

# Letting Go

*by notsosaintly*

Saving someone from the savior of the wizarding world is not always easy.

## Umbrage

*Chapter 1 of 10*

Saving someone from the savior of the wizarding world is not always easy.

Disclaimer: Thank you JK Rowling for allowing us to play with your creation. I promise to make them bathe before they come home.

---

~ *Umbrage* ~

The driving rain soaked through her cloak in seconds, swallowing the flood of tears that washed down her cheeks. She clutched the wet material around her tightly as she ran, not sure if the cloak she had grabbed was her own and not caring if it wasn't. Sobbing, she fled from the flat she had called "theirs" for five years.

The heavens seemed to grieve with her, yet they harbored no sympathy. The rain froze her skin and penetrated down to the very bone as icy rivers carved paths amongst the hairs on her scalp, channeling their way down her neck and beneath her clothing. By the time it even occurred to her to cast an Impervius spell, it was too late. A drying spell would be useless until she found shelter. She shuddered with cold; if her mother could see her now, she would no doubt be predicting an illness of ominous proportions.

She didn't really care if she caught cold...or even a fever...what did it matter now? What difference would it make? In fact, it may even improve matters slightly, as she could use the illness to hide behind, keeping family and friends at bay. She did not want to see anyone. She did not want anyone to see her. All she wanted to do was crawl away and hide somewhere deep where life wouldn't bother her anymore and nurse this pain that was wringing her heart.

Her feet slap-slapped in the puddles as she ran blindly to the end of the dead-end street, and she stopped, not able to go any further. There was no place to go, no place she wanted to be.

Hermione tilted her face up to stare at the dark, stormy sky, letting the raindrops break heavily upon her cheeks. She listened to them fall all around her and watched the end of their descent, as much as the darkness would allow. It was nearly impossible to keep her eyes open, and several times she had to blink away the wet. Wet. Wet was good. Wet made her numb, and numb was a state she preferred the moment.

How could he do this to her? She choked on a sob and railed at the heavens silently, cursing him, cursing her stupidity. After everything they had been through; after all the years she had put into their friendship; after sticking with him through his 'dark period' after he had vanquished Voldemort; after trying so hard to keep their relationship together, regardless of the walls he constantly threw up in her face ... How *dare* he do this to her!

How could she have been so blind? How could a girl with an intelligence rivaled by very few fall into a trap such as this? She bitterly let the questions cavort in the convoluted recesses of her mind. Deep down, she had known Harry would never commit to a wedding date. All he had ever done was to invent new and more exotic excuses. Half the time, she was aware that Ron had coached him, but she had chosen to ignore it. With each forged excuse, she simply dug herself deeper into denial. *She had dug her grave, and now she was going to lie in it:* that single thought kept coming back to haunt her.

The night sky, much like the body-numbing rain, was less than sympathetic, seeming only to mock her grief as the rain intensified. It fell in sheets, smothering her in a cold blanket that froze the pain in her heart, solidifying it. Irrationally, she stood up straight and willed the sky to send a giant bolt of lightning to strike her, wondering if lightning...if anything...could possibly be more painful than this.

Rain twisted with the blackness, and each turned upon the other, making Hermione lose her balance, not being able to discern which way was up. She fell hard on her hands and knees, and the water swirled in eddies about her wrists; the underlying current pulled at her fingers and the trailing edge of her sleeves. The ground was as black as the sky. Through her tear-blurred eyes, it looked almost as though the rain were falling up instead of down, born of the water-pregnant puddles.

Her body wrenched with the force of her sobs, and she had to forcefully push herself into an upright position. Sitting back on her heels, thick strands of hair slapped her in the face like wet noodles. Everything was dark. Her mind was falling into the blackness, becoming one with the air around her, weaving its way around her body, slowly cutting her off from the rest of the world.

Tilting her head back to stare at the sky, she realized that the fabric of the air in front of her was shifting. Her heart skipped painfully in her chest, and fear forced her backwards, gracelessly, into the quickly gathering water. Her legs sprawled ungainly before her; her hands once again submerged in the current. She tried to gain purchase, digging her heels into the ground and pushing backwards, but only succeeded in skidding and slipping, oddly reminiscent of Ron's Boggart spider. The scream caught in her throat and emerged as a mere whimper.

"Miss Granger," a voice accompanied the night-clad form. Apparently, the voice knew who she was; she deduced she probably knew who he was as well. She swallowed her fight-or-flight instinct and peered upwards into the unrelenting darkness, trying to discern who would try to fish her out of this sorry state. At least she was confident it wasn't Harry.

"Who's there?" she asked, her tone dripping with suspicion.

There was no answer, simply a shift in the fabric of night as the form bent, and a face slowly came into view. It was a very familiar face; certainly not one she would have chosen to see at this particular moment. His eyes stared with even less sympathy than the night and the rain combined.

The figure's shoulder-length hair hung limply much like hers. Hers, however, was weighted by sorrow of the heavens, whereas his was miraculously dry. The lines that had lightly etched his face since the day she had first known him had sunken, making his cheeks even more hollow than she remembered. His thrice-broken nose...why he had never used magic to fix it was beyond her understanding...seemed as ominous as ever and encroached upon her personal space.

Her mind clung to the obvious: he wasn't wet. *Perhaps the rain refused to touch someone so surly..* Her mind rambled, shock and sorrow turning her thoughts into slush. She reproached herself for the momentary confusion; he must have used an Impervius spell. The fact that she had forgotten her own no doubt disparaged her abilities as a witch in his eyes. Suddenly, self-disapproval washed over her and was reflected back to her in his oily gaze as he looked down the length of his hooked nose.

As if sarcasm was contagious, her mind remarked on how this was the perfect end to a most perfect day. What more could one ask for? A freakishly horrible day at work for an appetizer, finding your fiancé in bed with someone else for the entrée, and coming face-to-face with an old, bad-tempered ex-professor who was undoubtedly going to rub salt in the already gaping wound for dessert. No, it didn't get better than this. She briefly wondered if the puddle in which she was sitting was deep enough to drown in.

"What the bloody fuck do you want?" she spat, hoping he'd be offended at her language, walk away and leave her to freeze alone in the rain.

The man did not even flinch. She would have expected some sort of physical reaction, a raised eyebrow at the very least. But this man was a born spy, known for his sharpness of tongue and steadiness of demeanor. A harsh word from an ex-student was probably not sufficient to rouse his ire. Nevertheless, she braced herself for the rebuke that she expected to come.

