel obliged to respond back. It would be better all around if that didn't happen. She was glad that she had met Libertine, and she would be grateful for the new confidence that he had given her. However, she would always wonder who he truly was, how he looked under his mask, what his real name was, and what might have been if circumstances would have been different. But only just a little. She had Severus to worry about and to try to love. He was the reason she had paid someone to spend time with her in the first place.

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Meanwhile, down in the dungeons, a solemn Professor Snape paced back and forth, cradling her hair elastic in his hand. He'd not slept all night. Her hands, her lips, her hair, her body, her eyes... fuck, all of her. They were plaguing him. How would he make it through the week without touching her? Did she feel guilty still? How much time would she need before he could approach her?

Severus kissed the elastic in his hand. He would ask her to come to his chambers Wednesday night under the guise of needing to make final preparations. Smirking to himself, he finally laid down in his bed. He wrapped the hair tie around his wrist to feel something of her with him. Hermione Granger would be his. Soon.

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**A/N:** Up next: Each of them deal with odd feelings, and Hermione and Severus make plans for the weekend. Lonnie's note makes an appearance.

## Letters

Chapter 10 of 17

Hermione and Libertine exchange letters, there's a bit of girl talk, and Hermione sees Lonnie's letter.

**Disclaimer:** All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!

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"Well, I'm right bloody glad that Hermione paid such good attention in classes. Pulled us out of a jam a number of times, she did!" Ron said, slurring slightly. He brought his cup of meade to his mouth, spilling most of it. "Sorry. I seem to have lost my lower lip on that one."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She hadn't had much to drink due to the fact that they all had a few last minute exams to give out the next day. The term was winding down to its end. For that, she was glad. Not only because she had a weekend planned with a most brilliant man but she also truly enjoyed time off. They'd decided to come out this Tuesday night to celebrate Draco and Ginny's pending parenthood. No Weasley brothers, aside from Ron, were invited. They didn't want any more brawls. They would celebrate with family on the coming weekend.

After the laughter died down, Harry chimed in, "Yeah, remember that shit she pulled with Umbridge back at the end of fifth year?" Everyone except Draco giggled. "Had that old hag believing we had a secret ruddy weapon!"

"And, if I remember correctly, Ginny did a pretty mean Bat-Bogey Hex on Draco!" Ron was holding his side with one hand and sloshing his drink with the other.

"All right! Enough of that," Draco said, sneering hatefully. "Think you're funny, do you? Well, I have a few stories of my own to tell." He raised his eyebrows suggestively.

"Er... shove off, Malfoy!" Ron said, turning red in the face.

"Oh, I would love to hear this," Luna said dreamily.

"Hermione," Harry said, "why didn't you bring a... date tonight?"

"She's not got a man, Harry! You know that," Ron blurted.

"You'd be surprised," Harry said, clearly annoyed. "I don't see you with a witch on your arm, Ron. So don't even fly on that pitch."

"Neither do you, you tosser," Ron said, trying to down his drink.

"Oi! Look at those blokes. Arm-wrestling, eh? Let's give it a try," Draco said, eyeing some wizards in the corner. Ron and Harry followed Draco off, leaving only Ginny, Hermione, and Luna at the table.

"I really am happy for you," Luna said, attempting to grope Ginny's stomach.

Ginny dodged her palm. "Lord, Luna, I'm only just over two months. I won't show for a while yet. You can't feel it just now."

"But it's still there. A wee little Malfoy mixed with Weasley." Luna sighed. "I would like to have someone to love me as much as Draco loves you." She took a sip of her drink. "Actually, I would do for a good shag. Anything."

Hearing her chance to ask, Hermione said, "Why don't you try that Libertine again? Maybe another in the business?"

Ginny smirked and met her eyes slyly.

"Oh, Libertine is out of business anyway. I wouldn't try anyone else unless he was highly recommended," Luna said.

"Out of business?" Hermione knew this was not the truth. She'd just seen him four nights prior. "What do you mean?"

"His ad disappeared from the paper, and my cousin got an owl from him, breaking things off," Luna said with a shrug.

"But why?" Ginny asked, eyeing Hermione oddly.

"Says he fell in love," Luna said. "I just adore that. Apparently, the poor bloke was lonely and looking for a lover for keeps. I suppose he found her."

Hermione gaped. *I love you.* His words. He had meant them. Good Lord! But why? Why her? Surely he had dozens of clients to choose from *if things do not work out with your man, I would love to have you and call you my own. You are everything I could ever want in a woman* Poor man! She needed to owl him. She couldn't! Severus. She had never promised this man anything no matter how he felt about her. They had only met twice. Was he attracted to her innocence? Had it been that long since he'd been around a virgin? She sighed. "I have to leave."

"Wait, Hermione," Ginny said quickly. "Please don't go. Let's talk some more. Er... this weekend. Are you still going?"

Hermione nodded.

"Going where?" Luna asked.

Uncomfortably, Hermione said, "Severus... uh, Snape and I are going to a conference this weekend." She studied the blonde's silver eyes for any signs of disgust. She only saw amusement.

"He is sort of enigmatic, isn't he?" Luna asked finally. "I think that is so appealing. If you don't mind me asking, are you two an item?"

"Well, we have talked a little about it. Things are progressing at a comfortable pace," Hermione said.

Luna was actually smirking at her.

"What's so amusing, Luna?"

"I just couldn't really imagine you with a man like Snape is all," Luna said mysteriously.

"What is that supposed to mean, Luna?" Ginny asked defensively, moving her water to the side. "You think she isn't good enough? He isn't good enough? You can't just say something like that without explaining."

"Well, it's like we talked about last time. She is saving herself for marriage. Snape is likely a man who will never attach himself to anyone. I just think it's a waste for her. She's too pure for him, unless she is only after a quick fling," Luna said wisely. "She is entirely too naïve, acting like some scared teenager when we discuss sex. I just don't see them getting on well."

"How rude," Hermione huffed, standing to pull on her cloak.

"Don't get mad," Luna said softly. "I was just giving you some honest and blunt advice. If all you are looking for is a few meaningless shags, well then, Snape is likely your man. If you are looking for everlasting love, I just don't think he's the one."

"You don't even know him," Hermione spat bitterly. "I should not have said anything."

"Neither do you. Apparently," Luna smiled smugly. "You can't even contest what I say. I'm just looking out for you, Hermione. You are just more inexperienced than you realize. You probably believe yourself to be in love already."

"I do have feelings, Luna, and just because I haven't fucked everything with two or even four legs," she gave Luna a dirty look, "doesn't mean that I don't know what sincere feelings are when I feel them!"

Luna blanched at her comment. Her last boyfriend had been an Animagus. A dog. There were tales that someone had walked in on them in a most compromising position.

Hermione made it to the door just as Ginny caught up to her. "I'm sorry, Hermione. She's had one too many cups. I imagine someone will have to Apparate both her and Ron home."

"It doesn't matter," Hermione said bitterly. "What she said isn't that far off, you know! What makes me think that someone like Severus would really want something more than a weekend with someone like me?"

"Of everything that you've said about the two of you, I think he fancies you for a bit more than that. Even Harry sees it," Ginny said, hugging her. "When are you going to see him again? Breakfast?"

"If he is there in the morning, yes. All professors have testing schedules to keep. I didn't check to see which timeframe he is on." Hermione smiled. "This morning he asked if I wanted to come down to his chambers tomorrow night. He said we still had a couple of things to go over."

"Don't let what Luna said about him bother you too much," Ginny said. "And what is with that Libertine bloke? Fell in love? Cancelled all clients? Didn't you see him Saturday night?"

"I did," Hermione admitted. "The funny thing is... I think it's me he loves. He told me he loved me, but then he tried to cover it up. He sent a sweet letter the next morning, but he never said anything about quitting his job. I thought deep down that he was saying those things because he was paid to."

Ginny seemed thoughtful for a moment. "Odd, isn't it? That he would fall in love so quickly. Do you plan to see him again? How far did you two really go?"

"Oh, honestly," Hermione said indignantly. "I told you nothing happened. I got advice on what I should wear, he explained how to subtly make the first move, and I... touched him a bit."

"A bit?" Ginny pressed. She knew that something didn't add up. Who was this bloke? Why would he get rid of all his clients, save Hermione, and tell her that he loved her? Blast, but she wished she could have met the man. It might even be someone that they all knew. Ginny wondered if Charlie had any side jobs. He fancied Hermione much more than he let on. She was all he talked about, even though he mostly said rude things.

"Oh, all right," Hermione said, cheeks burning, "he had an orgasm. I really didn't touch it all that much. Only a couple of minutes. He showed me how to do it, and then his... er... seed? I guess I can call it that; anyway, it just flew out. I know he wanted something else to happen, but he gave me the option to stay or go. I fled."

Ginny giggled slightly. "You must have some really great hands! Oh, don't look at me like that. I am playing, Hermione." She squeezed her worried friend's hand. "You haven't fallen for him, have you?"

"No, but I do feel a little guilty. I feel as if I have cheated on Severus, even though he is not actually my lover. I loved the sweet words that he told me, but I tried not to read more into them." Hermione sighed. "It was so easy to pretend that he was Severus. I wished it were Severus doing and saying those things. Hearing what Loony there had to say, well, now I feel even worse! I know how it feels to fancy someone who appears to not have any interest."

"He does have interest though, Hermione. Snape wants you. I'm sure you will come to realize that," Ginny said with a warm smile. "I wonder if he is someone we know. Someone like Charlie. Wouldn't that be odd?"

"Oh, good Lord! Don't even say something like that," Hermione said, laughing slightly. "Well, er... does Charlie have a big, dark birthmark or scar on his inner thigh? Just here." She pointed to the spot where Libertine's mark had been.

Ginny shook her head. "No. You are safe. None of my brothers have marks there. That I know of, mind. Want me to get Harry to escort you back?"

"No, I'll Apparate. I've not had anything hard. You have a good night." Hermione hugged her friend and walked out into the night air. Poor Libertine. Maybe she should send him a little owl to thank him for being so understanding and wishing him luck in the future. There would be no harm in that.

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Severus lay in bed, unable to sleep. Hermione was out with the Weasley crowd. Would Charlie be there? If so, would he try to make 'amends' for being a berk? As far as he knew, it was only a few of them going. For the first time in his life, Severus wished that he were friendly enough with Harry Potter to go to his chambers during the night to ask after Hermione. Of course, that would never happen. Hermione hadn't gone running that morning. He knew she was likely to go the next morning though.

Her schedule for the exams wasn't too early. She never missed two days in a row unless the weather was completely horrid. He would go out again and watch for her. When she made her way back to the castle, he would follow her, and he would talk to her at breakfast. They needed to make arrangements for the weekend. He, being prepared, had already made some arrangements. All he needed to do was pass them by her. She would agree with whatever he said. He knew that already. Hermione wanted and cherished him. She would try to please him.

If all went well, tomorrow night she would be in his chambers. He would try to build up some tension for the weekend. Give a few subtle hints. Steal a few caresses. Kiss

her lips a few times. As Libertine, he had mostly kissed her softly, as if afraid to damage her. As Severus, he would be sure to ravish her lips, kiss her passionately. She would forget Libertine's kisses and caresses soon enough. He smirked to himself. Despite her endearing innocence, she was quite responsive and passion smoldered just below the surface. Things would be good between them. Damn good.

Eying her hair elastic once more, Severus drifted off into a restful sleep, leaving the hair accessory wrapped around his wrist. An internal alarm clock went off a few short hours later. As swiftly as he could, he showered, dressed, sipped on Summoned coffee, and made his way out to his position by the lake. He would give her twenty minutes. If he didn't see her, then that meant she'd decided to skip this day as well. Not long after, Hermione came into sight. She had come out earlier than he had expected and seemed to be on her way back towards the castle.

She stopped in her usual spot, bending over to stretch her legs. He had a perfect view of her arse. Severus closed his eyes in remembrance of how one of her plump cheeks felt pressed into his hand. When he opened his eyes again, he nearly fainted with excitement. She was pulling off her shirt. Her running pants had already been discarded along with her shoes and socks. Clad only in silky looking knickers and bra, she made her way into the lake. Words like goddess, temptress, and succubus swam through his mind.

Remembering her hands on his hard cock, he reached down to grope his slight erection. A jolt of feeling spread quickly. How could she always do this to him? Why did he always feel the need for release? Two more nights only. In just two damn nights, she would be his, writhing under him as he entered her over and over. Calling out his name. Deciding that he would save himself for the interlude with Hermione, he moved his hand away. His eyes hungrily found her again. She'd just come up from the water and was wading back to her clothes. As always she cast a drying spell on her hair before rolling it up to keep it out of the way.

Severus licked his lips. He could see her rosy nipples trying to poke through her flimsy, sodden bra, and the thatch of dark hair plastered to her wet, transparent knickers had him dying to taste her. Two more nights. Hermione dried her person quickly, put on her clothes, and made her way back to the castle. Severus waited a few moments before following. Remembering that Potter had seen him watching once, he looked around with narrowed eyes. Did anyone else know of his expeditions as a voyeur? Lord, he hoped not. How embarrassing.

Just to be safe he took a long route back to the castle. He busied himself with pretending to admire some of Sprout's articulate shrubbery. Sneaking a look around, he blasted a lone rose bush with his wand. The fallen petals mesmerized him for a moment. He Summoned them to him. Their scent wasn't exactly that bad, but he never did have a thing for the smell. He preferred other flowery scents. An idea occurred to Severus. He had a plan for the weekend. With any luck, she would be in the hall for breakfast by the time he made it inside.

Once he was nearly back at the castle, Harry's owl, Hedwig, swooped down on him. Knowing this could only mean one thing, he quickly took the parchment and shooped the owl away, hoping nobody had seen the exchange. He uncoiled the parchment quickly. What the fuck was she playing at by owling Libertine?

Libertine,

Forgive my forwardness, but I've decided to be a bit blunt. I had a chat with a couple of my friends last night. One tells me that they've noticed your ad has disappeared from the papers. She also said that her cousin was a client of yours. Her cousin received a note from you, breaking things off. The note also said that you had fallen in love with someone.

Am I this person? I was unsure that your words were actually sincere the other night, but now I am absolutely positive about it. I must know why. Why me? Who are you? I've thought of you often since then, and I have read your letter more than once. My other friend hopes that you aren't someone I actually know. That would be just too horrible to explain. Please talk to me.

Sincerely,

Hermione

Severus growled angrily. Why was she worried about the gigolo? Who the hell did she know that was related to client one? It had to be someone that had gone to the pub with her. Severus mentally thought of all present. A Malfoy, a Potter, two Weasleys, and a... Lovegood! That had to be it. How else would she have known? Her cousin had recommended him. Of course! Wasn't this lovely?

Why did she care how the gigolo felt? Would she want some relationship with the gigolo now? That bastard had stolen his woman's affections! Severus froze.

"I am that bastard. Bloody hell. This is fucking confusing."

He wanted to be angry with her for trying to keep contact with Libertine, but he really could expect nothing less. She had a big heart, and she was likely worried that she had ruined the man's livelihood.

And just which one of her bratty friends had put the idea into her head that Libertine was more than likely someone who knew her? It must be one of the two girls. Great! Just bloody great! He would mail a reply to her at some point during the day. For now, he had to make plans to spend the evening with her. How could she want to be with someone else? He sighed. This was a complicated, confusing situation. He thanked Merlin that she had no idea. As had she said, it would be horrible.

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With some trepidation, Hermione made her way down to Severus' chambers. What was he really planning this night? He'd been strange when'd he asked her to visit with him. She thought back to breakfast.

*"Professor Granger, tonight I happen to not have patrols nor any detentions to oversee. Would you care to come to my chambers? We could look over the things that I have done and make decisions about our plans?" He seemed stiff and uncaring. His dark eyes looked into hers without interest.*

*Hermione wondered what she had done to make him so ill at ease. She hadn't seen him since the evening meal, the day before. In fact, she almost hadn't gone to breakfast at all. She'd gone for a run and a quick swim. The only thing that had pulled her to the Great Hall was the thought of seeing Severus. She decided to not allow him to get her down. "Are you sure, Severus? It looks as though extending an invite for me to join you is not actually to your liking."*

*Severus studied her for a moment. "Come or don't come. You decide. I'll be expecting you after the evening meal. Have a good day, Professor." He scooted his chair away, leaving his food mostly untouched.*

*Hermione looked to Harry. Each held a puzzled expression.*

It had just gone downhill from there. Some of her students had played idiotic end of term jokes on each other, thanks to the Weasley twins' legacy, so she had to give a last minute detention for them to serve with Filch. She didn't want to oversee them and risk ruining things with Severus by missing their meeting. Near the end of the day, she'd received an odd owl from Libertine, which simply made matters worse.

It read:

*Hermione,*

*I must admit that I was quite surprised to receive a letter from you. If I have decided to rethink things and leave my job as a hired man, I don't see why you should fret over it. Perhaps I wrote to some of my other clients, saying the nicest things I could think of in order to not hurt their feelings. I would really rather not receive any more owls*

from you.

*You are truly a gem, love. Please don't think about me any longer. Time moves on. I would rather you not ever know who I am underneath the mask you have seen me wear. I've always kept to myself, and you don't actually know me. Just leave it at that. You will be in my thoughts and have my eternal respect.*

Cheers,

Sev Libertine

She couldn't even reply to him because he'd asked her not to do so. Ever. She shook her head sadly, feeling slightly rejected. She wished him well. Honestly. She just wished that he'd answered her question about why he'd chosen her to care for? She wasn't about to believe that he was only being nice to Luna's cousin. Well, it didn't matter any longer. The only thing that mattered was Severus. Just as she placed a timid knock at his door, it swung open.

"Hermione, I was just on my way out. I thought that you weren't coming," Severus said, clearly surprised to see her. "Come in."

She followed him to a comfortable chair before his fire.

"I have to oversee something in the Slytherin common room. Please make yourself comfortable. I've tea just there on the table. Help yourself. I shan't be long."

"Thanks," she said. He seemed to be in a better mood. For that she was glad! Hopefully, they could get back to the way things were. She longed for him to show her the gentleness that he had hinted at possessing. His rooms really were well kempt, even though he didn't allow house-elves in to clean. It was nice that a man could be tidy. As soon as the thought occurred to her, she saw something yellow under the chair opposite her. "What's this?" She kneeled down to reach under for the... parchment. It was apparently rubbish. The thing was crumpled into a tight ball.

Hermione moved to throw it into the fireplace, but she paused. "Maybe I should check to be sure that it truly is rubbish. I don't want to throw out something good." Truth be known, she was curious about it. Quickly, she unrolled the parchment for a read.

Lover,

*Why? What does it matter if you have found a girlfriend? I've had a husband for the past two months, and that never stopped you from coming to make love with me. We have good sex together. No man, not even my husband, satisfies me the way that you do.*

*You'd better not call things off between us. My husband and I have finally decided to go our separate ways for a couple of months to see if things are better that way. I had hoped that we could get together more often. It makes no difference to me if you have a witch in your life or not. What she doesn't know won't hurt her!*

*Think about it. I expect a reply from you right away.*

Always,

Lonnie

Hermione crumpled the letter quickly and threw it into the fireplace. Lonnie? She'd had no idea that Severus had been seeing someone. The note had said that she was a married witch and their affair had been going on for about two months. Sex had been great. No one could satisfy her the way that Severus could. Hermione shuddered. So... she had been right to seek out Libertine's services. A man this experienced wouldn't be satisfied with an innocent younger lady!

But had he stopped seeing the woman? The crumpled letter seemed a testament that he had. The woman had split up with her husband and wanted to see Severus more. It was apparent that he had owed her to end things before this.

Girlfriend?

"Me?" Hermione questioned aloud. She wished that the owl would have a date on it. Surely it was fairly new, as nothing else was out of place in his room. He would have found it if it had been there a long period of time.

Hermione bit her lip. She needed Libertine now more than ever. Blast! Why hadn't she let him sleep with her? Raising her chin defiantly, she made a vow. "I will not let some letter from an old lover scare me off. I will do what needs to be done, and he'll never know what hit him." She scooted back in her chair to patiently wait for Severus. She couldn't believe how jealous she felt over a woman she didn't even know. He'd never know that she had read his letter or that she knew about this *bitch* Lonnie.

Severus came back about ten minutes later, looking irate and tired. "Hi," he said, sitting across from her. "End of term pranks."

She nodded.

"Have you had some tea?"

She shook her head.

"Here I'll get us some. We have a few things to go over."

Hermione was amazed at how much his attitude had changed since that morning. He even smiled at her at one point while explaining the structure of the building the conference would be held in.

"This," he said, summoning a brochure, "is the exact room that you and I will stay in. Look at the view."

She smiled. The large doors opened, and she could make out a small, sandy plot of land and a blue sea, begging to be visited. "Oh, look! It's adorable." She traced the picture lovingly. "I can't wait. I think I'm beginning to not even care about the conference, you know. Just the thought of being away from the students and work for a couple of days is enticing. Not to mention the company..." Damn! She had been rambling. She looked up to see amused dark eyes watching hers.

"The company is most acceptable," he offered as a way to finish her sentence.

She nodded.

"Hermione, did you understand clearly? I said room. Not rooms. We will have to share."

"Share?" Gulp. It's what she had hoped on, but hearing it made it all the more realistic. She could feel her stomach tighten and her throat constrict.

"Yes, with all the visitors in town, the place was nearly booked. I had to pay a little extra to get this one. We were lucky." Severus raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure we shall find a way to coexist for three nights."

"Three?" They were only supposed to be going for two.

"Yes, three. It was the only way the bloke would rent it out to me. I had to pay for a minimum of three days. Never worry though. There will be much to do, much to explore."

His voice had lowered, and he moved closer. "I want to kiss you."

"Please," she said with a nod.

His lips tentatively touched hers for only a second before deepening into a demanding kiss. Her mouth opened immediately to allow him entrance. He kept his hands braced on the arms of her chair to keep him from pulling her down. Severus made sure that this kiss was not like Libertine's soft kisses. He showed her with his tongue and mouth that he wanted to possess her. When he finally pulled away, he felt a little dizzy from the lack of oxygen.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she panted slightly through her still parted lips. "Oh, my," she said. "Come here, Severus."

To his surprise, she pulled his face back to hers to launch her own fierce kiss. He loved it. His mind was jumping for joy as he realized she was making a bold move by pulling him to her for a kiss. She would be ready for him on Friday. He could feel it.

Severus pulled away after a couple of minutes. His breathing was unsteady. "I think, Hermione, that you and I shall get on just fine. It would be prudent, however, for me to escort you back to your quarters tonight." He smiled softly while caressing her cheek. "If you stay any longer, I will ravish you, and neither of us will be about to oversee our final end of term exams tomorrow."

"Very well," she said, smiling sweetly. "Until Friday then?"

"Indeed," he purred, pulling her up. He walked her back to her chambers leaving her there with a warm, passionate kiss. Severus walked proudly back to his chambers. He had won the girl after all. He'd not dwell on the things that she'd done with Libertine. That was in the past. Nothing could stand in his way now. Hermione was his.

Hermione quickly went into her room. "Good Lord! That man can kiss!" She threw herself down onto her bed and relished the way her body felt. She was warm, tingly, and needy. Severus would take care with her. To hell with that Lonnie woman. Severus belonged to Hermione now. She nearly squealed with excitement, remembering that they would be sharing a room together. His words had suggested that he wanted to make love with her as much as she wanted to make love with him. He would have wanted her to stay this night if they didn't have duties to attend the next day!

There was a small similarity between his kisses and Libertine's, but she couldn't exactly put her finger on what it was. Both were experienced men, she supposed, and they knew how to *love* a woman. That much was apparent. Where Libertine was soft and patient, Severus was firm and determined. Determined to dominate her mouth, lips, tongue... all of her. She loved it. Who cared that they hadn't talked for all that long? His words, his light caresses, and his kisses had been enough to turn a bad day into a good one.

