

# Dark Roast

*by lady\_rhian*

**Runner Up, Best Het Fic, Multifaceted Awards Round Six.** The war is over, and Hermione continues the final phases of her research on the English Coast. Her research causes an unexpected twist, which requires the assistance of a certain jaded war hero whose memory has haunted her ...

## Chapter One

*Chapter 1 of 16*

**Runner Up, Best Het Fic, Multifaceted Awards Round Six.** The war is over, and Hermione continues the final phases of her research on the English Coast. Her research causes an unexpected twist, which requires the assistance of a certain jaded war hero whose memory has haunted her ...

**Disclaimer:** None of it's mine, but you already knew that.

**A/N:** Many thanks to Psykiapa for her constant perusals of my work, her honest opinion, and her wonderful company. Also to the phenomenal ladyinthecloak for Brit-picking. :) Thanks to xCheersForTheEnd at Mugglenet for the story banner.



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Hermione sat at the mahogany desk, staring out the window. A ray of sun had burst over the horizon at the moment she looked up from her paper. She rubbed her eyes. Another all-nighter. Admiring the peeking morning sun, she shuffled her papers around her desk. Her work consumed her waking hours.

"Does mistress wish for any breakfast?" a tiny house-elf, clad in a pink apron, popped into the room with a quick burst of light.

"No thank you, Chryssan," Hermione murmured. She leaned back in her chair, stretching her arms behind her head. *Crack.* Ahh, now that was better.

The study was now flooded with rays of sunrise; brilliant pinks, purples, reds, and yellows practically burst, magnified by the charms placed on the large bay windows. A slight breeze muffled its way through the beach house; Hermione stood and walked to the window to admire the Channel's smooth waters.

The war was over. The Light had won. The Boy Who Lived had defeated Voldemort after her twentieth birthday, three years after finishing her seventh year at Hogwarts –

but those three years had been three years too long. There had been far too many casualties. First, Cedric. Sirius. Dumbledore. Then Charlie ... a few professors. Trelawney had leapt from the Astronomy Tower before the Death Eaters could take her. A feeble smile crossed Hermione's lips, remembering the daft, scatter-brained seer. Her moment of clarity had ensured the Light's monopoly on prophecies and information pertaining to the Dark Lord. The smile left our heroine's lips as she thought of the most recent casualty. Draco. He had turned to the Light during the final battle after seeing his father mercilessly kill his mother. In the aftermath, it was found that Narcissa had been passing information to her estranged sister Andromeda and, thus, to Tonks. Draco had mortally wounded his father, leaving the left flank of Death Eaters in miserable disarray. It had been enough. Harry had killed Voldemort. Mortally wounded, Draco's final days were spent in St. Mungo's where he had passed with Harry, Ron, and Hermione at his bedside.

Still, many had lived. Nearly all of the Weasleys – even Percy – had survived to witness the New Era. Lupin and Tonks were married, Harry and Ginny engaged, Ron a happily single ladies' man, and Neville too besotted with his greenhouse in Naples to have time for a woman.

Chryssan appeared again, handing Hermione a cup of dark roast. Dark roast was what Hermione drank every day, all day. It was with her to soothe and comfort in trying moments of research, to ward off hunger when a new discovery demanded the sacrifice of food, to assist her in her frequent sleepless nights, and to wake her up after a rare day of rest. Minerva's stash of dark roast was superior to any Hermione had ever tried, or so she thought.

This was one of Minerva's family homes, one on the coastal shore. Hermione had maintained her research on various curses and hexes – particularly Unforgivables – throughout the war, coalescing her knowledge of magical history, potions, and charms to keep the Order supplied with more antidotes and cures than they could possibly use. Her blood and tears, though, went into her specialised research project – developing preventative and protective potions for young children. She worked tirelessly at finding antidotes, charm-blocks, and cures that would protect children from mild to moderate hexes, jinxes, and – what she ultimately hoped to protect them from – Dark Curses, particularly the Unforgivable Cruciatius. Some – like Mr. Weasley – had cautioned her at the onset of project, saying that her goals were too lofty, even for such a brilliant witch as herself. Others – like Lupin – had encouraged her, saying that if a potion could be found to ward off the horrific transformations of Dark Creatures like werewolves, then protective potions for children were certainly possible.

Her emotions were highly invested in her work. Bill and Fleur's daughter had, at the age of one, been hit with a Cruciatius. The war had been nearing its end, and Bellatrix Lestrange had led an eleventh-hour attack on the Weasley residence, attempting to strike and weaken Harry's emotional core. Molly had been knocked out, Fleur nailed with over a dozen hexes. Bellatrix had delivered the Unforgivable to Liette Elise Weasley.

As Bellatrix and other assorted Death Eaters ransacked the home, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and Lupin had arrived.

It was Lupin who had the pleasure of killing Bellatrix, avenging the life of his beloved Marauder, Sirius Black.

Hermione had found Liette as Ron revived his mother and Ginny released Fleur from her many hexes. Liette's skin had been burned, her mouth frothing, body crumpled. Fleur's anguished cries haunted Hermione still.

It was for the Weasley family – and especially Fleur – that Hermione had worked for over a year on preventative and protective potions for young children. The Dark Lord was gone, to be sure, but dark practices – particularly those that stemmed from Knockturn Alley – frequently called for the blood of innocents, of virgins, of purebloods, of children. The disappearance of magical babies for this purpose was great throughout the universal wizarding world, particularly in Eastern European countries, where the Olde Ways still flourished.

She was close – this she knew. Thus far, she had engineered potions that could, she was certain, protect young children from basic hexes – the kind that older siblings were sure to throw the young ones' way. Moderate jinxes, too, she had mastered. She had been greatly assisted by Fred and George, whose research into bruise, hex, and jinx removers was far more extensive than any living academic's. Hermione's recipe for a long-standing shield potion used many of the twins' materials. Her meticulous research had, over the past year, appropriated the proper amounts of each researched potion to be given to children, based on their weight, age, and sex. Over a dozen volumes of her finalised findings sat on her desk, waiting to be published – but which, at present, sat bathed in the morning dawn.

Alas, the potion to protect the innocent from the Crucio eluded Hermione. Her perfectionist nature was reluctant to release an unfinished collection of her findings. The potion for the Crucio was the crowning piece, the cherry on top – her personal Holy Grail.

Hermione broke away from her thoughts, and slowly found her way out to the sun-deck. She chuckled. Minerva had certainly sent her to the right place to finish her brain-crunching research. The chaotic environment in her head was perfectly tempered with the tranquility of the surroundings.

She casually unbuttoned her white cotton shirt at the top and bottom, leaving three buttons in the middle fastened, allowing the collar and tails to move with the wind. The billowy cotton lounge pants wisped around her legs with the gentle breeze, as she soon felt the sand beneath her feet. She brought her dark roast to her lips, sipping her bliss as Heaven's chosen sunrise engulfed her. Nature washed away her academic concentration, her memories – both painful and pleasant ...

Hermione longed for her mind to reach that state of Nirvana, of blissful nothingness, as the three syllables she had fought for so long filled her mind.

*Severus.*

## Chapter Two

*Chapter 2 of 16*

In which Hermione has a visitor.

**Disclaimer:** All the characters are property of JK Rowling and her affiliates. None of it's mine, but you already knew that. :)

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Hermione had fallen asleep on one of the sun-deck's several lounge chairs, her hair strewn about in wild, bushy curls. The friction of the frayed strands with the cottony fabric did not a smooth head of hair make this she knew.

She awoke from her afternoon nap feeling faint. The skin on her face felt like it had been yanked across the bones and was on the verge of cracking. She inhaled sharply as she felt the tip of her nose. She didn't need a mirror to tell her that she had burnt to a crisp. She clenched her teeth.

"Chryssan," she barked, a mite sharper than she intended. When the house-elf appeared, she said in a softer tone, "Fetch me some Aloe Vera." She leaned back on the lounge chair, shielding her eyes from the sun, unsuccessfully, as she was loathe to put her arm against her fried skin.

"If I had a Knut for every time I burned myself on this deck ..." came an alluring, throaty voice from the other side of the deck.

Hermione abruptly opened her eyes somewhat painfully, as her lids had burned as well. She jumped to her feet and bounded across to embrace her mentor.

"Oh, Minerva. It is so good to see you!"

"Hermione, darling," the older woman said affectionately, ending the embrace with a gentle squeeze. The two took a moment to take in each other's appearance.

Minerva had always been a regal creature, excessively tall with fine bone structure. In her nearly eighty years, her glistening midnight mane had lost none of its brilliance. While eighty was barely middle-aged for wizards, Hermione was certain that the powerful witch had diverted some of her talents towards the preservation of youth.

The Headmistress looked down her green eyes at her favourite ex-pupil. She seemed changed, and not just because of the unnaturally frizzy hair and burned skin. She looked thinner and flatter. The womanly curves that had caused Ministry officials to weaken at the knees had shrunk considerably.

"You're looking thin, my dear," she remarked worriedly.

"Research does that to a person."

Minerva smiled wryly. "Research is meant to stretch the brain, not shrink the body."

"Sometimes the two are regrettably mutual." Hermione waved a hand, dismissing the issue.

Minerva sighed. "You are not the first person I've heard say that." She paused. "Well, child, shall we go into the kitchen? I believe I kept a remedy for curing disastrous sunburns. As I said, it frequently happened to me in my younger days."

Hermione chuckled. "Thank you, but it's not needed. Chryssan is fetching me some Aloe Vera," she said, as the two women made their way indoors and towards the kitchen.

Right on cue, Chryssan appeared, holding the bottle of green goo. "Later, Chryssan dear," Minerva cut in, halting Hermione's protests. "Though admirable, Aloe Vera is no match for a magical paste."

They reached the pine-decked kitchen in three more steps. Minerva ran her hand familiarly over the cupboards, as though reacquainting herself with old friends. She murmured, giving Hermione the distinct impression that the feel of a cupboard could tell her the contents. Sure enough, Minerva's hand stopped over the fourth cupboard and immediately extracted a sparkling jar of blue-tinted paste. She handed it to Hermione. "This will have your skin up and running in no time."

Hermione opened the jar, sniffing it as she leaned against the counter. "How does it work?"

"It speeds skin cell reproduction at an astronomical rate. Used correctly, it will heal a sunburn and replenish your skin to a brilliant glow in a little less than half an hour. And trust me, darling, sunburns are not all that I have used this for," she remarked, eyes twinkling, as Hermione's went wide. Minerva huffed. "Good gad, girl, you've had your nose in books for far too long if a simple innuendo like that can render you speechless!"

Hermione smiled, slightly embarrassed. "Forgive me, Minerva. I know this may seem dreadfully childish, but Hogwarts students do not typically think of their professors as sexually active creatures. I can assure you that the thought of any Hogwarts professor shagging in a broom closet never crossed my mind during my years of school."

Minerva paused, hand on her hip, in seemingly deep thought. "Even Gilderoy Lockhart?"

Hermione shrieked. "How do you know about that?!"

"Oh, darling, who didn't?"

"That is completely humiliating, you know."

"Well, I have to make the most of what I have to work with. Lockhart, Viktor, and Ron do not come remotely close to being desirable material for crude innuendoes."

"The hormones in that school have finally gotten to you, Minerva."

"Oh, I don't doubt that, not at all," the older woman chuckled. "How is your research coming?" she asked, changing the topic.

Hermione bent over, stretching out her legs. "Decently," she mumbled.

"Harry says you've nearly finished. Considering the mammoth scope of your project, that can be considered worthy of the highest commendation."

Hermione sighed and propped herself up on the counter. "I am still at square one with my research on Unforgivables. Finding a way to protect children from the Cruciatus. There is nothing to be found, Minerva, nothing at all. All published texts on the subject are total bullocks. The theories are either blatantly incorrect or have been proven such."

"You know, it is unlikely that the Cruciatus will ever come to be as dare I say popular a curse as it was during the wars."

"I am well aware of that. But I have to do this. It's ..." She trailed off, lost in her thoughts.

"Personal," her mentor finished for her, smiling gently.

"Yes," she barely whispered.

They sat in friendly silence for a moment before talking of other things. Hermione showed Minerva her research library, and token souvenirs that she had taken from her experiments. Her stash of Fred and George's secret supply of healing potions and simple jinx removers elicited playful envy from her former professor. "Don't let Pomfrey ever know you have these. I think the woman would spend a week in Azkaban to get her hands on them!"

Several hours passed, ending with the two women sitting companionably on the sun-deck, watching the sunset. Minerva stood up a few moments after the sun slipped beneath the earth. "You know, dear," she started, as the two walked out towards the beach, "I've been thinking about your predicament with the Unforgivables. There is someone an expert, albeit unpublished who has been pursuing similar routes with cures for Unforgivables, as you have been. It's a side project of his, one he loves dearly, although he is frightfully protective of it. Seeing as how the two of you are of similar mindset in thought and purpose, perhaps I could put you in touch."

Hermione paused, brushing a hair aside. "I trust he's credible, if you vouch for him."

"Oh, that he is, dear, and I do vouch for him wholeheartedly. One could say he has ... raw experience in the matter."

There was a pregnant pause.

"It's Severus, isn't it?" Hermione asked sharply, with a swift turn of her head.

"Why, yes." Minerva was surprised at her friend's hostility. "Who else?"

Hermione looked at the sand as they walked, lip twitching.

"What's wrong, Hermione? I know how the three of you so disliked him at school, but certainly with the war ..."

"It's nothing," she interjected. She knew their time together was ending. "It was so lovely having you here today. And thank you so much for letting me use your little slice of heaven." The women embraced.

"Any time, my dear." Minerva winked, Apparating away as swiftly as she had come.

Hermione turned around in her walk, smiling, and headed back to the house. The chill of the night breeze had begun to sweep across the southern half of England it was as predictable as the rising of the sun. Hermione sauntered up the wooden steps of the sun-deck, locking the screen door behind her as she entered the house. For reasons unknown to herself, she wandered into the living room. The one thing she saw caused her to bring her hands into a prayer-like position underneath her chin. Her thoughts wandered to what Minerva had said. Was he the only way that she could complete her quest?

Her right eye shimmered with an unshed tear. She walked across the plush carpet, which muffled her steps. She rested a hand on the fireplace mantle, examining her many elaborately framed photographs both wizard and Muggle. Thank God Minerva hadn't Floo'd, she thought, or she likely would have seen that one, particular picture.

The frame was chipped, and pieces of the glass were missing. She brushed the dust off the forsaken frame. She'd thrown it at the wall after their final fight. It had been last year, just after the end of the war. He'd never betrayed the Light, had merely acted on orders from his surrogate father ... like they all had. He'd never betrayed anyone, she thought as she softly caressed the picture, except himself.

They'd kept in contact after his true orders had been discovered during her seventh year. One academic to another. Whenever he came back during those final two years of battle, she was the second person he'd see. Minerva, of course, was the first.

They'd become attached. She first loved him as a friend. And then, as something more.

The picture was from Victory Day. Not even seconds after Voldemort's defeat, the Ministry had turned up to arrest and transport the remaining Death Eaters to Azkaban. Of course, they were also there to photograph the evidence or, it would be better to say, the entertainment for the next *Daily Prophet*. This photo had been one of the Creevey brothers' in a moment displaying remarkably keen Slytherin abilities, Hermione had got her hands on both the negatives and the actual print. It was of the two of them Hermione, soaked to the skin in perspiration, leaping into Severus' arms, both of them practically glowing with joy and relief. He had kissed her on the cheek, but the picture didn't show that. It showed the moment just before. In this picture, the two of them were forever captured in the anticipation of each other's arms.

Her heart jumped in her chest, she was nearly in physical pain over the memory. She had wanted to contact him, so badly, over the past year. It wouldn't have been hard. Minerva and Lupin both knew where he was at any given time. Well, most of the time. But it was useless. Hermione gently placed the photograph back on the mantle, face down, and walked to her bedroom. It was late. She was tired. And now, over memories long repressed, her heart had broken in two. Again.

Some of her friends would be surprised that she slept in the nude, she thought, as she tucked herself between the cotton sheets. Others wouldn't be. Sleep ... it was her rest, her respite from the world, her saviour from the constraints she placed on herself. As she drifted off into sleep, her conscious mind refused to remember the happiness that had burst through her heart nearly a year ago today.

Her subconscious, however, had a mind of its own. The memory's ghost visited her in her sleep ...

## Chapter Three

*Chapter 3 of 16*

In which we go one year back in time, to Severus and Hermione's final meeting ...

**Disclaimer:** It all belongs to JKR.

**A/N:** Thanks to Psykiapa, Rhiannon, & ladyinthecloak for their continued work and support of the story.

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*The memory's ghost visited her in her sleep ...*

It was barely a week after Victory Day. Hermione had been awake for a few hours, and was currently preparing a late lunch in her cramped kitchen. Her hair fell around her shoulders in tangles; she still wore the clothes she'd slept in. She figured that after the constant pressure, tension, and anxiety of the war, she was within her rights to be as unkempt as she wanted to be.

And this particular afternoon, she desired to be very unkempt. Today there was a press conference for the *Daily Prophet* which was, in fact, the tenth of its kind in the week since Voldemort's final destruction. Completely ridiculous, Hermione thought. Anyone staying glued to the *Prophet's* front page at this point in the lives of British wizards was, to use her former professor's words, a complete dunderhead. The threat of violence, of terror, and death it was gone. Celebrations had already died down as people sought to spend time with family and friends.

With Harry and Ginny off celebrating on the French Riviera ('celebrating' had become synonymous with shagging, Hermione thought), Ron finally able to accept the position of reserve Keeper for the Canons, and the more mature Order members off frolicking about England in well-deserved merriment, Hermione felt at ease to relax and spend a day with her coffee and her books.

At present, though, she was cooking up a delightful batch of fried *sopapillas*. Comfort food was the order of the hour. She smiled to herself. Sopapillas were her favorite Spanish dessert or was it Mexican? She could never remember. The pieces of fried tortilla were currently bubbling and expanding. She had a jar of honey and a bowl of sugar waiting to adorn the fried wonders. Hermione's sopapillas were, her friends agreed, better than the ones offered at any restaurant in London, be it magical or Muggle. Personally, Hermione was convinced that a brilliant potions student was likely to be as equally brilliant in the kitchen. Both were widely thought to merely consist of measuring and mixing various ingredients into one homogenous, edible blob. In truth, a good potion and a good meal required a good deal of intuition and brains. Coupled with golden gut instincts, they produced, undeniably, the best results of their kind in their respective fields.

Besides, sopapillas and dark roast were divine together.

He appeared quietly in a corner, admiring the figure that stood in the heated kitchen, mindlessly poking at the frying pan, so sure in her abilities and practised in her skill that barely any concentration was needed. He inhaled the aroma ... soapillars. He sighed one of his two weaknesses. Considering that the other weakness was in the process of making said soapillars, he felt a strong urge to embrace her and pledge his undying love.

Considering what he'd come here for, that was decidedly out of the question.

Hermione glanced up, seeing him standing there by the fireplace, leaning against it in a roguish manner, a contorted look of pain and pleasure on his face. She gave it little thought.

"Severus!" she cried, running to leap into his arms. She was elated to see him, and certainly the way he looked did nothing to discourage her. Fitted black dress pants, a crisp white shirt with unbuttoned cuffs, and that mane of black silk that hung barely inches from his shoulders ... it was enough to drive any woman completely mad with lust, let alone love.

He had, for one heady moment, returned the embrace, before stiffening and removing her arms from his neck. It almost killed him to do so.

Hermione looked at him, raising an eyebrow. "Is anything wrong?" Their eyes seared into one another's.

His eyes had flickered, she noticed. They now had assumed their cold, steely stare, but what was it that had been in them before? Alarmed, she realised it had been painful regret.

"I'm leaving England tonight," he said, at last.

"What?" she gawked, the words not registering in her head.

He ran a hand through his hair, looking to the floor for a miraculous explanation. "I have to go. This place ... this country ... it is too full of memories, too full of ..." he caught the words before they formed. *Too full of pain.* He cleared his throat. "A continued existence in this land is not something I can do right now, nor is it something I want to do. I desire some remnant of peace; I need rest," he finished, slipping into his classic professor voice. He hoped that that would be enough to placate her, but he knew that it wouldn't.

There was a flash of fire in her eyes. He'd been right. This wasn't going to be easy. Then again, was the right thing ever easy?

Hermione's eyes were practically scorching him with their intensity. "Is that really why? Do not try to woo me to your decision with short, contrived words, Severus. It does not become you. Since when did you ever need to give reasons to anyone?"

"It is not your approval I seek, woman. I came here to tell you of my decision, as I have told other Order members," he said through clenched teeth.

She gulped. "Other Order members? So that's all I am to you a person to inform? Do I mean nothing?"

He paused.

*Oh shit,* she thought.

They hadn't been involved well, not in a romantic sense. They were the intellectuals, the academics that had been at Grimmauld. Like-minded people gravitated towards each other. They'd soon become not only colleagues and critics of each other's research, but close friends.

If only he knew how she wanted him his body, mind, everything. Well done, Hermione, she thought to herself. Now he's leaving, comes to inform you just as he would Remus or Molly, and you decide to drop the Atomic Bomb of clues ...

Meanwhile, Severus stood dumbfounded. Had she just insinuated what he thought?

Hermione sighed, mentally slapping herself. May as well go for the gold.

"If you are leaving, Severus, it is obvious that I am not enough to hold you here."

*Oh shit,* he thought.

Did she know what she was doing to him to his resolve? He had to leave England, had been practically ordered to do so and now was when he found that the one woman he had ever truly loved had also loved him in return?

The mingled fire and pain in her eyes was enough to make him want to throw the Ministry's demands to the Atlantic. His hands twitched with the desire to embrace her.

He had fought with himself mentally for months. He loved her everything about her. Her brains, her desire for knowledge (a perfect match for his own), the way she moved, the way she laughed, the way she looked at him with those doe brown eyes ...

He had thought about how exactly to approach her. He knew he was older considerably older. His past was anything but decent. His reputation had been practically destroyed after Albus' death. He fought to control the welling emotions as he thought of his mentor. Any sane witch would never want him.

Hermione Granger, admittedly, walked the line of genius and insanity with graceful ease. She was, of course, brilliant, and an entirely well-adjusted person. But Severus had seen her in the throes of research; he'd been at her side when she had discovered both solutions and things that ruined the entire experiment. In these instances, insanity was a more apt description of Minerva's prize lioness.

She stood there, silent and deadly, waiting for an answer. *How could he,* was all she could think. After everything they'd been through together. Now he decided to leave ...

He didn't need Legilimency to know what she was thinking. And he so wanted to tell her why he was doing this.

The Ministry had approached him the day before. He knew what they would ask of him, had expected it, but was still slightly surprised when the time came. His compatriots, Hermione included, had come out of the war smelling like roses. He, on the other hand, was still tainted with the murder of Albus Dumbledore to his name and to the Ministry, a cleared murderer was little better than a convicted one. He had been told in not so kind words to make himself scarce; preferably, to leave the country.