"I see you have turned into quite a lady since graduation, Miss Granger. How impressive," Snape scoffed impassively.

He stared at her intently for a few moments, as she sat frozen on the ground, impatient for him to leave. He took his time, however, calmly staring at her through the falling rain while seeming to flaunt the fact that he was dry and she was not. She didn't understand why it bothered her so much; she was the one, after all, who had resigned herself to this fate.

"Well? Are you going to stand there staring at me all night, or are you going to bugger off?" she said with a curled lip, hoping beyond all reason that he actually would leave her to drown in a rain puddle.

"Your language leaves something to be desired, Miss Granger, as does your appearance." He held out a thin hand, offering to help her to her feet.

Hermione stared at the hand, her ego battling with her common sense. To take it or not to take it. Sit here and catch her death of cold...her mum's words...or have her ex-professor have a go at her already weakened self-esteem. Her ego whispered encouragingly that a fever was quite preferable to the latter.

"You cannot very well sit in a rain puddle all night; you will catch your death of cold," he spoke down his crooked nose at her.

Really? Wasn't that the idea? And when did he become her mum? He better *not* be reading her mind. Fine. If he was going to force the issue, she decided that a good argument before one died might be quite stimulating. She put on her mental flak jacket.

"And what, pray tell, do you care if I die or not?" Hermione dug in her figurative heels, ready for the fight. "Why don't you take your condescending, holier-than-thou attitude, go drown it in a vat of Firewhisky, and *leave ... me... the... fuck... alone!*"

Snape reached down and wrapped her wrist roughly in an unrelenting fist. "Believe me, I would if I could. My conscience, however, will not allow me to permit a girl, especially an ex-student who has apparently taken leave of her senses, to commit suicide." He yanked her to her feet.

"Ouch!" Hermione complained, rubbing her wrist where his fingers bit into her skin. "I told you to leave me alone. For a professor, you sure could use a lesson or two in *listening*," she growled, attempting to stamp her foot in the rather deep puddle she was standing in. The water had risen, and her foot merely sloshed.

"And *especially* a silly little girl who still throws temper tantrums," he added, making sure to emphasize the condescending attitude of which he had been accused. Shedding that persona for one with a little more compassion, he said, "Come on, Miss Granger. Let us get you someplace nice and warm."

His grip thankfully relocated to her upper arm, and he practically dragged her from the middle of the road toward the pub at the end of the street. The blinking sign above the door slowly came into view.

"The Magic Brew? You are taking me into *The Magic Brew?*"

She struggled against his grip. He was *not* going to take her into the swill house that Harry went to every week on his "Boys' Night Out." She had no desire to step foot anywhere that Harry frequented, now or at any point in the near future.

"There is nothing wrong with The Magic Brew, Miss Granger. However, they may find something wrong with *you*." He paused, considering her appearance. "I know the proprietor, so I'm sure he will make an exception to the dress code...this once. The sooner you get warm and dry, the better."

She had forgotten what a vice grip the man had. By looking at him, one would never guess at his strength. He pulled open the pub door with his free hand and shoved her in before him. The few people present turned to look at the newcomers for a blurry second before turning back to their drinks. Satisfied that no one would be bothering them, Snape pushed Hermione into a booth in the far corner.

"Abner, one Firewhisky and..." He glanced momentarily at the drenched girl on the bench. "I suppose you don't drink Firewhisky."

"I don't drink at *all*," she said.

"And a hot toddy for the girl," he added and tossed two Galleons onto the bar.

Abner nodded, tossed a bar towel over his shoulder, and summoned a glass.

"I *said* I don't drink," Hermione growled, still peeved at being rescued from her Opheliatic demise.

"You do now," Snape replied coolly as he sat across from her and adjusted his robes. "If anything, I am giving you the opportunity to drown yourself in a drink. You may be thankful for some warmth before you expire."

Abner plunked a Firewhisky on the table in front of Snape and slid the hot toddy under Hermione's nose. He walked off with a tip of his hat and a tilt of his head in the direction of the bar and Snape nodded slightly in response. The exchange did not go unnoticed by Hermione.

"You come here often?" It was more of an accusation than a question, and Snape picked up on it quicker than she expected.

"As a matter of fact, I *do* come here often," he mimicked her accusatory tone. "It is an excellent place to relax ... and entertain friends." His eyebrow rose at the final implication.

"Yes, well ... I wouldn't know." She took a cautious sip of the hot toddy. At least it was tolerable...and warm. She started to shiver as the warmth of the drink spread throughout her body, her muscles clenching painfully with each shudder. Perhaps getting wet hadn't been such a good idea, after all. Either that, or she should have just stayed outside where warmth had already been forgotten.

Snape sipped his drink, gazing at Hermione casually as the cup in her hand shook violently. Taking pity on her, he drew his wand, pointed it at her and muttered something that she could not quite hear over the chattering of her teeth. Warm air enveloped her, and within seconds, she was dry straight down to her knickers. *Amazing. Bloody impertinent, but amazing.*

"I suppose I should thank you, although I did not ask you to cast a drying spell." She tried to appear miffed, but it was difficult considering she was more comfortable. Perhaps she was...just a little...thankful.

"Technically, that wasn't a drying spell. You of all people should know the difference. And I accept your gratitude."

A snort escaped her lips before she could stifle it. He accepted her gratitude? That wasn't *gratitude*; it was involuntarily *politeness*. It was her mum's incessant brainwashing when she was a little girl being squeezed out of her like a sponge! She would rather be outside, drowning herself in a puddle and would have been doing just that if he had had the decency to leave her there! She swallowed the sob that threatened to erupt. Hades would freeze over before she cried in front of this man.

Snape set his tumbler on the table and folded his hands in front of him. "Now, Miss Granger, since I was so kind as to save you from a certain death, perhaps you would return the favor and tell me exactly *why* you were outside in the pouring rain and, most especially, why a simple Impervius spell seemed to be beyond your capabilities."

She nearly succumbed to another internal tirade when he described himself as 'kind.' Holding back the tears was proving to be more difficult by the second. Throwing up a wall of defiance in protection, she stated, "I don't see how it's any of your business."

"Is that so?" Snape sat up a little straighter and took another...rather large...swallow of Firewhisky. "Then perhaps I shall venture a guess."