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**A/N:** Next chapter will be the weekend, and there will be a large amount of lemony goodness. Just a little warning (in case that's not your thing).

## Weekend: Part One

### *Chapter 11 of 17*

Hermione and Severus get to know each other and decide to make love.

**Disclaimer:** All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!

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"I can't believe you're just going off to Southern Wales with him. What if he bites you? You'll be the next bat of Hogwarts," Ron whined.

"Sod off, Ron. It's only a conference. You know how she is about those ruddy things," Harry said, trying to keep the peace. "Better to have him stuck escorting her than us."

Ron smiled brightly. "Too right you are, Harry. Wouldn't catch me at a ruddy conference. I mean they aren't going to say anything that you can't read about tomorrow. If you would even care to read such rubbish, that is."

"Oh, that's rich!" Hermione scowled. "It's not rubbish, Ronald! Rubbish would be going to a retched Flobberworm discussion. This is about the interaction of Arithmancy and Potions."

"Yeah, well, so long as it's not the interaction of the Arithmancy professor and the Potions master." Ron shivered. "That would be a sight. Little bushy-haired Snapes running about the castle."

"Stuff it, Ron." Harry pulled Hermione's bag off of the bed. "Stuffed everything into this one?" She nodded. "Where will you be staying?"

"Just West of Cardiff out towards the Swansea side on the coast of the Bristol Channel. There is a small Wizarding community hidden there."

"Oi! Been to Rhossili Sands already when I was younger. Right nice this time of year," Ron commented, opening Hermione's dresser. "Bloody hell. Look at this, Harry!" He held up a pair of silky, black knickers.

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed, snatching her knickers away. "I don't appreciate your hands on my knickers. Er... in my drawers! Blast!" Both Ron and Harry began sniggering wildly. "Oh, you know what I mean," she chided.

After Ron managed to stop laughing, he said, "Well, mate, if she's leaving those home, at least we know Snape won't be seeing them!"

Harry simply smiled. "Sorry, Hermione. Ron's desperate lately. Only way he can get anywhere near someone's knickers is to steal a pair."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, it's about time for me to be off. The conference isn't until tonight, but I would like to get in some of the sites and be settled in. I'll be back Monday at some point."

"Monday?" Ron asked incredulously. "How long is this bloody conference? Don't see how anyone could stand more than an hour, meself. They ought to put up a sign saying: welcome to Cardiff, capitol of Wales, and the home of the longest, most boring conferences."

"It's just for tonight, Ron, but we're staying on so that Severus can get some ingredients. And, like I said a moment ago, I want to do a little tourism. I've seen pictures of some of the landmarks. The place we are staying in is beautiful. It's a very old, thatched cottage that they used magic on to enlarge and make many rooms for guests. Our room opens up to a lovely view of the coast."

"Hermione..." Ron's face turned pink. "Our room?"

"What of it?" she asked, suddenly angry. "Want to poke fun about it? Have your say then, you berk, so that you can have your laugh. Then, I'll be off anyway, not worrying on you or your opinion."

"My laugh?" Ron looked to Harry incredulously. "Hang on! You knew about this, didn't you, Harry? That's why you aren't saying anything! When was someone going to tell me about it? Been having a jolly time laughing behind my back at the comments I've been making, have you? Sniggering to yourselves because you both knew something I didn't!" Ron nodded. "It's mental!"

"I am sort of seeing Severus... maybe," Hermione said. "There is nothing to really say just yet. It's why nobody knows. Harry just guessed, and if you were a bit quicker on the uptake, maybe you'd have guessed too."

"Eh! No need to be saying I'm thick now! I just don't pay attention as much as I should." Ron began laughing loudly. "No wonder he worked Charlie over! He was jealous. Hahahahaha!"

Harry thrust Hermione's bag into her hands. "Go on. I'll see him to his hut, and I won't let him swipe any of your knickers."

"Thanks," Hermione said softly. She eagerly made her way to Severus' chambers. "Hi," she said breathlessly when he answered the door. He nodded his head formally.

"I trust you are ready?" When she nodded in reply, he said, "Very well. Follow me."

"Where are your things?"

He patted his pocket. He considered her for a moment before whipping out his wand. He shrunk her bag and put it into his pocket as well. "It'll be easier for us to get about this way. We're going to Apparate to the Ministry, to our prearranged Apparition point, where we'll get our Portkey. It will send us right to our cottage." He smirked at her nervous expression. "You do still want to come, don't you?" He raised an eyebrow.

"More than anything," she whispered. Not breaking his stride, he reached out to pull her hand into his. He thought about all the things that hand would be doing later. They made their way to the Ministry quickly, and she overheard a bit of conversation between Severus and Basil, the Head of the Department of Magical Transportation. It seemed that the man wanted them to take a Ministry car down to Cardiff as they were being overrun with transporting problems because of the time of the year. Vacations were beginning, and many decided to get out for a holiday.

"Certainly not," Severus said angrily. "I had this approved last week. I will not spend two hours riding down. Hell, I can Apparate there with only a couple of stops. The only reason I opted to get this was because Albus asked me to!"

"Now calm down, Severus. Go on. Take it. We just don't want people to be popping up all over and are trying to make this as safe as possible for everyone. I'm sure other, less hurried, people won't mind finding an alternative means of transportation," Basil said sourly, finally looking to Hermione. He seemed to want to say something, but Severus pulled her away.

"Bloody idiots," he grumbled. "Four seconds. Touch." As she finished mentally counting down, she felt the familiar tug behind her navel as they Portkeyed to their destination. Hermione noticed the difference right away. The air wasn't as thin or as fresh. The smell of the sea drifted to her nostrils. She could almost taste the salty air. The Wizarding community was larger than she had imagined. The streets were wide and made of cobblestone. Multiple shops and cottages lined either side of the street.

"This is us," Severus said, nodding to the large home in front of them.

She followed him inside.

The place was beautiful. Delicate, Victorian style furniture lined the rooms. The floors were made of polished wood, and beautiful rugs adorned it every so often. They had enlarged the inside using magic. The short, pudgy witch led them down a long hall to a huge door. "Now 'ere we are. The best rooms we got, they are. Go on then."

"Thanks," Hermione said kindly as the woman bustled away. The room was just as stunning as they were in the pictures that the brochure had shown. "Oh my," she said, grinning brightly. The first thing she did was run past the bed to the large doors. She flung them open, and the sea breeze whipped through her hair, tangling it wildly. The beige, sandy beach looked so inviting. "Can we go for a walk?"

"Now?" he asked, looking at her oddly.

"Of course! It's lovely! Oh, look! There is a cliff down the way. Could we?" she asked, looking at him hopefully.

"I suppose we could go and be back in time for the conference. You might want to change into something more appropriate. It looks hot out," he said, removing their bags from his pocket. He enlarged them, and with a few flicks of his wand, all of their things magically found places in the wardrobes and drawers. Without a word, he went through the masculine wardrobe, pulled out some clothes and headed for the bathroom. She went to the feminine wardrobe and found her items. There was a changing screen next to it, so she went behind it to pull off her robes and skirt. She pulled up a pair of denim Muggle shorts. The blouse she'd had under her robes was fine. She kicked off her shoes and socks, putting on sandals.

When she stepped out, she gasped. "Severus, you look nice." He had a crisp, light gray, button up shirt on with black slacks. His boots were gone and replaced by comfortable trainers. "You don't want any sandals? It will be easier to walk through the sand."

"These should be fine. I can always change them if I have any problems," he said. "Lead the way."

Hermione pulled him out behind her. She noticed his startled expression, but he didn't remove his hand from hers. The first bit of the walk was only a small trek through clumpy grass. Once on the beach, Hermione took off her sandals and ran for the water. Severus watched as the little nymph kicked and splashed around in two feet of water. He'd never seen her wear those particular clothes before, but the short denim material hugged her arse tightly. He could feel his gut jolt. Anticipation. He could care less about the damn conference. He honestly didn't want to go now that they were in the village. He just wanted to spend private time with his Hermione.

"Severus! Come here!" She waved him over.

"I don't want to get my shoes or trousers wet. I'll walk along the dry part," he said. He saw her disappointment, but he didn't want to get his clothing wet. Nor did he want to take off his shoes or wear... short trousers. Merlin! If they met up with someone, he'd be a laughingstock. The beach seemed to be deserted, however, which was odd. There had been many people in the cottage and on the street.

"Oh, come on! You can dry them or change." She looked to him expectantly. Remembering that this weekend was about making her happy and winning her over, he took off his shoes and socks, and he flicked his wand to change his shoes into sandals while stuffing the socks into his pocket. He also altered his pants to where they only reached mid calf. He shrunk his sandals and hers. He placed both pairs in his pocket.

Hermione giggled. She hadn't the heart to tell him that his pants now looked a bit feminine. She was simply happy that he'd relented for her. "Excellent!"

The water was cool despite the warm weather, and the wet, clumpy sand felt odd squishing between his toes. Each remained silent as they walked towards the cliff in the

distance. It was Hermione who spoke first. "Have you brought any other friends here before?"

"No."

She smiled. "I'm glad to be the first."

"As am I."

She paused to look at him for a moment. What was that supposed to mean? It dawned on her that apparently he'd figured out that she'd never been intimate with anyone. Well, she'd as much as told him, and he'd overheard what the boys and Charlie had said. In fact, it was a relief that he knew. There was not as much pressure to prove herself to him. Severus wouldn't expect her to be some sex goddess. She took his hand, and they continued walking.

"Severus, do you ever feel like you want to do something else aside from teaching?"

"I do other things," he said. "Holidays are the times I use for independent research and such. Though I don't like that most of the dunderheads that breeze through my class will never amount to much by the way of potions, I admit that I enjoy Hogwarts and would choose no other place to work." He looked at her for a moment. "What about you?"

"No. Teaching is the best decision that I could have made. I really like it. It feels as though I'm making a difference. My parents would have liked me to do something else with my life, but it's my life, after all. I think I can choose my own career, thanks," she said softly, squeezing his hand.

"It suits you," he agreed. "How many boyfriends have you had?" He hoped she wouldn't be offended. He knew the answer of course, but she didn't know that he knew.

"None, really. I mean, Viktor and I were merely good friends. He lived so far away, that it didn't really pay to try to make things work." She grinned. "I fancied Ron for a while, but that never went anywhere. There was that one date with Charlie, the tosser. That's about it. Is that all right?"

"Indeed it is," he said, smirking at her. Her body would be his. The body he'd been fantasizing about for the past few months. Only his.

"You?"

"Me?" What the hell was she talking about?

"Yes. Have you had many girlfriends?"

"A fair few," he said mysteriously.

Blast! She wanted him to mention something about that Lonnie woman. "Any recent girlfriends?"

He chuckled. "Girlfriends? No. Acquaintances? Yes." Well, that didn't bloody help! "You seem puzzled."

"Well, I just thought... someone like you... would always have someone," she hinted.

"Someone like me?" He was clearly puzzled. Did she really find him that attractive? He knew he wasn't the best looking man. There were a few things that he could change for the better, but he also knew there were many things that he wouldn't change. Once a woman had been with him, she would never forget him. He was a most brilliant man, after all. Especially in bed.

"Someone as appealing and mysterious as you. Women, I'm told, flock to the sensual, brooding type." She smiled softly at his taken aback expression.

"Are you attracted to this?" He pointed to himself.

"Of course. I wouldn't be here otherwise," she said lightly. "Look!" She dropped his hand and sped forward a few feet. Hermione picked up a large, peach shell. "It's so pretty. Look how the sun brings out some other colors!" She put it back down.

"Keep it."

"Right," she said with a smile, picking it back up. "Oh! Can we go there first? It looks to be some sort of little cove."

"All right," he agreed. They talked about little things for the entire walk to the small inlet. "Look at the little wading pool." Hermione grinned. There was a small cavern on the side of the mountain, and the small bay was very private. It appeared that the tide had gone down and left some water trapped in a small little pool. She peered down and saw many little living things scampering about.

"Damn," Severus murmured.

"What is it?" She noted the annoyed expression on his face.

"Rain."

She looked around. The sky seemed blue and clear to her. There was a change in the breeze though. It had picked up slightly and had a wet feel to it. He could be right. "Where?"

"Let's go take shelter under there. It'll likely pass quickly enough. It will blow in momentarily. Do you not feel the sudden drop in temperature? The change in the wind?"

"Only because you mentioned it," she said unobtrusively. The little cavern was quite cozy. Severus had placed a Cushioning Spell beneath them. A few moments later, the rain had found them. It seemed to be a bit more than a simple afternoon rain. The sky had darkened, the clouds had changed from cottony white puffs to menacing thunderclouds. The lightning and thunder had Hermione getting closer to Severus. Even the color of the water seemed to change. "Good Lord," she said, flinching at a sudden crackle of lightning.

"Come to me," he said quietly, placing his arm around her to pull her to him. When she snuggled closely, he inhaled her intoxicating, tangy scent. He would have to try to recreate the scent with a potion. He could always smell her that way. She tilted her head up to look into his eyes. Ever so slowly their faces drifted together. After one slight brush of his lips against hers, he pulled back to take in her expression. Acceptance. Her eyes closed slowly as she tilted upward again, so he moved his lips back to hers. This time he suckled her bottom lip for a moment, and then moved to suckle her top lip. As he moved back down to her bottom lip, her lips parted. He ran his tongue along its opening, letting her know that he would like to taste her mouth. His free hand had found and cupped her jaw while both of her hands had found their marks. One was firmly gripping his back to keep him from moving away while the other was softly caressing his face.

The moment his tongue entered the moist warmth of her mouth, he felt a burning sensation begin to build in his stomach. He immediately intensified the kiss. His tongue and mouth were demanding that hers pay homage to him. Hermione kissed him deeply, and her hand left his cheek to move down to his chest. He growled when he felt her fingers delicately graze his bare chest through the opened top buttons on his shirt. This gave him the incentive to do a little exploring as well. The arm that was around her body to keep her close went lax as his hand moved down to grope her well-rounded arse. His other hand left her cheek and fell to her breast. "Oh," she moaned as his fingers brushed her hardening nipple. After a few minutes of fondling and kissing, Severus realized that somehow they'd managed to lie down together. Hermione was beneath him and, to his approval, responding eagerly. Pulling away from her lips, he studied her face.

Finally, her eyes opened for him again. Each was oblivious to the storm still raging all around them. When she smiled shyly, he smiled back. "Hermione, are you all right

with this?"

"Yes."

"I want to do things to you, with you. I need you," he said seductively.

"Yes."

Severus wondered what the hell had happened to her normal chatter. "Yes?"

"Anything for you, Severus," she said, bringing her lips up to meet his for another scorching kiss.

Those words of agreement, and the underlying proclamation, put Severus into action. He would have her right there. Out in the open, during a raging storm, in their small, yet cozy cavern, he would have her.

Shit! Damn! He suddenly remembered the last time he had been naked at the waist with her. He had charmed his bits to be larger than normal. Severus had fixed that as soon as she had left, but he'd forgotten to charm away the blasted mark on his inner thigh. The only thing that he had there was a faint scar, but he'd embellished it to look like an hourglass shaped birthmark in hopes of throwing her off of his true identity should she ever see him naked. How could he have forgotten that? He moved back. "I need to... relieve myself," he said with a blush. "I shall not be long."

Severus moved further down and lowered his trousers to pretend he was urinating. The slight foliage hid him enough to where she could not actually see what he was doing. He pointed his wand at the mark and with a whisper, he felt the color and size melt away. He looked down. Ah. Only the little scar was left. She'd never put this together. Smugly, he began to fasten his pants again. A thought occurred to him. Why fasten them? He was about to take them off anyway. He simply pulled them off, leaving only his underpants. With his trousers draped over his arm, he walked back to his beloved. Severus nearly fainted.

Hermione's fingers trembled as she unbuttoned her blouse. She left it open and began to unfasten her denim shorts. When she unzipped them, she let them fall to the stone floor. She heard a male gasp, and she looked up to meet Severus' eyes. Had she made a mistake? Why was he staring at her knickers? "I thought it would be okay," said Hermione nervously. She noticed that his trousers were gone as well. His pale, lean, slightly hairy legs were bare for her to see. They were great! Lord, he had big feet. She smiled. They'd had the same idea. If he'd undressed, then it was fine that she had.

"It's perfect," he said, dropping his trousers and walking forward in what appeared to be a daze. His lips met hers for a burning kiss, and his hands dipped into her open blouse. One snaked around to hold her at the small of her back while the other found its way to her silkily clad breast.

She moaned into his mouth. Her eager fingers made their way to his buttons on his shirt. She pulled the first one loose and made for the second one.

This time he had to stifle a yelp, for when she'd pulled the button through its hole, she'd pulled out a chest hair.

Taking his movement to mean he approved, she carried on.

He decided to unfasten her bra. It was one of those sneaky fasten in the front types. Had his sharp eyes not seen the clasp between her breasts, he would have probably been fumbling around on her back like an unpracticed boy. Again, he had to muffle a yelp as a hair was caught with the button she'd unfastened. Breaking the kiss, he stilled her hands with his own. Looking into her eyes intently, he unbuttoned the remaining buttons with crafty precision. Unabashedly, he shrugged out of his shirt and let it fall to the ground. This left only his now tenting boxer shorts on his body.

He reached out to pull off her shirt. It fell easily. Next, his hands moved to the strap on her left shoulder. He pulled it down to her elbow before moving to the right side to repeat his actions. Severus cupped one breast and firmly pulled the fabric away, taking care to brush her needy nipples as he did so. The bra fell down to mix with their other clothing. "Now we're even," he whispered, bringing his lips to her neck to suckle on her flesh.

Hermione bit her lip. This man knew exactly how to make her excited. She didn't want to meet his eyes. What if he didn't like her naked body? Did she compare to Lonnie? As Severus found the little niche behind her earlobe, she whimpered slightly, and her body plastered to his. She gasped as she felt his erection jutting into her stomach. "I'm just a wee bit randy," said Severus, chuckling lightly. "You are so beautiful. You always do this to me. Every time I ..." Blast! He'd almost given himself away about spying on her! "...look at your lovely face and figure, I want you."

This declaration made Hermione feel better. So, he didn't find her body too thick or oddly shaped. He accepted her as she was. He was staring at her expectantly. Was she supposed to tell him the same? For some reason, that didn't sit well with her. She could just see the sneer on his face if she told him he was lovely. "Thanks," she said meekly. "If it's any consolation, you make my pulse quicken when you are near. For a while now."

What would Libertine tell her to do right now? Make the move. Touch him. Right then. She tipped her head up to kiss his lips softly while her hand glided down his chest to his back and over his bum. Giving his cheek a tight squeeze had her feeling even more excited. This was Severus. They were only wearing their shreds. They were going to make love... finally.

Severus quickly pulled her down with him onto the floor. The Cushioning Charm was still working, thank Merlin, and he laid her on her back while he covered her body with his. "Hermione, you do know that I am about to make you mine, don't you? If we do this, I'll not ever think of you as anything other than belonging to me. I won't tolerate any Weasleys hanging about. Can you deal with that? Are you prepared?"

She felt like he already possessed her. No Weasley or any other man would tempt her the way he did, but she wouldn't feel completely good about this if she didn't ask one question. "Will you abandon all others and belong to me only?" In that moment, lightning flashed just behind them. The beauty of Severus Snape's face looming over her with a crackling storm raging behind him would forever be etched in her mind.

"Yes," he hissed before capturing her lips with his.

*Ha! Take that, Lonnie! He's mine!* What was that feeling? He was sort of grinding against her, and his penis was rubbing against her sex. They both had thin clothing shielding their private areas, but she could still feel him rubbing against her. And it felt bloody brilliant. One hand propped his body over hers, one was administering pleasure to her breasts, his mouth was torturing her neck area, and his hard penis was gliding over her crux.

Experiencing all the sensations at once had her writhing beneath him. "Oh, good Lord, Severus, what are you doing to me?"

"I'm getting you ready for me." He began nibbling and suckling her more forcefully. His thumb and index finger were teasing her hard nipple. "I'm going to remove our underwear, Hermione."

She nodded and ached for him to return when he scooted away to reach for his wand. With two small swishes, she felt the wild breeze hitting her bare skin completely. It was an odd feeling, really. To be naked in the stormy elements with her lover was an exciting experience. Severus slid back over her, positioning himself between her legs. He licked his way up from her stomach to her breasts while his fingers played with her sensitive nub and lightly delved into her waiting wetness.

"It's... that feels really good," she mumbled nearly incoherently.

"There are so many things I want to do to you, love. We have all weekend. Everything I have ever thought about doing to you, we shall do. I'm going to make you a woman in this moment, Hermione. My woman. Our first time may not be as pleasant as I would like, for either of us, but I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you." With that said, his mouth found hers, and the hand that had been between them moved his hard shaft just over her crux. He began rolling the tip of his penis back and forth, round and round.

These feelings began developing rapidly. Waves of something seemed to be coming for her mind, trying to take her over. She could feel some wetness leaking off of him onto her. It felt... pleasant. "Oh... aah..." She moaned loudly. He paused for a moment, and she reflexively slapped his back.

"Ow! What was that for?" She'd bloody hit him!

"Why did you stop?" she asked hotly, panting in frustration. "Something was... happening!"

"It sounded like I was hurting you," he said curtly. All of a sudden, he grinned devilishly. "You liked that, did you?" She nodded, and he began again.

Almost immediately, the feelings started building. This must be an orgasm! She felt her sex being breached. Hermione kept her eyes closed tightly. She couldn't believe she was having sex and liking it! It didn't even hurt!

Hermione didn't realize that her nails were scraping across his back; nor did she notice that one leg had possessively clamped over one of his. "Severus, oh my... yes," she said in a high-pitched tone.

"Come for me," he whispered in her ear. At her moaning, his mouth clamped over hers. Severus felt as if he was feeding off of her sensuous energy released through her erotic cries of bliss. It took sheer strength of willpower to keep from coming along with her. Her cries sounded so enticing. He felt her insides clamping around his finger and felt the digit become soaked with bodily fluids as she came for him.

*She's so tight. If she feels this good just to my finger, imagine how she will feel once I am entrenched inside of her!* Her pleasure convulsions began subsiding, so he slowed his rubbing while removing his finger. He'd never rubbed the head of his cock on a woman to make her come before, but he couldn't help the need to do this. He wanted to feel her orgasm as intimately as possible. Her half lidded eyes opened, and she smiled lazily. He smiled back and kissed her nose.

Unable to resist, he brought his finger to his lips and sucked her wetness off of it. He growled. Hermione was delectable, and he had to be one with her. Immediately. "I need to be inside of you," he said darkly. She was extremely wet and ready. He knew that he wouldn't have much trouble sliding in to claim what was his.

"Hmmm?" Wasn't he just in there? They'd just had an orgasm. Or, at least, she had. Her first of many. How could he have said that her first time might not be all that pleasurable? He was moving just a bit, and she felt him probing at her entrance again.

"I want to see you. Open your eyes," he commanded softly. Her eyes opened. He moved his hand down to be sure that he was positioned perfectly. Tipping his head into her folds at the perfect angle, he said, "Put both legs around my waist."

She mumbled a lazy agreement, moving her limp limbs to weakly clamp onto him. *Orgasms sure did use up much of a girl's energy!*

Severus pulled back and plunged in deeply, tearing her maidenhood away with one stroke. Hermione's eyes widened, and she howled with pain or surprise. He couldn't be sure which. "It'll get better. It's best to push in all at once, love."

"I thought..." She felt like a pillock! "Didn't you just...?"