Leaving the country was not the problem for Severus. He preferred the warm, sunbathed summers of his youth to the bitter chill of the English seasons. He had many places he could go to. Personal residences, friends, and fellow Potions masters begging him for assistance with research. They were the least of his worries.

Hermione. He had fallen in love with the woman his correspondent, and then colleague, who he'd worked with for the year preceding the war's end. She had such a bright mind, such a promising future.

She loved him. She had to. Severus had once heard that the eyes were the windows to the soul. He'd thought it was some daft Muggle phrase. In retrospect, though, it was certainly true. At this moment, he saw the mixed emotions fighting for control. Anger, fury, passion, and pain. Sadness and loss. Love.

He swallowed his emotions. It was better this way, it really was. Society would not want her if she came with him attached at her side. Her future the one that promised to shape the wizarding world for centuries to come would not look so bright with a pardoned Death Eater in the picture.

She spoke before he could, barely a whisper. "If you don't want me, Severus, then for God's sake leave me." Her eyes clouded with tears that began to stream down her face.

He couldn't take it. He walked to her, his face inches from hers, as he placed his hands roughly on her shoulders. They both shuddered.

"It is not that I don't want you. My reasons are beyond explanation, and are without excuse. This is not something I choose to do. It is something that is required of me."

Hermione gave an incredulous laugh. "You, the great Severus Snape, Potions master Extraordinaire, the man who ruled the unscrupulous Slytherins with an iron fist, the right hand man of Voldemort, the trusted ally of Albus Dumbledore you are telling me that you cannot make one simple decision to stay? For me?" she raged.

His hands fell from her shoulders.

"This is it then," she choked, eyes brimming with tears yet again. "You want me?" she asked numbly.

He was hardly able to nod in response.

She put all her remaining strength into one last stand.

"Well, Severus, you *have* me, but you refuse to take me." She raised her eyes defiantly in challenge.

She wanted him to kiss her. Or do something more. Something that, Severus knew, would not bode well for either of them when his time for departure came. He broke away from her stare, declining the challenge. He saw her eyes begin to well with emotion.

"I am sorry, Hermione," he said softly. "It does not ... change things."

Hermione shut her eyes, trying to control her emotions. She loved this man. He was leaving her. Nothing made sense. She didn't know why this was happening she was sure there was an underlying reason. One strong enough to set this choice in stone.

She nearly heard her heart snap in two.

She raised a hand to his cheek, unable to see his features clearly through her tears. "I ... I don't understand, Severus. But ... I accept this ... decision. I am sure you have your reasons, but I," her chin was quivering so harshly she could barely speak. "... I ..."

He tried to draw her into an embrace, but she stepped back, evading his arms. "No," she said harshly, pointing a finger at him. "No," she attempted to control her breathing, "that will only make this harder. If you are so determined to do this, I need you away from me completely." She was scarcely able to get the words out.

He hung his head.

Several moments passed.

"Leave. Please leave."

She had turned her back, and heard him Apparate.

She held her face in her hands as her tears spilled onto the floor. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her framed pictures sitting on a side table. There was her family on vacation in St. Tropez, Harry, Ron, and herself, waving happily as the train took them to school before their fourth year, and, of course, a beautiful snapshot of the Weasley family taken last Christmas. And there was the picture. Her leaping into Severus' arms.

She couldn't take it.

"*NO!*" she shrieked, letting out a primal scream as she hurled the picture against the wall. Sobs began to wrack her body as she slowly knelt to the floor. As she leaned on the lowest part of her apartment for support as she cried her heart out, she realised that this was the lowest she had ever been in her life.

## Chapter Four

*Chapter 4 of 16*

In a return to the present day, we meet a certain brooding Potions Master ...

**Disclaimer:** JKR owns it all. I just play with her characters for fun.

**A/N:** My continued thanks to ladyinthecloak for her patience as she slowly Brit-picks the piece chapter by chapter.

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Hermione shot straight up in bed, breathing raggedly. Beads of perspiration were forming at her temples; a thin layer of cold sweat shrouded her chest. She glanced at her alarm clock. 3:30 AM. *Oh, God*, she thought, putting a hand to her forehead. *When is this going to stop?* She was tired of waking up before dawn, of losing sleep, of disrupting her body's rest. She couldn't take seeing *him* every night. It wasn't enough that his presence or lack thereof haunted her waking moments. Now he was invading her sleep as well ...

She let out an exhausted sigh, and collapsed back on her bed, springing slightly off the mattress. She clamped her eyes shut. *Please, Lord, this one night, don't let him return...*

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The moon shone brilliantly in the night sky, its silver glow illuminating the sensuous Italian property. Waves of moonlight soared over the tended gardens, which outlined the Stucco, sun-bleached villa and the marble-inlay surrounding the pool. The moon shimmered in the water's reflective depths.

It was late. Very late. He stood at the precipice between the glass door and the villa's stairs; he could not help but breathe more deeply. It was the dead of night, and he was alone in the cool, fresh air. Solitary. How he had once loved this feeling ... of being alone with his thoughts and attuned to nature. He slowly made his way down the tinged steps, one hand in his black pocket, the other holding a glass of wine. He raised the glass to his lips in weary contemplation.

A glass of fine Chianti Rufina and an excursion to his coastal villa usually did wonders for his state of mind. Sanguine he would never be, but a calm and collected state was one he had always been able to achieve.

Not now.

He stared out at the pool, his view extending further down the shallow green hillside and into the depths of the Tyrrhenian Sea, one of the Mediterranean's many subsets. The water was kin to him, he thought, it always had been. Its cool, steeled, steady demeanour was rife with tumultuous undercurrents and deep secrets. On occasion, it lashed out at the world, its contents spewing forth into the physical realm.

His long-held analogy had never felt truer. He could practically feel the torrent in his bones.

It wasn't just the war, or the casualties. Heartless he was not, but he was accustomed to death. The knowledge that sacrifice was necessary to achieve victory superseded his emotions' demands. He knew how to handle that kind of loss.

He did not know how to handle a loss of love.

Indeed, the concept of a lost love was one entirely foreign to Severus Antonius Snape. Due at first to his reclusive nature and later to his dangerous activities, he had never allowed himself to love romantically. Admittedly, he had not had much opportunity. Of course, there had been the several women throughout the past twenty-some years who had found his darker nature brutally appealing. He'd taken them to bed, and not pursued much else. Their interest in him waned as quickly as his in them, and the few who had attempted to hold him had found themselves pushed away in a manner akin to his treatment of his least favourite Hogwarts students.

Snape had enjoyed teaching, even enjoyed many of his students (loathe as he was to show it), but his true love had always been for research and development. He desired to hypothesise, experiment, and examine for himself not teach others what his colleagues discovered. While the blossoming of a young mind gave him a sense of validation, the budding minds were too few and far between to hold him at Hogwarts once the war was over.

The protection that Albus and Hogwarts had offered him was void the moment that Harry Potter had defeated the Dark Lord. Thankful he was, but Severus did not desire to stay on in a position that had been little more than a cover to begin with. He had, of course, been researching and publishing new findings during his time at Hogwarts. Despite the grudging acknowledgement the general wizarding population offered him, the worldwide potions community hailed him as one of the greatest scientific minds of their time. He had been thrilled at the prospect of being able to research full time.

Of course, the equally brilliant mind he had hoped to be researching with was hundreds of kilometres away in England.

She was the cause of his sleepless nights, the root of his heart-wrenching dreams.

He had left her.

He'd thought, at the time, that it was the best course of action. He had wanted to protect her to protect himself. He had been frightened at the powerful emotions raging towards the sprite of a human being; he'd been shaken by the power that he, in turn, held over her. He feared for her. She knew all about him, all about his past, yes but he had been waiting for the other shoe to drop. He had been anticipating the moment where everything she had learned sunk in.

He wanted to protect her from himself. His double-life, his two roles they were not separate from each other. His activities as both Death Eater and Hogwarts professor had inevitably overlapped, and his emotions and actions in each realm had slowly seeped into the other, thus affecting both of his lives. He had, admittedly, handled the situation with considerable skill, but so many years of deception, inevitably, wore on one's ability.

She had seen him, and taken him for what he was.

And he, the fool, had thrown it away, all in the name of honour and protection.

Severus stared out at the sea, walking across the marble patio towards the never-ending blue. If he had known what life would be like without her, he never would have done what he did.

And it was too late.

Hermione was safely locked away in England, the rising star of the potions community and the darling heroine of the Second War. She shied away from publicity, of course, but the Daily Prophet had seen fit, in the year since the war's end, to give her nearly more publicity than anyone involved in the efforts, save Harry. She was the sidekick, the brain, the steadfast and loyal friend and her modest nature only made the Prophet hound her more. They had interviewed every Gryffindor about her, had gone to such lengths that senior Order members had personally visited the Prophet's Editor-in-Chief to demand that the harassment cease.

That was the main reason that, two months previously, Minerva had offered to let Hermione stay in her hidden and secluded beach house on the southern shore.

Severus knew this because Minerva visited him frequently, keeping her late lover's adopted son informed of the various activities and inner-workings of the Order members. The Order had not disbanded, of course. There would always be dark threats and dark wizards thrust into corruption by their lust for power. Thankfully, at present, they were few and far between. Severus was certain that within the next year or so the threats would begin to surface more frequently. None, of course, would be as dangerous or terrifying as Voldemort. And even if they were ... *Well, the Order would know how to handle it*, he thought to himself, sipping his wine.

Lupin had come to the villa several times, and Molly was also a frequent visitor, bringing him cakes and treats. "You're much too thin, dear," she would chide him sweetly. Her visits were appreciated but thankfully short. Molly was quite the overbearing mother, and a mother was the last thing he needed.

God knew that Minerva tried to do that often enough.

Minerva's biweekly updates constituted the majority of his face-to-face social interaction. He was in near constant contact with Potions masters around the world, as well as with the journals where he published his work. He received and sent the occasional social owl. Minerva kept him informed a little too informed, if you asked him, especially considering that Hermione was one of her favourite subjects.

The fact that she rambled on at annoying lengths about her favourite lioness assured Severus that the wise witch remained oblivious to the inner workings of his and Hermione's relationship. Hermione obviously had no intention of telling Minerva about what he had done, and Severus himself was quite willing to let the subject lie. He didn't need Minerva hexing him off the face of the planet. Or, worse, trying to reconcile the split.

Minerva said that Hermione was enjoying the relative seclusion the beach home offered her. She wasn't close to many people; her singularly brilliant mind and devotion to her research effectively shut her off from mainstream society. Hermione, of course, didn't mind, Minerva would report glowingly. Order members were her social circle; Minerva, the Weasley family, Lupin & Tonks, and Harry. Particularly, of course, Harry, Ginny, and Ron. Ginny remained her best friend, Harry her closest confidant, and Ron her biggest supporter. Minerva frequently lamented the demise of Hermione and Ron's relationship. Even had he not been attached to the girl, Severus would have found it excessively annoying. Anyone with half a brain could see that Hermione and Ron could never be romantically entangled. Hermione demanded an intellectual equal, Ron a duplicate of his mother, and neither could give the other what they so desired. The mutual dissolution of the relationship had been one of the best choices they ever could have made.

He admitted a snide satisfaction that she was not in a romantic relationship. Still, he could not allow himself the thought that she still loved him; that she threw herself into

her current research to escape the thought of him ...

Minerva had told him of her concern that Hermione's dedication to her research was taking a negative toll on her body. Research did that to a person, Severus had remarked wryly. Minerva hadn't been happy with that comment, and she'd told him as much. Hermione wasn't even sleeping, she said.

Well, neither was he.

He flicked bits of feather and dust in the Neapolitan air. He let out a deep sigh.

He would give anything to go back to England right now ... anything to see her, to be with her, to be able to look on her form, to be lulled into peace by her voice, to smell her sweet scent. He closed his eyes, willing himself to remember.

It was hopeless.

Even if he could go back to England, she must have found a way to get over him by now. She had been progressing at increasingly impressive lengths with her research ... He obviously did not hinder her as she hindered him. She had not even tried to contact him.

What woman would want a man who had discarded her?

Passion flashed through his eyes as he hurled the wine glass. It shattered in tiny pieces across the patio, moonbeams catching and dancing on the shredded pieces. He lowered his hand, staring at his conquest.

He was furious with himself.

He stared at the moon, questioning everything. Especially himself.

## Chapter Five

*Chapter 5 of 16*

A short interlude.

**Disclaimer:** I always neglect this. The gist is, the characters aren't mine. JKR just lets me take them out and play with them for fun ... (I'd love to hear what she has to say about Hermione/Severus shippers!)

**A/N:** This is meant to be an in-between chapter. There will be a longer chapter to follow!

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BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP *Slam.*

Hermione groggily shoved her alarm clock off the side of her bedstand, where it smashed to the floor with a loud thud. *That's it*, she thought, lifting herself out of bed. She rubbed her eyes; she'd slept with her contacts in – again. She put the tip of her finger on the right contact, then the left, rubbing them, swishing them in her eyes' moisture, trying to lessen the stickiness. Satisfied, she turned. The sun was peeking through the windows. She'd slept too late. *Damn it.*

She shrugged the white sheets and quilt off her body and put her feet to the warm floor. At least the sun had warmed up the house already.

She grabbed her white silken robe from the chair and wrapped it around her body. As she made her way down the open white hallway to the kitchen, she fluffed her frizzed curls. She looked at the clock above the refrigerator, just to make sure she'd seen right.

"Shit!" she exclaimed as she turned and bolted down the hallway to the master bedroom, peeling off her robe as she pushed open the door to the private bathroom. She turned the showerhead on and jumped in, nearly slipping on the bath mat as she eagerly reached for the shampoo and conditioner. Damn the fact that her curly hair required daily bathing! It was uncontrollable otherwise.

Five minutes later she was out of the shower, allowing the water to run slickly down her body as she smoothed gel into her curls, scrunching them so that they'd have some remnant of life in them. She brushed her teeth hurriedly, and then grabbed the towel to wipe off the perspiration left on her body from the steam. Walking into the open aired bedroom, she grabbed for the change of clothes she'd picked out for herself before Minerva had stopped by.

Minerva. How she so dearly loved that woman. She was like an aunt to her, both a friend and protector at the same time. When Minerva had offered her the house to escape the rampant publicity, she'd jumped at the chance. After all, she'd secretly longed for it. Ever since the Order had celebrated Voldemort's downfall on the sunburn-inducing deck, she'd wanted to live in the beautiful coastal home.

And now she was. She would have smiled but for the urgency with which she was putting on her airy red sundress. Pulling her hair into a quick bun, leaving a few tendrils of curl dangling around her face, she rubbed moisturiser into her cheeks and dabbed a coat of mascara on each eye.

"That will have to do, Hermione." She spoke to herself in the tall bedroom mirror, as she reached for the white heeled sandals and quickly Disapparated.

## Chapter Six



**Disclaimer:** JKR owns it. I play in it for fun.

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Hermione appeared, inconveniently, in a spot of the Burrow's lawn where the sunlight had seen fit to attach itself. She averted her eyes from the strong glare and walked briskly towards the Burrow. It looked none too worse for the wear, all the years and six sons considered. Hermione smiled. It looked no different than it had last week.

The War had reminded people how important and precious family and friends were. With its end, Molly had declared that Sunday brunch was now open to any and all Weasley family and assorted friends who wished to attend. Minerva came on occasion, Lupin and Tonks were frequent visitors, and any number of children and significant others could be found gallivanting through the many levels of the house. Infrequently, Luna, Neville, or even old Quidditch pals like Oliver and Katie Wood (nee Bell) would come in for a spell.

Hermione and Harry never missed a brunch.

Just as she was about to climb the porch steps, the tall, green-eyed man in question burst through the front door. Hermione, startled from her deep contemplation, slightly jumped. "Good God, Harry, you can't just do that to a person!"

He chuckled, embracing her. "Of course, I forgot," he replied mischievously. He held out his arm to her chivalrously. She took it and smiled at him warmly.

"Shall we walk in? Where is your lady today?" she asked, looking around.

"Ginny is currently occupied at Madam Malkin's."

"In Diagon Alley?"

"That's the general idea, yes."

"Well, she runs the Paris branch; and with the two of you living on the Seine, one can never be too sure."

"Ahh, well, Madam requested that Ginny assist her today. Apparently, the Lady Scrimgeour requested Gin's presence," Harry said, looking proud of his fiancée. Hermione chuckled, releasing Harry's arm.

"Nothing against Madam, but Ginny could easily put her out of business."

"I guess that's why she's being groomed to take over."

"Well, she's fantastic with fashion. And hexes," she added as an afterthought.

Harry sighed, running a hand through the thick black locks. "Ginny and I are both bloody tired of doing the Ministry's bidding ... not that I ever really did," he said.

"I distinctly remember you giving the old one-two to Minister Scrimgeour during our sixth year. Repeatedly." Hermione smiled. The friends shared a good-hearted laugh over one of the few entertaining memories of that school year.

"Hermione? Is that you?" called the unmistakable voice of Molly Weasley from the interior of the house.

"Yes, we'll be in momentarily!" Hermione called back. She sighed, looking at Harry. "Shall we go in?" she suggested, starting to walk.

"Not just yet," he caught her arm. "What I came out here was to tell you, no, to warn you, that Ron's latest flame is dining with us today."

Hermione snorted. "Harry Ron's flames typically *do* clock in one or two of Molly's brunches before being fired."

"No, not this one. She helped Molly cook the meal."

"Since when does Molly let people help her cook?!"

"Exactly."

"It's *that* serious?"

"I think so."

"Bloody hell, Harry!" Hermione crossed her arms, shock written all over her face.

"Yes, so no jokes about Ron's commitment problems that you so dearly love to drop in conversation, eh?"

"You know me better than that," Hermione smirked.

"Do I?" Harry smiled. He paused for a second. "And not that it's likely to happen, but no mention of Death Eaters, or the War..."

"Harry," she interrupted sharply, digging her sandal's heel into the porch, "In addition to the fact that doing so is highly impolite and extremely uncouth, I would *never* do that in front of Molly and Arthur. Charlie ..."

"I know," Harry butt in. "What I am trying to say is your research."

"Harry that is my *work*! It's what I do! I thought we were all to the point where we could separate my research from directly addressing painful war memories," Hermione scoffed, indignant and somewhat hurt.

"We can. *She* hasn't been around it."

Now she was annoyed. Sensitivity to outsiders was not one of her strong points. "Ron's date, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Harry, it is my work, and Molly and Arthur are bound to ask about my progress ..."

"It's Daphne Greengrass."

Hermione was silent.

"Daphne, remember? Slytherin, pureblood, our year ..."

"I know, she took the OWLs at the same time as I did."

"You would remember details like that. Do you remember what's happened to her since Hogwarts?"

Hermione sighed. "There was a report about it in the Daily Prophet. Her parents were killed by Voldemort just after seventh year, weren't they? Something about blood traitors ..." she trailed off.

"Yes," Harry looked at her pointedly. "So today look, none of us are rude, but today the war is an especially sensitive topic."

"Harry and Hermione!" Molly's voice shrieked, causing the twenty-one year olds to flinch. "Would you two get in here before the food starts to freeze itself?"

They smirked at each other. "We're coming!" they replied in tandem. Hermione took Harry's arm and walked over the threshold.

---

As usual, Hermione heard the brunch attendees before she saw them.

"Pass the salt, George," Arthur's congenial voice boomed.

"I asked first," Fred said cheekily.

"I need the pepper!" Ron's voice chimed in.

"Here you go, darling," a feminine tone rang.

Hermione stared at Harry, raising an eyebrow. "You've *got* to be kidding me," she whispered, half-annoyed, half-amused, as she pushed on the wooden kitchen door. Ron's girlfriend even sounded blonde.

The door swung wide open.

She was.

Hermione and Harry walked in to varied greetings "Hello children," from Arthur, "There's the other two," from Ron.

"You're late, you chit," Fred teased Hermione as she sat down next to Arthur. Hermione, Harry, and Fred sat in a row on Arthur's left side, Daphne, Ron, and George at his right, with Molly at the head of the table.

"That is such a beautiful dress, Hermione," the girl seated across from her said. Hermione looked up, taking in her first real impression of Ron's "serious" girlfriend. She was thin, and blonde of course with sparkling blue eyes to match. Her hair was pulled up in a simple high ponytail. She had a touch of glitter rubbed in her cheeks, but was dressed rather conservatively, in a classic white shirt with a pearl necklace and Hermione assumed an A-line skirt with heels. Her sweet countenance was startlingly reminiscent of the Weasley matriarch. Hermione imagined that if, in her Prewett days, Molly had been rail thin and blonde, this is what she would have looked like. Harry nudged her with an elbow, reminding her to respond.

"Oh, thank you, Daphne." Hermione smiled at her, self-consciously adjusting a strap on her shoulder.

Arthur ceremoniously dumped an omelette on Hermione's plate. "Daphne helped with the cooking, Hermione."

Hermione nodded to Daphne, acknowledging her work. "So I've heard. You must be an exceptional cook, if you've assisted Molly."

"Oh, it's nothing," Daphne replied modestly. "Ron told me that you are a delightful cook as well. I hope I can measure up," she said sweetly, taking Ron's hand. Hermione and Harry both bit back laughter.

Hermione caught the twinge in her throat. "But I've never been invited to assist the incomparable Molly Weasley that is quite a feat, Daphne, and my hat's off to you for it!" She bit into her omelette, giving a small groan of satisfaction. "Oh, this is divine," she mumbled through chewing.

"Well, that's one of mine, thanks for the compliment, Hermione dear," Molly said brusquely, smiling. "How have you been lately, my dear girl?"

Hermione smiled. "Relatively well, thanks. Minerva stopped by to visit me just yesterday, in fact."

"Ahh," Arthur intoned. "How is that place suiting you? It's in the south, is it not?"

"Yes, near Brighton," Hermione replied. "It's beautiful there's even a beach, if you'll recall from our visit there last year. It's not at all rocky, no cliffs, just a lovely little inlet of peace ... It reminds me of the Mediterranean, actually. Or, at least, how I'd picture the Mediterranean."

"You'd love it," Daphne offered, cutting up her sausage. "My brother and I share a beautiful home in Greece it's just stunning."

Hermione's ears perked up. "That sounds divine!"

"We're considering holding the wedding there, actually," Ron said nonchalantly.

Forks and knives clattered onto plates. Hermione and Harry were completely dumbstruck along with the rest of the Weasley clan, Hermione noted.

The first to react audibly was, of course, Molly.

"RON!!!" she shrieked, leaping out of her seat to draw her youngest son into an incredibly tight embrace. Arthur stood out of his seat while Ron dealt with his mother and embraced Daphne (who was indeed wearing a beige A-line skirt). "Welcome to the family, my dear. You've been good for that raucous son of ours." He winked at her. Daphne laughed.

"Thank you so much, Arthur. I know it's sudden, and actually we didn't plan on announcing it for a week or so ..." She glanced over her shoulder, a wry expression on her face as she saw her intended being practically molested by Fred and George.

Harry laughed, standing to shake Daphne's hand. "That's Ron for you. When he's excited about something, he just can't contain himself."