He paused, daring her to object. Her defiant glare being the only forthcoming answer, he continued.

"My theory...and, mind you, it is just a theory...is that *someone* broke your heart tonight. He has possibly even been breaking your heart for some time, but you undoubtedly have chosen to be blind to the situation, and your eyes have just been pried opened to the reality. In your befuddled state, you ran away, foolishly forgetting that it was raining...perhaps not even caring...and that you are indeed a witch with a wand. Perhaps, may I even dare to say that you thought the rainstorm convenient, as death would most certainly be preferable to being without a *boyfriend*."

He said the last bit rather snidely, trying to bait her into responding. He smiled smugly when his efforts proved fruitful.

"He wasn't just my *boyfriend*. He was my *fiancé*."

"Oh. Well, that makes all the difference, of course. Regardless of his *title*, I cannot believe Mister Potter is more important than your health." Snape tossed back the rest of his drink and nodded at the bartender to get him another.

Hermione looked sharply in Snape's direction, her head swimming at the sudden movement. She had to close her eyes for a second to regain her equilibrium. Not wanting Snape to know the hot toddy was already affecting her...she had only drunk half...she feigned a headache and massaged her forehead between the eyes.

"What makes you think *Harry* has anything to do with this?" she asked weakly. Saying his name felt like she was twisting the knife Harry had thrust into her heart. Of course, her ex-professor would be quite aware of her relationship with Harry as it had been plastered all over the newspapers after the Final Battle. However, that was nearly five years ago. The man's memory could not possibly be that long.

"Your relationship with Mister Potter is hardly a secret. Unfortunately, I have noticed of late that your Mister Potter seems to have forgotten how widespread that knowledge is."

Hermione looked up, head wavering slightly along with her voice. "Exactly what do you mean by that?"

She did not really want to know what he meant. Wasn't ignorance bliss? She wasn't sure she could handle anything else tonight. Surprisingly, Snape looked anything but comfortable at the prospect of having to divulge what he knew.

Calmly, he placed his drink upon the table and brushed his hair away from his face, letting it fall behind his shoulder. She fixated on his hand, something small, something normal, determined to keep calm at any cost. The fluidity of his movements seemed odd, so unlike the sharp gestures she remembered. It was odd that she would pick this particular moment to notice something like that, but then again, she was feeling rather odd herself.

"What I mean, Miss Granger, is that Mister Potter has been anything *but* discreet when he is out in public."

He paused again, making her wonder if bad news was best in small portions or given in one giant dose. She reached shakily for her cup and drained the remainder of its contents in one giant swallow. The cup met the table a little quicker than it should have, and Abner, quite familiar with the sound of an empty glass upon a table, was quick to provide a replacement.

"It seems I have guessed correctly then," Snape drawled flatly, abandoning his usual derisive tone. He was older than her by close to twenty years; no doubt he had experienced a thing or two in his life, perhaps not the same, but similar. Could it be memory that softened his tone, albeit slightly? "May I reiterate, Miss Granger: Mister Potter is not worth risking your health for."

The second hot toddy made her even warmer than the first. Perhaps she had been a little hasty to run out into the rain. Perhaps Professor Snape was right. Why should she let Harry get the better of her? It suddenly occurred to her that he was being *nice* to her. Why was he being nice? Perhaps he thought she finally came to her senses and realized Harry was as much of a prat as he had always thought?

Her tongue felt slightly larger than normal when she spoke, and her breath definitely felt heavy in her chest, but it did not deter her from asking: "What exactly did you mean when you said Harry has been anything but discreet?"

The twisting knife-pain that had accompanied the mention of his name earlier felt more like a dull throb, thanks to the alcohol. She swallowed any apprehension she may have had with another draught of her hot toddy. The drink was actually pleasant. It was sweet and caused her to flush from the inside out, making her cheeks glow as though in a state of perpetual blush.

It was obvious that she was getting drunk. After all, she *had* said that she did not drink and yet had almost finished her second toddy in less than an hour. Professor Snape hesitated before motioning Abner to refill her cup. Perhaps he was curious as to what his ex-student was like completely pissed. Or perhaps it was just kindness on his part, knowing that what she had been put through today would be more easily weathered with a little more alcohol. Either way, he had certainly provided another way to drown herself.

She sat across the table, looking at him expectantly with watery eyes, waiting for his answer. His hesitance was almost endearing. She could almost believe that Professor Snape actually cared how deeply his next words would cut. Her hand wandered back to her drink, clinging onto it for dear life, thankful for its comfort.

Snape sighed and stared into his own cup. Here was a man who was used to taking pleasure from delivering bad news and watching its recipient fall apart at the seams, but he did not seem to be taking any pleasure from this at all.

Another swallow of Firewhisky seemed to strengthen his resolve. Hermione noticed the grimace and was sure it was not the result of the drink. He looked irritated, though not at her. It did nothing to quell the anxiety she felt at his impending answer.

"Very simply, Miss Granger, your *fiancé* has been seen at this bar on more than one occasion, blatantly enjoying the company of another whom you call 'friend.'"

What he said was vague, but Hermione knew exactly who he meant. His words opened the dam on the memories of earlier that evening. They hit with such force, it was all she could do to hold onto her sanity. She fought to maintain control as her memories dragged her downward ...

*... coming home from work early, completely exhausted from a harrowing day at the office, wanting more than anything to soak in the bath ... hearing odd noises coming from the bedroom she and Harry shared ... a rhythmical sound, one that her subconscious recognized, but refused to share with her conscious mind ... opening the door to their bedroom, her smile slowly transforming into a sick grimace as she watched the scene play out before her ... feeling as though she wanted to be sick on the spot ...*

It had taken them a while to notice she was there. Her mind had screamed at her to leave, but her feet felt rooted to the spot, stuck in time, in disbelief. Her traitorous body wouldn't even allow her to close her eyes, effectively burning the image onto her brain. They grunted with the effort of their coupling, hair disheveled, bodies sweating profusely. Harry and...no, she couldn't bring herself to put the two of them together. It was too much for her to even think about. Not only was Harry fucking someone else in her bed, he had to add insult to injury by fucking the only other friend she had in the world that meant anything to her.

Feeling empty and friendless, she finished off her toddy and let the mug clatter to the table. Hugging herself to ward off the unpleasantness of the memories, she felt the emotions welling up inside of her and knew that she was about to confide everything to the man in front of her.