It dawned on Severus that she thought they'd had just had sex. His naïve lover had much to learn. Her tight canal hugged him snugly. Severus probably should have waited, should have made her first time be in their comfortable bed. He pulled all the way out slowly and inched back in gently, never removing his eyes from hers. She was stretching to accommodate his girth, and her warm wetness was like a beacon inviting him home. Her legs tightened around him almost painfully. Hermione's back had arched just a little. "Are you all right, Hermione?" She nodded. "You felt ready for me. So hot and wet. I needed to be inside of you."

She tangled her hands in his hair and pulled his face down to hers for a kiss. When he pulled away, she didn't move her hands. "Keep your eyes on me," she whispered bravely, nudging her pelvis upward into his.

With a light groan, he pulled out again and slid in more quickly.

"Oh."

"All right, Hermione?"

"Yes."

Severus set a slow pace at first, allowing her to move with him. In her eyes, he saw awe, pleasure, acceptance, and, dare he dream, love? Never in his life had he been so gentle with a lover. He fit perfectly within her. Every inch of him was pulled into her depth while his thick girth was ensnared securely. Somehow this woman had bewitched him completely. He could feel the burning ache for release beginning to build up. Quickening his pace, he was pleased that she was keeping up, stroke for stroke. He slid his hand between them, and his little temptress twitched and arched into him provocatively. He had to come, and he wanted to take her along with him. Sliding one finger between them, he played with her sensitive spot once again as he quickened his strokes.

"It's coming back," she murmured, closing her eyes.

He wanted to tell her to open her eyes, but only a groan escaped his lips. He pounded into her rapidly, guiding their way to a peak. "Good God, Hermione!" he exclaimed as a rather large wave of climax hit him. This, along with his practiced ministrations, brought a squeal of delight from her lips. He began to feel a deep quaking from within just as his seed began spilling into her to mingle with her scorching womanly juices. Together they rocked, moaned, and climaxed. Their eyes met and locked, as did their lips. He lay over her for a long while after, trying to see into her soul. "You are beautiful. You are mine."

"I am yours, Severus, but you are also mine." She moved a bit, noting he was not as hard as he had been. "I feel sticky."

He raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Really now?"

"Don't you... feel that?" She moved again, feeling his penis twitch within her. It would never cease to amaze her how men's *things* could move about like they had minds of their own.

"Keep that moving up, and we'll never get back to the room. I think I could take you again," he growled seductively, nuzzling her neck. He looked up and saw that the storm had blown over. The murky sea looked a bit brown. There was only a light drizzle. "I have an idea," he said quietly, pulling away from her. He scooped her up before she had a chance to protest. "The sea will wash us off and soothe you." He waded out into the bay until the water was at his chest.

She was holding onto him as if her life depended on it. He wondered if she was frightened, but decided not to mention it. Severus didn't mind her body clinging to his. He reached down to cup her mound and moved a finger into her. As expected, she gasped and moved against it.

"It hurts a little," she said.

"I'm going to be gentle. I'll just move it a bit and stretch you. The salty, soothing sea will clean us and heal you, love." She put her head on his shoulder and opened her legs, wrapping them around him slightly.

It didn't take long for his finger to start delving deeper into her and more rapidly. To her surprise, it didn't hurt as much. She only whimpered slightly when he added a second finger. She opened her mouth to allow her tongue to reach out and lick his throat. She heard his slight gasp. Emboldened, she traced a slight path along his neck, nibbling and sucking along the way. One hand clung to his neck, but the other traveled down to his midsection. She grinned when she felt his completely hard erection.

Briefly, she thought of Libertine. They were nearly the same size, though Severus did feel a little bigger. She slid her hand lower to cup his bollocks. They were definitely smaller than Libertine's, but felt perfectly rounded. Remembering Libertine's instructions, she gripped her lover firmly and began moving up and down to return the favor he was bestowing on her.

Severus sucked in a deep breath. Good Lord! She'd remembered her lesson well. If she kept this up, he would spill again. He was glad to know that she had only done this with him. Her movements were so precise; he would have wondered where she'd learned it otherwise. The quicker and deeper his fingers maneuvered her flesh, the quicker and firmer her strokes would be. He could take no more. "I want to be in you."

"How? In the water?"

"Like this," he said, pulling her over his waiting shaft. "Ease onto me. Do it at your own pace, love."

"All right," she said softly, cheeks reddening.

He felt her hand guiding him into her. He had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from plowing into her. Once he was sheathed all the way in, they both moved slowly.

"It feels odd. Good, but odd." She had one hand around his neck, the other on his back, and her legs firmly wrapped around him to ensure that she had a grip on him. Hermione began moving quicker, and she felt something different welling up inside of her. It was that same feeling, yet a different type. Trying to chase the feeling, she began moving with wild abandon. Severus gladly moved with her, but he allowed her to lead him.

He couldn't believe his shy, naïve, little witch had relaxed so much with him to be completely comfortable and free with him. The Libertine lessons had been a benefit to both of them. If making love to her always felt this way, then he could envision a long and happy life with her at his side. "Oh, yes," he groaned as she rotated her hips to grind down in swift, circular motions.

"Ooh... yes... Severus!"

He felt her entire body trembling, and her insides squeezed him, coaxing his semen out. His body complied as he came with her.

"Hermione," he whispered into her ear. He held her and allowed the slight waves to push them back towards the shore. Lazily, they crawled onto the sand, still partially in the water. Each had spent a great amount of energy in a little time. Her eyes were closed, and a small smile played at her lips. Severus propped himself up on one elbow to watch her. Strands of wet, salted hair were plastered to her face. He brushed them away and began kissing her cheeks. It seemed that she had dozed off.

All of his dreams were finally coming true. Hermione was no longer a fantasy. She was a reality. He told her that she would belong to him if they consummated their relationship, and she had agreed. She had even told him that he was hers as well. He wondered if she was on the potion. Dare he worry on it? Before he would never have cared. Anything to have her. To trap her. To keep her. That had all changed now that he knew he had a future with her. He wanted time to enjoy her, to build a solid relationship before they had children, if ever.

He would have to ask her about it. As Libertine, he had told her that the wizard handled that, but that was when he'd intended to do what he had to do to bond himself with her somehow. It felt... dishonest to trick her now. Severus lifted the exhausted witch in his arms and carried her back to their little cavern. With his wand, he used magic to dry them and to put their clothes back on. He also cleaned up the slight mess that their first coupling had left behind. He decided to conjure a makeshift mattress, lie down, and hold her closely.

Nearly an hour later, Severus was awoken by soft kisses being placed on his throat.

"Hi," she said shyly.

"Hi," he said silkily. "Nice rest?"

"Mmmm hmmm," she said. "You?"

"Nice everything."

She blushed prettily. "I wonder if we've missed the conference."

"Hell, what conference?" It was true. He didn't care about the ruddy thing. His sole purpose of this trip was to spend time with her anyway.

Hermione giggled. "Are you hungry?"

As if on cue, his stomach growled. "I suppose that I could eat. Would you object to a hot meal in front of our cozy fire? A little wine, perhaps?"

It sounded so romantic. Who would have thought that Severus Snape had this side to him? "I would like that. I would also like to wash the sea off of me in that fabulous waterfall shower in our room."

"I will be tempted to join you," he admitted, leaning over to kiss her lips.

"Severus?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"What happens now?"

"What do you want to happen?"

"I want whatever you want... maybe."

"Maybe?" A long pause. "Hermione?"

"What if I want more than you are willing to give?"

"Impossible."

"Is it, Severus? What do you want then?"

"Everything. For always."

"All right. Let's take this weekend to learn all that we can about each other. We'll see if we are meant to be." She hugged him closely. "I would like for always as well."

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That night as Severus slept, Hermione thought about all that had happened. After they'd roused earlier, they'd come back to the room and showered together. There was no lovemaking, only long, languid kisses. He'd surprised her by washing her body and hair. He'd allowed her to wash him in return. She would have made love with him again in the shower if he had asked, but there was no rush. They had three nights to enjoy each other. After the shower, he'd dried her hair and brushed it for her. They had

helped each other to dress before sauntering off to the living area where he had ordered their dinner. The evening couldn't have been more perfect.

She was sure that Severus knew her entire life story. He'd asked so many questions. It hadn't gone unnoticed by Hermione that he'd only answered some questions about his past before deftly changing the subject. She supposed that those answers would come at some point in the future.

It wasn't until after they'd made love long after their dinner, and until Severus had fallen asleep, that she'd thought about Libertine. Where was he? Who was he? Would he find as much happiness as she had hopefully found with Severus? She hoped so. She may not truly know him, but he deserved to be happy. *Poor bloke.*

Libertine and Severus had so many similarities. Both were gentle yet firm. Their bodies were very similar in build, and their hair was nearly the same length. Libertine's hair had been altered by magic though. He'd told her that he'd changed it. She wondered what his true length and color was. Would he have silky, fine, black hair like her lover? Messy brown hair like Harry? Both men had large... penises. Severus' was bigger though, but it could be that she was biased. And, having had a better look, his bollocks were cuter than Libertine's. Hermione narrowed her eyes. Severus had a small, white scar on his inner thigh. Libertine had a large, dark birthmark shaped like an hourglass on his inner thigh. She tried to remember exactly where the mark was on her gigolo, but all she could see was Severus' tiny scar. She shrugged her shoulders. Who cared?

Hermione wondered about Lonnie. She could probably try to find her. She didn't want to talk to the woman, but she would like to see what she looked like, to see if she was possibly lacking in any way. Eventually, Severus would likely tell her the entire truth about his past and his many women. This only bothered Hermione slightly. He belonged to her now. He'd promised that no other would come between them. He wanted everything with her, for always. In her eyes, that meant love even though the words had not been spoken. It could be that her lover had become just as attached to her prior to this little rendezvous as she with him.

Everything. For always. His words. She would cherish them forever. She pushed all thoughts of his ex-lovers out of her mind. They were before her. There was no use making a big deal out of something she couldn't change. He'd had a life before her, as had she. Her sex life hadn't been much, but she had paid a man to see her. She'd even given the man an orgasm through the assistance of her hands. She certainly didn't want to answer for that, so she would leave the past just where it was. In the past. *For now.*

Weekend: Part Two

Chapter 12 of 17

Severus and Hermione look around the city for a bit, but this is mostly a lemon chapter.

Disclaimer: All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!

***** SS ***** HG *****

She was even beautiful when she slept. It was nearly noon, and she hadn't stirred for a few hours. Severus smirked. He must have exhausted her with his vigorous lovemaking. To be quite honest, the third time he'd taken her the previous night had left him tired. He'd not slept so peacefully in years. Just having her near, breathing in her intoxicating scent, allowed him to feel relaxed. He didn't have to peek under the sheet to see his naked erection. He could feel it, and if she would be awake, she'd be able to feel it digging into her bare bum.

Pulling his hand away from her breast where it had been for the last twenty minutes, he moved it up to her face. He'd already been up, gone to the loo, showered, and even had some coffee. Severus was becoming impatient. He wanted his Hermione to wake. He wanted to claim her body again. Would he ever get enough of her? He'd had her three times the day before. How many would it be this day? He'd been fantasizing for months about her. How it would be for them. The positions they would be in.

Severus pulled his hand away from her throat. He'd always imagined possessing her, and now other things were coming to mind. Them lying about in front of a fire reading, grading essays, or just talking. Both of them having a walk in the morning around the lake, and maybe he would even put his feet in the water while she swam. He would, of course, be on the look out for any prats in Invisibility Cloaks or spying eyes. Now, he thought of her stomach swollen with his child. Damn! He'd forgotten to ask her about a pregnancy potion. He'd have to broach that subject as soon as possible.

As he pondered this, Hermione began moving. She turned over to burrow into his chest. He could feel her naked breasts crushed against him as one leg draped over his. Her heat began to burn into his hip. Had she been a long time lover, he would have slid a hand down to wake her pleasantly, but it was a new day. They were new lovers, and he was uncertain if she would awaken with any regrets. He prayed not. Severus had never felt this way about a woman before. His woman. Always. She had admitted that she wanted him as well. Trying to at least portray the gentleman, he said, "Hermione, wake up, love. Forenoon is passing us by." Something that sounded like a growl was his only response. He bent down to kiss her forehead. "Do you always laze about on Saturdays?"

"Mmmm hmmm," she murmured.

"How do you feel?" He lazily traced a finger along the soft skin at her side, hoping she would get the hint.

"I hurt," she replied, still not raising her head. "I think maybe a bath would help sooth the pain in my...er...you know, down there."

"Would you be disappointed in me if I told you that I brought along a particular potion that soothes maidenly problems? I also have a little cream." He pulled back in hopes that she would look at him. She did not. He was right. She would be embarrassed about their coupling, even after they'd done it three times. Was it simply a spur of the moment thing? No, she'd wanted it. He had no choice but to give her time.

"I'm glad you had the foresight to bring them along. I'll have some please," she said, pulling away. When she turned her face towards his, a slight pink blush stained her cheeks. "H-have you been up long?"

"Yes," he said, smirking at his lover. "I wake early on all days of the week. It was a bit...unsettling that you slept in."

"Well, nobody asked you to lay about with me. You could have gone to seek out your ingredients, right?" She smirked this time, raising her eyebrow.

"Snarky little wench," he said, sneering at her. "Been around me for just over a day and picking up on my habits. Tsk. Tsk. Your fan club will be disappointed."

"Bugger them."

"I most certainly will not," he replied dryly. "I'll be back in a moment."

"Hurry back," she whispered after he walked out. How could he just get up as if it didn't matter that he had nothing on? She supposed that was a bit stupid. They'd made love three times the previous day. They'd seen each other's bodies, practically memorized them in actuality. She could be just as mature about this as he could. She, too, would pretend as if her nakedness didn't shame her. Apparently, he approved of her body. He had told her over and over again. She pulled back the duvet to sit up nonchalantly.

Severus paused only briefly upon seeing her sitting up in the bed. Her entire upper body was exposed, and she was biting that damn luscious lip again. He quickly decided to act as if nothing was amiss. The more comfortable she was, then the easier things would progress. He slid in next to her, not bothering to cover his naked bits. "Drink this. It's for any pain you might be having." She took the small vial and drank from it. Hermione grimaced only slightly. "Now, I shall have to apply this paste for you since I can see exactly where you may need it." Her eyes widened. He could see her internal debate.

"Er... all right then," she agreed, sliding the duvet down. Severus could have licked his lips at the sight of her womanly lower body. He reached out a steady hand to prod her legs. She parted them slightly.

"Just a bit more, love," he coaxed. Averting her eyes, she obeyed and gave him free access. He saw a small tear near the bottom. He lightly touched just next to it. "Just near here?"

"Yes. It felt like something ripped," she admitted.

He wanted to tell her that it had, but he didn't want her to imagine something horrific or to be turned off. He had to repress the urge to lower his face and soothe her little wound with his tongue. "This," he said, as he rubbed in the salve, "will heal that up for you, but I'm afraid it may happen again. We weren't all that rough...the first couple of times. Your body will learn to accept me and stretch accordingly."

"Okay," she said, closing her legs and forcing him to retreat. She clutched the duvet to pull it up, but something caught her eye. It was a small reddish stain on the sheet. "Is that...?"

Severus nodded and did a quick cleaning spell. "That's probably the last of it, love. Don't feel bad. It's all new to your body." He leaned over to kiss her cheek. "What would you like to do today?" He wanted to make love again, but there would be time enough for that later.

"Maybe we could visit some of the valleys and old coal mines. Oh!" She gasped excitedly. "I would really like to go visit the Norman keep at Cardiff Castle!"

"Anything you'd like," he said quietly. "I need to talk to a few people about the items that I have need for, but after that, we can allow you to choose how to fill our day."

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"Did you know there are mirrors?"

"What's that?"

"Up there. Above us," she said pointing upward.

Severus looked up and saw their reflections. He grinned. "That will definitely come in handy later. Go have your bath. I'll order us an elevenses to tide us over until later."

"All right, love," she said, using the term of endearment for the first time. He seemed pleased, and she could see the adoration in his eyes. She wanted nothing more than to kiss him, but she felt the need to brush her teeth. She had been sleeping for a long while, after all. "I shan't be long."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"I must say, Severus, you look handsome in Muggle attire."

"I'm quite enjoying that, what did you call it? Oh, yes, a sundress. Quite nice," he said leering at her wickedly. They had placed a Disillusionment Charm on their persons to sneak away from the tourist line within Cardiff Castle. They wanted to do a bit of exploring on their own. Somehow they found their way up to the Rooftop Solarium.

"Oh, look! They keep the plants well watered and lovely. This fountain is just brilliant. I would love to have one, if I ever have my own place!" She splashed her hand in the water playfully. "And, the design is simply brilliant."

"What's so exciting about a castle? We live in one," Severus said with a smirk. He saw that the place was artfully decorated and displayed wealth, but who cared? It was a pile of stones if you asked him about it. Maybe part of him was a bit jealous. He'd once had a grand home when he was younger, but that was before his father had lost nearly everything. They had to move into one of his mother's family properties that had been left to Severus by his maternal grandmother.

"Well, that's different. That's Hogwarts. We are used to it, seeing it each day. When I first went there as a student I was in awe of it." She grinned sweetly. "I grew up in a bit of a small home. My parents were well off, but they didn't like to show it. We lived in a cozy house, only two bedrooms. So, anything an inch larger or nicer attracts me."

Severus smiled inwardly. His little home had four bedrooms, so she would feel as though it was a nicer and larger home. Hearing that, he felt better. "Perhaps you would like to visit my home at some point this holiday. It's not as grand as a Manor, but it is quite comfortable. And, I have a library," he added, knowing that would attract her.

"Yes!" Her eyes were alight with pleasure. "I would love it. I've always wondered what types of books you had in your personal library."

"Well, we can make plans for a visit. If you-" He looked towards the entrance. "Damn. Someone is coming. Come to me." He quickly Disillusioned them and stood flat against a wall. *Shit!* It was the ruddy tour group. Luckily, the berks all went straight across to the fountain to have a look. Hermione and Severus were able to slink off undetected. They made their way down a few different corridors and snuck into a partially opened door.

"It's lovely," Hermione cooed. Severus narrowed his eyes. What the hell? "A nursery. Look at the little fairytale scenes. Don't you just love it?"

"Why does a rude witch belong in a child's room? It's enough to give her nightmares!" Severus said. The painting showed a hateful woman towering over a smaller, pretty girl.

"Oh, that's an evil stepmother trying to cow her beautiful stepdaughter. It's a fairytale scene, Severus. Didn't you ever read any when you were younger?"

"No," he said curtly.

She pursed her lips. "Well, I suppose they are mostly Muggle tales. Aren't there any Wizarding tales?"

"I suppose."

"Well, if you ever have children, you don't expect to read a bit of *Potions Today* to them each night, do you?"

"Hermione, that reminds me," Severus began, eying her warily. "Are you on the potion?"

"I took the bit you gave me this morning for my discomfort," she said immediately. "Should we have brought some more for me to take?"

"No, Hermione, the potion," he said, gesturing with his hands. "Pregnancy potion?"

She paled. She'd forgotten to see Madame Pomfrey. They'd had sex three times! "Severus, I thought on it, honestly, just in case we made love, but I completely let it slip my mind. I am sorry."

"When we get back to our room, I could cast the Conceptus Annihilus Charm if you'd like." He looked away. Damn! Why didn't they have this talk before? This was his doing. He'd purposely led her to believe that the male was in charge of birth prevention. She had thought about going to see Poppy, but it had slipped her mind.

"Severus, no. Doesn't that make my cycle start straightaway, killing anything that may have been created?" she asked, clearly horrified. "My cycle will be here soon enough, thanks, and if a child happens to have been conceived, I don't want to harm it. It's our fault. Both of us."

"Fair enough. What of today and tomorrow? Will we not...?"

She smirked. So, he was worried that she wouldn't want to make love without a potion. "Couldn't we look in the town for a Pregnancy Potion? If something has been conceived, it wouldn't likely be harmed by it. Not this early on."

"I'm not sure if I would trust some of these locals. We can look though. Until then, come here," he said, holding out his hand. She had given him a most beautiful answer. If they had conceived, she would want it! He moved his lips to hers and parted her lips with his tongue, delving into her warm mouth. His hand slid down to her perky breast. Breaking the kiss he said, "I think I've had enough sightseeing for now. We've been here for four hours. The only thing I want to see is you." He didn't allow her to respond; he simply pulled her to him for another scorching kiss and Apparated them out of the castle.

"Where are we?" she asked, shakily.

"You wanted to have a walk through a valley. I found this path the last time I had business here. I thought it quite nice," he said, pulling her hand into his and walking forward.

"Well, wait a minute. You just said that you..." Hermione flushed. "We can do this later. I'm a bit tired and could use a shower."

"Indeed?"

"Yes," she said softly. "I think you could use a shower as well."

"Very well," he said, pulling her to him. CRACK! He began to undress quickly when she stopped him.

"Let me do it, Severus," she said softly. He nodded and cringed inwardly. He hoped she wouldn't pull out any more chest hair. "I want to know if I am doing this right, okay? Please, tell me."

"You're not practicing on me to please another lucky wizard, are you?" he joked. Her eyes shot up and narrowed slightly before widening. He noted the blush creeping into her cheeks. *Shit!* Libertine. He didn't realize how close to home that comment would hit. He hoped she wouldn't dwell on his comment for long. He didn't need her to find out about his stint as a gigolo. Ever.

"Of course not," she said, sounding guilty. "I, uh, well, I am practicing for you. I wouldn't pay anyone to help me."

This was too fun to pass up. "Pay?" he asked incredulously. "I'm not being paid for this. I am doing this for free. I want to make love to you. I want to seduce you. I want to be inside of you. Seriously, you act like you have a hired man on your mind." He chuckled easily as if nothing was amiss. He saw her suck in a deep breath and swallow hard.

She laughed lightly, but he could tell it was a fake laugh. "Of course not. You're always on my mind," she admitted. "Kiss me." He lowered his mouth to meet her rising one, and she kissed him with such abandon that he'd forgotten nearly what they had been talking about. Of course, that was probably her point. *Poor Hermione. I wish I could tell you the truth, but you would never forgive me, love.* Her little fingers unbuttoned his Muggle shirt with ease, as if she'd been doing it all along. The trousers he had on required no belt, so she simply slid those down. He supposed he'd ordered the wrong size. Things were sized differently for Muggles. At least for him. His clothes were always tailored. He'd had to wear enough ill fitting clothes after his father had ruined their family name when he was younger. The moment he began making his own money, he bought nice things. Sometimes he'd had to wear the same clothes for a few days in a row just to make his clothes last longer.

"Severus," Hermione breathed. "I can't begin to tell you how sexy you look in these dark blue briefs." She slid all the way down with his pants, kissing his thighs as she went. "Kick off your shoes, please." He did as she commanded. To his surprise, she quickly took his socks off and slid up his body, rubbing her still fully clothed one against it provocatively. She kissed his cheek before stepping back. Her eyes never left his as she reached down to pull the dress over her head, leaving her clad in only her knickers and sandals. She kicked those off, crooked a finger to Severus, and strode towards the bathroom. He wasted no time following her. She turned on the water, and it came cascading down, sounding much like a true waterfall. Hermione slid off her knickers, but he could still discern the slight blush creeping into her cheeks.

Without waiting for him, she stepped backwards under the water. Severus sucked in a breath. "Little water nymph," he mumbled, casting off his uncomfortable underwear to join her. His lips immediately sought hers. Their kiss didn't last as long as he would have liked. Between the water splashing over their faces and the battling of their tongues, it was hard to breathe.

Hermione's hands slid around his neck to pull him closer. "I love how it feels to be held by you. I feel...safe, wanted."

"You are most wanted," he said lowering his head to kiss her again. As they kissed, he backed her into the wall. "I want you now," he murmured. He reached down to knead her rounded bottom for a moment before lifting her up. "Put your legs around me." He began kissing her again as he positioned them more comfortably against the wall. A finger probing into her wetness showed him that she was ready for him. "I'm going to be slow, love." He moved his throbbing head just into her before looking into her eyes. He pushed in ever so slowly. "Do you know how many times I have showered and wished to be doing exactly this to you?"