"I'll second that." Hermione stood, walking around the table to embrace Daphne. "I will certainly enjoy getting to know you. If Ron loves you this much ... you really must be incredible." She smiled at Daphne, whose eyes lit up at the compliment.

"Thank you, Hermione. Can I ..." she caught her breath as the twins' began to cheer and dance around the kitchen. The general laughter over the twins' antics soon turned to whoops and hollers as Fred and George grabbed Harry and began to sing rowdy bar tunes. Arthur and Ron roared with laughter, Hermione rolled her eyes, and even Daphne cracked a smile.

"Fred and George!" their mother shouted, abruptly ending the sing-a-long. "I will not have inappropriate ditties sung in my kitchen. Kindly take it ..."

"Outside?" Fred proposed cheekily.

"Sounds like a plan to me. Care to join us, Ron?" Harry asked, winking.

"Harry!" Molly exclaimed. "I am surprised at you."

"I'm not," George said, grabbing Ron by the sleeve. "We'll be outside in the gardens, Mum, making Ronniekins drink a shot of Firewhiskey for every time he and Daphne plan to..."

"George Alexander Weasley!" Molly screeched, flurrying across the kitchen. The young men flew out the door ahead of her faster than a Snitch, leaving extremely amused expressions on Arthur, Daphne, and Hermione's faces. Molly caught her breath at the doorway, hands on her hips.

"The minute those boys step foot in this kitchen, I'm going to ..."

"I'm sure you'll think of a worthy punishment, my dear," Arthur interrupted, winking at Daphne and Hermione. "But, in the meantime, we have family and friends to notify of Ron and Daphne's engagement."

"Oh!" Molly's eyes widened, looking at Daphne and Hermione. "I'd quite forgot about that!" she hurried over to a drawer, quickly pulling out a fancy quill and stationary. Sufficiently occupied, she sat down at the table with her husband and began to write.

Hermione and Daphne were still standing by the kitchen table, not having moved during the testosterone-fuelled ruckus. They looked at each other and smiled good-naturedly. *She really is quite pretty*, Hermione thought. *Not Ron's type at all, from what I'd have thought, but a better fiancée he could not ask for ...*

"Can I talk to you in private for a moment?"

Hermione blinked. "Of course, Daphne," she said, and followed Daphne into the living room.

The girls sat down together on the patched-up couch, facing each other. "What is it you wanted to talk to me about?" Hermione asked.

Daphne smiled pleasantly. Hermione liked this girl, she really did. She was very sweet very genuine, in fact, frighteningly so for a Slytherin. She couldn't fathom how so congenial a girl could have run around with the likes of Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode for so long.

"Hermione ... you do realise how much to live up to you are?" Daphne asked with a slight giggle, exposing a shred of insecurity.

Hermione laughed. "If this is about Ron ..."

Daphne nodded. "It is ... And about his family ... And the Order. It's an entirely new social stratum for me. I'm, well, you know my background." She looked at the floor. "Slytherin, pure-blood, in the thick with families like the Malfoys and Parkinsons. Pansy and I were good friends in school, and I ran around with them never one of the inner circle, but certainly privy to many of the plans ... And my father was never a Death Eater, but he was certainly valuable to that group because of his job." Daphne shuddered.

Hermione put a hand on Daphne's knee. "I know what happened to your parents. If you don't want to talk about this, you don't have to ..."

"I do." Daphne looked at her in earnest. "You've been one of Ron's closest friends for many years, and I come from a group that taunted and despised the two of you, and especially Harry ..." Her eyes were welling again.

"Here." Hermione silently summoned a handkerchief from one of Molly's many baskets lying around.

"Thank you." Daphne blew her nose. "I despised all of you in school as well. I won't be romantic and say that I adored Ron then I didn't, and I made fun of his family in private just as much as my friends did ... The Weasley family was certainly a popular target with my Slytherin friends ..." She looked at Hermione sadly. "I thought they were my friends. Just after graduation ..." She choked up.

"It's alright," Hermione encouraged. Despite Daphne's obvious penchant for tears, Hermione was impressed with her, and her curious mind was, admittedly, desperate to know what had happened.

Daphne started. "My brother was a year ahead of us. He had taken a Potions apprenticeship with a Master in Brazil, so he was far away from the War and all it entailed. My mother, however, came to me after the end of school with grave news. My father worked in the Ministry, he was very high up, actually, and my mother said that Lucius Malfoy had approached him. He had always given the Death Eaters small pieces of information in the past, and he had helped to engineer the bargains that helped set convicted Death Eaters free after the First War, after we all thought that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was gone. Well, after seventh year, Lucius demanded that my father join the Death Eaters. This came just after the turning point ... after the giants had entered on Voldemort's side, after all the mass killings had begun. My father may not have been the most scrupulous of men, but he knew that siding so directly with You-Know-Who was as good as putting an axe over his family's necks. And he loved us, he did." Daphne's tears had begun to fall freely now. "He loved my mother with such a passion ..." She choked.

Hermione sat in supportive silence with a hand on her new friend's knee, waiting for her to continue.

Daphne took a deep breath. "He loved my mother." She closed her eyes. "And David, my brother, and I meant the world to him. While David was relatively safe in Brazil, I was here. My father knew what was demanded of Death Eater's families. Wives may be safe on occasion, but daughters who were of age were ..."

"Sold to insure support or given as reward," Hermione finished for her. She looked into Daphne's eyes sympathetically. She had never been this close to a woman's tale of the Dark Side, and the very thought of its raw and brutal nature completely unnerved her.

"Yes," Daphne said, with an air of helplessness that nearly broke Hermione's heart. "I was his baby girl." She looked away with a dreamy expression. "He loved us so much, he refused Lucius," she said quickly, looking down at her clasped hands. "And it cost him his life on the spot. Lucius left his body on our doorstep," she finished quietly.

"I had no idea, Daphne." Hermione took one of Daphne's hands in her own.

Daphne closed her eyes again. "My parents had always been aware of the possibility of this ... ultimatum. They'd arranged things." She looked at Hermione, composed once more. "David's and my inheritance, all the papers, everything of legal or sentimental value, was in our home in Greece, on the island of Evia. I obviously could not Apparate there." She laughed, Hermione joining her. Cross-continental Apparition was difficult even for the most talented of wizards. "Within the hour, my mother had called on a trusted friend, within the Death Eaters, admittedly, but whom my father had been good friends with. Even he, one of You-Know-Who's closest men, did not yet know of my father's death. He assured my mother that he'd make sure I was taken to Greece." Daphne was crying again, but she smiled through the tears. "He tried to convince my mother to leave with us, but she would not be parted from my father. So he took me into hiding. He quickly turned me over to Hestia Jones, who stayed with me in Greece for protection, and it was then that I suspected that the rumours were true ..."

"Hestia Jones?" Hermione asked, her heart beginning to beat faster. "She's a member of ..."

"Of the Order, yes," Daphne said. "So is he, though I did not know it at the time."

"Severus," Hermione barely whispered. "He ..." She shook her head, trying to regain her train of thought. "He saved your life?"

"Yes," Daphne said, her eyes awash with gratitude. "I will be forever indebted to him for it. He also ..." She wiped a tear.

"What else did he do? Snape is certainly one of the most capable Order members..."

"And one of the most valued, as I have come to learn. Molly and Arthur do love him so much, like one of their own," Daphne said. Hermione smiled inwardly who did Molly and Arthur not adopt into their family?

Daphne sighed. "He quickly travelled to Brazil to tell my brother what had happened. Snape is also good friends with the Master my brother studied under. He was amazing. Would that he could have saved my mother ... but he tried," she said softly.

"They killed your mother?" Hermione asked in an equally gentle tone.

"Yes," Daphne nodded, relatively composed. "Bellatrix Lestrange."

Hermione's entire body tensed, and she herself closed her eyes. She could practically hear Liette's wail ...

Daphne intuitively took both of Hermione's hands in her own. "I know of what happened that night ... just before the War ended," she said quietly. "Ron told me. How it was you and he, and Ginny and Lupin who found the women that night. I am glad that Bellatrix was killed by a man wronged by her just as much as I was." She squeezed Hermione's hand. "I've heard of how much Sirius meant to all of you, Harry especially."

"Yes," Hermione said softly. "We all loved him, very much, and Harry was just ... No one should have someone so close to them ripped from their side so quickly."

"That's the truth," Daphne nodded. "Ron said that Lupin showed no mercy," she stared at Hermione, a hardened look on her face. "For that I am grateful."

Hermione straightened a little, impressed. Sweet and soft she may be, but there was an edge of steel in Daphne that would always rise in defence of herself and those she loved. Hermione gained a new respect for the girl.

She paused. "Harry told me not to talk about my work. He said that the War was a sensitive subject today, that you wouldn't be able to hear of it," she offered, brushing a hair aside. She smiled at Daphne. "You are made of a metal that will not easily bend ... Harry was wrong."

Daphne glowed. "Thank you, although I think that the War must take the credit for the metal of which you speak. It's hardened all of us, hasn't it?"

"That it has," Hermione sighed.

Daphne looked at her, an inquiring gleam in her countenance. "Ron has told me of your research, Hermione. I remember you being brilliant at school, but what he's told me is just incredible. Such a daunting task, really, and it sounds as if you are close to being finished. He told me that it was you who found Liette ..."

A tear glistened in Hermione's right eye. *Wonderful, now I'm just as emotional as she is*, she thought wryly, trying to push the memories away. "It was too late for Liette," she said sadly, "but I hope that with my research, our medical community can save thousands of more children. Children shouldn't have to see what we do." Hermione choked up. "Let alone experience it."

"Here, here," male voices chimed in from the doorway. Hermione and Daphne looked to see Ron and Harry standing in the doorway holding drinks (Firewhiskey, Hermione assumed). The two women quickly wiped away their tears, both quietly asking, "Is my mascara running?" and replying, "Not a bit, just there, there you've got it!"

Harry and Ron looked at each other, bewildered. "You have got to be joking," Ron said with feigned exasperation. "They just had a heart-to-heart about the war!"

"Hermione!" Harry looked at her accusingly.

"Don't worry, Harry, I brought it up," Daphne said. "We had a lot of history to cover, and I actually only had one more thing to say, that all of you can hear." She smiled. Hermione looked at her, curious.

Daphne gazed at Ron lovingly, then at Hermione. "Ron's family has become mine. They have accepted me in a way I never expected, nor could have imagined. I did not know that such love and warmth could exist for a person so deeply imbedded in grief. I have found a new life, a new love, a new family, and, I hope, a new friend." Her eyes locked with Hermione's, asking the question.

Hermione smiled back. "I think that in time, Daphne, we'll call each other something more than friends."

"That's where I come in, actually," Ron volunteered. They all howled with laughter, as Molly and Arthur looked in on them, knowingly, from the kitchen.

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**A/N:** Daphne Greengrass is a briefly mentioned character in the series. Information about her specific book appearances and role in JKR's notebooks can be found on Wikipedia.

Comments, critiques? I love to hear my reader's opinions.

## Chapter Seven

*Chapter 7 of 16*

In which Hermione and Molly have a heart to heart ...

**A/N:** As always, my thanks to Psy for her input and ladyinthecloak for her Brit-pick work.

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An hour or so later, the twins, Ron, Daphne, and Harry had all left. Hermione was sitting opposite Molly in front of the fire, holding a cup of dark roast in her hand. It wasn't Minerva's, but it was certainly wonderful in its own right. Molly Weasley could not cook a bad meal or brew a bad pot of coffee if her life depended on it. Molly, of course, preferred tea, but always brewed coffee for Hermione and Minerva.

"I'm glad that you had a good talk with Daphne, dear. I confess I was worried for you," Molly chuckled wryly, sipping her cup.

"Why so?" Hermione's feet were tucked behind her in the chair, her dress gathered at her knees.

"Well, you've been a member of this family for so long but you, obviously, haven't married into us!" Molly laughed heartily, stroking the throw blanket on the side of her chair. "I thought that there might be a bit of contention between yourself and such a newcomer as Daphne. We all love her, or at least Arthur and I do, but in a very different way from the affection we have for you."

Hermione smiled at Molly. "Your concern was certainly valid, and I did feel a bit of jealousy before Daphne and I came in here to talk. But now ..." Hermione looked off at the legendary Weasley clock. Harry's name had been put in Charlie's stead, hers added next to Ginny's, and she saw Daphne's there now as well, that was attached to Ron's, behind his segment. "Now I understand why Ron loves her."

Molly looked at Hermione warmly. "She's changed him, Hermione. In this short amount of time, they've really become ... dare I say, soul-mates?"

Hermione mused, sipping her coffee. "That phrase is an awful lot to live up to."

"Well, they're each other's counterpart in every sense of the word. They have similar experiences, but come from opposite sides, so to speak. Not just the opposing Houses, of course, but the entire course of their lives. The War brought them together. They've been together longer than we've known, I think ..."

"What?" Hermione leaned in closer, her chin resting on her hand. "Is there some gossip attached to this relationship, Molly Weasley?" she asked cheekily.

"Well," Molly started confidentially, "they've 'officially' been a couple for several weeks."

"How have I not known about this? Ron's one of my best friends!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Ron hasn't been at brunch for the past few weeks, now has he?" Molly reminded her.

"Point taken."

"Do you remember last year, the press conferences and everything, how most of the Order went to Minerva's beach house, where you're at now, and how you and Ginny holed up by yourselves?"

"Of course." Hermione nodded. "Bloody wankers left us ..." she said playfully.

"Language, young lady."

"I'm not so young anymore, Molly," Hermione said kindly.

Molly sighed. "I don't need to be reminded of that ... God knows where the time went, what with the War over and Ginny and Ron both engaged ..."

"Molly, the story," Hermione reminded her impatiently.

"Oh, yes, dear. Well, I later learned that they had gone to Athens with Fred and George to celebrate. The entirety of Europe was rejoicing, and Athens was no exception. The wizarding community there had gathered in the ruins of Ancient Athens, protected from the Muggles by considerable spell work, of course, and by all accounts, it was one of the ... most raucous parties in Europe."

Hermione chuckled to herself. For some reason, it did not surprise her in the slightest, and she could tell that Molly was still uneasy with the fact that her sons had taken part in such (probably immoral) merriment of youth.

"They weren't in Athens very long, but I understand that Daphne was there with her friends, celebrating as well. Obviously, having the mutual Hogwarts history and with all the publicity surrounding her family's tragedy, my boys recognised her at once. Fred said that she and Ron have been inseparable ever since," Molly finished.

"But you and Arthur only met her recently."

"Well, she does live in Greece. I wouldn't be surprised if Ron got himself traded to Bulgaria's team so that she wouldn't have to move back to England," Molly said, slightly anxious. Hermione patted her hand, sympathetically.

"If he does, it will be for the best. They so obviously love each other, and she has such a sweet, calming presence that will do him good," Hermione volunteered. "I'm very impressed with her and her story. I had no idea," she said quietly.

Molly nodded in agreement. "None of us did. The poor girl, what she's been through. So many families have suffered."

Hermione rose, giving her a hug. "It's over, Molly. The War is over."

Hermione knew that, with two wars and a dead son in her history, Molly easily distrusted the new-found peace in the wizarding community. So did all the older Order members, Hermione thought. Arthur, Molly, Lupin, Minerva, and Severus, as seasoned war veterans, were far more severely affected than the rest. Bill and Tonks, who were old enough to remember and comprehend the severity of the First War, did not suffer nearly as much. Hermione remembered Tonks telling her that even in this last year of peace, she would frequently sit with her husband as the tremors of his past and distrust of the present haunted his dreams.

"Well, let's all be glad for that," Molly said as she stood up. "Oh, in the excitement of today, I forgot to tell you! Bill and Fleur are expecting again!"

"That is wonderful!" Hermione exclaimed, embracing Molly in celebration. "Oh, that is such good news! I haven't spoken with Fleur in a while, I'll admit."

"You are close ... you and she." Molly smiled. "I'm very glad that you and Fleur are friends, and that Ginny and Fleur are finally sisters, and that Daphne is on her way to becoming just as valued in this family. Thank you for making her feel so at home, Hermione."

Hermione paused. "She is the one who drew me in, Molly, not the other way around."

"Yes. She so wanted your approval, for herself and for Ron. She admires you, Hermione, always has, and she's completely in awe of your research. I don't know a mother in the Order, or in the wizarding community even, who isn't grateful from the bottom of her heart for what you are doing. You aren't a mother yet, Hermione ..."

"Don't say that so quickly!" Hermione laughed, half in nervous fear.

"...But when you are, you will understand how truly meaningful your work is for those of us who are," Molly finished.

"It's for Fleur, Molly, it really is," Hermione said.

"I know." Molly's eyes sparkled with tears. "And that means the world to all of us."

Hermione embraced her. "I really should be going. Minerva stopped by yesterday, so I haven't worked in a few days. I should be getting back to my research."

Molly laughed. "Just don't let your work consume you so much that you forget to come visit me, dear. You're just like Severus, you really are."

Hermione looked down at the floor.

"You miss him, don't you?" Molly asked knowingly.

Hermione looked up, shocked. Molly chuckled. "Oh, darling, how could I not suspect? I know how to read the heart of a woman in love ... I've known you since you were a second year, dear one. I've never seen you in love before, but when you and Severus were together, you both just became ... complete," she said comfortingly.

Hermione sighed, tiredly. "Does anyone else know? I haven't even told Harry and Ron..."

"So I thought, and no, no one else does. Lupin has his suspicions, I think, but even Minerva remains pleasantly oblivious."

"Well, I knew that, how she talks about him ..."

"He was practically Albus' son, Hermione, and thus he became hers as well in spite of everything," Molly added. She took Hermione's hands in hers. "I know you need to go, but let me tell you one last thing. I visit him on occasion, I cook food for him he's far too thin. You'd think with Italian food he'd actually eat, but none the matter." Molly waved a hand. "He misses you," she said matter-of-factly. "When the two of you were together at Grimmauld well, that's one of the only times I've ever seen him happy in his life. He is not happy anymore, Hermione, and you yourself are very much changed. Don't tell me that part of your jealousy in your research is so that you will have something else to occupy your thoughts," she said.

Hermione barely nodded, the relief of confession overwhelming her. "I do miss him," she said. "More than I can say," she whispered.

Molly took Hermione's chin between her thumb and forefinger. "Then go to him, my dear. The two of you are halves to the same potion, so to speak. One cannot live a fulfilled existence or purpose without the other."

"He doesn't want me, Molly. He practically pushed me out of his life..."

"And it is up to him to tell you why." Hermione looked up, surprised. "I have said enough," Molly continued, "And now you need to go research. And think on what I've said," she nudged Hermione kindly. "I do so want to see you happy."

Hermione hugged the older woman. "All these engagements have put you in a remarkably frivolous mood, Molly Weasley," she remarked dryly.

"They do tend to have that effect," Molly said. "Now off with you! I've got to clean up this mess you've all left!" She waved her hands dramatically.

Hermione laughed, and Apparated out of the Burrow, trying to hide the emotions that were raging within her.

## Chapter Eight

*Chapter 8 of 16*

In which Hermione visits Diagon Alley ...

**Disclaimer:** I'm not affiliated with JKR - I just play with her stuff for fun. :)

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Hermione appeared smack dab in the middle of the kitchen, the early afternoon sun pouring through the windows. She took a deep breath in, and slowly released it.

*Calm yourself, Hermione*, she thought. The fists balled at her sides were only now beginning to loosen, her knuckles white from the pressure she had exerted on them.

It hardly came as a surprise that Molly had figured out the source of Hermione's obsession with her research. Molly was not the mother of Fred and George Weasley for nothing, Hermione noted, having regained her composure enough to pull the dark roast out from the second cabinet. Molly was naturally intuitive and knew exactly how to ferret information out of her "suspects." She was the quintessential expert, Hermione thought, at separating the wheat from the chaff.

The dark roast was brewing itself in an incredibly timely fashion. Its heady, familiar aroma rose to comfort the distressed academic, still fashionably dressed in her heels and red sundress. Hermione put a hand on the counter, steadying herself. She did not know what it was about Severus ... that the thought of him could so entirely unnerve her at any given moment. It was disconcerting to the highest degree. She prided herself on her self-control, on her daring Gryffindor bravery, in her never-failing sense of direction and morality. Once a path was chosen, she staid its course, for better or worse.

*Go to him*, Molly had said. She quietly selected a Canons mug (courtesy of Ron) from the cupboard and poured the steaming, not entirely brewed dark roast into it.

She could not wait for it to finish brewing. She needed it now.

She sipped its rich decadence, the flavor bursting in her mouth. It was slightly bitter, and she momentarily felt remorse at having been so impatient. The regret, however, quickly faded as calmness swept over her, and her contorted face relaxed into a serene countenance.

She drank deeply of its richness. It offered her support as little else could. She could not pour her heart out to Molly. Honesty and confession were one thing, but Molly was not a therapist, and Hermione certainly didn't have any demons she couldn't exorcise on her own. Ginny knew enough, but she would propose retail-therapy as the remedy of choice, and Hermione was in no mood to shop. Besides, they had plans for that later on in the week.

*No*, she thought to herself ... *this is exactly what I need.*

Several hours later, Hermione gave a deep sigh. She had just concluded her latest perusal of the incomparable *Most Potente Potions*. She rose from the white sitting room lounge chair and walked over to the bookshelves that flanked the fireplace on either side. She slipped the massive, leather bound copy back into its place on her reference shelf, in between *Important Modern Magical Discoveries* (with entire chapters devoted to Unforgiveables) and Arsenius Jigger's highly underrated *Magical Draughts & Potions, Fourth Edition*. She ran her hand lovingly over the books on the shelf. She reread them, and their fellow shelf occupants, on a regular basis; searching for elusive facts that would enlighten her research, or even tidbits that would give her ideas for potions unrelated to the Unforgiveables. She had made very little progress.

She stretched her arms out with a brief yawn. Her reading had given her an idea that demanded the postponement her daily lab work. Her passion for learning was, frequently, the only thing that could leave her devotion to research in the dust.

She looked at the timepiece on the mantle. It was nearly four o'clock. She had enough time to go to Diagon Alley's Apothecary and get a few ingredients.

Accio mirror, she thought, summoning a hand mirror from a kitchen drawer. She had found it during her first week in the house, while exploring the abode's nooks and crannies. There had also been some rouge and hairpins Minerva's, no doubt, either hidden away or long forgotten. *Probably both*, Hermione thought as she held her hand out to the approaching mirror.

It floated to her effortlessly, and she quickly checked her hair and makeup. They were decent, considering that it had been a Sunday brunch. Since her arrival home she had changed into Calvin Klein jeans (wizards really didn't know what they were missing) and a simple tank. Slipping on a pair of nearby flip flops, she fluffed her long hair out and Apparated to the Leaky Cauldron.

She appeared in a relatively quiet spot of the pub, which itself was relatively vacant. It was, after all, a Sunday afternoon.

"Anything I can get for you, Miss Granger?" the old landlord called. Hermione smiled in his direction.

"No thanks, Tom. I'm just in the market for some herbs today." She started to walk towards the back door.

"Of course. You take care, miss." He smiled kindly at her.