## Confession

### Chapter 2 of 10

Hermione cries over her loss and the professor wishes he had cast Impervius on his robes.

#### ~ Confession ~

The words seemed to stick in her throat, making it difficult to breathe. This man did not exude the air of confidant, and that made this all the more difficult. However, he did ask. He wanted to know.

"I found them..." she spoke at last, gathering her wits about her. "I came home from work early and found them ... in...in bed ... fu...fucking each other. In. Our. Bed."

She whispered the last three words slowly and deliberately, trying to keep her body from shaking, no doubt an aftereffect of the earlier shock that was surfacing. Shifting uncomfortably in his seat, Snape motioned to Abner for another refill. No sooner said than done. The bartender was certainly on the ball this evening.

"I am truly sorry, Miss Granger," was all he could say.

Eyes swimming with unshed tears, she looked at him sharply.

"Are you?" she bit, keeping her voice dangerously low. "Are you *really* sorry? Why do people always say 'I'm sorry' when they're not? Did *you* do anything wrong? Could you have stopped this from happening? Do you have anything to actually be sorry for?" Calming the rising hysteria, she continued. "Do you have any idea what it is like to walk in on your fiancé shagging someone else? Not only *that*, do you have any idea what it is like to be betrayed by two friends in one day?"

"My God, all those *Boys' Nights Out* were only a farce! I mean, here I was, worried that they might be meeting *girls* on those nights out. He wouldn't set a wedding date, always had an excuse...and some of them were quite outrageous. I accused him a few times of using going out with the boys as a cover, that he was really seeing someone else, but he never came back smelling of another woman.

"What was I supposed to do, keep nagging? I never had any evidence to support my suspicions. He told me that it was only my overactive imagination creating unlikely scenarios. How the bloody hell was I supposed to know he was fucking Ron?"

Now she was hysterical, punctuating her monologue with her hands. Professor Snape did the only thing he could do at that point and trapped her flailing hands in his and pinned them to the table. Finally, she gave in to the anguish, letting her head fall onto his forearms, and fell apart in a fresh onslaught of tears.

Unable to reach his wand, and not one for making a spectacle, Snape shot Abner a pleading glance. Upon the pretense of bringing another round of drinks, the bartender

paused and muttered a simple, "*Dissimulo*," as he walked away, giving them some privacy. Abner shook his head at the blubbing girl, whom poor Snape had the misfortune of accompanying.

"Miss Granger." Snape nudged the weeping witch. He noticed her tears had soaked into his sleeve and uttered a silent curse. "Miss Granger!"

Letting go of her hands abruptly, he chose to grasp her shoulders instead and coax her into an upright position. Her red eyes and blotchy face were not attractive, nor were they endearing, but her sorrowful appearance did succeed in melting his heart somewhat.

Pulling her closer across the thick table, he hissed, "Potter is not worth the amount of anguish you are putting yourself through."

His words, his body language, the lack of disdain in his voice: it made her wonder. All of this from a man who never had a kind word for her before? She was a little suspicious, but his expression held no malice.

"Why are you being so nice to me?"

Releasing her, he sat back and drawled, "I suppose *could* have left you out in the rain. However, contrary to popular belief, *do* have a conscience and somewhat of a weak spot for damsels in distress."

Damsel in distress? She supposed she fit the bill, yet her eyes narrowed at being labeled thus. It seemed almost romantic to be thought of in that light, and romance had never been paired with Professor Snape before in her mind. The twinge of suspicion flip-flopped in her stomach like a fish out of water, but it would not die. She wished it would go away. Perhaps a banishment charm would do nicely. The thought of pointing her wand at her stomach and banishing a feeling made her giggle.

"As nice as it is to finally see you laugh, I believe *should* forbid you to drink anymore."

*Why, bless his hardened soul,* she thought, *Professor Snape actually looks like he cares!*

"Well, of course I *care*, silly girl," he scolded.

She winced. She had read somewhere that alcohol loosened the tongue. Well, she didn't know if her tongue was loose...a wagging tongue hopping out of her mouth and wiggling across the floor flashed across her vision...but her head was certainly a little misty. She needed to take more care in what she thought because apparently it was escaping past her lips. Maybe a trip to the loo would give her the time she needed to pull herself together.

She started to rise from the booth until her thighs met with the bottom of the table, shaking Professor Snape's drink and nearly upsetting it. Hers, of course, was empty again. That made, what, three in an hour? She really needed to slow down and think before she did anything else. Sitting back down, she opted to scoot off the edge of the seat instead.

"And just where do you think you are going?" he raised an eyebrow at her.

"I need to visit the loo. If you would be so kind as to direct me?" She took a wide, faltering step away from the table.

Snape rose from the booth, more used to consuming alcohol and, as a result, more stable on his feet. "I will do more than direct you. I will escort you."

He held her firmly about the waist with his right arm and reached across to take her hand in his, guiding her to the back of the room. She looked up at him with a blatantly incredulous look on her face. This act of chivalry was quite out-of-character for her ex-professor. It made her wonder how much he was actually enjoying this. He was a Slytherin. He probably had an ulterior motive. No doubt he was congratulating himself on getting her drunk.

Upon reaching the door of the ladies' lavatory, he discovered Hermione was still staring at him. Quickly, he pushed open the door and ushered her inside, hoping he wouldn't encounter another female on the other side of the door. She stood for a brief moment in the open doorway.

"Be careful. I do not want to have to come in there after you," he said in warning.

Stumbling inside, she giggled to herself as the door swung shut behind her. A giant, oak-framed, oval mirror hung above the sink, perfect for long, inebriated reflections. Giving her appearance a once-over, she figured that after everything she had been through, she did not look too worse for wear. Her hair seemed to look more wind-blown than tangled, which she thought was fortunate as it made her look more attractive, maybe even a little bit sexy.

Sexy? No, she most certainly did not feel sexy. The awful events of the day still sat raw upon her nerves and sat like lead in her stomach. How could she possibly feel sexy after essentially being told...or rather shown...that she was undesirable and unwanted?