She moaned and arched forward, causing him to slip in further. "Do it then. You don't have to be slow. Don't hold back," she said tightening her grip on him and the wall. *Don't hold back! Did she know what she was allowing?* He pulled out slightly and gave her a sharp upward thrust. It made her shriek. "Again," she said boldly. He repeated his action a bit more forcefully. Hermione shrieked again and arched further into him. "Again!" He repeated his deep, hard thrusts over and over again until they were both panting. The very instant he felt her quivering from within, she yelled, "God Severus! Don't stop."

He grunted and pounded into her as quickly and solidly as he could until he joined her. "Hermione," he called out. "So fucking good." Completely spent, he slid to the floor with her as he kissed her. He'd exerted a good bit of energy in only a few short moments. What the bloody hell was wrong with his stamina? His staying power had never suffered before. Once he entered her and felt her moist heat, he could feel the urge to climax, and he would do it right away if he didn't hold back. Maybe it was the fact that no other woman had been as responsive as her, fit him as snugly, or allowed him to possess her heart and body at the same time. Whatever it was, he never wanted it to end. He hoped that he hadn't gotten too carried away with her. She would likely be tender again.

Severus watched her as she kneeled over him, and she began lathering up his body, not missing an inch. The moment she would lather it, some spray from the flowing fountain would begin to wash it away. She washed her own body, and it excited him again. Seeing her hands move over her own breasts, stomach, and crux had him wanting to reach out to stroke her. Hermione quickly worked in some of her Muggle shampoo into her hair and also into his. She pulled him up under the full force of the spray. In moments, they were soap and lather free.

Hermione had never been surer about anything in her life. This was so right. This man would never hurt her. He adored her. She could see it in his eyes, and she could

feel it in his touch. Nothing that she could do in his eyes would make him think less of her. *Except hiring a man to teach you about sex.* Feeling quite brave, she brought her lips up to taste his freshly washed neck. She could still taste a bit of the soap on him, but she didn't care. This was her Severus. She licked his throat and suckled him languorously. There would be no rushing. They had the rest of the day to do what needed to be done. Her lips drifted down while she traced a droplet of water. Once her mouth neared one of his flat nipples, she forgot about the tiny droplet and encircled his nipple with her tongue. She heard him groan and could even feel him hardening against her stomach. She puckered her lips and sucked firmly. He groaned again. She was still suckling as she pulled away to go to the other one, making a loud popping noise. "Oops," she said and began laughing. He chuckled as well, but all laughter was lost once her lips descended upon his other nipple.

Hermione lowered herself onto her knees, as being half bent over was an awkward position. Unfortunately, this brought her eye level with his erection. She wanted to taste him. "Severus, um...is it acceptable...can I?"

She saw it bounce with anticipation as he hissed a quiet, "Yes." She steadied herself by placing one hand on his waist, and the other cradled him. Not wanting to draw it out any longer, she licked the tip and felt it lurch happily. She giggled.

"What's so funny?" he asked, nearly breathless.

"It's cute," she said.

"Cute?" She could hear the sneer in his voice and didn't bother to look up to see it.

"Yes. I think it-oh!" He playfully pushed into her open mouth. Severus could feel her laughter vibrating through his member. Hermione tried to suck all of him into her mouth, but she only ended up choking.

"All right?" he asked, looking down with a raised eyebrow. He wished he wouldn't have asked because she deftly pulled her mouth away.

"Got a bit carried away, I think," she admitted. "Did that hurt?"

"Not at all."

"How can I keep my teeth from nicking you?"

Severus nearly fell over remembering the last time an unpracticed wench went down on him. Her teeth had scraped him painfully. Hermione, though, was unpracticed, but she seemed to be smarter than that other pillock. "Just be careful. Keep your mouth parted in just the right way. Concentrate on using your lips and tongue. If you-oh, God!" She'd begun again. Well, she certainly didn't learn this with Libertine! He moaned a few moments later when she moved her lips away only to sigh with pleasure as they found his bollocks. "Hermione," he said softly, reaching down to make her look at him. "Let me take you to bed, love."

She nodded and stood. He took her hand and led her to the bed. She sat down on the edge, and he kneeled before her, nestling his body between her thighs. "Kiss me," he commanded. She placed her hands on either side of his face to guide his lips to her. The kiss was soft, and she noticed he was swirling his tongue about oddly, though not unpleasantly. A sudden moan escaped her lips as his thumbs played with her aroused nipples. Good God, he was good! Severus broke the kiss, nuzzled her neck lovingly for a few minutes, eliciting more moans from her. His hands stroked her body gently as his mouth worked down to her breasts. He took note that she seemed more responsive if he nibbled on the underneath of each mound. His mouth traveled back up to hers for a searing kiss. Severus expertly maneuvered her to lie on her back, leaving her legs dangling over the bed on either side of his body.

He licked his way down to her thighs. At once, he buried his face in her thatch of soft curls. He loved the taste and scent of Hermione. Using tongue and fingers, he parted and lapped at her inner flesh hungrily. He could hear her whimpers and moans. Severus loved her voice. Where it used to annoy the hell out of him, he longed to hear it now, longed to have her speak his name, and longed to hear her crying out in pleasure. When his tongue found her nub, she cried out excitedly and clawed at his hair. The more he laved, the more she arched into his face. "Sev...er...us...! Do-don't st-stop! Oh my God!" She cried out louder and more passionately than any woman he'd ever been with. Her entire body trembled. His tongue trailed down into her folds to lick up any bit of her trying to seep out. *I wonder if I could live off of her* he thought idly, standing up just enough to pull her onto the bed completely.

"Look up and watch me, love. Watch us," he whispered. He saw her eyes look up and lock on the mirror above. In one swift movement, he plunged into her smooth wetness. "Ungh," he grunted. Entering her would never cease to amaze him. He would always be in awe of the fact that she wanted him there. Him and no other. Writhing, grinding, and pumping were his only concerns for the moment. His appetite needed craving. Only Hermione could satisfy him in this way. There would never be another woman for him. He could hear her saying his name over and over like a mantra as he slammed into her repeated. Without thinking, he lifted one of her legs to rest it on his shoulder. "Good Lord," he said as he felt her claws digging into his back. "My Hermione. My Hermione. Mine. Mine. Mione. My Mione." Shuddering violently, he came, feeling as if he were pouring a piece of his soul into her. Her leg eased down, and he collapsed on top of her ungracefully, kissing anything within reach. "I love you," he whispered. He heard a sharp intake of breath and only realized at that moment what he'd said. Damn! *Too much, too soon maybe.* He could honestly say that he loved her. On some level. He wasn't in love with her, but he could be...very easily.

"I think I love you as well." She smiled and looked into his eyes. "I know I do." They shared a long, passionate kiss, as if to seal their declarations to each other. Exhausted, they lay in each other's arms talking about anything and everything. She noticed that he was talking more and more about his own childhood and younger years.

"Damn," Severus bellowed long after, startling her from looming sleep.

"What's wrong, love?" she asked drowsily.

"We forgot a trip to the Apothecary," he said, looking abashed. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I should have thought about that."

"Well, tomorrow we will get some, and we will be more careful until we are ready for that sort of thing," she said with a shrug, leaning her head back onto his shoulder.

"Until we are ready?" he questioned, trying to shift to see her expression.

"Yes. Do you not want children? A marriage? All of that? You know, when people love each other, that happens eventually," she said, completely horrified that she'd said anything in the first place. Blast!

"You would want all of that with me?"

"Yes."

"Very well. I never thought a witch would ask me to marry her," he said wryly. "Where is my engagement ring?"

"You scamp," she said, swatting his arm. "Go to sleep, and keep your cheeky comments to yourself."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Severus?" Hermione asked after they'd gotten back from their trip to the cliff overlooking the sea. It was already their final night in their cottage. Most of their day had been spent hiking, swimming, and making love. They'd just gone for a moonlit walk along the breezy cliff to peacefully watch the rough waters. They made love under the stars, feeling very much part of nature. She couldn't believe how spontaneous Severus was. He hadn't said that he loved her again, but that one time was enough.

"Yes, love?"

"Do we really have to leave this place? It's so beautiful, and I'm afraid that things will change when we go back," she said softly.

"The only thing that will change is that we will be around people."

"Exactly."

"Are you embarrassed about us?" he asked, hoping his uncertainty didn't seep into his voice. She could make or break him with her answer.

"Of course not," she said instantly. "I don't care who knows about us, and I don't give a damn if they don't approve. But, it's you I wonder about. Will you treat me differently in public as opposed to when we are alone?"

Severus shifted uncomfortably. "Hermione, if you are asking if I'll be snogging you whilst we are eating in the Great Hall, the answer is no. If you are asking if I will ever bestow affection on you publicly, such as a small caress, a simple kiss, and the like, then the answer is...hell yes. I will proudly let everyone know that the cleverest witch of the age belongs to me."

She grinned. Many people had called her that. He had never been one of them. "I think I could live without the mealtime snogs. I just didn't know if you'd be worried about what people would think of you for choosing me."

"What of your Weasley friend? Will he not disapprove?"

"Well, he knows already. He didn't say all that much about it. He was more mad that Harry knew before he did," she said, laughing. "Why are you undressing completely?"

"Just in case we feel a bit randy in the morning," he said silkily. She grinned and pulled off her nightie and matching knickers. "You know I picked this out to wear especially for you, and it seems I didn't need it at all."

"It's lovely," he said, lying down. "Come let me hold you and whisper into your ear until you fall asleep."

She slid in next to him. "Severus, where did you get that scar from? The one on your inner thigh?"

He stiffened. Did she suspect something? "It's a long story," he said, wondering what he should tell her.

"We happen to have all night."

"My father...he thought it would be funny to teach me a lesson. He left that mark from a punishment that I had. I have others, but none scarred as much as that one."

Hermione moved away to look down at his lower body. She parted his thighs for just a moment, and she kissed the scar. She could feel his body stiffen. She supposed he didn't like her looking at it, so she moved away. Again she was struck with the odd likeness to Libertine that he shared. "Let me hold you tonight," she said, pulling his head down to her chest, allowing her breasts to be his pillow. "Sweet dreams, lover." She would not make him talk about anything that would hurt him. If they did, it would be his choice, and she would not coerce him as she just did.

***** SS ***** HG *****

A/N: Yay!! My beta is back in town. Whew, I say. I really missed her (not just b/c she helps, she's always a great friend).

I'm sorry if this seems a bit short, but I figured a bit of lemon was in order. And, unfortunately, it is time to get back to the real world. I had a brainstorm this weekend as I've been doodling.

I have such a funny twist as to how she tells him she knows what he 'did' to her. hehehe... That'll be in a couple of chapters. Cheers all! I'll update again asap, as my doll has come home!

Realization

Chapter 13 of 17

A pleasant first couple of days back; Something catches Hermione's attention

Disclaimer: All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!

"It feels so different here in Scotland," Hermione said softly, not releasing his hand. They'd opted to have a walk around the lake before going back into the castle. "It was beautiful there, but the air feels better here. I suppose it's good to be home."

Severus nodded. "It's nearly time for the noon meal, are you hungry?" he asked.

"Not really. I want to unpack and get things straight in my chambers. I left things all over. I'm sure the House Elves didn't touch my clothing," she said with a laugh. "Will you come up this afternoon, or have you other plans for today?"

"I need to store my ingredients that I brought back. That is a job in itself. I'll likely be tied up all afternoon," he said softly.

"Well, Severus, I can come down to help you after I'm done," she said quickly, then added, "if you'd like. I don't want to wear out my welcome."

"You won't," he said immediately. "I wanted to ask, but I was unsure if you would want to." He shrugged and looked almost shy about it.

"We are being ridiculous!" She laughed loudly, pulling him to her for a kiss. "We agreed that nothing need change since we are here. Let's stick to it. We are working on falling in love here! Walk with me inside, and then I'll be down to see you this afternoon."

Immediately after Severus had kissed her and left her at the entrance to her chambers, Ron showed up looking worried. "Quick, let me in," he said.

Hermione wondered what he was about, but she let him follow her in. He immediately looked her over and checked her neck and wrists. "Ron? Er...what the hell...?"

"Charlie said that Snape was a Vampire...really. All that bat stuff is based on the truth. Did he not try to bite you?" Ron asked, eyes wide.

Hermione couldn't believe this. She started laughing loudly. "Don't be so thick, Ron. You, of all people, should know how to detect a Vampire." Hermione crinkled her nose. "What the bloody hell is that smell?"

Ron's face and ears went pink. "Garlic," he said, pulling a handful from his pocket. "Sorry. Wanted to be sure."

"Get out, Ronald," she said impatiently. "If you want to know if I had a good time, just ask. There is no need to lie and bring Charlie into this."

"I'm not telling a lie. He did say it," Ron said, pleading his case. "Er...did you?"

"Did I what?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Have a good time?"

"Yes," she said, smiling inanely. Her mind wondered off, and Ron was about to question her glazed over eyes when she finally spoke again. "I'll try to see you and Harry at the evening meal. I have things to do, and then I have to get down to help Severus with something."

"But, you just got back. Don't you want to take a break from him?" he asked in disbelief.

"No," she said curtly. "Go find Harry to pester."

"Oi, kicking me out, eh? I see how you are. Guess you aren't interested in coming with the rest of us then," he said sulkily.

"Coming where?"

"We're going to The Leaky Cauldron tomorrow night. The staff. Well, most of us. Then we're going to pubhop from place to place after that. Just a bit of fun to celebrate our own end of term freedom." He smiled. "The entire family got together yesterday for dinner to celebrate Draco and Ginny's little one. It was nice."

"Oh, right. Sorry I missed that," she said, escorting him out.

"Mum asked after you," he said, buying more time. His eyes kept darting around the room as if he thought Severus would jump out at him. "Told her you were off with Snape. That's how Charlie found out."

"What did your mum say about that?"

"Said it was nice to see you two find each other. Charlie blew a thatched roof! He said he couldn't believe that you'd choose someone like Snape over him. So, he said that the Vampire in Snape must have hypnotized you," Ron said. "It does seem a bit dumb now, doesn't it?"

Hermione nodded. "I will see if Severus wants to go tomorrow night. No promises," she said. "Off with you!"

"All right. Good grief. No time for your mates anymore, eh?"

"Goodbye."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Poppy? May I have a private word?" Hermione asked sweetly.

"Sure; follow me," she said, moving towards her office.

Hermione was quite to the point. "Listen, I meant to come to you last week to get a dose of Pregnancy Potion for the month. I forgot about it, and well, I got a bit carried away. In others words, is there some way that I can check to be sure that...nothing occurred," she asked nervously.

The witch would likely realize that it was Severus that she'd coupled with, but surely, she would be discreet. "Here, let me run a quick check on you," she said, pulling out her wand. Her face crinkled. "I can't detect anything, but it's likely to be too soon anyway. When is your cycle due to start?"

"In just a couple of days, if I marked correctly," she said.

"Ah, well, that's not too long then. If there is nothing in a week, come to see me, but this close to cycle, I would say that you are fine. Let me give you a dose anyway. It won't harm anything that's been done, mind."

"Thanks," she said, cheeks reddened. She took the dose, hoping that she hadn't conceived, but she was sure that Poppy knew what she was talking about. Hermione decided to let Severus know what she'd learned. She would tell him after they finished their work together.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

It wasn't until much later that Hermione had a chance to actually talk to Severus. There was some small talk, but each just wanted to laze about. They had been reading in his bed for a couple of hours. All afternoon they had worked in his lab properly storing his purchases. After their baths and dinner, they decided to stay in for the evening. He had timidly asked her to stay the night so that they might get up early the next morning for a walk around the lake and breakfast. She'd known that it was just an excuse to have her near, but she hadn't cared. She'd wanted to find some reason to stay as well.

She closed her book and placed it on the nightstand. Not missing a thing, he held open his arm to pull her next to him while he read. Hermione rested her head on his chest and snaked an arm around his waist. His hand rested on her back, rubbing her soothingly every now and then. Being with him in his bedchambers felt so natural to her. She was so engrossed in thoughts about love and Severus that she never realized she drifted off to sleep.

Severus was growing tired. He put down his book and eyed the witch sleeping on his chest. He hated to disturb her, but his arm had fallen asleep. "Hermione, move over just a bit," he said. She sat up suddenly and crouched in the middle of the bed. She crawled near the foot of the bed holding her hand out in front of her. "Are you...all right?" He was shocked. What was she playing at?

"Sssh," she said in an irritated voice, waving him off. She was looking towards the fireplace.

"Hermione, you are asleep!" He began laughing loudly. He'd never seen someone do such things in their sleep. Of course, he'd not been around many people as they slept since his days at school, and even then he'd put Silencing Charms around his bed. He wondered if he did this sort of thing.

She blinked at him and sleepily crawled to lie down next to him in the bed. What the bloody hell was she dreaming about? She must have thought she had her wand drawn. He put his book on his nightstand before turning down the lamp. He'd hoped to be able to make love to her, but it didn't take long to realize that they were both too tired. He couldn't complain. He'd had more sex in the past weekend than he had in the past year combined, clients included. Smiling, he snuggled with his lover and fell asleep.

The next morning, Hermione pulled him by the hand all the way out of the castle. On the way, Ron called out to them. Blast! She'd not asked Severus about having a pubhop yet. "Oi!" Ron called. She felt Severus try to pull his hand away, but she kept a tight hold on his. She would prove to him that she was not ashamed of being in a relationship with him. "What the bloody hell are you two up to at this time of the morning?"

"Going for a walk," Hermione said cheerfully.

"None of your business," Severus replied.

Both looked at him. Hermione shook her head and giggled, but Ron looked put out. "I see what's going on here," Ron said, nodding.

"And, what would that be, Weasley?" Severus asked, narrowing his eyes.

"She used to do the same to us, mate." Ron threw a harsh glance at Hermione. "A man needs his rest, Mione. We've told you that. If you want to go off on one of your nature walks, go on then, but let the men sleep in when they can." Ron looked back to Severus. "Be glad she hasn't started nagging about your work yet. I can see it now." He used a high-pitched voice to imitate Hermione. "Severus, I've created a list for you that will allow you a certain amount of time to grade, read, eat and sleep. Sorry if it doesn't look like any fun, but you have to make sacrifices." Ron laughed at Severus' gaping mouth. "Oh no! She's not done it already?"

Hermione huffed and made a rude gesture with her finger, pulling Severus away. "Mind your own business," she called over her shoulder.

"Well, all right then. I'm going to eat, and then I'll be off. Meet us at The Leaky Cauldron around seven," he yelled.

"Meet them?" Severus questioned.

She smiled sheepishly. "I was going to tell you last night, but I sort of fell asleep."

"Speaking of last night, do you know that you move about and talk in your sleep?"

"I do?" She thought for a minute. "I didn't realize that I still did that. The girls in my old dorm said a few times I had talked, but I didn't get up. Now when I was little my mum said she had to keep all the doors locked tightly. I would try to go all over in my sleep, mumbling the entire while."

He smiled, imagining a small Hermione sleepwalking like some zombie. "Now, back to Weasley...er... you won't be making out a daily to do list for me, will you?"

She returned his grin and wriggled her eyebrows. "Perhaps. If I feel I'm not getting enough loving, that is."

"Oh, don't worry on that. You'll always have everything you need. I guarantee it," he said huskily. "Why does he want you to meet them?"

"Not me. Us. He wants us to go out for a few rounds of drinks. What say you? He says the staff is invited?" She looked to him hopefully, but she could see he was considering declining. "I would really like it, Severus. I know you don't like my friends, but I wouldn't feel comfortable going without you. It's not like you have to really talk to them. I'm sure Draco will tag along. You like him, don't you?"

Severus could see that his little witch wanted him to agree to go. Could he put up with the group of berks that she ran about with? Some of the staff would be there as well, so it didn't seem like it would be too bad. She did have a point about Draco going. He'd do it for her. "Yes, I don't see why we couldn't go. Are you sure?"

She glared at him. "Don't start that again."

He held up his hands in surrender. "Yes, Madame. I shall be on my best behavior."

"Oh," she said remembering her conversation with Poppy. "Poppy seems to think that all will be well even though we acted like berks and skived off taking the Pregnancy Potion this past weekend."

"You told Poppy?"

"Well, I had to talk to her. I didn't say us, per say, but I'm sure she will put it together once she sees us. She may know already if someone has told her that we went to the conference," Hermione said, wondering if he was angry.

"It's fine," he said, looking out across the lake. "Looks like the squid is having a bit of fun out there."

She squinted and could see some splashing in the middle of the lake. "Wonder what he's about?"

"Are you nervous?" he asked after a bit of silence.

"About?"

"Poppy's conversation," he said, not wanting to voice it.

Her cheeks pinked. "I'm supposed to start my cycle tomorrow. I guess we shall see. She said to come to her in a week if nothing has happened, but she doubts it since it is past my time to conceive for this month. I'm not all that nervous, no."

"Very well," he said with a nod. "What do you think we should wear tonight?" he asked, trying to change the subject. "We will only remain in the Wizarding pubs?"

"Yes, regular robes should be fine. Nothing fancy."

"Damn," Severus said, sounding annoyed.

"What?" she asked, stopping suddenly.

"I just realized that I let Weasley get away with calling me Severus. I should have had a go at him for checking you for Vampire bites, the berk!" Severus shook his head. "How did you ever befriend those two?"

"They saved my life, back in first year," she said with a smile, remembering her two friends coming to her rescue.

"What? Here at school? Oh, I remember," he said with a nod. "The Troll?"

"Yes. I'd overheard something rude that Ron had said about me, and I went to the bathroom to cry for a bit. This Troll came in, they realized I was in trouble, and you remember the rest," she said fondly. "We were mostly inseparable since."

"Well, I must say that I am glad that they did what they did, or I'd not have you," he admitted. "I think you and I will get along just fine, Hermione. Just fine indeed."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Severus slid into the large circular booth next to Hermione. Potter, Weasley, Hooch, Sprout, Hermione, and he were the only staff members present so far. Minerva and Albus wouldn't be able to come, according to Potter. "Is nobody else coming then?" Hermione asked.

"We've not asked anyone else," Rolanda answered. "Only a couple of others are still about anyway, and some had to remain behind."

"Oh no. What the bloody hell are they doing here? Nobody invited them!" Ron said crossly. Hermione turned around and groaned. Charlie and Bill. "Bet Ginny let something slip that they were coming over."

"Oi!" Bill called with a grin. "Looks like we missed our invites."

"Staff gathering," Harry said quickly as way of explanation.

"Is that right?" Charlie asked sarcastically. "Then, why would Draco and Ginny be heading this way?" His eyes roamed over to Hermione for a moment, but when Severus put a hand over hers, he looked away.

"It's all right. We're just stopping in," Bill said smiling kindly. "Have a good evening."

"Oh, come on then," Pomona said. "You two can have a sit with us."

"Sure?" Bill asked.

"Come on," Rolanda said. Everyone pushed in, and the two newcomers were now sitting across from Severus and Hermione. Things progressed nicely for a while. Draco and Ginny finally showed up. Draco and Severus talked while Hermione and Ginny talked about the upcoming Malfoy wedding. The more drinks that Charlie had, the more he'd look over at Hermione. Eventually, he began making comments to Bill. They were rather loud. Severus had about had enough.

"Can't believe she let *that* have a piece of her when she could have had me." He downed his drink. "S'all right though. I'll be waiting for her when he throws her out. Then, she will see what a real man can do for her."