Hermione quickly walked out the back door to the brick wall. She tapped the bricks with her wand, which at present was barely two inches long. She shrunk it for travel, as was custom. She stared at the bricks as they slowly began to unfold. There were, of course, easier ways to get into Diagon Alley, but she preferred this one. She remembered the first time that she and her parents had seen this. They'd walked out behind the Leaky Cauldron to the dingy little alley, a bit befuddled but mostly skeptical. The old man had tapped the bricks slowly, as if seeking to extend suspense and time. Hermione's lip twitched in nostalgia at the memory. She smiled, remembering her eleven-year-old self, as the bricks opened before her eyes in the present. She had felt such wonder and awe those ten years ago, as the world she'd imagined in playtime had been brought to her doorstep.

The Diagon Alley she stepped into now was relatively similar to its appearance a decade prior. The war, of course, had shut down shops and blackened the Alley's bright aura with terror and suspicion, but that had passed. The year of peace had successfully returned commerce and light to the district.

As Hermione walked down the street, she received few glances from passersby. Her heart practically burst with newfound joy. Ignored and rarely mentioned by the Prophet these last two months, she had blissfully fallen away from the public eye. In spite of this, she had long since decided to remain at the beach house. Minerva hadn't said a word, and the arrangement remained extremely satisfactory especially to Hermione.

She passed Madam Malkin's, briefly glancing in the window to see if Ginny was still working. She caught Madam's eye, asking the question, and Madam shook her head slightly. The women nodded to each other in acknowledgement before Hermione continued her path. She walked passed Ollivander's (now run by the late owner's nephew) and Flourish and Blotts. Her feet instinctively began to carry her to the front step of the legendary bookstore.

She stopped herself abruptly in the middle of the street. *No, Hermione*, she chided herself as she quickly walked passed the gleaming bookstore. *You are here for herbs, not for books ...*

She quickly arrived at the small, white storefront in question, and went in.

The bell on the door chimed, announcing her entrance. Hermione inhaled the heady, intermingling smells of jasmine, lavender, ginger, and eucalyptus. She quickly remembered that the entryway was charmed, so as not to announce to customers the stronger, more sinister scents of herbs located against the back wall. Hermione briefly glanced to her left. Most of the common and novelty inventory was located along the wall-length shelves. The long, chocolate brown tables ran perpendicular to the wall, displaying baskets of herbs and arrangements of oils on them. Hermione noted two older witches ogling Far East remedies. Charmed inquiry cards floated above the tables, each of them containing holographic images of the entire stock of herbs, oils, and rare and exotic potions ingredients. They were, Hermione knew, the second best source of information in the tiny store.

"Ahh, Hermione!" a pleasant male baritone rang out. Hermione turned to her right, towards the counter and locked display cases, and saw the voice's origin.

Archibald Longheven was a very tall, very muscular middle-aged wizard, resplendent in dark pants and a cuffed but unbuttoned white shirt. Not as young as Remus Lupin but not quite the age of Minerva McGonagall, he had run the shop with his father until the old man's retirement during Hermione's fifth year. So much the better, Hermione had thought at the time. Archie was an intuitive herbologist and a skilled potions maker who had the enviable ability to choose the perfect ingredient without prior research. His long, thick, slightly wavy hair was streaked with grey, and Hermione could have sworn that his salient beard was tinged with blue. His thick Scots accent reminded her of the TV news anchors she saw when visiting Bill and Fleur's flat in Glasgow.

"Archie, dearest." Hermione quickly walked over to the charismatic gentleman and embraced him. The older witches clucked in disapproval, quickly turning back to their conversation by the Far East table.

Archie's jolly green eyes twinkled. "How's the Brighton coast treating you, my dear?"

Hermione quirked an eyebrow. "How do you know where Minerva's ..."

He winked knowingly and chortled with deep laughter when her eyes bugged with realization.

"Oh, my!" Hermione quickly covered her mouth with her hand to stop the sheepish grin that was spreading. A slight blush flushed her cheeks. Archie had a reputation as a lady's man, to be sure. It made sense, she supposed, that the brazen intellect of her mentor would not escape this man's notice.

"Only a flirtation, of course," Archie noted, deciding to cut off Hermione's rampant stream of thought. "This was before she was with Albus. I knew she loved him but, young rogue I was, I thought I could change her mind." He chuckled pleasantly, obviously amused at the thought of his younger self. "Didn't lead anywhere, but nothing ventured, nothing gained." He clasped his hands together, smiling at the young witch. "I know you aren't coming away from your blissful seclusion which you are enjoying, are you not?" he asked sternly. Hermione nodded in response, satisfying her friend's protective nature. "Good. As I was saying, I know you're not here to listen to an old cad's blatherings ..."

Hermione guffawed. "You're hardly an *old* cad, Uncle Archie!" She fondly used the nickname she had bestowed on him years ago.

"Calling him her uncle!" Hermione swung her head over to the two witches, who had moved their gossip to the aromatherapy section. She opened her mouth, about to

verbally flay them, when Archie firmly took her arm.

"No, Hermione," he chided. "They are customers, after all!" He started to laugh. "Let the old bats have their fun," he finished in a congenial but purposefully loud tone.

The two women quickly went back to perusing the samplings of rosemary oil, with far more interest than was necessary.

"I never knew rosemary to be so intriguing," Hermione remarked dryly.

"I knew a Rosemary once. Beautiful woman, she was ..." Archie cleared his throat, cutting himself off at Hermione's scolding expression. "What are you here for today, Hermione? You seem quite eager to defend my ignominious and quite deserved reputation, but I know that is not what brings you to my store."

She smiled. "Much as I do love you, *Uncle Archie*," she emphasized loudly, trying to control her laughter, "I am here for a few herbs I don't have at Minerva's."

"Ahh." Archie crossed his arms, his inner herbologist taking over his characteristic flamboyance. "What may those be?"

"Aglaophotis and Orielibos."

"Hmm," he said, stroking his chin. "Extremely rare, and used for the expungence of dark forces, correct?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "Aglaophotis, at least, is reputed to secrete a crimson liquid that can be used for the summoning and expelling of demons, and for the exorcism of dark forces."

"Yes, yes, I remember now," Archie said, leaning against the counter. "Arabian desert, correct? Extremely hard to find. They're only legend in the Muggle world; modern bonatists have not found the herbs, though not for lack of trying."

Hermione chuckled. "Yes, *botanists* have certainly tried to find them. But they're not wizards," she said in a high tone, smiling cheekily. "I don't want them for summoning demons, though, Archie, so you can rest your fears there."

"I do confess a certain relief."

"They're supposed to have unlimited healing powers."

"Your research?" he asked, smiling wisely.

She nodded. "So do you have them?"

"I can almost assure you that I don't. Muggles think they don't exist. Apothecaries can sympathize," he said wryly, walking behind the counter. "Those are expensive herbs, Hermione, and blasted difficult to get your hands on."

Hermione's countenance fell slightly.

"Rest assured," Archie offered. "They're hard to find, but I *can* get them."

Hermione raised an eyebrow, suspicious. "What do you have up your sleeve?" she asked in a moderate but demanding tone.

He smiled. "I'm not the best apothecary in Britain for nothing. The family who controls the area of desert where the plants grow is legendary in their own right. However, one of their distant relatives was a friend of mine in Slytherin from a few years back."

"You were in Gryffindor, Archie."

"Should have been in Slytherin!" he huffed. "I'm too good with women to have been put in Gryffindor ... they're not all bad, you know, Slytherins. A minority are awful, to be certain, and in light of recent wars they've given the entire house a bad name. Cunning intellect goes hand in hand with bravery, you know." He looked up at her from the papers he was ruffling through. Hermione raised her eyebrows, in sarcastic disbelief. He cleared his throat. "Most students go seven years through Hogwarts without having the animosity with Slytherin that you and your friends had within your first year."

"We had the likes of Draco Malfoy to contend with."

"Yes, and I had his Aunt Andromeda." Archie's eyes misted over, with deep appreciation for the woman. "A better Slytherin you'd be hard pressed to find," he told Hermione as he continued to make a mess of the already cluttered desk. "Cunning, intuitive, brutally intelligent, and completely stunning. Married a Muggle!" Archie shook his head in practical disbelief. "Well, a Muggle-born wizard," he acknowledged. "Although I hear her daughter is a Metamorphmagus those abilities don't just spring up in families, you know. They evolve and develop as each generation increases in its magical ability. I'm glad that that it was through Andromeda that such an ability manifested itself. I don't see her daughter often, you know Aurors aren't in much need of herbs now are they? but I hear she's just as clever and vivacious as her mother was."

Hermione grinned. "Tonks well, she goes by Tonks, anyway she's just delightful. Married to Remus Lupin, actually; she walks her own path." She smiled, thinking of her klutzy, high-spirited friend.

Archie nodded, completely unaffected. "Of course she would be. Her mother was the first Black to ever marry a Muggle-born, it figures that her daughter would marry a werewolf ... but I digress. As I was saying, it's good that the Metamorphmagus ability came to fruition underneath the direction of Andromeda Black, and not under that of her sisters. Bellatrix was a bit older than us in school ..." he involuntarily shuddered. "Even at that time, you could tell something was not quite right with that woman, in the head, you know. She was mysteriously beautiful, a Black through and through, that dark aura. Quite captivating, really, until you got to know her..." He cleared his throat. "And then there was Narcissa, the pampered, insolent chit baby of the family who got herself married to Lucius Malfoy and had that prat son, may he rest in peace, of course."

Hermione frowned. "Draco turned to the right side, Archie. I was with him when he died," she sighed, putting her elbows on the counter. "Truly reformed. He was a pure soul ... the perfect example of how environment can shape a person." She shuddered. "Enough of that. Can you get me what I need or not?" she asked matter-of-factly.

"Here it is!" he cried triumphantly, lifting a paper from the gigantic stack. He pressed his lips together in concentration as he perused the sheet. "I have contacts in the Mediterranean," he said, setting the paper down, "whom I will now be able to contact. They have far easier access to the family than I do, and this particular friend of mine is a distant relative. I can guarantee you, Miss Granger," he said, winking, "that I will have your precious plants for you within the week."

"Thank you, Archie!" Hermione cried, bounding behind the counter to jump in his arms. He patted her back familiarly.

"Ahh, well, the old bats left the shop, nothing to perform for, sadly," he said, setting her down.

"What would I do without you?" she smiled. "These plants have so much potential, given the right mixture and texture of the healing potion, to at least ..."

Archie waved a hand off. "I'm sure they do, Hermione. Don't go off telling me all your plans for the research, though. That way you have nothing with which to blackmail me for my sources." He looked at her, slightly interrogating. "There will be no attempting to steal the paper with my contact on it, Hermione, or attempting to see through Invisible Ink, memorizing its contents."



Hermione blushed a violent red. Caught in the act. She *had* been trying to look at exactly which paper he had put down ... Archie's list of contacts, when organized, was irrefutably the best in Europe ...

"And you say you don't like Slytherins. Goodness, girl," he jested as Hermione walked around the counter again.

They smiled at each other in mutual understanding. She glanced at the timepiece he had mounted on the wall. "I'd best be heading back home ..."

"More books to read through?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Shockingly so."

She grinned. "Well, I'd best be off, but I will pay any price they name for the herbs," she called over her shoulder, walking out. "I am quite desperate to have them!"

"Off with you, then!" he called cheerfully from the counter.

Hermione walked out of the apothecary with a beat to her step. Mission accomplished.

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It was six o'clock. The store had been devoid of customers since the lovely Hermione's departure. Archie smiled to himself, looking over at the stack of papers he had cluttered about. He walked over the door, wand in hand, silently casting protective charms over his products and setting up the elaborate wards. The request he had received was surprising, to be sure. The requester, however, had not shocked him in the slightest. Hermione Granger was not a girl to settle for normalcy in her herb choice, Archie pondered, amused. She was a dear thing, completely unaware of how others looked on her. Good thing, too, he thought, cringing inwardly. Those who knew her loved her. Everyone in the rumored Order of the Phoenix, which Archie had great reason to believe actually existed, adored her. The Weasley family had adopted her, and she was, after all, a close friend of the infamous Harry Potter. She was a singularly brilliant and talented witch, possibly the greatest feminine mind to grace the wizarding world since Rowena Ravenclaw. *Ravenclaw, now that's the house she should have been in...* Archie thought wryly. Even Minerva McGonagall would not be able to measure up to Miss Granger's talent in the next few decades.

Archie circled around the tables, back to the counter. In spite of her brilliance and kind heart, there were those in the wizarding world who, he knew, were intensely jealous of the attention Hermione received. She shunned the media and had few, if any, kind words for the Ministry, and still certain groups gossiped and despised her. *Parkinson's circle, for one ... some potion circles, too, come to think of it ...* he thought. However, considering that it was tantamount to social suicide to condemn any member of the Golden Trio in public, any misgivings about Hermione Granger remained quiet. But for how long ...

Archie Apparated out of the now-secure shop to his luxurious apartment on the floor above. He unbuttoned the rest of his shirt and sat down at his large Yew desk, pulling a piece of parchment out from under the silver paper weight. He knew that his old friend was in Italy now, and that a recommendation from him would secure a sizeable amount of the requested herbs immediately. He grabbed the quill, which had sharpened itself the moment before, and began to write.

*My dear old friend - Severus ...*

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**A/N:** According to Wikipedia, Aglaophotis and Orielibos are rare herbs supposedly grown in the Arabian desert. Unknown to modern botanists, their legend was recorded in the Simon Necronomicon. (is my addiction to Wikipedia showing yet?)

## Chapter Nine

*Chapter 9 of 16*

In which we return to Italy and visit an old friend ...

**Disclaimer:** Anything you recognize belongs to JK Rowling!

**A/N:** I relied heavily upon *Fantastic Beasts & Where to Find Them* for this chapter. Nearly everything in this chapter relating to Ashwinder serpents came directly from that book. Anything that didn't was not touched on, so I felt at liberty to create as I so desired.

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The tall trees were ruffling their leaves, and the animals were scurrying about the countryside. The noon sun was bathing the coastal landscape, unfettered by the scattered wisps of cloud that were insignificantly strewn across its blue palate.

He glanced out of the large bay window across the study. Sweet heaven, it looked like a beautiful day outside. A perfect day to go to *a Serra Dolce Lunga*...

Severus attempted to clear his mind. Technically, his favored source for ingredients was called *La Serra Dolce e Lunga* but the *e* was frequently dropped. Grammatical practicality was no match for the beautiful flow of a romance language, Severus knew. Especially in Italy. His English colleagues would scoff at many of the slack practices of the Italian magical community, but even he could admit that *La Serra Dolce Lunga* rolled off the tongue in a particularly pleasing manner ...

Stop, he firmly told himself. A year ago in England, he wouldn't have thought twice about going out for ingredients when there was work to be done. Of course, the lackluster papers of his pupils had been replaced with the inquiries and requests of his fellow masters and mistresses. The intelligent notes and letters did not frequently require immediate attention, unlike the regular deadlines of midterms and ...

Oh, to hell with it.

He was quickly off his feet, striding across the study and out into the hall, his black silk robe billowing behind him. He had realized long ago that he did not require an audience to make a grand entrance. By now, he did not even realize that he made one.

Upon entrance to the high, vaulted chambers of his bedroom, he discarded the robe, flinging it across the bed. He reached into his closet, pulling out one of many crisp, collared white shirts. He wore white and black, also dark green and navy. Ahh, the variety, he thought wryly, rapidly buttoning the shirt. He slipped a pair of black pants over the green boxers, and strode out of his room as quickly as he had come in.

The entryway to the villa held all of his shoes. Nearly all, at any rate. The sturdy, harsh, dragon-hide boots he wore in his lab were housed in his lab closet, along with many duplicates. In his entryway, however, one found loafers, sneakers of the Muggle variety, and even sandals. He slid on a pair of sturdy Birkenstock sandals (courtesy of Hogwarts' Muggle Studies professor, Johnny Wellington) and Apparated out of the villa.

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He arrived on a large, green patch of cleared field. It always reminded him of Hogwarts' Quidditch Pitch *La Serra Dolce Lungasat* on at least twelve acres of land the actual greenhouse took up around three, by Severus' estimate. There were exotic trees, plants, and animal beds as far as the eye could see. It was an extensive collection, to be sure. It was the only place in Italy that one could go for potions ingredients of every variety one needn't visit an apothecary, and a greenhouse, and an animal specialist; a witch or wizard in need only had to come to this place to get all three.

The charm work always impressed him. He knew that these twelve acres, secluded in the outskirts of Naples, were charmed to keep stray Muggles away. There were also breeds of tropical plants and certain animal wildlife that required daily charm work to ensure their survival in the Mediterranean climate. Severus was certain that even this cleared patch of shimmering green grass had had work done. Glancing to his left, he noted the glistening stream that encircled the three acres of greenhouse building. There were many species of enchanted fish living in that stream, and Snape knew that Neville kept a large portion of the stream reserved for gillyweed growth.

Severus kept walking towards the large greenhouse. Its exterior was enchanted to look like an ivory silk tent, and the said walls seemed to be billowing out around the large, oak frame. When he was barely twenty feet from the entrance, he saw the ex-pupil in question come out of the greenhouse with a beautiful, blonde older woman. Kissing her on both cheeks, the tall young man wished his patroness a fair afternoon. The lady Apparated, and Snape saw Neville smile, running a hand through his hair.

"Not too busy this afternoon I hope, Mr. Longbottom."

Neville turned. "Professor Snape!" He smiled warmly, reaching out to shake hands with his approaching ex-professor. After so many exchanges, the men hardly realized how absolutely ludicrous the scene would look to a visitor from the Hogwarts days.

Every Order member knew that war changed people, and it changed their relationships. Three years of fighting had forced the fear from Neville's heart, and caused Snape to realize that outside of a Potions laboratory, Neville Longbottom was a truly remarkable young man. His purity of spirit and devotion to his cause had left Snape with a somewhat envious awe over his ex-pupil. Similarly, Neville had slowly come to comprehend the precarious and all-too-dangerous line that his professor had walked those years at Hogwarts. He respected Snape's brilliance, and the two men had slowly developed a silent camaraderie leading up to the Final Battle.

The bonds developed during the war, of course, were still based on the harsh, slightly humorous reality of daily life. Neville still held, undisputedly, the highest record for melted cauldrons in Snape's classroom. Severus had been viewed as the greasy bat of the dungeons (albeit, a greasy bat with an Order of Merlin, First Class) up until the day he left Hogwarts. However, their past had become a source of light amusement over the past year.

Despite Hermione Granger's brilliance, Neville Longbottom had been the undisputed expert on Herbology in his class. During the war, his passion had expanded into a love for the uses of natural phenomena (such as different varieties of enchanted water) and animal specimens. His culminating academic papers on different combinations of herbs, plants, spices, and animal parts (such as unicorn hair) had caught the rabid attention of an infamous Italian contessa. Allegra Rossi was the reigning matriarch of the Rossi clan the Italian equivalent of the Malfoys, sans the dark arts fascination. Allegra had nieces and nephews aplenty, but no children of her own to share in her passion for the enchanted twelve acres of Neapolitan landscape that she used to nurture various exotic plants and species. She had invited Neville to visit her and her various colleagues to discuss his research. She had been so impressed with his academic vision for the herbology field that she had offered him the twelve acres, plus funding, on the spot.

No one in the Order had ever seen Neville so happy in his life. He had moved to Naples shortly after the war's end, and had begun setting up the greenhouse and ordering various varieties of plant life and animal species. Allegra's wealth rivaled the royals of Muggle Europe, and Neville's every idea was satisfied by her pocketbook. The greenhouse if it could be called that, it was really a plantation of the finest caliber had opened barely six months ago. It had quickly developed a reputation across the continent as having the most extensive collection of ingredients in Europe. Potions masters and mistresses frequented *La Serra Dolce Lunga* as did professors, researchers, and collectors from every nook and cranny of the region.

Neville delighted in all his customers, but most of all in his former professor. He was extremely delighted with his professor's compliments, and was flattered when Severus had informed him that he was now coming to Neville almost exclusively for his ingredients.

"What are you in the market for, today?" Neville crossed his arms across his broad chest.

"Ashwinder eggs," Severus snorted.

Neville raised an eyebrow. "Brewing love potions, Professor?"

"You must be joking."

"Hardly. They're illegal in the Mediterranean, you know."

"But not for research purposes."

"Oh, it's for research, is it?" Neville was fighting the urge to laugh.

"Unlike many members of my gender, Mr. Longbottom, I have never resorted to brewing illicit potions to entice the female sex." Severus narrowed his eyes, enjoying the debate. "Nor have I ever purchased one from Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes," he added non-chalantly.

Neville practically choked. "You know we only used the 24-hour potion on Ron just to ..."

"All due respect, Mr. Longbottom, I'm not eager to hear how seventh-years justified the use of *Weasley's Draught of Red Hot Love*."

Both men burst out laughing, great belly-roars that drew the attention of several employees working by the stream.

"Ashwinder eggs, you say," Neville said, opening the door for Snape. The two men walked into the vast structure. There were rows of shelves for what seemed like miles and hundreds of hanging plants that floated above them. Various baskets of herbs and oils lined the walls. The herbs and assortment of both common and uncommon ingredients comprised the tallest, broadest section of the building. The two other offshoots on either side were smaller; one for rare and exotic ingredients, the other for animal parts.

Neville led him to the left side of the greenhouse where they walked across at least an acre of building before reaching a charmed, protected door that Severus had never seen before. Neville waved his hand over the heavy oak door where a series of white and blue sparks flashed to verify his handprint (an interesting combination of charms and divination work, Severus thought).

"Come on in." Neville flashed an inviting smile. Severus obliged.

He walked into an array of light. The white marble floor contrasted with the burst of colors. In one corner of the room, Severus noted shelves illuminated in yellow warmth.

The opposite corner held baskets that were surrounded by an icy blue glow. Another corner was as white as snow, with steam reminiscent of Muggle dry ice coming off of its transparent box.

"It's a freezer," Neville commented, noting the direction of Severus' attention. "A useful Muggle contraption for keeping things cold. The penguin eggs and feathers need to remain chilled, far more than the ocean temperatures," he said, gesturing to the blue corner, "and the freezer does the trick. Allegra is very knowledgeable about Muggle things."

Severus' eyes quickly swept over the remaining corner, which, colorless, suggested that the shelved contents were kept at room temperature.

In the very center of the room, there was a tall, glassy structure. "Fireproof," Neville said, walking towards it.

Severus walked with Neville towards the impressive contraption. "Charmed?" he asked.

"Nothing can get in or out without my say-so."

"Fantastic," Severus murmured, walking around the tall, rectangular structure.

The glassy panes were flaming red blood red, in fact ...

"A magical fire?" Severus asked, his mind working at why Neville would authorize such dangerous occurrences in his greenhouse.

Neville smiled broadly as the fire raged.

"Good God, boy!" Severus exclaimed, suddenly understanding. "You're not ..."

"Creating our own Ashwinder serpents, yes."

"You're either very brave or very stupid."

"Incredibly intelligent, actually."

Severus snorted, which Neville took as a compliment. There were no other greenhouses in the world that could boast their own Ashwinder breeding facilities.