Still, her stomach had fluttered a little at the feel of Professor Snape's hand in hers, and fluttered again in remembrance. She could not discount something as unexpected as discovering Professor Snape had a more ... human side. And on him, that most certainly *was* sexy. She didn't understand why she hadn't noticed him before. The gracefulness of his hand gestures, the way he brushed his hair over his shoulder, and the strength of his body, all were quite attractive. Even the self-assured way he had of holding himself, which she had always attributed to him putting on pompous airs, was appealing.

Could it be possible that the drink was making her think this way? She paused for a second, pondering that thought while still scrutinizing and fixing the rougher edges of her reflection. Alcohol generally removed a person's inhibitions, didn't it? So, theoretically...and it really could only be a theory since she hadn't the opportunity to test it until now...she would only be having these thoughts if they had been buried deep within her to begin with. So, perhaps it wasn't the drink making her think this way, but the drink that made the thoughts bubble to the surface. That sounded about right, especially since he really did have that whole sexy Potions master thing going for him.

"He really *is* sexy, isn't he?" she said aloud, giggling.

"Yes, my dear," the mirror replied in a way-too-cheerful voice. "If you say so, he most certainly is."

Smiling at the mirrored platitudes, she entered a stall to clear her mind. By the time she finished, she had decided, in her slightly vertiginous state, that the mirror could very well be right. Maybe he had always been this sexy, but she had never noticed before. Considering her recent loss, perhaps moving on as soon as possible was preferable to mourning. Professor Snape had been most kind to her this evening. Not all men were insensitive, cheating sods like *other* men she knew. She hesitated a moment, realizing that she had completely wasted more than five years of her life with Harry, and she had a lot of time to make up for.

~~~o o~~~

Professor Snape stood just outside the door, resting a shoulder against the wall, arms folded, waiting for Hermione to emerge. A part of him was taking great satisfaction that his ex-student was no longer connected with Harry Potter. The other part, a much larger portion if he chose to be completely honest with himself, hated the way it was destroying her. Her weakness for the boy made him angry more than anything else. She should be thankful the boy finally showed his true colors, thankful that she was finally rid of him. She could do much better than the likes of Potter.

It had always been that way. Any favoritism for Potter generally irritated him beyond all reason. In his opinion, which he was sure didn't hold much clout in her world, Hermione had stood by Potter's side for far too many years. The boy couldn't hold a candle to her in intelligence, wit or otherwise.

When Hermione finally emerged from the bathroom...he had almost given up and gone in to check on her until he heard the water flush...she seemed slightly more composed and sure of gait. The brilliant smile she flashed in his direction thawed his heart another fraction, sending a trickle of warmth through his chest before he clamped down on the errant feeling.

Hermione shuddered theatrically. "I believe I am still feeling a mite chilly, Professor. Mind if we have another drink?"

A drink was undoubtedly what they both needed, he thought as he escorted her back to the table. Fresh drinks awaited them, compliments of the overly attentive bartender. Snape wondered for a moment who was trying to get who drunk here. A raised eyebrow at Abner elicited an amused shrug. If anything, Snape had to admit, the bartender did his job well.

~~~o o~~~

Hermione sat and inhaled the steam from her drink. It was lovely. She had never been one to drink before, having only tried her mother's cheap brandy and not liking it too much. This, however, was most enjoyable.

"This was a wonderful idea. I thank you." Her precarious mood tilted temporarily toward contentment.

"I believe you already expressed your gratitude, Miss Granger," Professor Snape pointed out. "And my ideas generally *are* favorable."

She smirked at him. "Undoubtedly they are. I only...well, I wanted to express my gratitude with a clearer head, I suppose."

She felt as though a thick blanket had been thrown over the disturbing events of the day, smothering them. The feelings were still there but a little easier to ignore, though not completely. The lighthearted banter with Professor Snape was nice, but at the same time so contrary to her true feelings that it was impossible to prevent reality from crashing down upon her. She sighed morosely and took another sip to hide the break in her mood, trying to lose herself in the alcohol.

Snape stared at her pensively. "Why are you so upset about Mister Potter's infidelity? Undoubtedly, you were aware for some time that he was not being completely honest with you. Is not the pain of uncertainty more painful than the knowledge itself?"

Hermione pierced him with a look of intense contemplation combined with a hint of irritation, uncharacteristically...and thankfully...tempered by a little alcohol-induced blurriness.

"If I were to be completely honest with myself, I suppose *did* know something was wrong for a quite some time. We have been engaged for three years, and not once in that entire time did he ever actually *want* to set a date for the wedding. He and Ron..."

She cleared the lump from her throat. When she resumed, her voice was scratchy. "They always had some really lame excuse. I think I knew on some level that it was never going to happen. I was...I *am* scared. I don't remember what life is like anymore without Harry and Ron. And now, I have neither of them."