Severus noticed that Hermione had heard. Her eyes narrowed dangerously for a moment before she pulled her wand and shouted a curse that Severus had never heard before. Charlie's nose began to grow each time he tried to talk. Hermione said scornfully. "I'd keep that mouth shut, Charlie. The spell will last for three hours. Each sound you utter will cause it grow. Why? Because nothing but filth comes out of your mouth. This is my own personal little Pinocchio Curse that your brilliant little sister helped me create." Hermione looked to Severus. "Let's go please."

He nodded and smirked at the boy. The idiot was still muttering a bit, and the nose was growing longer with each syllable. Finally, Bill had to clap his hand over his brother's mouth. "Good night, all," Hermione said jovially, winking at Ginny.

Severus escorted her out, and he Apparated them back to the gates of Hogwarts. As they walked to her chambers, he asked, "Would you like to...come down with me again? You could grab a couple of things here."

"All right," she agreed. "I do feel odd though. Maybe I shouldn't have had that foul tasting liquor. I'll just get something to sleep in and something for tomorrow." She pulled him inside. "You don't think I should have let Charlie get away with that, do you?"

"No, I found it quite original and amusing," he said with a smirk.

Hermione smiled. "Listen, I like this odd pink nightgown. You don't mind, do you? It's so soft, and I feel the need for comfort tonight. Something isn't right with my stomach."

Severus smiled. No sex again this night. It was likely that her cycle was about to start if she was feeling down. He didn't see how so small of an amount of liquor could hurt someone. "Hermione, I told you already. You need to wear whatever makes you feel comfortable. I, personally, don't care if you wear absolutely nothing, but it's you that needs to be relaxed. Trust me, love. Anything you wear will be perfection. Just like you."

She paused and looked at him oddly. It was like déjà vu. Hadn't he said that to her already? "You've told me that already, haven't you?"

"Oh, right. The other night down in Cardiff. I was going on about you looking...comfortable wearing nothing at all, and I told you that you were perfect no matter what you chose to wear." He furrowed his brow. "Hermione, I thought you were sleeping when I told you that. You must have heard me on some subconscious level." He tried to act nonchalant, but he knew that she'd just caught him in a lie. Severus prayed that she bought it. She seemed to believe him. She merely shrugged and grabbed a few more things.

"Ready?"

"Yes," she said, taking his hand. They walked down to his chambers quickly. The castle was so peaceful without the stomping feet of students and raised voices. She wondered what his home was like. When would they make arrangements to go there? She hoped it would be soon. She wanted more time alone with him. Really alone. It was a pity she didn't feel a little better, or she would initiate lovemaking. If it passed, she would definitely give it a go.

"Hermione, I still feel a bit sticky from that drink you spilled on me earlier even after the Cleaning Charm. I'll go have a quick shower. Make yourself comfortable." He kissed her softly. "Would you like a potion?"

"No, it'll probably pass," she said. "You go on and hurry back."

He smiled. "I will."

When he left she changed her clothes and made her way to the bed. She did feel like lying down for a while. "Ouch!" she yelped after she stubbed her toe on his nightstand. She turned on the lamp to have a look, but there was no bleeding. It just hurt like hell. She spotted something black under a parchment in the open top drawer of his nightstand. It looked familiar. Oh! "My elastic," she said, smiling brightly. He had saved it. Hang on! She hadn't seen this elastic since her meeting with Libertine, right? Didn't she lose it there? Her brow crinkled. Maybe it was twisted up in her things and had fallen out on the grounds. He probably recognized it and being that he fancied her, he kept it for himself as a little keepsake. She put it back as she had found it, not wanting him to think she'd been digging in his things. She pulled back the duvet and slid in bed.

She wondered idly if that Lonnie bitch had ever been here with him. No. She doubted that. He'd never bring a woman to his personal chambers. No woman except herself of course, she thought proudly. Hermione wondered how they met. An old friend maybe? Couldn't be. From the way the letter sounded, they'd just decided to have a sudden affair, and he wanted to end it when he realized that Hermione was interested in him. Ruddy harlot! She shouldn't be going around with other men whilst married and expect them to remain faithful! Hermione shook her head. Who was she to judge? This woman was probably some lonely lady that needed a lover to tend to needs that her husband neglected. Ha! She should have called Libertine.

Poor Libertine. She wondered if he'd started thinking of her less. It was flattering that he fancied her so much that he'd quit accepting clients. She smiled fondly, remembering his kindness. If Severus hadn't fallen for her, maybe the mysterious Libertine might have taken her heart. Wow! Another coincidence between the pair just presented itself. They'd both fallen for her. One cancelled his clients, and the other ended an affair. For her. Her eyes drifted back to the open drawer. What the fuck? She was quite certain that she couldn't find that elastic when she left Libertine in haste. Why would it really be in Severus' drawer?

The scar on his leg. The mark on Libertine's leg. Coincidence or the same mark only tampered with to appear differently? The thing he'd said earlier about her nightgown! She knew something seemed off about it. She *had* heard it before, from Libertine, but he'd led her to believe that he'd said it as well to keep her from realizing that he was the gigolo. Bloody hell! Libertine! Severus...was...Libertine. Tears of righteous anger made their way to her eyes. She heard the water shut off in the bathroom, so she knew she would only have a couple of minutes to compose herself. She needed to think. She needed to place everything together, but she wouldn't let him know that she knew.

Was this his idea of some kind of joke? Did he enjoy muddling her brain? Taking advantage of her? Using her? Were his words of love nothing but lies? Apparently so. He was all about lies, wasn't he? She would get him for this. He would pay for making a fool out of her. Hermione was trembling with anger by the time Severus slipped into bed beside her.

"Love, are you all right?" he asked softly. "I could stoke the fire a bit more."

"I'm not feeling well. I just need some sleep," she said, keeping her voice deliberately low. She didn't turn to kiss him when he placed a few small kisses on her head nor did she respond when he pulled her back against his chest. He didn't deserve anything else from her. He could never know how truly hurt she was. Not even after he found out that she'd caught him. A wicked plan began to formulate in her mind.

Severus raised an eyebrow. It must be that wretched premenstrual syndrome stuff that he'd heard about. She was in a very bad mood. He should have forced her to take some potion to take her discomfort away. No matter. If she felt that sleep was the best remedy, so be it. He loved her terribly, and he wished he could take some of this pain from her.

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**A/N:** Goodness...I wonder what she's planning. It's in the works, and I love writing it. I am sure you will all agree that it is a very fitting punishment. Heehee. Any guesses as to what she's going to do? :) And, What about that tosser, Charlie? He's such an idiot. I don't think he'll ever mess with them again.

## Bitterness

Chapter 14 of 17

Hermione's plan seems to be going well, but she begins to feel guilty as she hears Severus' side of things.

**Disclaimer:** All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

**As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!**

**A/N:** I feel as though I must warn you. I started out with this wicked plan of Hermione's, and it was going just fine. Then, I ended up doing something different with it as a dang plot bunny harassed me! So, just a bit of Angst here.

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Hermione hadn't slept at all. The longer she had lain there thinking, the angrier she had become. That bastard had the nerve to hold her tightly all through the night, and he'd slept so soundly, as if nothing was wrong. As if he hadn't tried to seduce her in the form of a gigolo! How often had he chuckled to himself about the trick he was playing on her? He had known the entire time that she wanted him!

All of the fucking guilt that she'd felt for caring for Libertine and for giving him a hand job was uncalled for. For days, she had privately felt disappointed in herself for giving a sexual favor to a man other than Severus. She'd felt like a harlot! It wasn't another man. It was her lover the entire time. She could have sworn that he'd really fallen for her. He had only started paying attention to her and trying to talk to her when she'd made arrangements to see Libertine. If he figured he couldn't have her as the gigolo, he would use the things he learned about her to woo her as himself then. That had to be it. She seethed in remembrance of the little joke he'd made while down in Cardiff about practicing with him for another man. She smirked to herself. *You don't even know the half of it, Severus. I'll see that you feel like an arse for doing this to me.*

"Good morning," his silky voice said, penetrating her thoughts. "Feeling better?"

"No," she said crisply. "I think I need to be off to see Poppy for a vial of something to help. Then, I want to go to my chambers for a while to rest. I didn't sleep well last night."

"I should have made you take that potion. I have some here," he said, moving to get up. She placed a hand on his chest.

"That's not necessary. This is a woman thing, and I need a potion made specifically for that. Poppy has some." She moved away from him, summoning her things to her. "I'll talk to you later, Severus." She had changed her clothes earlier, and to be honest, she should have left. But, she wanted him to feel that something wasn't right. If she had just left with no explanation or even a note, he would have sought her out. This way he would know she wasn't happy, and he would leave her in peace. Hopefully.

"What's making you angry, Hermione?" he asked, beginning to worry that he'd done something wrong.

"I'm just not feeling well," she said. She turned back to him before she left. "You know, Severus, you might want to be careful what you leave hanging around."

"Meaning?" he asked, becoming annoyed.

"I found a letter. I wasn't prying, mind. I was sitting by the grate. You had apparently tried to throw it into the fire. I checked to be sure that it was rubbish before throwing it in. Do you know what it was?" she asked acridly. He remained silent. He hoped she would not say that it was one of his gigolo letters. It would not do for her to find out about that, not now. "No idea then, eh?" She frowned for a moment. "It was from a woman named Lonnie."

"What did it say?" he asked, rising to approach her.

"Not much. Just that she was married and disappointed that you were calling things off. I hope that this was before you started to see me, Severus," she said, hoping to make him feel guilty.

"I never touched her after you and I decided to make a go of things," he said honestly, feeling panic rising. Her eyes looked cold even though her voice was calm. "When you said that you were interested, I owed her to break things off."

"It's just very discouraging to know that you were really involved with someone, and I interrupted something that you'd started. She left her husband! Maybe she left him because of you! I feel as if I've stolen someone's lover," she said, pouting slightly. He moved to hold her, but she put up her hand to stop him. "I just need a bit of time. I already feel bad, and this just adds to it. Bye." She quickly stalked off, leaving him alone and upset.

The moment she was in her chambers, she sat down at her desk to write out an owl.

*My Libertine,*

*I haven't been able to get you out of my mind. Your soft words have come back to haunt me over and over. I got what I wanted, you know. Well, you would be proud. I did everything perfectly. I think. We had a very good weekend together, but something was missing.*

*He's not touched me since we've been back to the castle here, so I wonder if there is any reason for that. Do you know what I found? I found a letter from an old lover! It*

*seems that he hopped from a relationship with her straight into one with me. I can't live this way, always wondering if he'll just jump on to the next offer that comes along.*

*Last night I saw that boy that tried to make a pass at me before, and I was completely disgusted. After thinking about this letter though, maybe all men are dishonest. Maybe they all only think with their pricks! I'm very upset right now.*

*I need you, Libertine. Would you please meet with me again? I need someone to talk to, someone to give me some advice, and maybe even something else for your trouble. I know I have no right to ask this of you, but you are the only one that has been honest with me, aside from keeping your name and appearance a secret. You've at least made me feel like a woman, and you didn't think poorly of me for my lack of experience.*

*Libertine, I'll not take no for an answer. Please meet me tonight. I have to see you. I need you.*

*Love from,*

*Hermione*

There. That ought to blow the bastard's mind. "He'll probably be licking his lips knowing that he gets to see me again and play more tricks with my mind," she said aloud while sealing the parchment. She quickly went to the Owlery to have the owl send it to him. She sneered, remembering that night she'd owed him. What a fool she had been! She honestly believed that the owl had made a mistake with the Sev name. It had delivered its message to the correct person after all. Angriily, she went to her chambers to await her reply. She had an instinct that he'd be writing back very soon.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Severus was gobsmacked. Innocent, loving Hermione wanted to turn to another man. She wanted Libertine. She didn't feel well enough to stay and visit with him, but she felt well enough to traipse off with another man! "Fucking Libertine," he roared, kicking a nearby chair over. He threw her parchment into his fire, but immediately, he regretted it. He summoned it out, but it was too late. He nearly burnt his hands in the process. Growling, he reached down to flip his table over. Severus grabbed two jars and flung them across the room. They shattered on contact with his wall.

The irony of this was that she was planning to betray him with...him. He thought about what her note said again. She was miffed that he'd not made advances on her since they'd been back. Well, it wasn't as if he didn't want to. She hadn't seemed to be in the mood, and he didn't want to push her. "Fuck," he said, pounding his hand down on the shelf next to him. The vibrations made another jar tip off and fall to its doom onto the floor.

If Severus would happen to see Lonnie, he might strangle her for the trouble that she'd ended up causing him. He supposed he should be thankful that Hermione didn't realize that he was Libertine. If she knew that, there was no telling whom she might turn to. How could she think that he would seek anyone else after he'd been with her? The only reason he became a bloody gigolo in the first place was to find someone like her. He'd only slept with four women during his stint as a gigolo. He wasn't doing it for the sex. He was doing it because he'd believed that he couldn't have her. If he hadn't desired her in the first place, there never would have been a Lonnie, but how could he explain this truthfully without telling her he was Libertine?

He'd thought about telling her the truth briefly earlier, before the owl came, but if she were that upset by a letter, how would she feel if she knew everything? He just prayed that she would never make the connection. He tidied up the mess his jealous rage had caused before sitting to reply to her letter.

Severus felt as if he had no choice but to meet her. If he didn't, she might feel abandoned, and try to seek out help from another. He couldn't bear to think of her with someone else. He would kill any wizard that touched her. He was glad that he had blocked all owls from women to Libertine, save owls from Hermione.

Hermione,

I am quite surprised to hear from you again. I thought that I'd made it clear that it was best that we no longer had any contact with each other. I care for you deeply and have left my 'profession' to find my own path in life with a woman that would care for me.

We can meet. I'll be in our usual spot again tonight, but don't come until nearly nine o'clock. I have some things that I need to do. I am sorry to hear that your lover was involved with someone else before you and he finally decided on seeing each other.

Couldn't it be that he simply broke things off with her because he wanted to see you? Only you? If he sees you as the treasure that I see you as, there is no way that any other woman could tempt him. We can talk tonight, Hermione. I can give you that much, and there will be no need for payment. Please don't bring any money with you. Just come as you are.

No matter how you feel or how I feel, there will be no sex between us. I wouldn't want to interfere in your relationship that way. I'll help you think things through and give you stable advice.

Affectionately,

Sev Libertine

It sounded fair enough. He quickly made his way out of the castle and to Hogsmeade to use one of the owls there. He looked around for Hermione on his way out and back in, but she was not about. She was likely to still be up in her room resting...or awaiting a reply.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Hermione smiled ruefully. Could these words be true? Did he really leave Lonnie alone because he wanted to be with only Hermione? He honestly did leave his clients alone. Luna had confirmed that early on, as her cousin was his client. Hermione wondered if Luna's cousin would be Lonnie. No, that name didn't sound like the name she remembered. Libertine had said that he'd found someone.

Severus probably did love her. Now it made more sense for Libertine to feel something for her after only two visits. That had nagged at her since he'd told her. It just seemed too quick. How long had Severus wanted her? Why was he a gigolo in the first place? How many tricks did he turn whilst in the trade?

Shaking her confused thoughts away, Hermione had plans to make, lingerie to choose from, and a bath to take. She would seduce Libertine, and then she would force him to reveal himself. He shouldn't have lied to her. He shouldn't have accepted her as a client in the first place. That was dirty...wrong. He deserved a little punishment. Nodding at her decision, she stalked off to have her bath.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Hello, Hermione," he said, pleased that she had not dressed provocatively for another man. Maybe that was a good sign. Maybe she only wanted to talk. He could give her advice and point her back in his direction.

"Libertine," she said, looking as if she might cry. She ran forward and threw her arms around the surprised gigolo. She buried her head in his chest. "I don't know what to do."

He pulled back to look at her. "What is so wrong in your life that you would need to see me again, Hermione? It can't just be because of some letter a witch wrote to your lover. Tell me."

"I am unsure about everything." She smiled softly. "I have also not been able to get you out of my mind. I found myself on the most romantic weekend I could have only dreamt of, but at times, I would think of you."

"At what times?" he asked, flashing eyes visible beneath his mask.

She could hear the anger in his voice. *Feels good to be lied to, doesn't it?* "Well, for example, after my lover fell asleep one night, I wondered what you were doing and if you would find the happiness that I had thought I found."

"But, you did find it," he said, his voice softened.

"No, I don't think so. I read that whore's note! She...what if she takes him away from me? How do I honestly know that he isn't still seeing her? I specifically asked him a few questions, and he was very evasive," she said, playing her role perfectly.

"He's not. He never loved her," he said, willing her to believe him. "He loves only you."

"Oh," she sobbed, "how would you know? He can be very deceptive when he wants." She swiped at her eyes. "I need something else tonight." Did he mean what he said? She prayed that he did. There was only one way to find out for sure. If he would just come clean with her right then, she wouldn't be as upset. She was still being deceived. Part of her had hoped that she would Apparate in to see Severus waiting for her. Livid and jealous and showing he cared! But, there sat his Libertine persona. She'd get to the bottom of it, once and for all.

Severus took a step back. "What do you need?" *Please don't let her try to make love to me.* Hermione began unbuttoning her robes while Severus sat down on the settee. She was going to betray him. He would never be able to trust her. Never. She was worried about trust? Ha! "If you try to seduce me, Hermione, I am afraid that I shall have to turn you down. Remember last time? You felt badly after because I was not the one you cared for."

"Yes, I did, but that was also when I was still a bit innocent in the ways of the world. I've learned a lot from my lover. You know," she said with a smile, "he even asked me if I was practicing on him for another lover. Odd, isn't it?"

"Were you?" he asked, his voice accusing.

"No. I do care for him, and this may sound selfish, but I want to know how it feels to have another lover. He's had one. Had many for all I know. Why can't I?" she asked saucily, continuing to undo her buttons.

Severus could have shaken some sense into her, but he kept his hands to himself. How dare she act like such a pillock? Didn't she realize how idiotic she sounded? It was time for Libertine to talk some sense into her...before things would be irreparable between them. "Hermione, you aren't thinking clearly. Why would you do this? You are smarter than this. You need to speak to him. I will not have you in my bed this night...or any night. I told you I would come here to," Shit! He swallowed hard as she pulled off her robes. "...talk. Only to talk. No sex, Hermione."

"I don't need sex. Didn't you say what we did last time wasn't really sex? You also promised me the first night that you could bring me to an orgasm without penetration. Were those not your words, Sev?" she asked brazenly. "I want to know how it feels to have an orgasm with someone else. I suppose we don't have to do anything further, since you are bent on denying me."

"Hermione...no," he pleaded, absently licking his lips as one of her hands reached up to trace the line of her cleavage.

"Please, I need this. I have to know how it feels," she said softly. She raised her chin defiantly, "If not you, then I will go to someone else, but I want it to be you. You are the only one that I feel something for besides my lover."

He bowed his head in defeat and sighed. Severus didn't want her to go to anyone else. With his shoulders slumped, he walked forward, took her hand, and led her to the bed. "Lay down," he said unemotionally.

"That's it?"

"Hermione, please," he said quietly. "This is hard for me."

"Why? You are a man. Isn't this what all men want? Willing women? Lots of them?"

"Some men, maybe," he said.

"What about you?"

"I've had many women, Hermione, but there is only one that I can say that I want," he said, reaching out to untie the silky maroon ties holding her knickers together. He noticed that she stiffened. "Speak now if this isn't what you want."

"How many women?" she demanded.

"As a gigolo?"

"Yes."

"Four." He shook his head. "Five, if I count you."

"Haven't you been a gigolo for long?"

"A few months," he replied, pulling down the front of her knickers, revealing her sex. He smiled faintly. He'd come to know her body so well. He knew exactly what it took to make her writhe, moan, and scream out in pleasure. He pondered briefly at making her experience an awful one. Should he? He brought his sad eyes to meet hers. There seemed to be some regret in her eyes. "Please tell me to stop, Hermione." He didn't want her to go through with this. He knew in his mind that she wasn't really cheating on him, since he was the man she had chosen, but in her mind it was cheating. Single-minded and planned cheating. She seemed to be out for some vengeance. He didn't deserve this because of some old letter that should have been incinerated the night he'd read it.

"He hasn't touched me since we've been home," she said, untying the top satin ties. "Maybe he tired of me already."

"Maybe he was waiting for you to make the first move. Maybe he was respecting that you didn't feel well and that you were tired," he retorted irritably. "Maybe you aren't thinking things through by running off to be with another man. Where does he think that you are now?"

"He thinks I am sick and in my room. He tried to see me earlier, but I sent him away," she said softly. "Please don't try to make me feel guilty. If you don't want me either, just say it. I'll leave." She tried to act hurt, and she hoped that he would think she was serious. She knew damn well that Severus wanted her. This was just a little game to play with his mind. She should feel really proud of herself because she seemed to be affecting him more than she could have imagined. The only bad thing was that, she'd assumed he would pounce on her as soon as she came in. She had to coax him to even touch her, and he looked so disappointed in her. His eyes were haunting. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see his pain. She only wanted to remember hers.

"Did you tell him that you hired me to teach you how to please him?" he asked suddenly, tracing her thigh with a lone finger.

Her eyes snapped open. "What?"

"You heard me. Were you forthcoming about us?"

"I didn't think it would be a good idea to mention I had paid a man to teach me about sex, no. What is your point?" she asked uneasily.

"My point is, Hermione, that you and he are guilty of the same thing. You have ~~me~~ that you are trying to keep secret, and he had this woman that he was trying to keep secret." His finger moved up to play idly in her trimmed thatch of pubic hair. "Why didn't you tell him?"

"I thought maybe he would think that I was...a slut. I thought he wouldn't want me," she admitted.

"Maybe he didn't tell you his secret because he thought that you would be disappointed as well," he murmured. "Tell me, Hermione. Do you want me to do this?"

He could tell by the darkening of her eyes that his finger's caresses had been turning her on. Her body seemed to be arching upward slightly. "I...do," she said meekly. "And, I don't. I'm confused again."

"Decide, love," he said. She whimpered. He had sounded so much like himself just then. Her body answered for her as it arched into his finger. Hermione closed her eyes. Oddly enough, she didn't want to see this odd Severus stroking her. It felt like cheating. *Good Lord, if he loves me, he must truly be devastated. No wonder he looks and sounds so upset. He thinks that I think I am cheating on him.*

Hermione was confused. She had wanted to hurt him. She had wanted him to believe that she was ridiculously fickle, had not faith in him, and that she cared about Libertine. Now that she had achieved that...well, it didn't feel so great. "Take your mask off," she said, eyes still closed.

"No," he said softly, dipping his finger into her a little roughly before bringing it out to circle around her waiting nub. He was glad that her eyes were closed, or she might see the sheen of tears welling in his eyes. She didn't love him, as he'd believed. He would never forgive her for this. He couldn't believe that she would do this to him. Severus knew deep down that he would never deserve her. It's why he became Libertine in the first place.

Her hand moved over his to still his movements. His eyes met hers, each pair holding questions. "Severus, take off your mask."

He pulled his hand away from hers and stepped back. "Wh-why did you call me his given name? Don't you usually call me Sev?" His heart was pounding. She couldn't have guessed. She couldn't know. He'd been very careful.

She bit her lip. "I'm calling you Severus because I know who you truly are. I figured it out last night, and..." Were those tears in his eyes? Was his lip trembling slightly? Bloody mask! She couldn't be sure. "I'm sorry. I was angry."

"Is that why you treated me that way? Hermione...this is unforgivable," he said backing away. He took off his mask, fixed his eyes and hair. There was no use. She knew what he'd done. He was ashamed of himself, but he was also hurt that she would go through such lengths to punish him.

Suddenly his nearly naked witch sprang up angrily. "Unforgivable? This? If I didn't love you, I would allow you to continue believing that I was here to betray you!" she yelled hotly. Then, in a soft voice said, "You betrayed me first, Severus."

"I have not been with Lonnie," he bellowed. "When you told me that you wanted me, I wrote to her and ended things. I wrote to my other, and only, client and ended things as well. FOR YOU!" He smirked. "That's right. I only continued seeing two of the four."