"We employ expert snake handlers and pyrotechnics to handle it, of course," Neville said. "This particular compartment, as I said, is fireproof, charmed, practically indestructible. Our fires are perfectly contained, and there is no magical being that could break this thing from the inside."

Severus watched in awe as two men entered the room from a side door two of the said snake handlers, he presumed. They waved their wands (foolishly, of course) in different directions. Severus jumped as the floor beneath the four cornered areas, containing various animal parts, specimens, and eggs, quickly collapsed into vaults beneath the floor.

The men nodded to Neville, and left the room.

Severus and his former pupil were immediately engulfed in pitch-black darkness. "You certainly know the process, Professor," Neville said, his calming voice coming through the darkness.

"Who wouldn't? Ashwinders are legendary, and relatively rare." Severus knew that Neville was smiling. He continued with his explanation. "They are grey serpents with red eyes, who come exclusively out of magical fires. They live long enough to lay fiery hot eggs in a dark, secluded spot. If the eggs are not found and frozen quickly, they will set any surrounding building on fire."

"Taken almost verbatim from *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*," Neville chuckled.

"Touché, Mr. Longbottom, touché," Snape said.

"Ssh," Neville whispered.

The raging fire inside the structure had begun to subside. Snape watched in fascination as two red eyes stared out at him through the glass. The fire quickly went out, and he saw the long, grey, slithering body through the glass. He knew that the snake could not see any of the individuals in the room, as Ashwinders were known to have poor vision, but he was entranced by the snake's elegant movements. If the studies were true, the snake would lay anywhere from two to several dozen fiery hot eggs in the next hour, and die soon afterward. It was imperative that the eggs be frozen within minutes.

The bottom of the container on which the Ashwinder lay writhing started to slowly fall, not unlike a trap door. When it was entirely beneath the floor on which Severus and Neville still stood, Neville extracted his wand, waving it around the room. The lights came up brightly, and the paneling over the four corners slid into the walls, allowing the panels carrying the various animals to rise and secure themselves to the sturdy marble.

Neville turned to Snape expectantly. "The Ashwinder will lay her eggs soon, at which point our trained handlers will immediately transport them to the freezers."

"Brilliant," Snape said, barely above a whisper. He cleared his throat. "Thank you for showing me. I have never had the privilege of witnessing such an event ... truly spectacular."

Neville's eyes glowed. "I was sure you'd like it. We perform the ritual once every month or two, give or take the demand. We have eggs currently frozen here," he said, pointing at the transparent crystal freezer in the corner, "and the fresh ones below us will be taken to a larger, not as aesthetic freezer in the lower chambers. Would you like me to get the eggs for you now?"

"Yes, please," Severus said. The men walked across the room, splitting as they walked around the center masterpiece where the fire had just been. Neville extracted thick, silvery-scaled dragon hide gloves from a shelf above the icy freezer. Snape shivered just being in proximity to the frigid cold. Neville reached a glove-clad hand to the shelf again, pulling down a pair of sparkling platinum tongs and a feathery silk bag. He smiled. "Amidst such dangerous creatures as the Ashwinder, there is much beauty in this room. Allegra favors such aesthetically pleasing items, and they certainly delight customers," he said, taking the tongs in one hand as he opened the freezer with another. Snape peered over Neville's shoulder to look in the low freezer. In the spirit of many magical compartments, this small freezer contained a vast amount of frozen goods. Severus noted chilled gillyweed, iced fluxwood (frequently used in the infamous Polyjuice Potion), and several bottles of red liquid at first glance. Neville silently summoned the container of Ashwinder eggs to the front.

"How many would you like?"

"Seven."

Neville began to extract the silver-streaked, faint red eggs, placing them in the silk bag.

"The bag is charmed as well?"

"Of course. Impenetrable, unbreakable," Neville said, not looking up.

"Is there anything in this building that is *not* under some sort of magical enhancement or protection?"

Neville looked up and paused for a second, pensive. "No," he said. "Save the employees ... perhaps." He shut the freezer door.

Severus quirked an eyebrow as Neville stood, tying off the bag and placing the tongs on the shelf.

"Here you are, Professor." Neville handed the bag to him, smiling.

"Thank you for the eggs."

"Thank you for the business." There was a moment of silence.

"Shall we walk?" Severus proposed.

Neville led him out of the room and back to the entrance of the greenhouse. "Charge your account, as usual?" he asked. Snape nodded. Neville reached under the Yew desk and pulled out the beige notebook, setting it in front of Severus. He paused. "May I ask what the project is?"

Severus waved a hand as he took a quill, signing the account book. "It's that damned Ignacia du Montmorency."

"Montmorency?" Neville's eyes went wide. "Ignacia du Montmorency?"

Severus looked at him, images of melted cauldrons flashing before his eyes. "Yes."

"As in, the only living descendent of Laverne du Montmorency?"

"Her great-great-granddaughter."

"Incredible." Neville ran a hand through his hair. "I take it she's in your line of work."

"She's a Potions mistress, yes."

"Love potions?"

"Her grandmother invented most of the love potions still in use today, and Ignacia is certainly a fervent follower of her grandmother's ideology."

Neville quirked an eyebrow in response. Severus sighed. "She recently published a slanderous article on the negative long term effects of Ashwinder eggs."

Neville furrowed his brow. "I've never heard of such effects."

"Nor I." Severus gave a low chuckle. "You do know that Ashwinder eggs are the core ingredient in the strongest love potion known to man."

"I may not be able to make a potion, Professor, but I certainly know what goes in them. You speak of Amortentia."

"Ten points to Gryffindor, Longbottom."

Neville chuckled. "So you are trying to disprove Ignacia du Montmorency's theory?"

"Yes. I'm not one for love potions myself..."

"Can't say I'm surprised, Professor."

"...but I hate seeing research so carelessly and incorrectly bandied about," Snape continued. "Ignacia is obviously trying to discredit one of the major love potions purely because it was not directly created by her grandmother." He smiled wryly. "I'm sure she'd be interested to know that one of Amortentia's more interesting side effects was inspired by her ancestress."

Neville laughed. "I'm sure." A bright red object began glowing at the edge of the desk. A Remembrall. For some reason, Snape wasn't the least bit surprised.

"Oh, what have I forgotten now?!" Neville said, exasperated. Severus laughed heartily.

"I'll leave you to your business, Mr. Longbottom," Snape said. He started to walk out the door before turning around.

"And Neville," he called. Neville turned from his place at the desk, surprised.

"Yes, professor?"

"Thank you," Severus said quietly. He walked away, Apparating as he did so.

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**Announcement:** *Dark Roast* has been nominated for the Multifaceted Awards in the Rapture category (best het fic rated G - PG-13). If you're enjoying the story, may I be so forward as to ask for your votes? :) Thank you all for reading.

## Chapter Ten

*Chapter 10 of 16*

In which Severus gets a visit from an old friend...

**Disclaimer:** It all belongs to JKR, whom I bow before in gratitude.

**A/N:** Many thanks to Psy for her encouragement and Rhiannon for catching the errors I miss.

Several hours later, Severus was sitting in his favorite sitting room chair, sipping a cup of dark roast. He smacked his lips as he read over the article in his lap:

*My research has proven that the addition of Ashwinder eggs to the base of Amortentia is highly dangerous, with the potential to affect both the environment in which the potion is brewed and the unfortunate brewer. The blood-boiling birth the eggs undergo create in them a highly volatile tension ...*

"Rubbish," he muttered under his breath, tossing the article to the side. He brought the steaming cup to his lips, inhaling the aroma, savoring the taste. Dark roast was perfect at any time of year even in the balmy Italian summers.

His eyes flickered to the open window. A blue-gray owl was flying towards him, and it gracefully landed on the arm of his chair.

"Athalia?" he muttered, extracting the letter from the owl's beak. He had not seen this particular owl in a very long time.

The beige-colored envelope was sealed with the royal blue signet of the Apothecary Guild. A curious expression rippled across Severus' features. He peeled off the signet and opened the envelope. A crisp beige page fell out. He ran his fingers over the smooth stationary, turning it over to read its contents.

5 July 2002

*My dear old friend Severus,*

*It has been too long since I have seen you, you old scoundrel, but it is on the subject of business that I must write to you.*

*A favorite customer of mine has requested Aglaophotis and Orielibos. I would not ask for such a favor were it not for my complete confidence in the individual in question. I am certain that those particular herbs will be used for the betterment of society. The young lady is a skilled researcher, and quite a dab hand at potions! Almost as good as yourself, old boy.*

*Think on it. Any favor will not go uncompensated, or forgotten. I'll expect a reply either way in a few days.*

- Archie

"Humph!" Severus set the letter on his lap, thinking. Impertinent old bugger. Telling him what to do, giving him orders. It was so like Archie. So nauseatingly Gryffindor.

Much as Severus hated to comply with Archie's outlandish requests, one had to admit that they held a certain dangerous appeal. It wouldn't take too long for him to get his hands on the herbs in question, provided enough egos were stroked and enough women were flattered. His connections were perfect and would quickly serve his purpose. It would almost certainly guarantee a run-in with Ignacia du Montmorency maybe this could benefit his rebuttal of her foolish arguments.

His jagged nails gently clicked against the china cup in a distinct rhythm as he perused the letter.

He caught his breath.

In the excitement of his potential compliance, he had overlooked the detail with which Archie had described his 'favorite customer'.

Hermione. It had to be. There was no other young woman in England who could possibly command the kind of praise Archie had bestowed on her. *"Almost as good as yourself!"* And what other woman would request such rare ingredients?

His hand clenched and his face tightened. *Damn* the girl! He should've known that such an intriguing intellectual challenge could only come from her. Who else would be pursuing the betterment of society with such an ambitious ingredients list?

Hermione was doing something researching *something* that was big. Those two herbs would not be used for anything less than world-changing material.

He stood up and began to pace in front of the dormant fireplace, racking his brain. What had Minerva said about Hermione's work? Preventative potions for children. A noble cause, to be sure, certainly not one frequently researched beyond rudimentary levels.

Minerva had said something on her last visit something about Hermione working with the Weasley twins. He smirked. She could do better than that ...

Apparently she was. Aglaophotis and Orielibos ... Gods, why couldn't Minerva talk more about Hermione's potions research and less about Ronald Weasley?

"Severus?" a throaty, domineering voice filled the room.

He started and then stopped pacing. *Speak of the devil*, he thought, looking down at the green head in the fireplace.

"So good of you to call, Minerva," he spoke, his voice laced with sarcasm.

"I know you're overjoyed. Now dismantle these dastardly wards and let me in."

He chuckled and waved his hand over the marble stones. Minerva McGonagall came through the fireplace almost instantly, dusting the green powder off her robes.

She looked at him ruefully. "You know I come to visit; why do you not lower your anti-Apparition wards?"

"They are not anti-Apparition. I can Apparate on the premises."

"Yes, you and no one else! Floo is so cumbersome, Severus."

He snorted. "If you desire to see me so fervently, I'm afraid you must find a way to do so."

"Feeling peaky, dear?" Minerva humphed, walking a few steps and seating herself in the other chocolate-colored lounge chair. She flicked her wand towards the window. A breeze quickly swept through the room.

"I purposely ward the windows against the wind."

"I know." She looked up challengingly. "That's better, though, don't you think?"

Severus used his arm to brace himself against the mantle. "Why don't you get it over with, bring your suitcase, and move in?"

"Impossible. I might actually grow accustomed to your cheerful disposition."

"I doubt that." He allowed a smirk.

"Why don't you sit with me?" she asked, patting the lounge chair next to her.

"I'm sure I can hear your nattering from here."

"Don't get cross with me, young man."

"I'm hardly young, Minerva," Severus said tiredly, sitting down in the chair.

"Younger than this old witch, that's for certain."

"Can't have everything."

Minerva chortled.

"Dark roast?" Severus offered, summoning an additional coffee mug and a pot of the said liquid bliss.

"I'd love some." Minerva eyed the coffee gratefully. "I could use a stiff pot. I've nearly run out of what you've given me at Hogwarts, and Hermione is at the Brighton house."

His face was expressionless as he poured a cup for his companion, waiting for her to launch into the Hermione Report. She sipped her coffee, her face simultaneously lighting up. *Ahh*, he thought, *there is something to tell*.

"Ronald is engaged!" She smiled widely.

Severus grimaced, both in disappointment and near-physical pain. "Who is the unfortunate lady?"

"Oh, do put aside that schoolboy grudge of yours. It does not become you."

"Nor does the flattering of mediocrity benefit yourself."

"Ronald is a fine, upstanding young man."

"You jest. What idiotic lioness has seen fit to attach herself to the Quidditch idiot?"

Minerva smirked. "Not quite a lioness."

"A raven, then."

Minerva smiled, quietly drinking her coffee. She paused, tapping her cup. "You might want to look a little closer to home, Professor Snape."

Snape blanched. "You cannot be serious."

"I'm afraid a little lady serpent has been charmed by the pride of the Chudley Canons."

"I cannot bear to hear this."

"Daphne Greengrass."

"Ahh." Severus relaxed into his chair. "She's marrying him for his mother."

"Severus!"

"Daphne's a fine young lady; of any Slytherin candidates for a Weasley marriage, she'd be at the top of my list."

"You love Molly just as much as I do."

"Perhaps not *quite* as much as you do, Minerva."

"Well, Ron and Daphne are very happy."

"I wish them the best, and when I say them, I mean Daphne." A smile quirked at Severus' lips; baiting Minerva was far too easy. One needed only to poke at one of the cubs in her den and the emotions would roar.

Minerva seemed to be calming down. "Your dislike of him will vanish when you see how he treats Daphne."

"Doubtful."

"A man could not treat a woman better."

"It is no less than Daphne deserves."

"You *will* like Ronald eventually."

"Idealism is not what they say it is in Gryffindor House. You are too romantic," Severus said matter-of-factly, sipping his coffee. He glanced over at the window. The birds were flitting about outside, chattering incessantly in a way remarkably akin to the woman he was conversing with.

"And you're not?"

Severus turned to face the older woman, who had a wry smile on her face.

"Not what?"

"Idealistic. *Romantic*."

"I most certainly am nothing of the kind."

Minerva chuckled. "Just look at you, Severus, sitting there, drinking a cup of the most divine dark roast, brooding and moody, an entity unto yourself. You're living in a stunning Italian villa, solitary, alone because you fear your past more than you fear love. And the *only* reason you're here is because of the Ministry's request that you extricate yourself from British wizarding society. You were a double agent for over twenty years, pretending to be evil, but at heart a good soul."

"I must stop you while you're ahead." Severus raised a hand. "I am none of what you say," he muttered under his breath.

"Yes, you are. You're a good man," Minerva stated kindly.

"I killed your husband."

"A necessary evil that only you could do," she replied automatically. Her eyes glistened. "You knew he was dying."

He sat stoically, unmoving.

"The ring's effects would have taken him, Severus. You only bought him time ..."

"I took it instead."

"Why haven't you forgiven yourself?" she asked forcefully. "I have, the Order has ..."

"Really?" He raised an eyebrow. "You honestly think that every good witch and wizard in Britain has forgiven me as effortlessly as you?"

"You are making excuses. Even if there was an Order member who held it against you, it would not keep you from coming back to England."

He jerked his head. "What?"

She looked him straight in the eye. "The Ministry has finally acquiesced to our demands that you be reinstated."

His eyes narrowed. "And who did you bring to ensure such a promise? The Golden Trio?" he quipped.

"Bill and Fleur are highly respected in the community, as are Andromeda and her daughter."

Severus looked at her, demanding. She slumped her shoulders.

"Harry, too."

He snickered. "As ... pleased ... as I am ...that so many Order members have taken such a vested interest in my well-being, I am not keen on returning to England. I have outstanding resources at my disposal here in Naples. The weather is better, the people are better, and the seclusion is addicting!" he finished.

Minerva simply smiled. "It seems you've gone on a tangent, Severus."

"Yes, well," he mumbled, "don't expect it very often." He looked at her. "I do not wish to return, Minerva. There *isnothing* for me there."

"Isn't there?"

For a moment he thought a knowing look had passed over her face. He dismissed it.

"Surely you have other purposes on this visit aside from telling me to come back to England and teach at Hogwarts."

"I never mentioned teaching, but I am sure we will discuss it another time."

"Absolutely not, Minerva."

"You're a brilliant instructor."

"And they're complete dunderheads."

"Isn't it time you found a new term to describe the future of wizarding society?"

"Please don't call them that. The thought of any one of them being the Minister of Magic is enough to make me roll over in my grave."

"You aren't dead yet, my dear."

"One day I will be, and, when I am, those blasted idiots are going to come dance on my corpse, and I assure you, Minerva, that*will* roll over."

They sat at an impasse for several moments.

"Is there anyone you would like to hear about?" Minerva asked sweetly.

Severus' eyes flicked, remembering what he'd been so intent on before she'd arrived. Hermione's research.

*Hermione.*

Hermione was in England.

Damn it, he wasn't going down this road. He would not move back just for a woman. He might visit, though ...

"... Bill and Fleur are expecting again, isn't that wonderful?" Minerva was saying.

"Yes," he said off-handedly.

"And Hermione is doing well. I just visited her a few days ago. Wasting away with research. I tell you, she's becoming more and more like you every time I see her."

"Research tends to have a negative effect on fat deposits," he said, encouraging her to continue.

"Her research is getting her nowhere." Minerva sighed. "I'm so sorry for her. Several people warned her at the onset that finding a preventative potion for an Unforgivable would be impossible ..."

"A preventative potion for an Unforgivable?"

Minerva turned to him, looking at him quizzically. "Yes," she said, slightly flustered, "Have I never mentioned it to you?"

"No ..." Severus trailed off, his brain working a mile a minute. Hermione was researching a preventative potion for an Unforgivable ...

"Which Unforgivable? *Crucio*, I presume?" he asked in an academic tone, trying not to betray his mounting excitement*Excitement for the girl or the research?* That small little voice in his brain quipped.

"Yes. When last I visited her, she was very discouraged. It's so sad to see that," she said slowly, drinking her coffee. "When academics find themselves disappointed in their research. Especially when they have put so much of themselves into it." Minerva set her cup down on the small table to her left. She put a hand to her temple, massaging. "I fear for her," she said worriedly. "If she cannot find the right ingredients for this potion, I fear what it will do to her. She has accomplished so much, so much that she does not realize! And she won't release her findings without the cure for the Cruciatius." Minerva's eyes welled with tears. "I love this girl, Severus," she looked at the man opposite her. "You worked with her; you know how brilliant she is. She is losing hope, and she's throwing herself into last-ditch efforts that will probably not work."

I'm sure she went to Archie yesterday; all he can give her is false hope!" Minerva wiped a tear. "This potion eludes her, and she is the most brilliant witch of our age. If she has not found the cure by now, Severus ..."

He allowed a few moments of silence to pass, filled only with the wiping of tears.

"I have still not found a cure for lycanthropy," he said simply.

Minerva looked up.

"Archie wrote me," Severus said, reaching for the letter. He handed the tawny page to Minerva. "You'll see that he clearly describes Hermione."

Minerva's eyes glazed over as she read the note. She nodded slowly, handing it back to him. "More impossible ingredients she could not have asked for," she said simply.

"True ..." he trailed off. "But, Minerva." He leaned forward towards her. "I can get these. You have shown me that it is a matter of utmost importance. You and Archie desire her success. Loathe as I am to admit it, I have a certain fondness for Arthur and Molly, and their family is invested in this research. The entire Order is."

"Why, Severus," Minerva chuckled softly. "I didn't know these things mattered to you."

"They don't," he stated. "But they matter to you. And I owe you."

He cast his eyes downward, avoiding her piercing gaze.

"You owe me nothing," she whispered.

"Yes I do." He waved his hand, dismissing the issue. "In addition to that, I did work with the young lady. A more brilliant witch you could not find. It would be a disaster were the wizarding world to lose such a promising mind."

"Since when do you care for the wizarding world?"

"I agree to help you, and you play Devil's Advocate?"

"When I'm around you, it just comes naturally." Minerva's eyes twinkled in a nature frighteningly similar to her late husband's.

He cleared his throat. "To answer your question, the wizarding world in the context of politics matters very little to me indeed. However, the academic world is one that I desire to see thrive," he continued. "Therefore, I will assist you as soon as I can."

"Thank you." Minerva rose from her seat, and embraced the stiff Potions master. Severus closed his eyes, desperately wanting the moment to be over.

"Oh, indulge me." She wrapped her arms around him tighter. He awkwardly patted her back, hoping that it was the magic solution.

She released him. *Oh, thank God.*

Minerva stood to full height, and Severus rose from his chair to stand next to her. "I will expect to hear from you soon," she said.

"You will." He nodded curtly. "I will act as quickly as I can."

"This means so much to me, dear." Minerva put her hand on his cheek. "I know you're not one for emotion and affection, but I really know no other way to express my gratitude. You are my last hope to save her."

He nodded, ignoring the lump in his throat.

"I'll see you soon, then," she said, walking over to the fireplace. "Take care."

She disappeared in a puff of green smoke.

Severus stood there, immune to his surroundings. The streaming sunlight and chirping birds were active as ever, but they did not stir him.

He would act ... this he knew. And soon. For Minerva's sake, for society's sake. This potion could forever alter the wizarding world as they knew it. His services were needed.

His eyes flickered to the letter, which lay on the table between the two armchairs.

*...Almost as good as yourself, old boy! ...*

His throat tightened. He concentrated, attempting to control the emotions that were welling within him.

It wasn't just that society needed him, or that Minerva needed him.

The woman he loved needed him.

*What a terribly romantic sentiment,* he thought. With that in mind, he Apparated away.

---

**A/N:** Comments? Critiques? I'd love to hear from you. :)

## Chapter Eleven

*Chapter 11 of 16*

In which Hermione and Ginny take a trip.



**Disclaimer:** JKR owns it all; I play around for fun.

**A/N:** Many thanks to my lovely beta Rhiannon for her work on the story.

---

Hermione peeked an eye open. Sunlight was bursting into the spacious bedchamber; the charmed windows sent the rays spiraling in directionless myriads of colors. Beautiful. Then again, it was always beautiful.

She yawned, sitting up. She squinted, picking up her alarm clock. 9 AM. Setting it down, she reached, stretching her arms behind her head, letting the muscles strain towards the ceiling. She felt her vertebrae crack and shift into a more comfortable position ... *ahh, yes, that was it.*

Breathing in deeply through her nostrils, her eyes opened wide. That aroma was familiar, and she was not so daft in her waking hours as to misplace its origin. Dark roast was brewing in the kitchen.

She swung a leg over the side of her bed, grabbing a fistful of white sheet to swath her nude figure in, when a whirlwind of spunky, red-haired personality shot through the bedroom door.

"Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty!" Ginny grinned widely, eyes large, hair bouncing. Her eyes widened at her friend's nakedness. She quickly shielded her eyes. "Well, that's more of you than I've seen in a while; thanks for sharing."

Hermione laughed, wrapping the sheet around her torso. "Well, I do live here." She smiled and stood. "You can look now, Mother Superior."