The tears started to fall again, silently this time. With pursed lips, Professor Snape rummaged inside his waistcoat for a handkerchief and handed it across the table. She murmured a polite, "Thanks," and dabbed at her eyes, trying to compose herself. It wouldn't do to keep falling apart in front of her ex-professor. She had more than likely tried his patience to its limit already.

~~~o o~~~

"I must look a sight," she commented flippantly to cover the lag in conversation.

"Rather," he agreed.

She *did* look a sight: her clothes were wrinkled from the rain, her hair was more out of control than usual, there were dark smudges beneath her eyes, and she had a slight outdoorsy smell about her. Her appearance was a physical manifestation of her distress. He found himself feeling sorry for the girl and a little reluctant to leave her in such a state. An intense desire to see all her pain taken away washed through him.

"Thanks much," Hermione chided at his frankness. Although the lilt to her voice, the slight smile, and the hint of a glimmer in her eye all told him that she didn't mind a bit of honesty.

She let out a long quavering sigh. "I'm afraid I don't know what to do now."

It seemed the night was going to be fraught with confessions. He knew that he had brought it upon himself, but where he would have normally been irritated, he found that he actually wanted to help her let go of a decidedly bad relationship.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "I suppose you go on about your life as always except as a single woman."

"No, I'm aware of that." She shook her head at not having expressed herself clearly enough. "What I mean is that I cannot go back to my flat; Harry and I live together...*lived* together. I have no clothes other than what I am wearing, and they are in dire need of washing. And I need a bath; I smell like I fell in a river."

His snort sounded suspiciously like a chuckle. He looked down, letting his hair block his face. Suddenly, it occurred to him that he could help solve this little problem. It was the least he could do, really, and it was entirely in his power. Still, he was a little incredulous at what he was about to suggest. Even more incredulous that he actually wanted what he was about to suggest.

"My place is just up the street," he offered almost inaudibly. His breath constricted in his chest. What in Merlin's name was he doing? He wanted to take care of her. He wanted to make everything better. Mostly, he wanted to save her from the savior of the wizarding world. *He* wanted to be everything to her Harry Potter was not.

*Where in the nine levels of Hades did that come from?* he wondered, not daring to raise his eyes to meet hers. An empty glass stared mockingly back up at him. No doubt he was one too many Firewhiskys to the wind.

"Hogwarts?" she asked, knowing that stating the obvious was not going to further endear herself to the man.

"That is where I reside, the last time I checked," he grumbled at the table, finding solace in sarcasm.

The seconds ticked by agonizingly in Snape's head while Hermione considered his offer. The impending rejection was palpable. He was beginning to regret making the suggestion. Then, she broke the silence.

"Okay," she said simply, as though it were the most natural thing in the world to have an ex-professor invite an ex-student...and one he had not particularly cared for in the past...to stay with him.

The blood rushed in his ears, and his heart tightened in his chest, pumping faster through the constricted vessels. Slowly, his eyes ascended, afraid that his ears had deceived him. Hermione just stared at him openly, relief and gratitude showing openly on her face.

Snape figured he better get them out of the pub right away before she came to her senses. Abner nodded his head one last time in their direction, taking notice of their leave, and grabbed his towel to clean off the soon to be deserted table.

Standing, the professor held out his hand to help Hermione to her feet.

A/N: Some of you were wondering who Harry was shuffling on the side. \*snicker\* Well, you have your answer. The Harry I portray can be a real prat sometimes, as you will see in the next chapter. Sweet-and-caring Harry is probably more canon, but I'm not always a canon kinda gal. Sometimes, I would rather just shoot canon-balls.

# Ablution

## Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione gets clean...and comes clean. Oh, and Harry makes an appearance.

~ **Ablution** ~

Suddenly feeling all too eager to leave the bar for someplace perhaps a little warmer and a little more inviting (she hoped), Hermione stepped unthinkingly out into the pouring rain. As quick as a Seeker, Professor Snape reached out and snatched her back into the entryway. She looked up to find him peering down at her disdainfully.

"I suppose an Impervius spell is beyond your capabilities this evening," he spoke through gritted teeth. "Please allow me."

A shiver ran over her entire body as the spell wrapped her in its invisible protection. She watched as he fluidly cast the spell upon himself before they started down the long road toward Hogwarts.

"Wouldn't it be wiser to Apparate, Professor?" Hermione asked, slightly out of breath, desperately trying to keep up with his considerably larger step. At this rate, she would collapse from exhaustion before they even reached the gate.

He stopped rather abruptly with the intention of letting her catch up, only to have her stumble into him. Hermione had to grab fistfuls of his cloak not to fall backwards into a rather enormous puddle, which nearly pulled Professor Snape off balance as well.

"Miss Granger," he growled. "Will you *please* be more careful? Impervius spell or not, I prefer to remain standing."

"Sorry," she mumbled as she found her footing and let him go.

"To answer your question: I do not feel it is wise to Apparate when one has been drinking," he continued, walking at a slightly slower pace to accommodate her smaller stature. "I have no doubt of my ability to Apparate myself, but to be perfectly honest, I do not feel up to Apparating the both of us."

Well, it made sense; she would most certainly splinch if she tried to Apparate, everything considered. At least he had the decency to slow down so she could keep up.

Suddenly, Hermione felt her heel slip on the pavement. The world began to spin, thanks to the hot toddies coursing through her bloodstream, and time slowed down as she tried to futilely regain her equilibrium. She tried valiantly to save what little dignity she had left, but she knew that was probably a lost cause. Then, rather abruptly, her descent came to a halt, and she found herself enveloped in a cloud of black silk, saved once again.

Gasping for breath, she looked up into the wide eyes of her savior, his face only a few centimeters from her own. He searched her face wordlessly to make sure she was all right, though the few seconds it took for her breathing to slow down felt like an eternity. The sudden attraction she felt in that moment, as he looked down upon her with concern, made her limbs tremble and her heart flutter in her chest.

The bubble of protection against the elements suddenly became very small. Wisps of his hair swung forward and blew in the stormy breeze, and short puffs of warm air dissipated right in front of his slightly parted lips. She could see every fine line in the faint blush of those lips. She wondered what they would feel like upon her own. Would they be as hard as his words were sharp, or would they be uncharacteristically soft just as the rest of him had been that evening? She wanted to touch them, to feel them, if not with her mouth, then with her fingertips.

Her hand was beginning to move of its own accord to satisfy the musings of her brain when an exclamation broke their mutual reverie.

"What the *bloody hell*?!" The words ascended over the wind and rain. "Let go of her immediately, Snape!"

The voice was familiar. Why shouldn't it be? That voice had only been a part of her life since she was eleven years old. Professor Snape, of course, did the exact opposite of what the voice commanded and pulled her closer, enveloping her safely within his outer cloak.

"And why should I do that, Mister Potter?" Professor Snape asked dryly. "You seem to have no claim on her any longer."

"And how quickly you stick your big nose into affairs that are none of your business," Harry growled in Snape's face. "I suggest you take your sodding claws off her before I give you a first-hand demonstration of exactly how your *Dark Lord* met his demise. Come on, Hermione. Let's go."

Keeping one eye on Snape, Harry held out his hand, fully expecting Hermione to take it. Instead, she shrank further into Professor Snape's warm embrace, trying to escape Harry's grasp. Professor Snape tightened his hold gently around the girl who was now shaking like a leaf in his arms. She hadn't expected to run into Harry so soon; she hadn't given it much thought but expected to be able to avoid him for at least a week or two, long enough to master her emotions.

"I am going nowhere with you, Harry," she said, her words dripping with anger. "How *dare* you presume I would go anywhere with you after what you did to me!"

"Don't be silly, Hermione. Where else will you go? Let's go home, and we can have a civilized conversation over a hot cup of tea." He thrust his hand toward her, this time demanding that she take it.

Using the professor for support...her legs felt as though they were about to give out...she braced herself for what she had to say. "I *will not* go with you, Harry Potter, much less return to a flat that is no longer my own. Professor Snape has offered me a place to stay for a while, and I accepted his most generous offer. He has shown more care and compassion for me tonight than you have in the last five years."

"You most certainly will *not* stay with Snape! There is only one thing that snake is after, and his intentions are in no way *compassionate*!" Harry spat.

Her voice quavered. "You have no right to tell me what to do anymore. His intentions are none of your business, and neither are mine. You and I are through, Harry Potter, and you may relay that news to your *boyfriend* as well. I want nothing to do with either of you ever again!"

Harry stood there for a moment, staring at her with eyes that would have cut her into a million pieces if Professor Snape had not been there to hold her together. His

fortitude somehow shored up her waning strength. She glared back defiantly until, without another word, Harry spun on his heel and stalked off in the direction of their...or rather his...flat.

Only when he was out of sight did the weight of the situation overwhelm her. Her body trembled violently and tears gave way to uncontrollable sobs. The man who had saved her from self-destruction and defended her against the boy-who-shattered-her-heart gently picked up the pieces and headed off toward the castle, as she leant her head against his shoulder and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck.