"That's not what I mean. I meant the deception. You accepted me as a client, knowing that you would likely end up seducing me. I should have meant more to you than some piece of arse," she yelled.

He stalked forward and grabbed her arms to shake her. "I became a gigolo because of you, you idiot! Why do you think I've only bedded four women? I had many offers! I turned anyone down that didn't resemble you. Why did I turn down Lovegood? Why did I describe you in hopes that she would tell you about me? Because I have wanted you for a long time, Hermione. I just never thought I could have you. This was just the best way to find someone like you."

"But, Lonnie was married!"

"So, what? If I would have gotten on well with her, then I would have asked her to leave her unhappy marriage!" He was still yelling. Hermione wondered if any others could hear their argument. She hadn't seen him this angry for a long time. "After I got to know her, which we had only a handful of visits, I knew it would merely be sexual between us. A mutual agreement. I never promised her anything. I never promised anyone anything except you," he spat angrily. He released her arms and began stalking to the door.

"Severus, wait!" she yelled, running after him. "Don't leave."

"Don't leave?" he asked in an incredulous whisper.

"No, please...just...stay with me. I do need you. We can find a way to-"

"ENOUGH!" He picked her up over his shoulder and stalked over to the bed, plopping her down. Without looking at her, he unfastened his trousers, and he lowered them only slightly. He kneed her legs apart. In one solid stroke, he entered her, making her cry out. She wasn't as wet as he'd thought, but he knew this wouldn't hurt her. He could already feel her moistening in welcome. It felt odd to have so many layers of clothing on while making love...no, fucking her. He brought his mouth down to nip at her breasts as he pounded into her over and over.

"Oh, don't stop...don't stop...don't stop," she chorused. Her legs had wrapped around him tightly, and her fingers were desperately seeking his bare flesh through the sleeves of his robes. "Oh, my God! SEVERUS!" He knew that she was lost. He could feel her convulsing around him, and he decided there was no need to prolong this rutting any longer than need be.

He came in jerky spurts and finally slowed his harsh strokes. She smiled softly when he looked at her. His hardened heart nearly melted. He bent down to give her a long, soft, lingering kiss. "I loved you," he whispered. CRACK!

Hermione blinked. He was gone. "No," she screamed. "Come back." What had she done? Tears welled up and spilled down her face. He fucked her and left her. Now she truly knew how it felt to be a whore. His whore. Why hadn't she just talked to him? In her haste to tie her nightie back up and find her robes, she knocked the lamp off the nightstand. It shattered. Just as her heart was shattering. Just as his must have shattered. She tried to pick the pieces up, but she only cut her fingers. Had she cut him too deeply? Unfortunately, she believed she had. "Severus, no," she sobbed. "I'm so sorry." She had to calm herself for a moment, so as to not splinch herself when she Disapparated.

She Apparated just outside the main gate of Hogwarts, and she ran all the way to the castle, down the corridors, and into the dungeons. Peeves had tried to harass her on the way, but she paid him no attention. Hermione ran through his classroom and found his door. She began beating on Severus' office door. "Severus, please let me in." She knocked, kicked, and banged on the door for a couple of minutes before sliding down to cry in a tortured heap. "I love you," she whispered repeatedly.

She heard footsteps and saw a black boot in front of her. She looked up through teary eyes hopefully and began to cry harder. It was only Harry...and Ron. They were looking at her with horror on their faces. "Mione?"

She shook her head. "Go ahead," she said. "It's my fault."

"She's bleeding," Ron yelled. "Bloody hell, Mione, what's happened?"

"Where is Snape?" Harry asked.

"I'm...tr-trying...to fi-find him now," she sobbed. "I ne-need to se-ee him."

Harry picked her up and cradled her almost like a baby. "Let's bring her down to your hut, Ron. See if we can't calm her down to see what's happened."

"Right, come on," Ron said.

"Severus isn't here," she wailed. "I need to find him. I need him."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Severus sat in the dark room of his family home after having summoned a bottle of Firewhisky to him. He needed to get her out of his head. Once and for all. There could be no going back. All of those things that she'd admitted to him. The way she truly thought about him. Oh, she had chosen the perfect way to punish him for his deed. How the fuck did she figure it out? One simple letter couldn't have told her anything.

He'd hoped for her, he'd been able to love her, and he'd experienced how it felt to lose her. He missed her already. Things could never change for them. She would never understand why he did what he did, and she would never understand how much he really loved her. So be it. He was Severus Sydney Snape, Potions Master of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry! He would not grovel to anyone. He would just get back to the way things were before he'd dared to allow himself to dream of a life with her. It wouldn't be hard for him. Not at all.

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**A/N:** Ducks down and runs to avoid the howlers!! Hahahaha! See what I meant by my note at the top? I don't know what happened. It just turned sad. Sigh. Never fear! I shall fix it up.

I have a great idea for some help with patching the pair up. hehe...

## Time Apart

*Chapter 15 of 17*

The boys try to figure out what is wrong by talking to Severus. Hermione and Severus finally talk after a little time apart. What happens?

**Disclaimer:** All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

**As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!**

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"Well, I've got her fingers all healed up. Said she was trying to pick up a broken lamp that she knocked over. Glad you thought to go get those...girlie things from her chambers. I just wonder though, what the bloody hell Sn-"

"Ron," Harry interrupted. "Don't draw any conclusions. She won't say anything else. We need to talk to Snape. Dumbledore has told me exactly how to find his home. I think after we're sure she'll be down for a bit, we need to pay him a visit."

"A bit suspicious, if you ask me," Ron said crossly. "Where was she coming from? We saw her Apparate alone and run for the dungeons. He couldn't have done this to her, but if not him, then who?"

"She was mumbling something about being a whore and some Libertine bloke. I mean, you saw what she was wearing before I gave her one of your shirts. Only had that sexy," Harry coughed, "only had those skimpy shreds on. I think she might have been with another bloke, and I think Snape found out. Probably caught them at it." Harry took off his glasses to wipe a couple of smudges away. "Maybe he and the bloke fought, and he left angry. Could be why she's looking for him."

"Oi! Don't draw any conclusions, eh? What do you think that's called?" Ron mocked. "How come 'sall right for you to have a say, and I can't?"

"Stuff it, Ron. I just meant for you to not think Snape did this to her. I know you don't like him much," Harry said.

"Hell, I had a right nice conversation with him the other morning. He and I joked about Hermione trying to run things all the time." Ron pointed an accusing finger at Harry. "You're the one who hates the bloke. Why'd you not say anything more about this in the first place?"

"I don't hate him any more. He...he talked to me one night when I needed someone to talk to. Don't tell him I told you, or I'll likely be missing something important to me." Harry laughed, adjusting his crotch. "You believed it was possible that he was a Vampire!"

"Shut up, Harry," Ron grouched. "What are we waiting for then? Let's go talk to the bloke! What have we to lose?"

"Our dangling bits for one," Harry said glumly. "If he is mad at some bloke Hermione was shagging, well, just keep your wand ready and prepare to run!"

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Having polished off one bottle of Firewhisky, Severus was now working on the second. How could he have allowed her into his life so quickly? She had somehow figured it out. "Fucking know-it-all!" he roared, hoping his two House Elves woke. Nobody deserved to be comfortable when he was feeling this way. He was sure that Hermione had had a little cry about things. She was probably disappointed that he didn't beg for forgiveness. "I will not beg. I told her why I did what I did!"

Brilliant! He was talking to himself. And, to top it off, he was slurring! He could hear it with his own ears. Severus growled before taking another swig from his bottle. She was probably taking a bath now and feeling smug about her success. Well, yes, he'd done something wrong, and he should have said something. He just couldn't resist the idea of having her. His one desire. His one weakness. When he found out that she did want him, it was too late. "Fuck it," he said with a shrug. "Get your arse together."

Thump. He looked around. The House Elves must be about. He took another long drink. Damn. This bottle was nearly half gone already. No matter. There was another

bottle on the bar. Thump. Someone was standing behind his door. His wards had just alerted him. He pulled his wand and crept forward to blast away the intruder. Then he heard it. The voice of bloody Harry Potter.

"Well, I don't think he's awake. Maybe we should just wait." There was laughter. "What? I'm not afraid, but if he's sleeping, we shouldn't bother him."

Who the hell was with Potter? He grimaced as he heard another voice. One he loathed. "We need to find out if that bloke hurt Mione. Snape's the only one who can tell us." Weasley. What the hell was he going on about? What bloke? Even though Severus was dismayed with her, he'd kill anyone else that hurt her. It would be prudent to let them in, so that he could find out about this fellow.

He opened the door slowly. "You might try knocking, boys," he said, crossing his arms in front of him. "What do you want? Speak quickly before I have you thrown off of my property."

"All right then," Ron said quickly. "We saw Hermione Apparate to Hogwarts, and she ran down to the dungeons. We followed because she was crying." Severus' chest tightened. "When we found her, she was all crumpled at your door in tears, full of blood."

"Blood? Why? What happened?" Severus asked, moving aside to usher the boys in. "Who hurt her?" Anger was coursing through his veins. It must be the bloke they were talking about!

"Well, we don't know, really," Harry said. "She keeps crying and saying odd things. There are a few things we were able to make out, but I don't know. Claims she was bleeding because of a vase she broke, but I think some bloke..." Harry looked to Ron for backup, but Ron was staring at the house. Harry cleared his throat.

Ron looked at Severus. "Right."

"Right what?" the dark man asked, clearly agitated. They needed to get on with it and do it quickly.

"Er...whatever Harry was saying?" he asked cautiously. Harry pushed him aside.

"We just want to know what happened, Snape. She told us about some bloke named Libertine," Harry said, stepping back at the man's expression.

"Did she?"

Harry and Ron both nodded. It was Ron that spoke. "Sure. If you can call it that. More like said something about being this bloke named Libertine's whore, and something about needing her Severus back. Mostly rambling to be quite honest."

Severus could have laughed. They had no idea who Libertine was, and he would bloody well not tell them either. Berks! But, why was she bleeding? "This Libertine? He made her bleed?"

"Well," Harry began, "she says that she knocked over a lamp, and when she went to pick up the pieces, they cut her fingers. Then, there was the other bleeding. Down low, but it wasn't what we thought. It was strictly feminine problems."

Severus grabbed him by the front of his robes and pulled him to his face roughly. "Potter, are you telling me that you examined her...personal areas?" he asked, voice deadly low.

"Not on purpose! We helped her take off her robes..." Severus tightened his hold. "...and, she hardly had anything on. There was a little blood on her leg."

"You looked at her in what she was wearing," Severus stated coldly. He quickly pushed Potter away, causing him to trip. When he glared in Weasley's direction, he was met with a wand pointed at him.

"That's enough of that, Snape. We didn't do anything wrong. She's like our sister. We just want to know who to go knock up and hex. We thought you would know," Weasley said, seemingly angry.

Severus tilted his head sideways. Did this pillock believe that he could actually do anything to him? Severus began laughing loudly. Both boys began looking at him oddly before beginning to laugh slightly. "Er...sir?"

"Fuck it," Severus said. "I suppose bad company is better than no company, but just for one drink. After that, you had better march your arses back to Hogwarts and mind your own business."

"A drink?" Ron asked. "All right then. Move out of the way, Harry. Let the man through."

Severus walked as carefully as he could to his chair. "There is a bottle over there. Glasses as well. Serve yourselves." He picked up his bottle and took a long drink.

The boys did as told and sat down. Ron spoke. "Why don't you just tell us what happened?"

Severus looked at the pair of brats before him. He'd loathed their trio for so long, yet at some point he'd fell for one of them. For her. They would tell nobody if he did mention it. It was apparent that she hadn't told them, yet. But, why? Why bother to be loyal still? Why not tell the world? Did his little witch love him enough to keep silent and not ruin him amongst their colleagues? Did she just want to keep silent so nobody would know that she'd acquired the services of a hired man? His love for her wanted to reach out somehow. Could he use these two to do that? His pride would never allow him to approach her first. He knew that. Perhaps, he could talk to them, explain things, and maybe it would help things along. He sighed. She might not care. He had to at least do something. Just in case. In case she cared. *If I make this last sacrifice for her, then at least she will have someone to talk to about everything. They can help her if she needs it.* Ha! Not that she cared. Just in case though.

"Do you have any idea who Libertine is?" Severus asked, sitting forward. They both shook their heads. "He's a gigolo."

"Holy shit," said Harry.

"A gigolo? A gigolo attacked Mione?" Ron sprang up. "We'll kick his hired arse!"

"No, you idiot. Just sit down, shut up, and listen," Severus snapped. "Hermione hired Libertine. No, it's not what you think. She never had sex with him. After Charlie Weasley said those things to her and about her, she was afraid to be with me, fearing that I would think less of her for being inexperienced. She hired Libertine for advice only."

"So, you found out, thought the worst, showed up, and hexed the bloke's bits off," Harry summarized. "I can understand the mistake. You didn't know any better, but that outfit. I mean, not that I was looking, mind," he added nervously, "It was a bit revealing and would lead me to think the wrong thing."

Severus nodded. "What you don't understand, either of you, is that I am Libertine."

"Bloody hell," Ron said. "So, you hurt her? What the hell? Why?"

"What?" Severus bellowed indignantly. "Think you I would harm her? You can GET OUT if that's what you honestly think! NOW!"

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT," Harry pinched him, "ouch! I don't know what to bloody think, but I want to hear what you were doing acting like a gigolo. I want to know why she came home crying!"

"Shush, Ron," Harry said, holding onto his friend's arm as Severus stood up to advance on them. "What happened, Snape?"

"Yeah, tell us," Ron said, trying to sound brave. Harry could see his friend swallowing deeply as Severus' hand went towards his wand. "How could you do that?"

"She never knew. She thought I was another man," Severus said, taking note that the boys' appeared to be listening rather than planning a fight. He sat back down. "This was our third meeting."

"Fucking hell," Harry blurted. "And, she realized that tonight? You two had a row then?"

"Hold on a moment," Severus said, trying to clear his inebriated mind. "She owed me a couple of weeks ago, seeking to ask questions only. I decided to take her on. She built a kinship with my Libertine persona. Needless to say, she found a letter from an old client last night. She put things together, and she planned her revenge. She owed Libertine to make me think that she'd decided to betray me as my punishment. Things turned out badly, and she told me she knew who I was."

"Snape, did you hurt her?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Shut up, boy," he said angrily. "I would never hurt her. I care, fuck that, I love her. I didn't mean for any of this to happen. It just got out of hand."

Ron took a long sip before speaking. "Love her, eh? Sure, I could see that," Ron said sarcastically. "Come on over, Mione, let's shag, and let me tell you that honestly I care. Don't expect me to disappoint my other scarlet women though. That would be bad for business."

Severus pulled his wand on the brat. "I would never betray her. When I realized that she truly wanted a relationship with me, I cancelled my ad, refused owls from anyone but her, and I owled my clients to let them know things were over. I just...couldn't admit it to her." He lowered his wand and shrugged. "It's done. We're over with."

"But, why?" Harry asked. "You both seem upset. Can't you just take a few days apart?"

"Yeah. Ginny and Malfoy do that all the time," Ron said nonchalantly. He missed the guilty expression on Harry's face and the knowing smirk on Snape's as he poured himself another drink.

Severus thought for a moment. "I think that things can't be undone. We've both done and said things to hurt the other. It's just a long story."

"Hang on," Ron said suddenly. "People, er, women actually pay you to shag them?"

Severus gave the boy a sour expression. "Yes," he hissed. What was the boy trying to say? Hopefully, he didn't think this was the only way he could get a woman?

"Bloody hell," Ron said, clearly thinking. "Harry, do you know what? I think I've just decided on a little side job. I could make extra galleons and have sex. You could join in, and we could call ourselves Th-"

"If you don't mind," Severus said sardonically. "I suppose I appreciate your gesture by coming to talk to me on Hermione's behalf, but you've wasted your time. You just don't know everything, and I don't think you'd understand."

"We've got Firewhisky, and we've got time. Tell us," Harry said.

Severus decided to tell them. What else could go wrong on a bad day? Why not let the imbeciles know how he truly felt? "I want a wand oath that you will not speak of this again to anyone, aside from Hermione."

Both boys made their promises, and Severus told them everything beginning with his accidental spotting of Hermione by the lake. He didn't tell them that he watched her repeatedly after, but he did admit to the one time that Potter had seen. He even admitted to enjoying her presence at meal times and in the staff room prior to the boys' employment. He didn't give any sexual details, but he alluded to the fact that they had an extremely healthy sex life. To his surprise, neither groaned or made faces. He left nothing out of the bitter day's events. "I suppose she is upset because I am not groveling at her feet, begging for forgiveness, or trying to do her bidding. I just...she said she loved me. I believed her. I still want to, but I just can't." Severus' bottle was gone. He looked to their empty bottle. "I'm all out of Firewhisky, but I've some Mulled Meade."

After they had their new drinks, they were silent for a while. Ron spoke first. "I think she truly loves you, mate. It's one of the things she was saying over and over. Hermione might not mind a bit of revenge, but she's not cruel."

"Right," Harry agreed. "I mean we are talking about the founder of S.P.E.W. here. Who else tried to be a champion for House Elves?"

"I'm afraid that I refuse to make the first move. I will not expose myself again this way. She handled things childishly."

"Well, I'd say you both did. Should have just been honest," Ron said. "Take Harry here for instance. He was upfront with Draco about his past with Ginny when they started dating. Maybe you should have done the same. Mione had told you about her experiences."

Harry spoke quickly. "Er, I see Snape's point though. Sometimes it's better to just let some things slide away and be forgotten." Harry hoped that intoxicated Snape wouldn't tell Ron his secret. That would really put a hitch in things.

"I suppose," Ron said. "But, really Snape, I say you go over and just tell her how you feel. What's the worst that can happen?"

"She could laugh at me. Tell me she's changed her mind. Lots of things. I won't do it," he said firmly, feeling dizzy. "I am going to bed now. Stay or leave. You decide." With that he rose, and made his way to his bedchambers.

"Bloke just up and leaves us in the middle of a conversation," Ron grumbled.

"You all right to Apparate?" Harry asked. "Don't want to," hiccup, "get splinched."

Ron looked over to Severus' stock of liquor. "Why not have a few more? He's being right hospitable. We know it won't happen again. Should really take advantage while we still can, I say."

"Right then," Harry said with a grin.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Come on, Mione! It's been three days," Harry grumbled. "It's not that I don't mind the company. Really. But, you can't hide out in my chambers forever. You have to go talk to him." She shook her head. "Well, then you have to go out in the castle. If you happen to run into him, well, so be it. He may have tried to owl you or something."

"It would have found me here, Harry. Look, if you don't want me holed up here, just say it," she said with a sigh. "Oh, bother! You're right. I need to get a hold of myself. I just can't believe I lost him."

"You two are the thickest set of lovers I've ever seen," Harry said saucily. "I told you what he said. You know he would like to reconcile if you make the first move. You are just too proud to do it. Same as him."

"What if he laughs at me? What if he's changed his mind about me? I couldn't face that, Harry. Not while we still work here together," she said sadly. "It would just make things worse. I think we should avoid each other for a few weeks, let things cool down, and then maybe talk."

"Absence makes the heart grow forgetful, Hermione."

"More fonder."

"Don't believe everything you hear. Trust me," Harry said, pulling her up by the arm. "Get out. Go to your rooms. Go get some fresh air. Just try. If you can't do it alone, after you've tried, then come back or go to Ron's, but you have to try on your own. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," she denied. "Well, I am. I was such a fool, Harry. Why did I hurt him? If you could have only seen his eyes, you'd know what I did to him. It's as bad as if I would have taken a dagger to his heart. I have such regret."

"I do know what you did to him. I listened to the fellow go on about it for three frigging hours the other night. He was pissed on his arse if you ask me, but he was still hurt. Ron and I both saw it." What the hell could he say to make her talk to him? What could he say to the git to make him talk to her? The man had accosted him a few times, inquiring on her health as he hadn't seen her. He was beginning to feel like a go between. Every time he came in, she would ask him if he'd seen Severus, how he'd looked, and if he'd said anything. It was just nerve racking!

Hermione smiled sadly. "I'm going to go for a run, I think. It's been a while." She quickly went to her chambers, dressed in her running attire, and headed for the path along the lake. Her cramping had subsided finally, thanks to Poppy's new potion for female problems. It was actually the first time in a few days that she woke feeling normal. She wondered if she had gotten pregnant if it would have changed anything.

The ache of having him only to lose him would have been easier if she would have conceived. She would always have a part of him with her that way. They would always be linked. Hermione shook her head. That was really ridiculous. She knew better than to think such things. Forcing someone to marry you or to be tied to you because of a child was a horrible trick. She would never purposely do such a thing, but it didn't hurt to daydream about what a child may have meant to them eventually. It was just hard to not wonder.

What would she do once she was forced to go to her own chambers and be alone? Harry and Ron were great company, and being with them kept her occupied. Being alone, she would only dwell on Severus even more. If only she had some sort of sign! Should she approach him first? What if he scoffed at her and pushed her away?

She had a good work out and felt so alive as she ran her way back to her finishing point. She bent down to stretch and cool down. Hermione straightened quickly as she heard a twig break. She nearly ran when she saw her dark lover looking at her snidely. "He-hello, Severus," she managed. It was a sign. It had to be.

"Hermione," he said with a nod. "Not planning on going for a swim, are you?"

"No, I'm not," she said suspiciously. "Do you know that I swim after I run?"

"I do, and I just wanted to make my presence known to you in order to save some embarrassment," he said, turning to walk away.

"How do you know that I swim?"

"I've come upon you already, and I didn't feel comfortable making my presence known, as it would have been embarrassing. There are a few brooms in the air, thanks to Hooch and her friends, so I hated for anyone to spy on you. Good day." He stalked off.

"Wait," she called. "Is...is that all you have to say?" She saw his back stiffen, and the cold reply he gave her made her shiver.

"How dare you attempt to coax me into an apology," he said harshly, not bothering to spare her a glance.

"No, that's not what I meant," she said hurriedly. Maybe Harry was right. If she swallowed her pride and made the first move, things could be as they were. Well, not as they were, but things could be better for them. "Can't we just start over, Severus?"

"Without an apology?" he asked cautiously. "You can't know what you did to me."

"I apologized that night. I told you I was sorry. I told you I loved you!" She was beginning to get angry. Why would he try to pin this on her? He started it. "Severus, why do you have to be so stubborn? I mean, I really believe that you loved me. Do you still love me?"

"Hermione, I think the time for us has passed. We both did things that may not be forgivable," he said, walking off. Those words were the hardest that he'd ever said. The final words that would be the end of them, of what could have been.

Her mouth gaped open. He was just leaving. She'd made the attempt, and he didn't take it. He had changed his mind about them, after all! Tears sprung to her eyes and began to stream down her cheeks. Bastard. She stalked after him and surprised him by forcefully spinning him around to face her. "I still love you. This is just too much. We could just start on a clean slate. There is no need for any more lies. Why can't we just build a relationship up again? Slowly this time?"

Severus sneered as he looked down to the witch's hand on his arm. How dare she think to handle him in such a way? He made eye contact with her, and once again, he felt his hardened heart soften. She meant her words, didn't she? This was not some guilt pushing her to make amends. She really wanted him. Right? Fuck! Confusion crept into his mind. He was confused. He pulled away from her grasp. He'd done nothing but think of her for the last three days. Lonely days. Before he could say anything, she began sobbing and ran for the castle. *Shit!* She had made the first move. Why had he still been too proud to accept her offering? If nothing else, he could offer to talk to her, to hear her entire side of what happened, and he could tell her everything. The complete truth. If something were meant to be between them, then it would be.