Ginny lowered her arm, smirking. "Me, a nun, that's a good one, babe." She crossed her arms over her chest. Hermione fluffed her hair, taking in Ginny's appearance today. Gin was certainly Bohemian Chic. While a simple green t-shirt and tight jeans were admittedly normal, Ginny's added touches - a bright pink driving cap, a knit white waist-length scarf, and spiked black leather boots over the jeans - were certainly out of place in the wizarding world.

Hermione walked over to the closet, shedding her sheet. Ginny quickly shielded her eyes, "You could give me a few seconds warning before you show the goods, Hermione dear."

Hermione slipped on some panties from Marks & Spencers and simple summer wear - white capris and a pink V-neck - in record time. "You know, for all the avante garde clothes you wear, one would think you wouldn't be embarrassed at the prospect of nakedness. After all, you practically live with Harry, and don't tell me you've never seen each other completely in the buff!" She bent over, shaking her curls out, and threw them back over her shoulder as she stood.

Ginny snorted as she and Hermione walked out of the boudoir and made their way to the kitchen. "We've been friends too long. You've obviously forgotten that I have six older brothers. While I've seen my fair share of naked males, naked females in my house were few and far between. I don't think I saw my mother naked after the age of five, and I most definitely did not walk around in my own skin."

Hermione eyed the ready-brewed dark roast on the gleaming counter and quickly laced her long fingers around the coffeepot. "Everyone was walking in on each other, I suppose?" she said matter-of-factly, pouring the roast into ceramic coffee mugs.

Ginny rolled her eyes, seating herself on the counter beside Hermione. "Far too often. Suffice to say that between my home life and the propriety of Hogwarts showers, the only girls I've seen naked on a regular basis are you - when you're in the mood - and Tonks. I think the girl was raised without clothing, the way she walks around," she said, sipping her cup. "My God, this coffee is fantastic!"

Hermione grinned. "That it is. Minerva only keeps the best in the house." She savored the flavor. She tapped the side of the mug in contemplation. "And Tonks walking around naked must certainly do wonders for Remus."

Ginny choked, spitting into her coffee. "Bloody hell, you can't do that to me! Lupin was our professor!"

"Well, I know that, and I certainly never had a crush on him the way some girls did." Hermione innocently sipped her coffee.

The redhead glared. "I never had a crush on Remus Lupin."

"And I failed my OWLs."

"Damn you to hell, Hermione Granger."

"You'll get there before I do, as you bloody well know."

"And why might that be?"

"You're shacking up with the saintly Boy Who Lived; you may as well have defiled the Holy Grail!"

The girls mutually fell into hysterics.

It was Hermione who recovered first. She sighed. "I suppose you're taking me up on that lost bet." She smiled.

Ginny grinned. "Wizard's Poker is a wicked game, Hermione."

"Not quite like what my family plays in London."

"Well, of course. It's more cutthroat than its Muggle counterpart."

"Even though it's derived from Muggle society."

"Do you really think that?" Ginny winked.

Hermione groaned. Ginny patted her arm.

"I thought you enjoyed learning," she said, her eyes sparkling with laughter.

"Prat," Hermione muttered. The friends took advantage of the lull to drink their coffee.

"So," Ginny said, setting down her cup, "we'll go to my flat first and leave from there."

Hermione blanched. "We're taking a Portkey from your flat to Paris?"

"Of course." Ginny shrugged. "Floo is unpleasant and Apparition is far too difficult."

"I could cross-continental Apparate," Hermione remarked, drinking more of her roast.

Ginny looked at her incredulously. "Have you ever tried?"

"Well ... no ..."

"It's damned difficult, even for the best wizards. McGonagall doesn't even do it anymore."

"She's getting older."

Ginny waved a hand, brushing the issue aside. "No matter. We'll Apparate to my flat and go from there."

Hermione drained her coffee and rose off the stool, washing the mug out in the sink. "I still can't believe you keep an authorized Portkey in your flat."

"What can I say? Lady Scrimgeour *loves* me," Ginny exaggerated sarcastically.

"You know, I see why Harry fancies you," Hermione said after a moment.

"Why is that?"

"Because if he didn't, you'd smile evilly and give him the strongest dose of Amortentia known to man ... or something equally akin to slavery."

"Bugger off."

"Your flat?"

"Let's go."

--

Letting go of the Portkey, the two women swiftly treaded their way to the ground, landing in the middle of an open field in the Parisian countryside.

"Bonjour," an older gentleman's voice boomed. He walked towards them, tipping his bowler cap as he did so. He was of medium height, very stocky, with splashes of graying hair interspersed with the chocolate brown tufts that stuck out from under his cap. His beard was thick and unruly and entirely gray.

Hermione and Ginny walked towards him. Hermione slowed her pace as she examined the countryside. The rolling green hills and flower were beautiful they looked like something out of an Impressionist landscape, she thought.

"Bonjour!" Ginny greeted cheerfully. She turned, gesturing for Hermione to keep walking.

"Ahh, Mademoiselle Ginevra." He took Ginny by the crooks of her arm as he leaned in to kiss both of her cheeks. "How are you today?"

"Very well, thank you, Claude. Hermione, I'd like to introduce you to Claude Beauprè. He's an old family friend," Ginny added.

"Very pleased to meet you." Hermione smiled warmly. She held her hand out to shake his, but he in turn grabbed her by the elbows and greeted her in the same manner that he'd greeted Ginny. Hermione didn't mind; he had the air of a grandfather about him. "If I may ask," Hermione started as Claude released her, "why are we here?"

Claude let out a deep burst of laughter. "Oh, my dear. This is all my land." He swung an arm out, gesturing to the vast expanse of countryside. "Over seven hundred acres of warded land a wizard's estate. It's been in my family for many generations. I live in that wooded region," he explained, pointing to a distant forest. "The family manor is especially guarded."

"And when he says manor, imagine Buckingham Palace and then some," Ginny quipped.

Claude chuckled congenially. "Perhaps half of Buckingham Palace."

"Well," Ginny said, unflustered, "it's excessively large. Claude's family is nobility in France," she told Hermione.

"Wizards in nobility?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"Well, it's not common in England," Claude began. "English wizarding society is very private, very sheltered and cut off from the rest of the country save, of course, for the effect of recent wars. In several European countries, however, the wizards integrated themselves among Muggles so that no one ever suspected. This was the case in France, of course. There have been extremely skilled wizards and witches among the nobles for centuries. Not any of that pureblood nonsense, though. French society has always been so integrated that everyone was a half-blood at best."

"If only we could have been so lucky," Hermione remarked wryly.

"You didn't know anything about that?" Ginny asked.

"I read *Hogwarts: A History*, not books on the intricacies of foreign wizarding societies. Except Bulgaria," she added as an afterthought.

Ginny groaned. "Oh, spare me the *Krum*-iness of it all."

"That was a pathetic retort, Gin."

"I know." Ginny glanced at Claude. "You can ignore that; it's just stuff from our time at Hogwarts."

"Would that I could have gone to Hogwarts. Dumbledore was the greatest wizard in Europe." Claude got a misty look in his eye. "Came here frequently, you know. Fairly law-abiding when it came to things like staying hidden from the Muggles. He'd always come here before going to visit Madame Maxime at Beauxbatons. Of course, that's in the south, near Marseilles, but he'd Apparate from here ... always had a stiff pot of tea and a few lemon drops," Claude added, smiling. "I miss him."

"We all do," Hermione said quietly.

There was a moment of silent respect

"Well," Ginny interrupted the silence. "I believe you had a question about why we were here, Hermione?"

"Oh, yes. Apparating from England to anywhere on the Continent is quite difficult. Therefore, there are approved Portkey arrival spots scattered along the coast and the outskirts of larger cities. From these points, wizards or witches arriving from Scotland, England, Ireland, wherever, either Apparate to Paris any place up until Germany, really, is safe for Apparition or, for instance, if they're traveling to Russia, they Portkey from here to the outskirts of Moscow."

"Oh, yes," Hermione said, remembering a detailed conversation she'd had with Tonks about the advantages of airplanes over Portkeys. *Airplanes. Hands down*, Hermione thought.

"Given that Claude has so much land, this is the most popular Portkey arrival destination in France," Ginny said. "He gets paid a pretty penny for it, too!"

Claude shrugged his shoulders. "I have more than enough to live off of without the French Ministry of Magic seeing fit to pay me amounts of money that would cause Merlin to stammer, not to mention the minor dividends from Minister Scrimgeour ..."

Hermione burst into a coughing fit. Ginny didn't even have to look at her to know that it was time to go. "It's been wonderful talking to you, Claude, but we really must be getting to Paris!"

"Ahh, going to *L'Ruelle de Déesse*, are we?" Claude asked.

"Where else would two fine, upstanding British witches go?" Ginny winked at him suggestively.

Claude guffawed. "You'd best be going. I'd hate to let something slip to your mother."

"I bring her back things from the *Déesse*, you know."

"Your father must love those ..."

"Well, we really must be going now, Claude! *Au revoir!*" Ginny screeched, grabbing Hermione's hand to Apparate before she could protest.

--

They arrived in an Apparition room. This, Hermione had expected. However, this room was pink brilliantly pink. There was lace trim and flourishes more reminiscent of Marie Antoinette than of Princess Di. Not that Ginny would know who Princess Di was ...

"Ginny, where *are* we?" Hermione asked, smoothing her shirt and her capris. Ginny was adjusting her driver's cap.

"There's no easy way to tell you this, Hermione ..."

Two women came giggling in through a creamy white door, carrying shockingly pink bags, and quickly Apparated. Hermione drew in her breath sharply. The witches hadn't opened the door more than a crack, but she'd seen something ...

"Ginny," she slowly began. "Are there bras in there?"

Ginny looked at her, exasperated. "You lost a bet."

"Is that a lingerie store?"

"Yes."

"Bloody hell, Ginny!" Hermione cried. "Is *that* the *L'Ruelle de Déesse*?"

"Gosh, no. *L'Ruelle de Déesse* is translated as 'The Alley of the Goddess'. It's basically Diagon Alley for sexually active females only."

"So only women are allowed?"

"Husbands and boyfriends come from time to time to buy gifts, but it's predominantly women, yes."

"What kind of shops exactly?"

"I'll show you."

"Dear God."

"You lost a bet, and this is the price. Now, as to that night, to remind you exactly why we are here - if I remember correctly, we were playing Wizard's poker with Tonks, Fleur, Hannah, and the Patils at my flat in London."

"I have no idea how we got them together."

"Neither do I," Ginny said, shaking her head. *And*, Hermione, if my memory serves me correctly, that particular round was a version of Muggle strip poker, was it not?"

"Yes." Hermione tapped her foot impatiently. She didn't like where this was going.

"You lost. Actually, Fleur won that round, so I lost too," Ginny added, now gesturing with her hands. "And so Hannah, Parvati, Padma, Tonks, you, and I all stripped down to our underthings. Now, Hannah was wearing blue velvet typical Hufflepuff safety, Parvati was wearing black leather naughty girl, she was going to see Dean later that night, I'm sure of it ..."

"Parvati and *Dean*? I thought she was with Seamus!"

"*Padma* is with Seamus, and she was decked out in this naughty little virginal getup because she was also going to see her boyfriend after ..."

"How did I forget that?"

"We were all quite plastered."

"Correction, Gin, *you* were quite plastered. I'd just had a few drinks ..."

"Of course you had."

"And don't remind me what Tonks was wearing, *please*, don't ..."

"Tonks was bare-breasted with the scantiest vibrating thong I've ever seen in my life; damn, I need to find one of those ..."

"GINNY!"

"A little louder, Hermione, I don't think Claude heard you."

"A vibrating thong, Ginny? You know how uncomfortable that would be?"

"Yes, if you're an idiot who leaves the 'random' charm activated when you're at work. Otherwise, perfectly pleasurable."

"But Harry ..."

"Hermione Granger, even the Boy Who Lived cannot be the Boy Who Brings Multiple Orgasms every night of the week."

"I didn't need to know that about my best friend."

"I'm really not sorry. Back to that night, though. I was wearing a very tiny black pushup bra and black knickers."

"Fairly conservative for you, actually," Hermione remarked casually.

"I know, shocking, isn't it? Anywho, *you*, my darling Hermione, were in a white cotton set from Marks & Sparks."

"Marks & Spencers is a perfectly respectable and quite popular line of lingerie ..."

"Yes, but it's Muggle, and more importantly than that, it's boring! It's white and plain and decidedly un-sexy ..."

"Ginny, unlike you, I don't have a boy toy to dress up for every night."

Ginny sighed. "I understand that," she said softly. "But don't you ever want to feel a bit dressier than normal a bit racy even if it's just for yourself? Knowing that you're wearing this gorgeously sensual scarlet bustier underneath a conservative suit? Wouldn't that just give you the kick you needed to get through the day?"

Hermione contemplated this for a moment, deciding that, of all the lingerie she could have picked, Ginny had nailed it right on the head, as it were. A scarlet bustier would certainly be nice to have ...

"Fine," she conceded. "We'll go into the naughty lingerie shop, you'll buy a load of new goodies, and I will buy a scarlet bustie*if* we find one."

"Done!" Ginny grinned widely and took her hand, pushing open the creamy door.

Hermione quickly took in her breath. The store was sectioned off into startlingly pink, red, and black sections, all with lacy white trim, and witches were bustling. The sales counter was busy, as were the ladies who were stocking supplies. Hermione looked at Ginny, impressed.

"You like it? Notice that the only white in the store is here." Ginny pointed to the few feet that spread out from the creamy door to the Apparition room. The white carpeting slowly melted into pink, red, and black, depending on which direction it went in.

"Why is there no white?"

"You leave white at the door." Ginny winked. "You'll be fine. See, I'm off to black ..."

"How did I know you were going to say that?"

"But I want you to off to the red over there, see," she instructed, pointing to the color that shot straight out across from the Apparition room, "and one of us will meet the other." With that, she took off to the right, to the crowded black section, leaving Hermione standing in the virginal entryway.

"Marks & Sparks, you've treated me well," she said quietly under her breath, and started towards the back wall of red lingerie.

--

Twenty minutes later, Ginny cornered Hermione in the red section. "Found anything?" she asked, smiling.

"A few pairs of knickers and a bra that is specially designed for Potions work."

"Which means?" Ginny gave her a blank look.

"It'll give me fantastic support and, most importantly, will not drench with sweat from the activity and heat of the potions process. It's resistant in every way."

"See, in this instance, wizarding lingerie is decidedly superior to Muggle."

Hermione quirked an eyebrow at Ginny. "This is what I've got though; it's basic."

Ginny perused the items in Hermione's velvet-red drawstring shopping bag. She groaned. "They're red versions of your normal knickers."

"Well, yes!" Hermione exclaimed. "I'm not adventurous, nor am I particularly sexually active ..."

"I gave you a great Muggle contraption, Hermione."

"The Rabbit vibrator is quite exceptional."

"But it's not racy lingerie!" Ginny said rather loudly, drawing a few amused glances from the other witches in the shop. "Here's what I have," she said, reaching into her black silk shopping bag.

"What bag do they give the pink girls, by chance?"

"Cotton. Awfully boring, if you ask me. Bras with flowers shooting out from the nipples, it's really rather girly... ah! Here they are," Ginny exclaimed, setting her pending purchases on a table of red sex toys (the feathers were very unrealistic, Hermione thought).

Hermione looked at the three pairs of black underwear. The first was standard kinky Ginny black leather. She sighed knowingly, eliciting giggles from her friend, and moved on to the next. Black and green lace. "Branching out, are we?" she asked.

"I figure that if the green is below the belt, it won't make me look like a Christmas present."

Hermione nodded and moved to the third. She heard Ginny whisper a charm, and, all of a sudden, the thong sprung to life on the table, vibrating harshly against the silk tablecloth, causing the table itself to shake.

"Ginny!" she screeched. "Make it stop!"

With another murmur, the commotion was gone.

"What in the *bloody hell* was that?" Hermione asked, eyes narrowing.

Ginny was looking a little too smug for her own good, Hermione thought. Ginny grinned. "It is the latest in the Illusion Vibrating line. That was the highest power setting. Think of what that could do to a witch!" Ginny exclaimed.

Hermione sighed. "What store are we even in, Ginny? What kind of store sells vibrating knickers?!"

Ginny was entirely nonplussed. "The *Déesses* 'Goddesses'. Most popular lingerie brand for witches everywhere. One of the most popular lines happens to be the vibrating thong ..."

The black thong in question had begun to vibrate loudly on the table again. "Damn!" Ginny exclaimed before silencing it. "I must have put it on random ..."

Hermione stared at her pointedly.

"Oh, shut your face." Ginny stuffed her underwear back into the silk bag.

"Excuse me," a blonde witch asked, taking Ginny by the arm. "But what is that, and where do I get one?"

Ginny quickly directed the lady, who was holding a pink cotton bag, to the black section.

"Another convert," she said, smiling goofily.

Hermione groaned, running her hand through her hair.

Ginny stuck her tongue out at her and started to gape at the wall behind Hermione.

"What?" Hermione asked.

Ginny pointed. Hermione turned, and, midway up the wall, saw the sexiest bustier she'd ever seen in her life. It was silk with an underwire, shaped like a corset, and had brassy gold buttons that would slowly unbutton and rebutton back up. All said and done, it was fairly modest, but ...

"...Worn with black knickers and some black hold-ups and that damned arrogant intelligence of yours, it'd be damned sexy," Ginny was saying.

Hermione stared at the bustier, and cocked her head. It'd been a while since she had sex. She and Ron had fooled around, during their relationship and after their breakup, and they'd had plenty of sex. She wasn't the innocent virgin people thought her to be, but with all the time spent on research, she'd been starting to feel like one. She hadn't had sex in nearly three years, and considering that the one wizard who could soak her knickers was decidedly not in England ...

She shook her head, banishing the thought. "Yes," she affirmed, smiling at Ginny. "Yes, I'll get it."

--

Three hours later, the friends Apparated to Claude's land, with bags from *Déesses* and other various stores on *L'Ruelle* (Hermione had picked up plenty of books on witch history and feminist movements within wizarding society). Claude was not there to greet them this time. "He must be talking to another traveler," Ginny said, and the two of them Portkey'd back to England after shrinking their packages.

This time, they arrived at the Burrow.

"I have to see mum," Ginny said, shrugging her shoulders. "I feel bad about missing the meal with Ron and Daphne, even if I did have an excuse."

Hermione sighed. "If you don't mind, Gin, I'm going to head home. To Brighton, I mean."

Ginny laughed as she walked into the house. "Hermione, *that's* your home!"

Hermione smiled, a warm feeling flooding her, as she Apparated back to the coast.

---

After all those drabbles, I've finally gotten around to working more on this story. Hope you're all enjoying it!

## Chapter Twelve

*Chapter 12 of 16*

In which there is a confrontation.

**Disclaimer:** JKR owns it all.

**A/N:** Many thanks to my lovely beta Rhiannon for her great work and support.

---

Hermione arrived at the Brighton residence, eyes gleaming. She nearly skipped along the beach up to the house the sun was shining, the water sparkling, and there was nary a cloud in the sky. She had bags of bottles, books, and bustiers, and it was a good day.

She made her way up onto the deck and opened the screen door. There was a nice breeze mulling through the house, slowly making its way from one side to another. She walked down the hallway to the kitchen, dropping her bags on the floor as she went to the fridge to reach for the lemonade. She heard some of the bags tip over, but no matter. It was a wonderful day. *How horrendously optimistic is that?* she thought, smiling, wrapping her fingers around the glass of ice-cold lemonade.

A brief flash of light in the corner of her eye caught her attention. She frowned and walked over to the counter opposite her. A crimson box sat on the pine countertop, gleaming with sparkling silver dots and tied with what appeared to be...

"Oh my God, is that unicorn hair?" she asked aloud.

"Ten points to Gryffindor," a lazily seductive voice drawled.

Hermione's hands, previously engaged in untying the strands of hair, froze. She knew that voice. Had been mesmerized by it for years. Had longed to hear it for ... only God knew how long. *Please let it be him. Please don't let me be imagining things ...*

She slowly turned to face the adjoining sitting room. Resplendent in a white cuffed shirt, black cargos, and *My God, are those Birkenstocks?* she thought, sat Severus Snape. His hair fell in waves that framed his face, and his hands were clasped behind his head. His skin was still pale as ever, but he looked ... relaxed.

Her body was frozen, but her mind was racing a mile a minute.

"How did you..." she started.

He chuckled and released one of his hands from his head, holding a gold key between his fingers. "Minerva," he said simply. He nodded towards the box on the counter. "Go ahead. Open it."

Her hands were shaking by now, her heart was racing, her mind spinning as she opened the crimson box.

*Why is he here? What is in this box? Why would Minerva give him a key? Why would he want to be here? Is he coming back to England ... oh please, God, let him come back ... does he still love me? Is he here because he loves me or...*

The last piece of paper gave way to reveal a simple white box. Hermione looked up at him briefly, and was shocked by the angered, pained expression that seemed to be on his face. *Pain? Anger? Am I reading him correctly...?*

She opened the box. There was a small note on top - *Archie told me you were desperate to have these. Use them well.*

She looked up at him, shock registering on her face as she removed the card to reveal two small glass vials of black and red powder. "Are these ...?"

"Aglaophotis and Orielibos?" he asked, getting up out of the chair. "Archie told me you were ... desperate ... to have them."

"He didn't say that he'd tell his friend ... Oh my God, you're his contact in the Mediterranean?"

"I don't know whether to award points or take them away right now, Miss Granger."

"Why don't you call me Hermione?"

"This is a business transaction," he said simply, his countenance revealing nothing. *Damn his ability to hide whatever he's feeling. Is he feeling anything?*

He sighed and continued. "Seeing as how Minerva and Archie both beseeched me on your behalf, I could hardly refuse the request. It was too ... intriguing ... a challenge."

"Did these come from Neville's greenhouse?"

Severus laughed, a deep roar that made her heart clench in nostalgia. She'd always been able to make him laugh when they were working together ... or talking together, or...

*Stop it, Hermione. He said he's here for business. He is not here for you. God, why did you let him come if it's only here for business?*

"Alas, no. I have distant relatives no, distant doesn't quite explain it enough extremely far removed relatives in the Arabian desert who control the supply of these herbs. They are very stringent with whom they allow to have them," he said slowly.

"And they let you have them?"

"No, they let *you* have them."

"But Archie said ..."

"It was easy enough to discern from his description who he was trying to procure the herbs for. In addition, the family would never allow the herbs to be released into society if they did not know the exact name, background, and profession of the person who would be using them."

"I don't understand. They're a Light herb ..."

"Have you not learned by now that even the best of magic can be used for evil purposes?" His piercing gaze silenced her.

"Of course," she muttered. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"So I thought." It looked like he had wrung his hands for a moment, but Hermione decided it was just a natural twitch. *He's so controlled. How does he do it?*

His eyes met hers, and for a moment she thought she saw a flash of pain in them.

"Well, now that I've delivered the herbs, Miss Granger ..."

"Don't call me Miss Granger!" she exclaimed, unable to hold back any longer.

"What?" He looked at her quizzically.