~~~o o~~~

It was a long trek down the path toward the castle, and only when the familiar battlements came into view did the sobs finally abate and the tears dry up. Professor Snape wisely decided to use his private entrance to the dungeons in order to avoid any unwanted attention. At this point, Hermione would certainly view any attention as unwanted.

"Can you stand? I need to put you down to remove the wards," he murmured into her ear.

At her silent acquiescence, He set her gently on her feet and let go momentarily to swipe his wand in the necessary pattern. The walk down the dark, stone corridor was a quiet one, though by no means uncomfortable. He directed her with a hand on her back, allowing her the silence she needed to recover.

He didn't begrudge her the decidedly Gryffindor display of emotion. It was healthier than suppressing it, and he knew it would bring about a swifter recovery. Still, it was unsettling to find her staring morosely at her feet when they had finally reached the door to his quarters.

"Miss Granger, if you have changed your mind..."

"No!" she said quickly, startling herself out of her thoughts. "No, I mean, I haven't. It's just I...well, I suppose I'm feeling slightly depressed and...oh, bloody hell, I could really use another drink!" He almost chuckled at the confession as he let down the wards and invited her into his rooms.

Her shyness dissipated as she realized that the sitting room had been transformed into a small library. Books spanned the walls from floor to ceiling. An overstuffed, somewhat worn chair sat in the middle of the room on a Persian carpet. It looked terribly comfortable and so unlike the image she had formed in her mind about Professor Snape.

She was visibly torn between wanting to have that much-needed drink and a nice hot bath or losing herself for hours in a good book and forgetting about everything that had happened. It was fortunate that Professor Snape was there to direct her to the door on the opposite side of the room. She supposed the drink and bath were slightly more necessary at the moment.

His living area was another surprise...a continuation of the rich furnishings, and nearly as distracting as the library. Overlapping carpets of muted earthen hues covered the stone floors. The sofas were luxuriously covered in solid fabrics as a counterpoint to the wild Persian patterns and were definitely chosen with comfort in mind. It had a lived-in feel and, something she hadn't expected from her ex-professor, an inviting atmosphere.

Professor Snape directed her to another door. "The bathroom is right through here. Why don't you run the bath, and I'll go prepare your drink. What would you like? Something sweet? Something strong, perhaps?"

"Surprise me," she answered with a weak smile. She actually had no idea what to ask for, much less what she preferred.

If the rest of his quarters made her feel at home, the bathroom made her feel like she had died and gone to heaven. It was tiled from ceiling to floor with black and white Italian marble, and the bathtub, large enough for three people, was partially sunken with two steps leading up to it from the outside. She ran the bath full of thick, foaming bubbles and played with the different charms to add scent. She finally settled on something that smelled vaguely of nutmeg and cinnamon, scents that she equated with comfort, and stripped quickly, leaving her damp and musty clothes on the floor.

Sinking into the bath and submerging beneath the layer of bubbles that skimmed the surface, she began to feel her body unwind. All in all, it was a surreal end to a surreal day. The circumstances that led her here were unusual enough, but it was almost unbelievable that she was actually taking a bath in Professor Snape's quarters.

When she resurfaced, it was to find the owner of said bath standing before her with a glass of green liquid in his hand.

"Oh! What's this?" Whatever it was, it was pretty. Though leave it to him to choose something green.

"A martini. Specifically, an apple martini. I think you'll like it," he replied, handing the drink to a bubble-coated hand.

Hermione noticed his attention slip for just a moment to the bubbles that most conveniently cloaked her. At first she thought that perhaps she was showing a little too much skin, but a glance downward assured her that she was properly covered. She smirked and took a sip of the luminescent drink.

"This is really good. Thank you." She smiled up at him. Pausing a moment, she decided to be forthright. "Professor, I want to thank you for earlier tonight, for helping me deal with Harry ... for letting me stay here ... for all of this."

"As I've said before, Miss Granger, I have a penchant for damsels in distress." He almost smiled. "However, since you are feeling so kindly disposed, perhaps you would do me one small favor?"

Hermione gulped down the last of her drink before replying. "Anything, Professor. Just name it."

"Very well. It seems that I have only one bathroom, and you are using it. Since I did not have the luxury of using the facilities at the bar, I ask that you close your eyes or look the other way for a moment."

Her florid blush tweaked a corner of his mouth. "Come now. Surely you can afford me one little kindness after all I've done for you."

If she hadn't been nude beneath the bubbles, she would have cut her bath short and given him some privacy. As it was, there was nothing to do but stay put since her dirty clothes...and wand along with it...had mysteriously disappeared, and Professor Snape had not as yet gifted her with a towel. She figured that turning her head while he went about his business would be less embarrassing than giving him a show.

Closing her eyes, she consented. "Very well, Professor, go ahead."

All intentions on showing good faith and keeping her eyes closed were dashed against the stone floor as he chuckled at her discomfort. He forced his features back into a frown, not quite able to attain the usual scowl.

"Ah, ah, ah, Miss Granger," he scolded. "Peeking is not very Gryffindor."

Her eyes snapped shut, and she placed her hands over eyes for good measure. This time she remembered to keep them closed, even as quiet laughter echoed from across the room.

She supposed embarrassment at such a thing was rather silly, though she had never been in the vicinity of a man while he was relieving himself. Harry was probably more self-conscious than most; he was intensely private and never allowed her inside the bathroom while he was using it. However, he had no compunction whatsoever about walking in on her while she sat on the toilet. She had tried to argue that it was a double standard, but talking to Harry was like talking to a wall sometimes...well, most of the time.