Nearly ten minutes later, a decision had been made. He would talk to her. He would make things right somehow. Severus began a quick walk to the castle only to pause in mid stride. She was on top of the Astronomy Tower. Bloody fucking hell! He ran as quickly as he could to the corridor and stairway that led to the tower. Not pausing for breath, he finally neared the door at the top. It was locked and warded for privacy. She wouldn't jump. She couldn't have jumped. An image of finding Hermione's battered body accosted him. A lone tear slid down his cheek. Why didn't he summon a damn broom? Severus quickly unwarded the door and cast an Unlocking Charm on it. He strode towards her stooped figure immediately. She was still crying.

"Hermione," he called softly, hoping to not startle her. "Please come away from that ledge."

She looked up to meet his gaze. "Severus?" He had come to talk to her again! Perhaps he'd changed his mind. She had just been crying and asking anything that would listen to help her. She prayed to God, Merlin, Mother Nature, and any others listening. Maybe this was another sign? It was meant to be?

He made his way to her quickly and paused right before her. "Take my hand, and get down from that ledge." Damn! She was walking carelessly on the ledge. Any loss of balance would see her tumbling over. *Please don't let her jump. Let her know I love her. Let her know I've come for her.*

"It's pretty from here," she said softly. "The wind blows right through you. It's as if you are a part of nature."

Her hollow voice was scaring the shit out of him. In her emotional state of mind, she might well jump. "Please take my hand."

"Severus, I'm fine. I come here a lot to think. I'll not-Oh!" A gust of wind had blown her robes wildly.

She lost her footing and nearly tumbled off the ledge. He reached out, pulled her down quickly, and lost his balance, falling with her on top of him. His back smarted, but he didn't care. She was safe. Hermione wasn't planning to jump. She was stronger than that, obviously, and she would never attempt suicide. Even so, she'd never felt better nestled in his arms. She tried to pull away, but he held her securely. "Hermione, I don't want to lose you. I just don't know what to do or how to do it. I have no words that could make things better. I can't fix this."

"We can fix it together, Severus. We have to try. Can you honestly tell me that you don't love me?" she asked, searching his face. She didn't care about words. It would be actions that mattered. He needed to let her know in any way that he could that they could be together.

"No."

She blanched. "No, you don't, or no, you can't?" *Please don't hurt me. I swear I will never hurt you again.*

"No, I can't say it because I do. I just...what I did was wrong." He looked away for a moment *Please let that be good enough. I don't know what to say to you. I'll never hurt you if you'll meet me halfway on this.*

"I was wrong as well. We just need to get everything in the open, Severus. It was special what we shared. I've never dreamt that I could feel so comfortable with someone. Give us a chance." She smiled hopefully. "It's all I ask."

Severus was unsure. It sounded nice. It sounded beautiful actually, but what if something happened again? What if he lost her eventually? "All right," he heard himself agree. "We'll talk. Meet me in my chambers for a meal this evening. We'll talk over dinner."

"I'll be there, Severus." She moved closer and placed a small kiss on his cheek. "I have missed you." Hermione had never missed anything so much. She didn't care if she disappointed her parents or if she disappointed her friends. To have Severus disappointed in her was too much. *Please say you've missed me. I love you.*

Hesitating for only a moment, he pulled her closer and kissed her lips softly. "I have missed you as well, Hermione. This has been the longest three days of my life, but I won't get my hopes up. We have much to talk about. I can only hope to work something out." *She's been just as miserable as I have. She loves me. She's missed me. I love her.*

"I hope so as well, Severus." Things had just taken a turn for the better. Maybe they could work through everything. Being held by him had never felt better. They could do things right this time.

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**A/N:** Well, I know it was a bit short. Sorry, but I needed to cut it off here, so I could devote the next chapter to what I hope (Hehe) is a reconciliation and lemons. It should be lengthy and tie up any loose ends. Lonnie will make an appearance. Just a little FYI... *\*\*wink\*\**

## Moving Forward

Chapter 16 of 17

Severus and Hermione have dinner and have a long talk. They decide to have a bit of time before resuming their ? sexual? relationship. Will this last?

**Disclaimer:** All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

**As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!**

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He couldn't believe it! Hermione had agreed to have dinner with him, and she clearly wanted to work things out. This made Severus happy and grateful, yet it annoyed him. She thought it was easy to just forget what had transpired between the two of them? He was in love with her. There was no question about it, but yet he didn't trust her to act so immaturely again. Couldn't she have just confronted him without seeking such punishment? When he believed that she was begging and demanding for Libertine's touch, he believed that she was blatantly betraying him and had no remorse. That had hurt. He'd nearly begged her to change her mind. Yes, she had a right to be angry with him for the things he had done, but he did feel justified to some extent.

Was he sorry? Only part of him. *The part of me that is upset about being caught.* He smirked only for a moment though. *I suppose I did betray her trust and invaded her privacy. I will not be sorry for trying to get to know her when I thought I could never have her.* He would do it again if given the choice without knowing what the future held. She had contacted him, after all. This was entirely her doing. Of course, he'd written the extra note to Lovegood, and he'd tried to throw his ad in her face. However, she had owed him of her own free will. She decided to turn to a hired man. She was lucky that it was he that she'd chosen. Some other gigolo may have taken advantage of her innocence.

Hell, he'd tried to break things off with her. He would never have touched her during their second meeting if she hadn't insisted on touching him first. A man could only endure so much. If he hadn't helped her to build her confidence or to give her a small amount of experience, their first weekend together might not have been as pleasant. It was all about love. All of it. Could they work through things? Would this not always come up in the future? Could he forgive her for her means of revenge? She'd made him feel as if his life was over, as if there was no hope for any happiness.

It would be the only way they could move forward. He'd have to forgive her and try to forget it. He would also request that she do the same. Would it be weak of him to apologize? Would she think she'd won something over him? Did that really matter in the end as long as he had her? He should apologize, and he would after dinner. That might help to smooth things over. Severus decided to let her do all of the talking this night, not that her chatter had ever been a problem before. She would have to lead them where they were meant to go. It was time to fetch her to come down. Severus made his way to her chambers.

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Hermione had been contemplating on what she'd say first. There were so many thoughts in her mind, so many things to tell him. Where to start? She loved him. She wanted a life with him. Things had been so beautiful. For a long while she had been attracted to him, and when she finally thought he was interested, well, it had made her so happy. When she'd found out about his deception, it seemed like nothing would ever be good for her again. It had felt good to hurt him the other night...at first.

Only when she heard the plea in his voice, the tremble of his lip, and the sorrow in his eyes did she realize that she'd gone too far, and by then, it was too late. He had been driven over the edge. Harry was right. They both let pride get in the way of their relationship. How long would it have taken for her to go to him if she hadn't run into him near the lake? It would have been much longer. Pride and fear both contributed to reasons for her to stay away. *Hang on! What the hell was he doing out there anyway?* She smiled. He had probably orchestrated the entire thing purposely so that they might talk.

Severus loves me still. Why would he have been so afraid that I'd fall off the Astronomy Tower otherwise? When she'd realized that he'd feared for her life and came to

'rescue' her from the Tower, she knew that no matter how harsh his words had been, how discernable his expression had been, he still loved her and wanted her safe. They had a lot to talk about. She would let him lead things the way he wanted them to be. She didn't want to appear pushy or put pressure on him. They each had a lot to account for.

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Just as he rounded the corridor near Hermione's chambers when he heard a noise. He paused and looked up and down the way. There was only an old suit of armor near by. Shrugging Severus continued on. "Pst, mate! This way," a hushed masculine voice said. "Oi!"

Raising his eyebrows at the old knight, he strode towards it cautiously. It was likely Peeves up to mischief. He drew his wand slowly. "Show yourself," he commanded.

To his surprise, Ronald Weasley crept out from behind the suit of armor with his hands up in surrender. "Don't hex," the boy said, grinning madly.

"Weasley," he said distastefully. *Not again!* "What are you doing skulking about Hermione's corridor?" He hated to ask. The boy had been accosting him all about the castle the last couple of days wanting to know about the gigolo business.

"Harry said that Hermione said that you said you would meet her here at this time."

"Speak clearly, boy. What is it you want?" Severus said becoming annoyed.

"I wanted to show you something," Weasley said proudly, pushing a paper towards Severus. "Go on. Give it a read."

### ***A Real Bloke For The Ladies***

Tired of having a ruddy husband that doesn't know how to treat you? Give me an owl. I can perform your fantasies.

Stress of the job has you down? Send an owl to me. I'll massage all your problems away.

Just looking for a bloody good time? You know what to do. Let me shag you!

~The Wicked Rake~

**All prices vary. Send picture with owl.**

Let the owling begin!

Don't be shy!

It's not a sin!

I'm your guy!

Time to give in!

Ron was nodding happily when Severus looked back up to him. A light chuckle escaped his lips. With wording like this, he'd never get a woman to owl him. He sounded like an imbecile. "See that there?" he asked, pointing to the poem. "Wrote that meself, I did!"

"How proud you must be," Severus commented dryly. "Now if you would excuse me, I have to see to Hermione."

"Thanks, mate," Weasley said, practically skipping off in the other direction. Good Lord, but that one was a real berk.

Severus knocked on Hermione's door. She opened it immediately as if she'd been waiting just on the other side. Dark eyes met brown and locked. Hermione smiled faintly. He looked ravishing. He'd chosen to wear dark blue dress robes, and he smelled delicious. *I love you, Severus. I want to be with you for always. Just tell me what I must do.*

She was beautiful. No other witch could have made him prouder. She'd taken the time to tame her hair. She wore periwinkle robes and a matching dress underneath. She was radiant. She reminded him of everything good in the world. *Merlin, but I love you. I'll not let you go.* He held out his hand, and she placed hers in his grasp, intertwining her fingers with his. They silently made their way back down to his chambers. Once there, he finally pulled their locked hands up to his lips to place a small kiss on her hand. "You look lovely," he murmured.

"Thanks," she said softly. "You look handsome."

He simply nodded and led her into his chambers. The House Elves had decorated the table elegantly and placed their food trays there already. The candles on the table had been lit. All he needed to do was lower the lamps around the room, and they would have a perfect, romantic dinner setting. He'd never done anything like this, and he'd had to go to the library to look up a few things to be sure he instructed the Elves correctly. He wanted things to be perfect for her. The only reason he left the chores up to his helpers was that he didn't trust himself to make things just right. He pulled out her chair. "I hope you don't mind lamb chops and roasted potatoes."

"Not at all," she said brightly.

"I've some Red Currant Rum. Would you like some?" he asked politely.

"Yes, please," replied Hermione. She took the glass he'd filled for her. Everything was beautiful. He'd really gone through a lot of trouble on her behalf. Severus turned down the lamps and seated himself across from her. "Thanks for allowing me to come."

"Thanks for accepting."

After a moment, she said, "Hand me your plate. I will fill it for you." When he just looked at her oddly, she reached over and served him. She then filled her own plate. "It's quite good," she said conversationally.

"Indeed," he murmured. She had served his plate without having to ask, not that he had intended to. He was simply waiting for her to make the first move out of politeness. It was...touching. It made him wonder if they would always be that way. His parents had never gotten on this well as far as he knew. They'd had an arranged marriage, so it never was about love for them. Without realizing what he was doing, he began talking about his childhood.

"My mother loved periwinkle," he said. "A large number of her things were in that shade there." He nodded to her clothing. "My mother's family was well off, and after a few generations of heavy spending, my father's family needed an alliance to a wealthy family. My father ended up dwindling most of my mother's fortune away though she was able to be sure to provision some for me."

He had mentioned this to her before, but he'd never seemed so subdued when he spoke of it. Was he finally trying to explain things to her? "I'm glad she had the foresight to do so."

"She told me once that she thought she could love him, but he was only nice until the marriage had been performed. He was a cold man after that. Most of the time, he

would yell at us in a drunken stupor. He had lady friends that he would taunt her with." He took a sip of his drink. "I hated him, yet I respected him. That changed eventually. No matter what I did, he would always find fault. I was too weak, too much like my mother, or too ignorant."

"How horrible. I can't imagine growing up like that, but I suppose subtle comments can be just as damning," she commented, reaching over to softly stroke his hand for a moment.

"Are your parents that much like mine?" he asked doubtfully.

"No, I was never yelled at, but they have their own methods to disguise their displeasure in me and the choices that I make. It's the little things sometimes that get to me," she said, sadly remembering. "There is always something that I could have done better."

"Such as?"

"Well, for instance, once I made 96% on a potions end of term exam, and my father said that he was very proud of me. Unfortunately, if I had studied harder, used bigger words, and added a foot of parchment more, I could have achieved a higher percentage." She smiled ruefully. "He always said that every little percent counted, and he'd hate to have a daughter that missed out on being great by 1%. He'd hate to have a daughter that would settle for only being good."

"That is still an excellent grade. What the hell is wrong with him?" he asked angrily.

"It's just the way they are, Severus. Remember when Draco hexed my teeth?" Severus shook his head and tried to remember. "Well, anyway, it was back in fourth year. He and Harry had an exchange. Draco's hex hit me instead. I allowed Poppy to fix my teeth, and I let her carry on a bit so that they weren't as large as they were before. My mother had a fit."

"But, why? You were only doing what you had to do."

"They are both dentists. They don't believe that magic should be used on the body. I heard for years about how I should have trusted their methods with my mouth if I was unhappy with my appearance." She smiled. "They wanted me to go to a Muggle university after I graduated here. Imagine their disappointment when I chose to stay on. Now, I'm getting old and letting all worthy men pass me by."

"Good Lord," Severus said. "Not much better than my father. I suppose you should be glad that you still have them. I miss my mother. If I could have my father as he was before he passed on, then maybe I wouldn't mind having him back. He was a very bitter man. My punishments used to be to lock me up in the attic for a couple of hours. If my mother would try to intervene, he'd do unspeakable things." Severus shuddered and pushed those thoughts away. "Hermione, how can you care about me now after all I have said to you in the past?"

"Well, that was different. We had a student and teacher relationship then. I've grown to know you as a colleague and a man now. I like what I see, Severus." She smirked. "And, you? Why would you care for an insufferable know it all?"

"This may come as a shock to you, but I quite enjoyed our bantering in staff meetings and at meals. I was very sorry to see your friends show up here," he said honestly.

"That didn't need to change. I enjoyed it as well, and I missed it."

"I don't like them. They annoy me. I really don't know if we'll ever be able to have a civil relationship, and it bothers me because I know that you would like us to." He refilled their glasses. "Care for some more potatoes?"

"No, I have plenty," she said as he began to scoop a bit more into his plate. "I don't expect you to be best mates, Severus, but I would like you to get along on some level. Harry said that you three had a nice talk the other night, and you allowed them to sleep over at your home. He and Ron also claim that you've been friendly with them lately."

"Friendly? Every time I turn around Weasley is there asking me about..." he looked away. Damn. Why had he brought that up?

"What project is he working on? Do you know?" she asked.

Was this a test? Surely the brat would have told her his plans. They were best friends after all. "Did he not tell you?"

"Not really," she admitted. "Would you? I'll not say anything."

Severus sucked in a deep breath. "He would like to try his luck as a hired man." He held his breath, waiting for her roar of disapproval. Instead, he heard laughter. He looked her way and saw that she was holding her face in attempt to contain herself.

"I might have known! After you told them, he asked me what kind of room we would meet in, how the owl exchanges were made, and just odd things. I was wondering what he was playing at!"

Chuckling with relief, Severus said, "You won't believe what he's done now. He has placed an ad in the paper. It's atrocious. No one will reply to him."

After their laughter faded, Hermione decided it was time to initiate their needed talk. "Why did you really become a gigolo, Severus?"

"You," he said simply, sipping his rum. "I wanted to find someone like you."

"Why not just ask me out? You really hadn't intended to ask me to the conference?"

"No, I was trying to get you to notice my ad," he admitted, cheeks splotching momentarily. "Hermione, there is something you need to know. A few months ago, I started wa..." He couldn't tell her that. She would think him a pervert.

"Tell me everything. We need this," she said. She placed her hand over his.

"Well, I was coming back from a terrible jaunt that I'd had. I saw you running in my direction. I hid, of course, not wanting to talk, and you stopped right near me. You proceeded to undress and have an early morning swim. I'd never seen anything more beautiful than when you came up from the water. It was an instant attraction." He noted that she hadn't withdrawn her hand yet.

"So, you saw me without my clothes?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, but I thought you'd only paused to stretch. Next thing I knew, you were undressing. If I had called out, it would have been embarrassing," he said.

"But, you stayed and watched anyway. Did you not divert your eyes?"

"No, I wanted to see you," he whispered. "I am a man, Hermione, and trust me. I loved what I saw. It made me see you differently. Not just as a sex object, but as someone that I could see myself with. Someone sexy and smart is hard to find."

"Severus, if you felt that way, why couldn't you have come to me? Had you no faith in me?" she asked, looking stung.

"It was an insecurity in myself, pride, and stubbornness that kept me away. I never thought you would be interested in me. I became obsessed with you. I went out nearly every day to see if you were out, and I admit it freely. I did watch you. I tried to tell myself at first that it was for your own protection. Something could have come out of the

forest to attack you or something in the lake could have attacked you. It was more than that. I wanted to see what I knew would never be mine." He pulled his hand from hers to move a strand of hair from his face. He was heartened when he put it back on the table hers sought it out.

"Strangely enough, I don't mind that you watched. Not now that I know you, but I wish you would have come to me. We could have skipped all of this."

"Well, at some point, I overheard Rolanda and Pomona talking about a hired man. The idea struck me that I could do much the same. I could become a gigolo, find someone that resembled you, had intelligence, and I would woo her, eventually making her my own Hermione. I never took on a client without checking her out. Most I knew before I even had to have a look, like Lovegood. Others though, I would make a point to see first. If they didn't faintly resemble you, I didn't accept them. There were only four, as you know already, that I took on. One was much like you, but she wasn't very smart. I found her company...enjoyable." He paused.

"It's all right, Severus. I can handle it. Go on," she urged, squeezing his hand.

"The second one, I did see a couple of times, but she was in a shaky marriage. I finally gave her advice, and thankfully never heard from her again. The third one was one time only. She was simply new in town. The fourth one, well, that's Lonnie." He felt her nails dig into his hand for a moment. "She and I saw each other a few times as well. She had odd tastes and was also...enjoyable, but she was married. I knew it would never go any place. I knew neither of the two would be anything like you, but I kept seeing them." He sighed exasperatingly. "I was alone, Hermione. I had no one. If I had known that one day you would give me a chance, I would never have done it."

"I can understand that, but why would you purposely try to get me to hire you? Wouldn't you have felt horrible about it? Dishonest?" she asked softly, hoping not to embarrass him.

"No," he said firmly. "I wanted you, and the Slytherin in me decided to use whatever tactics I could to have you. I am sorry if you find that dishonorable, but my feelings for you were, no, are real." She simply nodded, pulled her hand away, and stood up. Damn! Did he lose her already? He'd only just found her again.

Hermione moved around to stand behind her lover, placing her arms around his body and her head on his shoulder. "I just wish you would have talked to me, Severus. That was wrong. I was under the impression that you were a stranger."

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he said, voice cracking slightly. She was right. It was wrong, but part of him would never regret it. It had given him the confidence to approach her and her the confidence to approach him. It was exactly what they needed.

"I forgive you," she whispered. "Do you forgive me?"

He hesitated for only a moment. "I do, but I wish you had confronted me. I thought...I thought you were willingly betraying me with another man. I don't think I've ever felt so utterly disappointed."

"That was wrong of me. I found myself questioning your motives and your feelings for me. It wasn't until I was already there and saw how it was affecting you that I came clean. I never meant to hurt you so badly, and I am so very sorry," she whispered, kissing his neck lightly. "If you decide to give us another chance, I can guarantee that I'll never hurt you again."

"Of course I want another chance. I'll try to make this up to you somehow," he declared, turning to brush her lips softly. "How did you figure it out?"

Hermione blushed. "Well, before we even went to Cardiff, I found that note from Lonnie. It was crumpled, and I figured it was rubbish that simply missed the grate. I wanted to be sure, so I opened it to check. I wasn't trying to pry. Honestly."

"Understandable," he said with a nod. "Go on."

"Well, I assumed she was your lover, so I asked a few little questions. You said there was nobody of importance, so I assumed that things had remained broken off. I didn't let it bother me. Well, maybe a little. I didn't know if I could compete with her, what she looked like, and that sort of thing. I did wonder about her often."

"Hermione, I will point her out to you if you'd like. She is nowhere near as beautiful as you are. Nor does she possess your intelligence. Lonnie never had me completely," he said honestly.

"Thanks," she said with a smile. "Anyway, the other night as I was going to bed, I saw my hair elastic in your drawer. First, I thought it was sweet of you to keep it near. Then, I realized that I had lost it when I was with Libertine. That, the letter, the scar on your leg, things you'd said, the owl, Lonnie's letter, and just everything made me think. It just all fell into place."

"And, you actually believed that I had set out to purposely use you? Dishonor you?"

"Well, yes, part of me did, and that part of me was the one that formed a plan of vengeance. We need to begin again, and try to push those thoughts and feelings away. I can do it. Can you?" she asked hopefully.

"What do I do? Where do I start?"

"We work together. Both of us. I think we should take things slowly this time. Start over. Forget Libertine. Forget what I did. I want to know everything about you, and I want you to know everything about me. I want you to meet my parents even though they will likely find something to disapprove about. I want to go to your house to spend time with you." She kissed his lips again and smiled at him. "What do you want?"

"All of that. Everything. Forever," he said, kissing her again. This time he sought entrance to her mouth to deepen the kiss. She allowed it, but only for a few moments.

"I love you." *Please say it.*

*She said it!* "And, I love you," he echoed. Their lips met again. Severus twisted around to pull her onto his lap. After several moments of kissing, their breathing began to come in excited jolts. He began to frantically kiss her neck. "Hermione, if I don't stop now..." He half hoped she would tell him to carry on, but he'd respect her wishes. Either way.

"I know the feeling. Let's just take a week first. Learn each other inside and out," she said before nipping at his neck. He groaned. "Or, at least a few days," she amended breathlessly.

He had to remove her from his lap before he told her to forget the days without. Hermione would never be rid of him now. She was within his grasp again, and he would do what he needed to do to be sure that she remained with him. "Let's go to my home. Just us for the week."

"All right. When?"

"Tomorrow," he blurted.

"I'll be ready early," she said, pulling him up to stand next to her. "I think that I should go, Severus. It's hard not to...touch you."

He nodded and took her hand. "Dinner was lovely, but our talk was inspirational. It makes me want to be a better man and do kinder things. Almost," he said, thinking of her two bratty friends. Why should he waste kindnesses on them? "I am pleased, Hermione. We can make this work."

"I'm sure of it as well," Hermione agreed. When they reached her chambers, she asked if he wanted to come in. He declined, knowing it would be too hard to resist the urge to make love to her. He left her feeling as if nothing in the world could ever go wrong again. As long as she loved him, it would be perfect. Hermione smiled as her lover

made his way back to his dungeons. Things would be fine between them again.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Day 1

Hermione allowed Severus to Apparate them to his home. It was quite nice and cozy. It was much larger than the home she'd come from, and the grounds were large. They spent most of the day walking around. They'd had lunch out on the grounds near a small stream. Near the nightfall, he showed her where his mother's flower garden used to be.

"Oh, this is lovely. I love the little brick wall there and that tree. I could imagine myself sitting there reading a book while smelling the scent of flowers floating about."

"My mother used to sit there," he said. "She told me that when she was a young girl, it was her favorite spot."

Hermione didn't know if she should feel guilty or happy that he was able to speak so freely. He had such a sad look about him when he talked about his mother. It was as if being home had changed him a little. He seemed more relaxed, sort of as he was in Cardiff. "It's beautiful here, Severus."

"Thanks. You ready to go in?"