*It's now or never.*

She looked at him straight in the eye and walked towards him. "How can you do it?"

"Do what?" *Is it just me, or does his voice sound strangled?*

"Act like there was nothing between us."

"I can because there obviously was nothing between us."

"How can you say that?" she yelled. "I loved you! I loved you and you left!"

"Do not speak of that day, Hermione!" he warned, his voice dangerously low. "You did not care for me enough to come after me."

"You didn't care for me enough to tell me why you left! I had to hear about it from Minerva! *Minerva!* And then, I heard about it months after the fact ..."

"The Ministry kept it quiet," he said, irritated.

"You could have told me!"

"No, I couldn't have!"

"You were stupid, Severus. Stupid. And a coward."

"DON'T CALL ME A COWARD!" he shouted, walking towards her at full force, shoving her against the counter. "I acted in my own self-interest. I see now that I was wise in doing so." He turned away.

"Why?" she screamed, tears slipping out from her eyes. "I haven't seen you in a year, damn it, a year! Don't you think ..."

"What I think is irrelevant, *Miss Granger*," he sneered.

"I missed you," she said insistently.

"Like hell you did!"

"Who are you to tell me what I'm feeling?"

"Yes, who am I to tell you, when the evidence is laid right here before me?!" He shoved her shoulders and walked into the sitting room. She followed *Oh God not again. Don't let me lose him again...*

"What EVIDENCE?" she shrieked.

"You did not know I was coming; therefore, I can safely assume that ~~that~~ piece of evidence over there has been purchased for a different gentleman. Your pathetic attempts at clinging to me are wasted when there is obviously someone else in your life." His eyes glittered. Hermione attempted to search their depths, but he shook her by the shoulders. "You are making a fool out of me and a mockery of yourself. You have your damned herbs. Find your cures, publish your findings, reap the wealth and fame. And live in your self-serving hypocrisy," he finished, and Apparated away.

The tears were streaming down her face. *What piece of ... oh no ...* She slowly turned around in the sitting room to see the bag from Paris spilled out onto her hardwood floor the bustier exposed for all to see.

---

"Here's the key, Severus. I trust you'll be able to dismantle the wards and let yourself in."

"Why can't I just Apparate in?" he asked, turning to face his friend.

Minerva grinned. "She's just like you, Severus. She doesn't allow anyone to Apparate onto the premises except herself. And me, as well," she added as an afterthought.

"A nice gesture," he said snidely.

"Yes, considering that it *is* my house." Minerva smiled.

"As *this* is your office? Territorial, aren't we?" Severus asked, gesturing to the vast expanse of office surrounding them. He had been shocked when he arrived at Hogwarts to speak with Minerva; the office of the Headmaster (or Headmistress) had changed so dramatically since his last time here. With Albus.

Whereas Albus had favored simplicity and traditional Anglo-Saxon furnishings, Minerva's tastes tended towards the lush traditions of the Scottish Highlands. Her penchant for tartan robes and rich colors were obviously displayed in the spacious office. Tartans, plaids, and tapestries all bearing different Clan patterns adorned the walls. Several House Cup trophies danced above the fireplace all Gryffindor House Cups, Severus noted and the smell of coffee, incense, and old tartan wool simultaneously flooded the senses. He felt quite out of place for many reasons, not the least of which was the Birkenstock sandals he was wearing.

Minerva had yet to notice the sandals. When he had arrived with the herbs, no less her jubilee had been nothing short of explosive. She was a powerful witch, and had long become so accustomed to the shows of her power when in high emotion that she didn't notice the swinging of lanterns and glow of her hands. Yes, Severus thought. *Powerful indeed.* Minerva McGonagall was one witch you did not want against you.

"Yes, territorial," Minerva said, and winked.

*Oh, gods, spare me Minerva in an excited mood. She's far too much like Albus for her own good ... all those innuendos and meddling ...*

"At times I wished I was as accomplished a Legilimens as you, Severus. I'd love to see what goes on in that head when you mentally vacate the conversation."

His attention snapped back. "For my sake, Minerva, I'm very glad you are not."

She guffawed. "So, you're going to take the herbs to Hermione?"

"She is the reason I procured the herbs in the first place."

"She'll be overjoyed to see you."

"Again with your assumption that every Order member values my happiness above all else," he snickered, trying to cover the emotions raging within him.

"Hermione's a kind soul," she said softly. "Now, off with you, my boy."

"Such a kind dismissal."

"Would you rather I called you a ...?"

Severus did not stay to hear Minerva's baiting innuendo, and practically hurtled himself towards the fireplace.

---

He Apparated onto the beach by the Brighton shore minutes later, gazing around, taking in the surroundings. There was a plethora of lawn, miles of beach and water, and a quaint white cottage situated the perfect distance between the two.

Hermione was there. If she wasn't, he would wait.

He'd been waiting a long time.

He walked up the steps of the wooden deck nervously, taking out his wand. He attempted to pool all of his concentration into dismantling her complicated and elaborate

wards, smiling wickedly as he realized that a few of the wards were identical to his. *She spied on my wards last year, did she? Sorty little minx ...*

He took out the key and entered the house, wand out, trying to detect her presence.

She wasn't there.

*Ah, well. Where's a chair...*

He made his way down the hallway and into the sitting room, deciding to poke around a bit before she arrived. *After all, all I have is time* he thought. He first walked into the kitchen. *First things first.* He pulled a small crimson box out of his pocket, muttering a charm to enlarge it to its full size. He set it on the counter, tilting his head to look at it. A crimson, silver-starred box with unicorn hair tied around it in a bow. A bit ... feminine ... for his tastes, but his dear distant cousin had insisted on it. *Oh, you love the woman!* Azar had exclaimed.

She was four or five times removed from him on the family tree, but she was his favorite relative, a petite woman a few years his junior. Azar had dark, sparkling eyes that came to life even when she discussed the most boring of subjects. And a wide variety she could extrapolate on, too! She was just as intelligent as Severus, with a knack for charms and a taste for coffee. She had married a man in charge of Columbian coffee, and Severus got his dark roast exclusively from her.

Yes, Azar had been thrilled when Severus had come for herbs. She was one of the few people he knew who actually delighted in his presence. *Minerva would be another,* he thought wryly. Shaking his head, he glanced around the kitchen. Fairly standard. He walked over to the sitting room, sparsely decorated, full of whites and creams, pale colors. Calming colors.

The elaborate marble fireplace caught his attention. *Proof of Minerva's ownership,* he thought, looking at the elaborately wrought stone. The mantle, in particular, was stunning or would have been, were it not so cluttered with photographs. *Hermione's photographs.* He looked up at the framed pictures both wizard and Muggle which were full of predictable faces. Harry, Ron, the Weasleys, Minerva ... they were all here. *My God. She has that ...* his confidence left him as he saw a silver frame, pieces of glass missing, silver bits chipped off the edges. *How did that happen?* he wondered. Inside the frame was the picture from V-Day ... of when she jumped into his arms ... of the first time he kissed her. He'd kissed her on the cheek, but the picture didn't show that. It had been taken the moment before, when she jumped into his arms. In this photograph, they were forever captured in the anticipation of a kiss.

"Is it always to be like that?" he wondered aloud.

He turned away from the mantel, fighting back emotion. Why had he not come to her before? He loved her. He loved this cottage already. It was Minerva's, yes, but the photos ... the meticulous living space, the odor of brewed dark roast ... everything screamed Hermione. She needed him. He sank into a large lounge chair next to the fireplace, holding his head in his hands. What would he say to her? What had he expected? She would want a reason and ... he didn't know if he could give her one. All he could do was apologize. Severus Snape, apologize! But he was ready to do it...

The screen door to the deck clanked open. He sat up, startled. *She's here.*

Attempting to make himself look as relaxed as possible, he swung one his ankle up to rest on his other knee, and leaned back in the chair, hands behind his head. He knew how to cover his emotions, he knew how to steel himself against things. He'd appear relaxed, calm, smooth, collected, and...

She walked through the hallway leading into the kitchen. She didn't look to her left she didn't see him yet. She had dropped a bundle of bags onto the floor. *Ruelle de Deeses? My, my, aren't we full of surprises.* He smiled; quirking an eyebrow. She had her back to him in the kitchen. She looked lovely. White capris, sandals, a pink tank, wild curls. She looked spontaneous, happy, unbidden. His heart swelled. One moment. He'd say something in just a moment...

She pulled a pitcher out of the refrigerator and was pouring herself a glass of lemonade.

The rustling of bags startled his attention away from her. Severus glanced over to the large grouping of bags, some of which had contents now spilling onto the floor. *What is that...*

*Bloody hell. I'm a fool.*

The most appealing scarlet bustier he'd ever seen in his life had freed itself from the constraints of its bag. The *Deeses. Well, well, Hermione.*

His expression hardened; his thoughts in a flurry, his emotions raging with anger. *Minerva never said anything about Hermione having a man in her life. A lover, it would appear ... well, of course she wouldn't tell Minerva everything.*

*She's found someone else.*

His heart constricted with a pain he hadn't thought possible.

*Control yourself.*

He closed his eyes, allowing the pain to wash over him in floods. If he had controlled the Cruciatus for so many years, he could certainly control this. A woman's love was fickle. Well. He was here on a business transaction. He was here to give her the herbs.

She'd noticed the herbs.

"Is that unicorn hair ...?" she was asking aloud, unaware of his presence.

Steeling his mind and heart against her, Severus relaxed his features and sank back in the chair. "Ten points to Gryffindor," he drawled.

---

Well, what do you think? ;)

## Chapter Thirteen



In which Hermione and Severus deal with the pain proactively.

**Disclaimer:** They belong to JKR; I just take them out and play around for fun. I promise to return them soon. : )

**A/N:** Many thanks to my lovely beta Rhiannon. She is just an angel! And many, many thanks to all of my reviewers your continued support is so appreciated and your compliments never cease to make my day! Also thanks to everyone who voted in the Multifaceted Awards *Dark Roast* was voted the Runner Up, Best Het Fic. I never would have thought that would happen, but to all of you who made it happen: thank you! : )

---

Severus stormed into Minerva's office, throwing the key on the desk.

"Take the damn key," he said through gritted teeth.

"Severus?" Minerva looked up in alarm.

Severus strode towards her fireplace, walking so quickly he seemed to be gliding. His face was contorted in anger, eyes blazing. His hands were clenched at his sides, and he seemed ready to catch fire at any minute.

"Severus, what happened?" She swiftly rose from her desk and walked over to where he stood by the fireplace.

"You knew what would happen," he said, eyes piercing. "You *knew* she was with someone else."

"Severus, do calm yourself, my dear."

"I will not calm myself!" he exclaimed, pacing in a rage.

"I haven't seen you like this in years, Severus, years! Why are you so upset? What did Hermione say?" Minerva asked calmly, crossing her arms.

"Hermione didn't say anything, Minerva! Why didn't you tell me she was with someone else?" he asked, his voice dangerously low.

"What?"

"She obviously feels nothing for me anymore..."

"Of course she does," Minerva insisted. "Both of you are so stubborn, neither of you would budge in the other's direction, regardless of who put what bug in your ear..."

He halted in the middle of pacing. "You knew," he said flatly.

"Yes." Minerva sighed. "How could I not notice the two of you at Grimmauld? How could Molly, Remus..."

"Oh, do spare me the list of sympathizers."

"They aren't sympathizers, Severus, and there are only three of us anyway! We want to see you and Hermione happy. Now would you kindly get a grip on yourself and tell me what she said that has you in such a rage?" She stared at him, eyes penetrating.

Her words were cold water on him. He shook slightly and leaned against the fireplace.

"You knew." He stared at her, his expression a mixture of disbelief and mistrust.

"Yes," Minerva said, by now impatient. She took a seat in a leather chair opposite the fireplace. "Brandy?" she asked, summoning a decanter.

"What's the strongest thing you have?" he asked darkly.

She looked at him pointedly. "Brandy."

"Brandy it is, then."

Minerva poured a glass for him. "Now, what happened?"

"I gave her the herbs."

"And?"

"And... she tried to tell me she still loved me," he muttered.

Minerva's features softened. "Oh, Severus," she said softly.

"There was a bustier, Minerva. She'd just returned from shopping, and the bags on the floor spilled over. *Abustier*. Now, I ask you, what woman buys a bustier if there is no man to see it?" He looked at her skeptically. "She tried to tell me she still loves me, and she's obviously... involved... with someone else."

"What if she were to... break it off?" Minerva asked, raising an eyebrow.

Severus fought to keep his composure. "Do you know anything about this?"

"No. Hermione does not confide that kind of thing in me. Besides, I assumed that you and she still..."

He gave a humorless laugh. "I obviously don't matter to her."

"Yes, you do. I've watched that girl suffer..."

"She's obviously not suffering anymore."

"Did the thought occur to you, my dear boy, that maybe she sought out a partner as a way of easing the pain?"

"I didn't!" he shot back. "I have secluded myself and fought with myself for the past year, Minerva, the past year over her."

Minerva thought she saw a tear swimming in his eye, but his eyes so practiced quickly hardened.

"I could not look at another woman without feeling in the deepest part of me that I had betrayed something sacred. And she... she can obviously do more than look at another man."

There was a moment of silence.

"I do not know what to tell you. Aside from that I am sure she has a logical explanation."

"I don't want an explanation."

"Severus, sit down."

"Minerva..."

"Sit down," she commanded in a tone that sparked distant memories. The voice he had so often obeyed as a student took over, and he did as she asked.

There was a burst of flame from the fireplace.

"Minerva?" a voice called.

Minerva's head shot to the fireplace. "Remus!" she exclaimed. Severus grunted. She glared at him.

"Coming through, my dear?"

"Of course. I just need a few files to go over."

Remus suddenly came in through the fireplace, his black robes dusty with the neon green powder. He smiled at Minerva and was on the verge of speaking when he saw Severus.

"Why..." he sputtered, walking over to the Potions master. "Severus." He grasped Severus' hand. "It's so good to see you!"

"I wish I could reciprocate," he remarked, his lip curling in amusement.

"Sense of humor still intact, I see," Remus said cheerfully. "What brings you to Hogwarts?"

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that," Minerva said, eyes twinkling.

"This is not an interview, Minerva." Severus glared. "And if I ever chose to teach again, I would hope that I would not need one."

"Well, you never know, Severus, she's got to keep up appearances. What really brings you back to this dank old island, then?"

"Dank old island?" Minerva interrupted indignantly. "I'll have you know that this 'island' is anything but dank."

"Well, it's certainly not cheerful," Remus replied.

"Cheerful would be an overstatement in every sense of the word," Severus added darkly.

Remus laughed. "If you'll excuse me, I just need those there." He pulled his wand from his new robes and flicked it in the direction of an overloaded bookshelf. Several files darted towards his extended hand.

"Ahh." He waved the files. "Just what I need."

Minerva sighed. "Well, I think I'll be turning in for the night. You boys are just too much for an old woman like me."

"Old woman?" Remus snorted. "You're nothing of the kind."

Severus remained silent. He gazed at Minerva, any thought of Hermione briefly forgotten. Minerva did look older. Much older. The wrinkles were further indented into her skin, and her hair color was most certainly no longer natural.

"Allow me my trivialities, Remus," she said. "Now, Severus. I hope you'll be staying on the 'dank island' as Remus so kindly put it for a short while. Home is where the heart is, after all."

"Perhaps," Severus muttered.

"Did you have any plans for accommodations, Severus, or did you just come here on a whim?" Minerva asked impatiently.

"Severus do something on a whim?" Remus guffawed. "The very thought implies the worst state of drunkenness."

"I'm not there yet," Severus acknowledged, gesturing to a glass of brandy. "But I hope to be very soon."

Remus' eyes darkened for a bit before returning to their natural tawny color. "Do you have accommodations, old chap?"

"No," Severus said. "I thought I'd be here for a short visit." *I thought I'd be with Hermione.*

"You're welcome to come back to the Manor with me."

"Manor?" Severus asked, his interest raised. "Since when does the Ministry allow werewolves to own manors?"

"Since Andromeda's line is the only line of Blacks left," Remus said flatly. "The Lestranges are dead, thank God. Sirius and Regulus are dead. Draco's gone, Lucius is in Azkaban..."

"I heard about Narcissa," Severus said softly, stroking his chin. "She was a good woman."

"Her husband is vermin..." Remus spat.

"Say what you will about Lucius." Severus raised a finger. "But Narcissa was a good woman. She only did what she thought was best for her family. Whether or not she was correct in her actions is not for anyone to say, but they were done in the interest of her love for her husband and her son."

"You have a soft spot for her, do you?" Remus asked, tilting his head in newfound knowledge.

"As much as I can have for anyone," Severus answered tersely, picking up his glass.

"What I was saying, though," Remus continued, choosing to discard the subject of Narcissa Malfoy, "Grimmauld was obviously willed to Harry, but there were several family estates that were in Narcissa's legal possession. When she died with no heir, the Ministry contacted Andromeda."

"Andromeda Tonks?" Severus snorted, a derisive smile spreading across his face. "The woman would have burned it all down if she could."

"Yes, well, she did consider it." Remus smiled. "Tonks and I didn't want to rent a flat, so Andromeda offered us one of the estates. It's on the Welsh border. Fairly modest for the Blacks, which means, of course, that it's entirely too large for the two of us. If you'd like to come down, you're welcome to. Minerva is, of course, only a fireplace away." Severus could have sworn he winked.

Severus paused. He couldn't believe he was considering this.

"How's your stock of whiskey?"

"Best in the south of England."

With the promise of getting piss drunk, Severus stood, and he and Remus bid the Headmistress a good night.

---

Hermione clenched her fists and walked over to the kitchen. She'd been on the floor crying for God knew how long.

She needed to be proactive.

*I'm sick of being in love with that man. It brings me nothing but pain.* She opened and slammed cupboard doors, looking for Minerva's infamous stash of firewhisky.

"God." She slammed the last door, half tempted to Floo Minerva to ask where the liquor was.

"Hermione?" a cheerful voice called from the fireplace.

"Tonks?" she asked incredulously, turning to her sitting room.

"Damn it, Hermione, let me through! Do you always block your Floo?"

Hermione waved her hand in the direction of the fireplace.

Tonks stepped through, dusting green powder off her body, a Weird Sisters tee and tight jeans adorning her small frame.

"Wotcher, darling. Remus went to Minerva's for a spell so I thought I'd stop in and see how long you're doing. I haven't seen you in ages." Tonks embraced her.

"I'm... I'm good, Tonks," Hermione said softly.

Tonks stepped back. "What is it? Research not going well?"

"No." She shook her head. "Ah, bloody hell, Tonks. I may as well tell you; he'll never change the way he is. I've all but given up, and I may as well." She slumped her shoulders in resignation, leaning against the counter.

"Hermione!" Tonks exclaimed, alarmed. "What is it?"

Hermione looked at her old friend. "You want to know what is going on?" She shook her head. "I'm in love with Severus fucking sod-his-arse Snape! And he just came here to give me herbs for my research, and I'm sure we would have reconciled, but then he saw *that*." She pointed at the exposed bustier still gleaming on the floor. "And he bloody well *assumed* I didn't love him anymore and that I was shagging someone else, and he never even said he loved me and... sod it all, I just need to get fucking pissed, and I can't find Minerva's damned firewhisky!"

Tonks, who had never heard Hermione swear so much in her life, blinked a few times in rapid succession. "Are you sure?" she asked.

Hermione glared at her.

"All right, all right. Come with me. I have *plenty* of wine and brandy and any kind of hard stuff you could like. The Blacks could certainly hold their liquor," Tonks said, dragging Hermione towards the fireplace. "We're going to get pissed, and you're going to tell me the whole story. Snape, honestly! I never knew!"

By now they both stood in front of the fireplace. Grabbing a fist full of powder, Tonks strode into the fireplace, shouting "THE MANOR!"

Hermione followed.

---

Tonks and Hermione came through the fireplace into an elaborately decorated Elizabethan-era room. Its radiant pink shade reminded Hermione of Pepto Bismol.

"A bit cheeky, isn't it?" Tonks asked playfully. "Apparently it was Narcissa's, when they'd stay here, which they didn't often. Mum hated this place... but so did her family, so I suppose she wasn't really staking a claim in that."

Tonks walked out of the room and down the candlelit, tapestry-laden hallway.

"Where exactly are we? I've never been in this particular..." Hermione started, constantly turning to see the various tapestries and paintings that lined the walls.

"The East Wing. This place is huge," Tonks said. "And it was one of the smallest of the Black family homes, apparently. Well, Grimmauld obviously was, but that was modern. This is *ancestral*," Tonks exaggerated, gesturing grandly. "Far too ancestral for Remus and I, but it's large and private and..."

"Lots of great places to shag," Hermione finished.

"Exactly!" Tonks grinned wickedly. Hermione smiled.

"I remember a game of strip poker a while back where you got a bit smashed."

"Entirely wasted is more like it."

"Wasted, pissed, whatever floats your boat," Hermione murmured.

"Wait." Tonks stopped in the hallway, the wheels of her brain rapidly working. "You." She pointed a finger. "You... you and Ginny had a bet that night. That bustier. Oh, my God... you bought the bustier because of your bet from that night, and then..." Tonks put her hand over her mouth.

"Right in one," Hermione said, hands in her hips. "We'll talk about it when we get wherever we're supposed to be going. Honestly, Tonks, how long does this hallway go for?"

"Right here," Tonks said, turning into a room.

Hermione walked in. It was the second floor of a library. She could see the balcony that overlooked the first floor...

"It's a useful room. Tons of reading material, though Remus is the one who really gets kicks off it. He misses it when he's at Hogwarts," Tonks said softly.

"And you miss him," Hermione said matter-of-factly.

"Well." Tonks shrugged. "I love the summer; we're together constantly. But during the school year... I'm with him on weekends, and every other week... I just have duty, you know? I mean, I'm trying to get posted permanently out of Hogsmeade, but I'm not quite high-up enough to demand that kind of thing. Kingsley's been trying to get me assigned there, though. Good bloke. He really cares about Remus and me."

"Mmm," Hermione murmured in agreement. "There have to be thousands of books in here..."

"Nine thousand at last count, I think. The house-elves said so, anyhow. Hey, hey, no looking at me like that," Tonks said as Hermione raised her eyebrows. "They absolutely refuse payment. Remus has tried. Ah, well. I'm used to them. They're just..."

"Spare me the arguments," Hermione said.

"Ahh, yes, never come between Hermione Granger and her politics," Tonks said playfully, opening a desk drawer. She pulled out two bottles of wine. She grinned mischievously, grabbing two wine glasses. "Also, never come between Hermione Granger and her liquor when she wants to get pissed. Although I don't think you've ever purposely gotten pissed, so this will be an experience." She sat down next to Hermione on the Turkish rug in the middle of second story room. Hermione opened a bottle and started pouring.

"Well," Tonks said, looking at her pointedly. "I think you were going to tell me about how you fell in love with Severus Snape."

---

## Chapter Fourteen

*Chapter 14 of 16*

In which our leading pair indulges in the belief that misery loves company.