"Yes, I would like some dinner, a bath, and a nice book," she said, allowing him to pull her up. For a moment, he pulled her into his arms to hold her.

"I'm glad you are here."

"Thanks for inviting me, Severus."

They shared a companionable evening, each reading their own book while cuddling near his fire. When she was ready to turn in, she said, "I'm tired."

"Allow me to escort you to your room," he said softly. He walked her to her door. "I would love to come in, Hermione, but I won't pressure you. I know you wanted to take this time to platonically get to know each other. Good night." Severus kissed her and with a nod he left her longing for more. She secretly wished she hadn't said that rubbish about waiting. What was the big deal? It wasn't like they'd not made love before.

Day 2

"I can't believe you talked me into this!" Severus exclaimed, splashing water on his beloved once more.

"Oh, I love playing in the water! It reminds me of when I was a young girl. My grandmother used to come on vacations with us. She used to always have fun with me in the pools, streams, or beaches. My parents usually snuck away for a bit of privacy," Hermione said pulling Severus down with her. Their eyes met only briefly before Hermione straddled his lap to kiss him. Minutes later she pulled away for a breath. "I've missed this."

"As have I," he murmured. His lips found her neck as her hands found the bulge in his pants. He groaned loudly. "Hermione, if you keep that up, I'll have to take you right here."

She was fascinated with the way he felt through his trousers. It was as if she could outline nearly every inch of him. Luckily it was positioned sideways, or it might peek out the top of his trousers. "Oh, yes," she moaned as his tongue darted out to pet her ear. The breathing in her ear was a turn on in itself.

Severus couldn't do this. Later she would say they moved to fast. She wanted to wait, and they would wait. He wouldn't pressure her into anything. Seduction wasn't fair, and he wouldn't be accused of anything. "We need to stop," he said firmly. "Please, Hermione. We promised ourselves."

"All right," she agreed, removing her fingers. "But, I hated not sleeping in your bed last night. I was a bit lonely being in a strange house and all that. Would you mind if I at least shared your bed, love? Being both adults, I'm sure we can control ourselves."

Good Lord! I am not made of iron! "Of course," he lied. How the hell would he be able to keep his hands off of her? Hours later, after they'd gone through every book in his personal library, they finally made their way to bed. Severus lay down first and looked to his lover expectantly.

She slowly made her way to him and relaxed in his arms. He could sense that she wanted to say something, but she remained silent. He kissed her forehead and tightened his hold. In return, she kissed his collarbone and held him tighter. "Sweet dreams," she whispered.

"They will be...now," he replied delicately. "Now that you are in my arms again."

Day 3

Hermione's eyes were narrowed. He was sitting there reading his paper like nothing in the world was wrong, like he wasn't frustrated! She had hardly slept the night before, wanting to climb onto him and take him into her. "Severus," she said finally.

"Yes?"

"Remember our conversation over dinner in your chambers the other night?"

"Of course."

"I didn't mean it." *Please know what I'm talking about. I don't want to feel like an idiot. I need you. I want you. Make love to me. I can't stand it anymore.*

"Sorry?" he asked innocently. "We talked for nearly two hours. Which part did you not mean? You do want to be here, right?"

"Yes, I want to be here, but I want to...I want make love to you. Why wait? It's ridiculous," she said finally, staring at his mouth instead of his eyes.

Yes! She said it! She admitted openly that this was too much. The night they'd spent in each other's arms must have been just as hard on her. "I only wait because you felt we needed time. I wouldn't rush you, Hermione. Take the time you need."

"To hell with time. I need you."

He raised an eyebrow and set his paper down before leaning forward. "Is that so?" he asked seductively.

"Hell yes," she breathed, leaning forward. "Kiss me."

"As you wish," he commented, pulling her face to his for a soft kiss. She moaned in protest as he pulled away. He stood and took in her appearance. Why had he not noticed how scantily dressed she was? She had come down wearing a sleeveless, low cut blouse and a short skirt. Her feet were bare and her hair was pulled up in an elastic band. From his standing position, he could see right down into her shirt and make out her tantalizing cleavage. *To hell with proper!* Like a mad man, a hasty sweep of his hand across the top of the table sent everything flying onto the floor. He pulled Hermione up and over to his side and laid her on her back, letting her legs dangle. "I want you right here and now."

"Yes," she whimpered as his mouth found her throat. Her nimble little fingers easily unbuckled and unbuttoned his trousers. She pulled those down as best as she could, along with his underpants. His hard cock sprung out freely into her hands. She stroked him quickly and helped to guide him to her.

"Now? Like this?" he asked.

"Yes, now."

Without any further action or words, he ripped the ties apart on her knickers, and he pushed into her, slowly, easily. He wanted to savor the feeling that he'd gone without for so long. She was wet already, so he hadn't much trouble sliding in. His little witch was so responsive. Her body was ready to welcome him after only a few kisses, nips, and caresses. Even now she was arching against him, pulling him all the way in to her with her legs. When he was all the way in, he paused to look into her eyes. "I've missed this."

"God, me too," she murmured. She lifted her head to meet his lips when they heard a loud popping noise.

"Master has a mess," one of his two House Elves said, surveying the floor. Hermione and Severus both glared at the creature as its eyes finally went from the floor to them. "Oh, begging your pardon, master, mistress." The Elf popped away.

They both began laughing, slightly embarrassed. "I suppose it would have been prudent for me to carry you to bed." He pulled all the way out and pressed back in quickly. "Ungh. But, I couldn't, whew, damn, wait."

Hermione silenced him by bringing her lips to his as they moved together in a frantic, nearly rough fashion. It had been nearly a week since they'd had each other. The groans and growls coming from his throat and filling her mouth along with his tongue had her feeling hotter than ever. "Don't stop," she finally screeched, tearing her mouth from his, bucking wildly against him. From this position, it was as if he was filling her more deeply. "Oh, my!"

"I can't stop. I can't. I can't. I'm going to come," he was saying in a youthfully, carefree voice. "Hermione!"

"Severus!" The waves of feeling had crested for a moment and slammed onto shore. The swells of pleasure slowly receded leaving only two spent lovers panting and sweating. "Severus, that...was...intense," Hermione said, punctuating each word with a kiss upon his face.

"I'm not done yet," he said arrogantly, moving to stand. He had remained mostly hard. Still buried within his lover, he walked up to his bedchamber. The journey was slow with her added weight, and he couldn't see much with her mouth locked onto his. Finally his bed came into sight, and he happily plopped her down. "What shall I do to you first?" he asked in a mocking tone.

"Scourgify?" she asked cheekily. They both chuckled.

"Very well, although, I do hate to leave my current position," he said, moving within her.

"Ah, wait. Awww, don't go," she whined when he pulled away.

"It was your suggestion," he said blandly, pulling his wand from his sleeve pocket. He went about cleaning them both, and he took the time to undress himself completely this time. Severus unfastened her blouse, pulling it away from her skin. She shimmied the skirt down as he unclasped her bra.

"Come to me," she said, opening her arms to him.

"Oh, I shall come, Hermione," he said seductively. "But, not until you do."

He slid onto the bed again and nestled between her thighs. "You're going to...oh Lord," she moaned as his tongue and fingers found her crux. It appeared that she never lasted long. Why? How could he hold himself back so easily? She tried to concentrate on what he was doing instead of just going with the feelings in order to prolong it. His tongue was applying perfect pressure and licking her in intimate circles. Two of his slender fingers were dipping in and out of her flesh. *How does he know exactly where to curve his finger to...ooh, make me feel so bloody good?* Thoughts left. Feelings overcame her as his mouth began suckling and nibbling more forcefully. "I love you. I do. I love you. Love me. SEV-ER-US," she gasped, trying to pull his head as snug to her body as she could in attempt to feel his mouth completely as she quivered against his face. He pulled free to watch her for a moment.

"I do," he said, gliding up her body. "Love you." Severus slid into her warm, welcoming depths. For the second time that morning, he was home. He'd never let her go. Anything she wanted, he would try to give her. Nothing would stand in the way of their happiness again. "Beautiful," he murmured. Pounding into her had never felt better. Everything was in the open. There were no more lies. Nothing to hide. It was the start of a great new life. Pushing all thoughts to the side, he concentrated on following his lover into her little piece of heaven. Over and over her slammed into her until the seed burst forth, finding a temporary home within her. "Hermione," he called softly into her ear. "Always." Never leaving her, they fell asleep tangling in each other.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

### **Five Weeks Later**

"Bloody hell," Ron complained. "Not this one again." He handed Harry a parchment. "You take her, mate."

Harry took the parchment, and his face scrunched up. "No way, mate. I had her last time, and anyway, we've not got any Polyjuice Potion. I'm afraid she's all yours."

Severus and Hermione looked at each other and shook their heads in disbelief. Ron's gigolo business had accumulated a handful of clients. On a couple of occasions, he'd requested help from Harry, if appointments overlapped. Hermione asked, "What's wrong with that one?" She nodded to the parchment in Harry's hand.

"Always going on about some bloke that she used to see, but he left her just after her husband did. Likes it really rough. Too wild if you ask me," Ron said.

"Well, don't reply to her any longer," Hermione suggested. "Harry can't always help you out when you get in a bind anyway."

"Oi! She pays a good bit of galleons, she does," Ron protested.

"Then stop complaining."

"And, Harry doesn't mind a couple of shags. Do you, Harry?" he asked.

"No, I don't. It's just odd though," Harry said. "Here, I'll reply for you. We'll tell her to meet you about seven?"

"Can't I'm with that new client at seven. Unless you want to take her," Ron said hopefully.

"Well, where is her picture?" Harry asked, making to grab what Ron had in her hands.

"Oh, honestly!" Hermione huffed. "Come on, Severus. Your cauldron should be ready for the next set of ingredients now."

Severus stood to follow his lover to the dungeons. "Have a good night," he said with a smirk. He still didn't like the brats much, but they did prove to be quite entertaining. Weasley hadn't had many replies at first until Hermione reworded his ad for him. She'd explained that the wording was dreadful, and she never would have sent an owl to him. Just as they reached the door, they heard Potter say one name. Severus cringed. It was Lonnie.

Hermione spun around and made her way to Harry before snatching the parchment from him. Aha! It was the same handwriting. So, the little tart had moved on and forgotten her idle threats to Libertine then. "Severus, have you not got at least one dose of Polyjuice Potion?"

"Now, Hermione, you wouldn't dare," he said moving forward.

"I just want to see her," Hermione said mockingly. "It's a woman thing. I doubt you would understand."

"What's so important about this Lonnie?" Ron asked. "She's a nightmare. Can't blame the blokes for ditching her. Right menace if you ask me."

Hermione turned to him. "Where and when will you meet her?" she asked. "I won't interrupt, but I want to see her. Please."

"Er...all right. We've been meeting at the Hog's Head for a drink, and then we rent a room out back. I'm going to meet her at eight tonight since Harry is going to take my new client. Go have a drink then," he said nonchalantly. "Mind, I won't have any peek show going on when it's down to business."

"As if we would be interested in seein-"

"Shush, Severus," Hermione interrupted. "We'll be having a drink ourselves. Cheers."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"That's her," her lover whispered. Hermione looked up from her spot in the shadows and saw a fairly tall woman with long, wild, brown hair. She was build a bit stocky, and when she spoke to Ron, she sounded a bit manly.

"Well, she's not really all *that* pretty," Hermione said tartly. Even with a couple of oddities, the woman was not hard to look on nonetheless.

"Hermione," Severus said, reaching for her hand. "Nobody compares to you. I love you. Only you. Never doubt me."

"I'll never doubt you again, Severus," she said, kissing the hand cradling hers. She grinned evilly as she raised her wand. "Diffindo," she whispered twice, slicing the two thin straps on the woman's dress.

"Oh!" Lonnie exclaimed as her dress slid down. She grabbed at the silky material to keep her breasts hidden. "My dress!"

Before Severus could say a word, Hermione was up and walking towards the distressed witch. "Need some help?" she asked sweetly.

"My straps broke," she said with a slight whine.

"Er, I'm sure this nice witch can help," Ron, disguised as a gigolo, said. Hermione could see him swallowing nervously.

"Sure, hold this," she said, handing the woman her glass. "I'll tie the straps up behind you like a halter top. It should be all right until you can mend it or change."

"Thanks," the witch drawled, turning around. Hermione quickly tied her straps.

"There. That should keep you covered," she said sweetly, reaching for her drink. She pretended to trip on Ron's foot though and tumbled into the witch. "Oh, bloody hell! I'm so clumsy. Oh, no!" The witch had fallen into the bar, and the red liquor had spilled all along the front of her dress, ruining it. Hermione knew that no cleaning charm would get every bit of that out. "Scourgify," she said quickly. "Tsk. Tsk. Sorry. It looks as though you'll have a bit of a stain there."

Lonnie was seething. "Thanks for all your help," she said through gritted teeth. She pulled on Ron's hand. "Let's go." Hermione watched the pair make way for the door. "Diffindo," she whispered again. The seam in the back of her dress ripped apart giving anyone willing a nice view of her furry peach knickers. A few blokes started catcalling, but the oblivious pair walked on.

"Had fun?" Severus asked, scoffing at her. "You should have just introduced yourself as Libertine's lover and been done with it."

"Oh, honestly! She won't know it was I, Severus. I was being a friendly witch after all. A bit clumsy, mind, but a friendly one all the same."

"A naughty witch. Why don't I take you back to the castle and give you a little spanking for being such a bad girl," he whispered seductively into her ear. "I have a little punishment in mind for you, silly girl."

"Is that so, *Professor*?"

"Indeed."

"Well, what are you waiting for then? Take me back to the castle and begin my chastisement." He kissed her cheek and led her to the door. "I do love you, Hermione."

"I love you as well, Severus," she said. Cheekily, she added, "You're stuck with me forever you know. Can you handle that?"

"I know I can. Come here," he pulled her to his chest and kissed her roughly before Apparating back to the gates in front of the castle.

A/N: Well, it's been fun, and this concludes my little gigolo tale. I had debated on an epilogue of sorts, but that is up to you. If you'd like to draw your own conclusions, I won't mind. Thanks to Betz for making this challenge over at WIKTT, and thanks to my brilliant beta, Nay.

I have another answer to the gigolo challenge. It's named "Vengeance is Sweet!" You can find it here at Ashwinder. I will be adding a second chapter to it now that I've finished this one. Have a read.

Epilogue

Chapter 17 of 17

A quick glance to see if our lovers are still together.

Disclaimer: All characters are for J.K.R. of course. Plot thought of by Betz. The other stuff belongs to me!

As always, a big thanks to the brilliant Charmed Nay for being my beta!

The weather this time of year was always lovely. Severus looked out along the beach and smiled. It was always private here. This particular cove had been the first place that he and Hermione had made love. He was glad that they'd chosen to come back to their little Wizarding village yet again. For the last five years, they'd returned to the same rooms they had shared on their first visit for that Conference that they'd never made it to. His eyes drifted back to the curly haired brunette a few feet away from him. He watched her intently as she squealed like an excited child as a small bit of water sloshed over her little feet. He smiled as she made her way over to him.

"Daddy, look!" she said, giggling. "A prezzie for you." She opened her outstretched hand to reveal a broken seashell.

"A treasure!" he exclaimed. "I shall keep it always." He took the shell and added it to the pile of others that had been accumulating over the last thirty minutes. His daughter plopped down in his lap. "Would you like me to take you out into the water just a bit?" he asked.

She nodded excitedly. "Yes! In the water."

Hermione sat down next to them. "Severus, please don't go out too far. I don't like her being out in the water. You never know what might happen."

Severus smiled at his wife before kissing her reassuringly on the cheek. "I think that I can keep her safe, Hermione. You, love, worry too much." He and their daughter made their way into the surprisingly calm water.

Hermione smiled when she saw that they hadn't gone very far. She always worried about everything. Janie had recently turned three, and she was very headstrong. Hermione found herself constantly having to keep an eye on the inquisitive girl. She and Severus had been married for almost five years, and she felt that her love for him grew with each passing year. A year or so into their marriage, they'd decided mutually to stop taking pregnancy precautions. Not long after came the news that they would be parents. The only thing that changed now that Janie was with them was time alone.

There never seemed to be enough of it. She couldn't bear to keep their daughter in another room when she was still only an infant, so she kept her crib next to their bed. The crib grew into a toddler bed, and they decided to try to put her in her own room. Most nights she would crawl into bed with them anyway. They took turns taking her back to her bed and staying with her until she fell back asleep again. After a few weeks, Janie finally started sleeping the entire night in her own room, so they'd been able to make love a lot more often lately.

"I suppose we should take advantage while we still can," she said to herself. She'd found out before they left for Cardiff that she was about six weeks along with their second and likely final child. She was waiting for the perfect time to tell her husband. They'd argued about having another child months earlier. She'd wanted to wait, but he didn't. He'd said that Janie deserved a sibling near her own age so she'd have someone to play with. Hermione knew though that was not his only reason. He felt as if time was slipping by, and he would soon be too old to have more children. That was ridiculous, but Severus was a very stubborn man at times. She'd stopped taking her Pregnancy Potion nearly four months earlier, and it had finally paid off.

She'd changed her mind when she held Harry and Gabrielle's newborn daughter for the first time. It brought back so many memories of how she felt when she first held Janie and how Severus looked as he smiled at his child for the first time. It was then that she decided she was ready for another child. Ron and his wife, Madeline, had decided to wait a while before having children. It was Madeline that helped with Janie while Hermione and Severus were teaching. Hermione couldn't have asked for a better nanny. Ron had really found a gem.

Hermione began snorting with laughter causing Severus to turn to look at her. "All right?" he called. She nodded and waved. Ron had met his wife through his long defunct gigolo service. He'd had quite an adventure for nearly a year, and he'd brought Harry along for the ride until Harry ran into Gabrielle Delacour again. Ron met Madeline, and he fell in love. His little side business shut down completely. They had all come a long way since she and Severus had begun a relationship. Life couldn't get any sweeter, could it?

~~~~~HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Oi! You going to move any time today?" Ron asked, clearly annoyed. Severus smirked at him but made no reply. He simply went back to studying the chessboard. "I mean," Ron began, looking at the others, "he's been staring at this move for twenty minutes now. Bloody hell! Can't he see that I've nearly got him?"

"Kindly shut your mouth, Weasley, or you will find that I'll have to shut it for you," Severus said angrily, narrowing his eyes at his opponent. "I don't whinge when you are trying to concentrate."

"Whinge? Whose whinging? I'd just like to finish at some point in the near future," Ron replied sarcastically.

Hermione shook her head as the pair continued to argue. She wondered if they enjoyed that the most when they played. Each time they got together, this would always happen. She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked to see Harry grinning broadly. "Have a minute?" he asked.

"Always," she said, following him outside. They sat on an old log at the back of Ron's hut. It was still odd not to think of it as Hagrid's, but with the passing years, it was getting easier to think of their fallen friends without feeling such sharp pain.

"Can't believe how things have worked out," Harry said. "We're all still together here at Hogwarts. We're all married. You and I have started families. It's just perfect."

"I know what you mean," she said. "I feel so content."

"What of your parents?" he asked quietly.

"They still don't want to see us, but they do exchange letters asking after Janie. I guess they might come around one day. I just wish they would get to know her," Hermione said wistfully. "No matter. Minerva has become quite a stand-in grandmother. Molly as well. I don't know what I would do without the advice they have given me or the help Madeline has given us either."

"Sorry," Harry said.

"It's all right, Harry. I've had almost six years to deal with it. I guess it still smarts at times, but they've been drifting away from me for years. I suppose I just never amounted to what they thought I would."

"Their loss," Severus said, walking up. "I think we should snatch up Janie and return to our quarters. Weasley is going into shock, as he didn't realize my superior skills at Wizard's Chess would always surpass his."

Hermione and Harry laughed. "Where are Gabrielle and the little ones?"

Harry smiled. "She told me she would go sit in the sun with them near our old spot. Let's go get them."

Hermione pulled Severus' hand into hers as they followed Harry. Severus looked down at her hand and smiled. Small shows of affection still meant so much to him. After all this time, she still hadn't tired of him. He would never regret falling in love with her. She had given him a new life, and for that, he'd always be grateful.

They found Gabrielle reading to Janie as her own child slept peacefully at her side. "Hi," she said sweetly when they approached.

"Ready, Janie?" Hermione asked.

"No! It's story time," she said with a pout.

Before either parent could reply, Gabrielle laughed. "I think that I will really need help with Lilliana tonight if Janie would like to have a sleep over with us. I could arrange a nice little bed next to ours."

"Ooh! I want to," Janie said excitedly.

Hermione and Severus eyed each other uneasily. They'd never allowed Janie to sleep without them before. "I don't know," Hermione said. "I think you should just come with us."

Harry picked up Janie and began dancing around with her. "She'll be fine, Mione. We'll Floo you if she changes her mind."

Hermione smiled. Harry had been so good with Janie from the moment she'd been born. She looked to Severus who raised an eyebrow in return. "I suppose we could use a little time to ourselves," she said. "Are you sure?"

"Of course," Gabrielle said. "If she gets homesick, I'll have Harry Floo you."

"Agreed," Severus said.

~~~~~HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione leaned back against Severus' stomach in an attempt to get comfortable in the tub. The soapy water splashed over onto the floor. "Oops," she giggled.

"Making another mess, Hermione?" Severus asked playfully. "I shall have to be forced to clean things up again."

"So long as we can stay here for a while. It has been years since we've bathed together," she said. "I have missed this so much."

"As have I," he agreed. "Perhaps we could make time to do this more often."

"Yes, I think we should do it now that Janie is finally sleeping in her own room all night." She held his arms to her tightly. "We need to do it while we still have time."

"We have plenty of time. I don't think she'll break the habit of staying in her own bed," he said sleepily. "Speaking of bed, should we make our way back to ours? The water is cooling off. I'd hate for my lovely little wife to get too cold." Hermione turned around to straddle Severus. He smirked. "Can't wait for the bed?"

"I want to look into your eyes when I tell you this," she said mysteriously. Her lips found his for a moment. "I love you."

"And, I you," he said, wondering what she was on about.

"I meant that we only had a limited amount of time because in approximately 33 weeks, we will have another little one to look after." She grinned at his confused look. "I'm pregnant."

"How?"

"Really, Severus! I would think that you-"

"The Pregnancy Potion? I thought you'd decided to not do away with it," he said.

"Well, I rethought things, and I felt that I was ready. I had hoped to surprise you. Are you disappointed?" she asked, biting her lip.

"Of course not, you silly girl," he said, pulling her to him again. "I wish I'd have known you'd changed your mind though. I had given up hope that you would want another child before it would be too late."

"Severus!" she said huffily. "Too late for what? You've got about 110 more years in you I would think. We have all the time we need."

He smiled. "A father again! Janie will be pleased to know that she'll have a sister or brother. She has been asking for one since Harry's Lilliana was born."

"We'll tell her tomorrow morning after breakfast," Hermione said. "For now, I think I'd like my husband to make love to me again." She rubbed her body against his provocatively. "I do believe you are about ready for another go."

"Indeed I am," he said with a growl. He picked her up with him and carried her to their bed. "You've made me a most happy man," he murmured into her ear as he pushed into her.

"I think we'll always be this way, don't you?" she asked softly, wrapping her legs around his waist and placing small kisses on his shoulder.

"Definitely," he said and proceeded to make love to his wife. Later, as she lay sleeping in his arms, he allowed his hand to drift down to caress her stomach. It would be rounding nicely in a couple of months. The future was bright indeed.

A/N: Sorry the epilogue took so long to get up! Things have been hectic for the last couple of weeks, and I've been trying to finish up with The Succubus.

If you've liked this Gigolo story, please go see my other take on the challenge. It is called Vengeance is Sweet. I hope you've not been disappointed for the lack of 'lemons' here, but I felt this was good enough. It just shows that all is still well for our couple and their mates. Cheers!