**Disclaimer:** JKR owns it all; I just play around for fun.

**A/N:** Many, many thanks to Rhiannon, Psykiapa, and ladyinthecloak for their hard work on this story.

---

"Bloody hell. He didn't tell you why he went to Italy?"

Hermione nodded, gulping her wine, not caring how undignified she looked. She smacked her lips. "Wait until I tell you the rest..."

Tonks looked absolutely gob smacked. "Snape... I never would have expected that. I mean, the cellar at Grimmauld always had a tense atmosphere, but I thought it was the potions, not sexual tension... what a situation to be in, honestly!"

Hermione waved her hand dramatically and intoned, "Two socially backward academics thrust into each other's company by extenuating and traumatic circumstances. Who ultimately fall completely in love with each other but continually turn away from that love... sounds like some Regency romance if you ask me."

Tonks chuckled. "Regency romance or not, you and Snape are obviously meant to be together."

Hermione snorted. "Meant to be together?" She shuddered. "Refill my glass, Tonks."

"If you insist. Now tell me the rest of it."

---

"So this is the Manor," Severus said matter-of-factly as he strode through the fireplace.

Remus nodded. "Well, the library anyhow."

Severus gazed up, staring in unwitting awe at all the books. He took a few steps towards the nearest shelf, dusting the floo powder off his robes subconsciously.

"How many books are in the library?" he asked, walking along the bookshelf-lined walls.

"Nine thousand at last count, I believe, or somewhere around there. Tonks knows the exact number."

Severus didn't acknowledge Remus. He paused in front of a shelf, extracting a book.

"*Plurimus Malum Cruciatu illius Regius?*" Severus asked in disbelief. He looked at Remus pointedly. "Every copy of this book was burned in the sixteenth century." He tried to open the book, but its bindings remained stubbornly locked.

Remus, who had been pouring whiskey by the fireplace, strode over to Severus. He looked at the cover. "Ahh," he said. "One of the infamous Black Bindings."

Remus placed a hand on the cover of the book. The bindings visibly relaxed.

"The book can only be opened by a resident of the house?" Severus asked.

"Right in one," Remus responded. He glanced at the shelf. "This particular section of the library was used by the sisters. Andromeda in particular read a lot of Muggle literature."

Severus snorted.

"As I hear it, Andromeda and Narcissa snuck a lot of Muggle literature into the Black libraries. They'd bind the books with a simple spell..."

"Yes," Severus interrupted. "The most common spell used by parents to keep their children out of adult business. The *Kama Sutra* and things like that."

Remus blushed. "Well, they used that spell, simple as it was, to bind the books. Then they would charm the covers to resemble books like this." He waved the book in his hand.

"So, they would bind the book and change the cover to that of a Dark work to stave off their parents," Snape muttered. "And if the parents tried to open the book, they'd assume..."

"That it had been bound by the previous generation," Remus finished. "Quite ingenious, really. I think that a few 'Do Not Notice' charms were cast in the general direction of the library."

"Let's see what we have here." Severus took the slack book from Remus' hands and flipped the book open.

"Russian roulette?" Remus asked playfully.

"As it were," Severus said, allowing his eyes to fall randomly on the page.

*God knows, I have been a very indifferent lover. But you understand me. Yes, you see, you understand my feelings and will return them if you can. At present, I ask only to hear, once to hear your voice...*

Severus snapped the book shut.

Remus looked at him curiously and took it, flipping it open to the title page. "Ever heard of a book called *Emma*?"

But Severus had already walked to the middle of the room, trying to control his features.

*I have been a very indifferent lover.*

"Guilty," he barely muttered.

*You understand me.*

*Yes, you understand my feelings.*

*And will return them if you can.*

He shut his eyes.

*I need to get pissed, he thought. And concentrate on something else.*

With great conviction, he looked around the room, studying his surroundings. The Turkish carpets were ornately designed, the bookshelves were a deep mahogany, and the colors were rich. The leather wing-backed chairs sitting in front of the roaring fireplace were the most modern things in the room.

He allowed his gaze to wander up the bookshelves. They were incredibly tall, reaching up to the very top of the vaulted ceilings. Enchanted globes were bobbing towards the top of the ceiling, different parts of the world illuminating from second to second. The chandeliers that hung from the ceiling appeared to be pure gold and glimmered with crystal. The room exuded old wealth and finery.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Remus asked, taking a few steps to stand next to Severus. "I love being here, though sometimes I feel that I don't appreciate it as well as some people could."

"Such as?"

"You," Remus said simply. "Minerva, Filius. It shocked me to discover how many books that man has published."

"Yes, size isn't always everything," Snape said. *Snark still intact*, he thought wryly.

Remus laughed. "Very true." He pointed up. "I don't know if you noticed the second story. You'll notice that part of the floor is entirely missing."

Severus did notice. He glanced over at their first-story fireplace. Directly above it, there was no ceiling, merely golden rails jutting out in a jagged curve to keep people from falling into the fireplace and arm chairs below. He could vaguely make out even more lined bookshelves beyond the rails, and he saw the distinct shape of a lit fireplace.

"We rarely go up there," Remus said. "Most of the Dark Arts books are up there..."

Severus raised an eyebrow, interested. "It looks like the fireplace is already lit..."

"Some other time," Remus said quickly, walking towards the chairs and roaring fire. "I thought your purpose here was to get pissed, and as you can see, the whiskey and brandy are all here." He sat down in his arm chair, Severus following suit. There was a mahogany table between them, and several bottles of various liquors.

"Do you keep all the liquor here?" Severus asked snidely, sitting down.

"Yes," Remus said, taking his already-poured glass of whiskey. "Unless Tonks has taken to getting pissed up in the Dark Arts section, I am fairly certain it's all here."

"Of course," Severus said, reaching for his glass. He drank deeply, memories flooding back to him. His genial attitude immediately sobered.

He gazed at the flames darkly, the orange flickering in his obsidian eyes.

"What is the occasion?" Remus asked, cocking his head.

Severus took another drink. "I need at least two more of these."

Remus raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure we can do that." And he poured himself another glass.

---

On the second floor, Hermione had finished relaying her tale to Tonks.

"...and so now he thinks I've been unfaithful to him," Hermione said, teary-eyed, finishing her third glass of wine. "Not that there was ever anything to be unfaithful to."

"Your feelings, obviously. Snape is very loyal," Tonks said matter-of-factly, pouring more wine into the two glasses. "And it seems that betrayal of trust is the thing that he despises most."

"Funny for him to think that," Hermione muttered.

Tonks chuckled. "Well..." She shrugged. "My dad once said that my mum was like an onion. That she had a lot of layers to peel back, that not all were very pleasant, but that she was a woman worth peeling away layers for."

Hermione laughed. "That's funny." She turned to the fire and sipped yet again at her half-empty wine glass.

"It's like Snape. And you, you know. You're both incredibly difficult people to get to know, but it's worth it in the end."

"So Snape is an onion." Hermione looked at her pointedly. "And that makes me...?"

"An onion." Tonks nodded with a tone of finality, bursting into giggles.

"I'm an onion," Hermione said, amused, laying on her back. "This makes the rejection thing so much easier."

---

Severus was feeling sufficiently inebriated, but not so inebriated that the hands of the grandfather clock blurred. It had only been an hour, after all.

"As your host," Remus said, slurring slightly, "I feel entitled to know a little bit about why we're drinking whiskey in my house. Not that I don't welcome the occasion, mind you, but still."

Severus sighed, and downed the remainder of his glass. "Well, it's about Hermione sod-her-brilliant-arse Granger and how she doesn't love me anymore."

Remus raised an eyebrow. Severus waved his hand.

"Give me your glass. We're going to have to have two more of these before you believe what I tell you."

---

"I still can't believe you bought a fugging busty for that wanker," Tonks said, opening a new bottle of wine.

"I know!" Hermione exclaimed. She was now on her stomach, propped up on her elbows. "It would look so good on me, but there's no one to see it..."

"I'd look at you in it," Tonks said. "Looked pretty hot to me."

"Tonks!" Hermione exclaimed. "You like naked chicks, don't you? Or any excuse you can use to get naked..."

"Haha," Tonks laughed. Her eyes lit up as she poured more wine. "Let's get naked right now!"

Hermione guffawed. "What, just sit around in our knickers?"

"I don't see why not. Contributes to the drunken atmosphere," Tonks informed as she handed a glass to Hermione.

"Let me finish this first. I just want to forget that I ever loved him," Hermione muttered.

Tonks looked at her pointedly. "That won't make this go away, you know..."

"I don't care," Hermione whispered. "I just don't care."

---

Severus stared at the fireplace. "I love that bloody witch," he muttered. "I've thought of nothing else for months and months. And now..." He drank more whiskey.

"You know, Severus," Remus started. "What if this is all just a misunderstanding?"

"What?" Severus turned his head sharply.

"Well," Remus said cautiously, "What if Hermione... hadn't... bought the bustier for someone else?"

"Don't be stupid. What woman buys a bustier like that if there isn't an audience?"

Remus sat, thinking. "I honestly don't know. But she was with Ginny..."

"Stop making excuses for her," Severus raised his voice. "She's young, pretty, intelligent, resourceful, witty... a man would have to be stupid not to want her."

"And young men often are. Stupid," Remus added. "Young men all too often pass over beautiful girls because they seek what will gratify them."

"Instant gratification culture," Severus announced.

"So you're agreeing with me?" Remus asked.

"No...young men can make foolish choices. But only for so long...and the young men who she knew are not so young anymore."

Remus, who knew a lost cause when he saw one, grabbed another bottle of whiskey.

---

Well? What do you think? :)

# Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 16

In which Hermione and Severus come to a resolution... the final chapter.

**Disclaimer:** It all belongs to JKR, I just play around for fun.

**A/N:** As always, my thanks to the lovely ladies Rhiannon & Psykiapa for their much appreciated support and assistance. And with that, enjoy the final chapter.

---

Hermione sat up groggily, rubbing her eyes. *Where am I...?*

*Oh, yes. Tonks' library. Oh, shit. Hangover. What was I thinking...?*

She rose to her feet shakily, thankful to note that she still had her clothes on. Tonks, clad in boxer shorts and a bra, was still passed out on the floor in front of the still-roaring fire.

"Tonks?" Hermione asked quietly. "Tonks..." She shook her friend's shoulder.

"Hmm?" came Tonks' sleepy reply.

"Tonks, do you have any Hangover Potion?"

"Kitchen... just do the 'Point Me'... too many directions..."

"Alright, I'll brew us a batch; go back to sleep."

Tonks murmured groggily as her head sunk back to floor.

---

Hermione shrunk her wand and put it back in her pocket as she approached the kitchen. *Something's brewing... Hangover Potion?*

She tip-toed to the door and peeked in.

There stood Severus Snape brewing a batch of Hangover Potion on the kitchen table.

"What...?" she started.

His head rose sharply as he turned around to face her.

His eyes were almost as bug-eyed as hers.

"What are *you* doing here, Miss Granger?" His voice was low but not venomous.

*What am I doing here? What are you doing here! Why are you brewing Hangover Potion... Oh my God, did you see Tonks and I... Why the hell is he here with... is he with Remus? Why else would he be here? Oh my God, please let me explain...*

"Are you going to say anything?" he snapped, his eyes narrowing.

"Y-yes," she stammered. "I was just coming down to..." She pointed helplessly at the batch he was making.

He paused for a moment. "Ah."

"Ah what?"

"Were you and Tonks here last night?"

"Yes," she said cautiously. "On the second story of the library..."

He chuckled darkly. "I thought I saw a fire going."

"You were...?"

"I was with Remus. I... ran into him while visiting with Minerva," he said, his voice even.

"Oh."

There was silence for a moment.

"I was just coming down to brew a batch, but I see you've got it taken care of..." Hermione started. *God, why do I have to make such an idiot out of myself whenever he's around me? Can't I just think clearly for once! I've got a second shot at this. I need to make this right.*

She took in a deep breath. "Have you made any coffee?"

"No."

She nodded. "I'll brew some then."

He didn't respond.

She reached for the coffeemaker and set about to work.

---

The silence was deafening.

*Why isn't he saying anything?*

She was focusing as hard as she could on the task at hand: brewing coffee. However, making coffee was harder than it looked when she was standing four feet away, silent as the grave, radiating disinterest.

*Damn it.*

She watched as the coffee started to drip.

---

"Here you are." She handed a cup of dark roast to Severus.

"Thank you," he murmured, not looking up as she set the cup next to him. She stood there, inches away, for what seemed like hours.

"I'm not sleeping with anyone," she blurted out.

*Oh, fuck. Good job, Hermione.*

His face was expressionless. "Is that so?"

"Yes." She set her cup down next to his with a loud thud.

"Pray tell what has your knickers in such a knot this morning, Miss Granger?" he said snidely.

"You bastard!" she screeched, her control breaking. "You bloody well *assumed* that just because I bought a bustier I was fucking someone else! How DARE you think that! I went shopping with Ginny, and I dare any woman to go shopping with her and *not* buy some inappropriate piece of lingerie! And I was thinking of you when I bought it because, fuck you to hell Severus Snape, I still love you, and I am furious with you for going to Italy! You didn't tell me anything! You run away at the first *sign* of any trouble, even if there isn't trouble! You *create* trouble! Long distance relationships can work bloody Christ did you really think I wouldn't have come to you in Italy? but wait! I didn't even have the chance to see you in Italy because you never told me where you were going! You are a bloody infuriating man, and I want to rip your eyes out right now for putting me through that kind of hell!

"You are afraid, Severus, and it is maddening! I love you, damn it, and I don't like being treated like a common whore by the man in question! You have no idea what it's been like for me this past year," she said through gritted teeth. "NO idea. How I've thrown myself into research, the pain that I've had every time I had to hear about your life from someone else! Minerva, Molly, Remus Christ, I heard about you from all of them, and if you would just stop jumping to conclusions for once, you'd realize that *I* want you and *I* need you and why the bloody hell can't you just come and talk *to me* instead of them? Why do you shut yourself off from me?" She paused, chest heaving.

He handed her a vial of the potion.

"Take this. It'll help with the hangover," he said simply, and he walked out of the room.

---

She blinked.

*He did not just do that.*

*No.*

*I'm done running.*

"SEVERUS!"

She followed him out of the room at a furious pace, catching up to where he was standing in the middle of the candlelit hallway.

He was in the middle of the hallway, his back turned to her, hand in a pocket, drinking his coffee.

"So, Hermione. You've finally decided to come after me."

"No, Severus. You're going to stop running."

He turned sharply and breached the few steps between them. He leaned down towards her, intimidating.

"And why do you think I have been?" he asked through gritted teeth. "You lead the life I did, and you tell me whether you would be able to adjust so quickly. You tell me whether you would implicitly trust others, if you would automatically assume the best as opposed to the worst. You tell me whether you would be willing to fight a losing battle or would you simply walk away? Twenty years with Death Eaters, Hermione. Years of fighting, of spying, of living a double life you tell me if you would be any different."

"I don't know," she said challengingly, looking up to meet his eyes. "But what I do know is that I love you, and I am willing to work through everything to be with you because when I'm not with you I am miserable, and I am furious with you for the things you have said to me."

"Oh, I know that I have made mistakes," he answered in a low, velvety tone. His hand rose up, almost as if to caress her chin, but was lowered just as quickly.

"Then apologize to me," she said evenly, "and don't run from me when I tell you that I love you."

"It won't fix everything." He crossed his arms.

"Of course it won't."

They stood in silence.



"Well?" she asked. *Please let him love me. Please let him come to me.*

He paused. "I've missed you," he said quietly. "And I'm sorry."

"I've missed you, too. And you're forgiven."

There was a heady moment.

"Severus..." she caught her breath, hands flexing, wanting to draw him closer.

He took her by the elbows and pulled her close to him, skin to skin. She could feel his breath hot on her hair, hot on her face, hot on her neck.

"Has anyone told you what an incredible woman you are, Hermione?" he asked softly, brushing her ear with his lips, barely touching.

"There's a first time for everything," she said, a smile spreading across her face.

"Mmm, yes."

He leaned his forehead against hers and placed his hands gently on her neck.

"I love you."

"Oh, Severus..." She let out the breath she had been holding.

She closed her eyes in anticipation.

*Thank you, Jesus.*

*Thank you, Merlin.*

*Thank you, Circe.*

*Thank you, God.*

*...Why hasn't he kissed me yet ...*

"Severus?" she started, opening her eyes. His head snapped back a few inches from hers.

"I appreciate the slow moving," she said, "but I have been waiting for you for over a year. A year of foreplay is more than enough. Would you kiss me already?"

He smirked. "With pleasure."

---

**A/N:** I'd like to thank all of you for your wonderful reviews and support! I never imagined that the story would become as successful as it has. You're all wonderful. :)

## An Ending Scene

*Chapter 16 of 16*

Not an epilogue... but an end.

**Disclaimer:** It all belongs to JKR.

**A/N:** I promised you all an epilogue at the end of *Dark Roast*, but I never gave one, because I never wrote one that satisfied me. Three different epilogues are languishing on my hard drive, all unfinished, and none provide a suitable finish for this story. Last week's challenge at the grangersnape100 was "Compulsions", and I was inspired to write a "missing scene" from Severus' perspective. It ended up being a scene that, I think, ends *Dark Roast* in a way I can be satisfied with. I sincerely hope you all are satisfied as well.

\*

Severus wrapped his hand around a steaming cup of dark roast. Hermione had been kind enough to brew much more than was necessary this morning. She knew he'd need it, although she certainly needed it as well. Today was their wedding day, after all.

Severus thought back to that day, that day in Remus and Tonks' home when Hermione had finally confronted him and brought all that foolish beating around the bush to a halt. It was, admittedly, his foolish meanderings that had kept them apart for so long, but no matter. They were together now.

\*

They'd commenced research on finding the healing and preventative potions for the *Cruciatus* immediately. Hermione had been working on the project for weeks, but given her weakened emotional and physical state, her quality had slipped. With him at her side, she'd been back in all her former glory. Not that she needed him, Severus thought wryly, but he had certainly lifted her spirits.

Within two months, the work had been finished. Hermione's findings had been published, and she had insisted on giving him half credit for the final product. He had fought her tooth and nail, as he failed to see how his two months of work equaled her months and years of preparation. In their largest blow-up, she had acquiesced to his wishes. Rather, Severus *thought* she'd acquiesced. His name had shown up in the research's publication in various potions journals.

Another fight ensued, this one ending as their fights typically did. With Hermione on top, in more ways than one.

\*  
Severus was startled out of his reverie when his best man came bustling into the room.

"That smells wonderful. Mind if I have a cup?" Remus asked, already reaching for the pot of coffee.

Severus waved his hand. "Not that what I say matters. You'll do as you please."

"Much as yourself, old boy," Remus said, grinning. "Excited?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "It's all for her, you know," he said after a moment's pause. "I am not compelled to ceremony and the like, but for her..." he trailed off.

"It's a small enough wedding. The Order, a few of their dates," Remus said. "Did you know that Neville Longbottom is dating one of Allegra Rossi's granddaughters?"

Severus chuckled. "It doesn't surprise me."

A peal of laughter rang out in the room above theirs. It sounded like Hermione. He smiled.

\*  
Remus left, cup of dark roast in hand, to make sure the girls were on top of things. Severus had tried to tell him that this was *Hermione* he was talking about – she was guaranteed to be ahead of schedule. Remus had curtly reminded him that there was also Tonks and Ginny to consider, and they would be behind schedule. Severus had tried to argue that it evened out, but Remus had been out the door before he could stop him.

It was just as well.

*Compelled to ceremony*, he had said. He liked that phrase. Ceremony didn't suit him. He did not care about having a wedding, or even about having the certificate. They'd do as they damned well pleased.

\*  
Hermione, however, had a different opinion. Well, she had a different opinion than he did. She had the opinion it seemed most women shared: that weddings were necessary. That the ceremony was necessary; that they'd have a perfect wedding on a beautiful day, that he'd look splendid (he did look rather dashing, all things considered), and that she would be wearing the most beautiful dress she would ever wear in her life.

He couldn't wait to see it. She'd kept it a secret from him, which bothered him, and had kept it successfully, which bothered him even more. Though the fact that she could out-wit him and play his own game was very attractive and probably part of the reason he was marrying her in the first place. She did strange things to him, his Hermione.

\*  
Like compelling him to ceremony and weddings. She had been the source of nearly all the compulsions he'd ever felt in his life, mind. Save the allegiance to... well, save that dark period in his life, she had been the source of all his impulses, both gallant and stupid.

He'd left England to protect her. He'd come back to save her. He'd run from her instead of running to her. He had thrown all caution to the wind and pledged his undying love and devotion to her. His libido had garnered a new range of impulses and desires, thanks to her. He actually wanted to be cordial to Harry and Ronald, just for her. He actually wanted to call Harry and Ron by their first names. He had a newfound desire to make potions for women's headaches and times of month more pleasant and palatable. And he'd catalogued her damned library, romance novels included, twice. Because he loved her.

\*  
And he'd been roped into this ceremony and wedding because she'd wanted it.

She'd recently expressed a desire to have children within the next few years, a desire he did not share at present, but that he was sure he'd come round to. Just for her. Hell, he'd probably be the one to ask if they could throw out the potion before she did. She had the strangest way of projecting her desires and impulses on to him. Or maybe it was because couples became more like each other after time. But it'd been barely half a year; was that really enough time to start sharing the same desires and traits?

*Damn it to hell*, he thought. He didn't care. If this was what life with Hermione Granger – soon to be Snape – would be like, he'd take the desires and impulses and all that came with it.

\*  
"Five minutes, Severus," Remus called in, again snapping Severus out of his train of thought.

Severus walked to the mirror to brush off any lint and straighten his bowtie.

"You look good, mate," Remus said with a wink.

Severus turned around. "Kindly keep your affections to Nymphadora, Remus," he said, only a mild trace of sarcasm in his voice. It might be his wedding day, but he wasn't about to lay down and play the proper groom.

Remus ignored him. "The girls are ready on time, would you believe it."

Severus smiled, his bowtie adjustment complete. "It's Hermione. What else would you expect?"

\*  
Remus smiled. "True. We should get going. The other groomsman is waiting."

"Is Harry on the patio?" Severus asked.

"I'm still getting used to you calling him by his first name. A woman can do strange things to a man, eh?"

Severus nodded. "That they can."

Remus held open the door for him as they walked out into the hall. "By the way, Minerva showed up with Archie Longheven on her arm."

"It is a day for romance," Severus said, laughing heartily, hardly believing what he was saying.

Remus almost threw up. "Please don't tell me she's changed you that much."

"She hasn't. And she won't, rest assured. We influence each other."

"So you'll soften a bit and her edges will sharpen?"

"I imagine so, Remus. I imagine so."

"I can't wait to see what your children are like."

Severus smiled. "Two will be like me, two like her."

Remus gaped. "Already planning, are we?"

Severus smiled as they walked onto the patio behind his Italian villa, and across to where Filius Flitwick stood, reviewing his notes at the altar.

"Like you said, Remus," he said, smiling at Minerva as he passed by the rows of white chairs, "a woman can do strange things to a man."

\*

The End. :)