Still, it was oddly silent. She expected to hear the evidence of his...was it four or five?...Firewhiskys by now. Slyly peeking through two fingers, she found him unbuttoning the last two buttons on his trousers. She had to bite her tongue so as not to give away her indiscretion by exclaiming, "You even have buttons on your trousers?!" The exclamation died in her throat, however, as he came fully into view.

Whatever it was that she had been expecting, it wasn't the obvious lack of undergarments, though that was rather surprising. It wasn't even the never-before-witnessed action of a man taking himself in hand and relieving himself. What drew her attention to the exclusion of all else was the size of the organ that lay in his palm. Whatever she may have surmised about Professor Snape in the past, it had nothing to do with the overly-generous size of his penis.

Her nipples tightened beneath the bubbles. One complaint she had always had about Harry's prowess was that it never felt as though he fit her quite right. When she was with him, she ached to feel more, to feel him stretching her. She ached to feel full. She throbbed deep down at the thought of Severus Snape filling her ... He certainly looked as though he could.

Her thoughts were suddenly banished as her hands were pulled away from her eyes. Thank the gods he hadn't noticed she had been peeking again! She looked up to see Professor Snape's amused smirk.

"I said you may open your eyes now, Miss Granger. I hope you haven't fallen asleep; I have a whole shaker full of apple martini that would go to waste."

Carefully, she rearranged herself beneath the bubbles. "Another drink would be lovely, thanks."

She felt herself flushing. It had suddenly become dreadfully warm, and she knew it had nothing to do with the temperature of the water. What she didn't quite understand was how she could feel like this so soon after Harry's betrayal. The thought nearly drowned the warm feelings with a fresh bout of tears; that is, until Professor Snape returned holding another apple martini in one hand and a Firewhisky in the other. She reached out eagerly to take her drink.

The warmth in his voice made her forget Harry for the moment. "You have sophisticated taste for one who doesn't drink. Every so often I enjoy an apple martini; the blending of the sweet with the sour can be quite pleasant."

His voice soothed her still-fragile nerves, and she took a healthy swallow, paying attention to the sourness of the drink that was still quite noticeable even though tempered by the puckering sweetness. She smiled up at him as he situated himself on the steps of the tub, the stark white bubbles threatening the blackness of his robes.

"I agree, Professor. It is quite enjoyable."

"I think, taking the circumstances into consideration, that we are beyond formalities. Wouldn't you agree?" he asked, leaving no room for disagreement.

"It does make sense, sir...that is, I mean..."

"Severus." His name sounded like a hiss as he leaned toward her ever so slightly. "Don't be shy, Hermione. I would love to hear you say my name."

His closeness made her cheeks redden yet again. Why was she getting all flustered? Could it be that the only barrier between her and Professor Snape...er, Severus...at the moment was a thin sheen of bubbles? She drowned the thought with the last of her second martini.

"Perhaps I should wait before refreshing your drink." He noted her flushed skin as he casually sipped his Firewhisky. "In the meantime, why don't you tell me why it is you choose not to drink...under ordinary circumstances, that is."

Hermione looked away. She really had to get control over herself; every thought of Harry brought her close to tears. For some reason, she no longer wished to subject Prof...Severus to any more of her sniveling. She didn't want to become tiresome.

"Harry didn't like it when I drank. He said it made me act silly, and he didn't want other people seeing me lose control."

Severus's expression hardened almost imperceptibly, though Hermione most certainly noticed; she had become an expert in deciphering his various expressions by her seventh year. Out of habit, she opened her mouth to defend her reasoning for accepting such a stringent request.

Raising a palm to ward off her useless excuses, he asked, "And what else did your Mister Potteprotect you from? In all your years since leaving Hogwarts, exactly what have you experienced of life? As I remember, you used to be so fond of learning and exploring the unknown."

Hermione looked down into the thinning spread of foam, realizing the water was becoming tepid. She could broach no argument. Harry had held onto her after the war, and Hermione had made the sacrifices necessary to support him. Looking back on it now, knowing what she knew now, she would have made different choices. But she was no Seer; she couldn't tell the future. Young people made mistakes all the time. Her parents had tried to warn her, but she had shunned their advice, convinced that they could not possibly understand; after all, Harry was unique. True, he did not like her to do certain things, but given his upbringing, she couldn't fault him for being insecure.

"Mm. I thought as much," he continued. Her reaction was enough of a response. "As he undoubtedly proved to you tonight, Mister Potter has never thought of your well-being. He has only been concerned with his own. Am I correct?"

He was correct, she sadly admitted to herself, but to actually voice the fact was another thing. Harry had stifled her. She did not have the career she would have chosen because of Harry. She was horribly anti-social because Harry had kept her isolated from what friends she used to have, and being isolated did not really lend itself to making new friends. But worst of all, she had used the excuse of their long-standing friendship to justify staying with a man...very much still a boy in many ways...who discouraged experimenting in the bedroom, made her feel inferior physically to other women, and neglected to notice that she actually needed to feel satisfied too.

Hermione looked up into Severus's eyes, thoroughly disgusted with herself, and stated quite honestly, "Yes. You are correct. And now, I believe I shall have another drink."

Solemnly, he poured another glass for her. Her eyes were lit with the sudden understanding of her situation; she would undoubtedly speak about it when she was good and ready. He waited patiently and was not disappointed.

"I missed out on everything; you have no idea," she murmured into the green swirl of her drink before looking up and meeting his eyes. "I wanted to double major in Potions and Transfiguration after graduation, but I had to settle for an apprenticeship in Charms because Harry didn't want to leave the area. He *couldn't*, he said, because he had already lost so much, that he needed to have some stability in his life to make up for it. I sort of understood what he meant; he had sacrificed so much growing up. I guess I felt sorry for him."

The only pause she took was to drink. The liquid seemed to give her courage to continue, to get it all out in the open. There was no turning back now.

"I have a job I absolutely *hate* because of him. I have no friends left because of him; I suppose I don't need to tell you I have not made any new ones. My parents even offered to pay my tuition and lodging if only I'd go on to University, but I thought I was doing the right thing. Now I have wasted an opportunity; those are five years of my life I will never get back.... Not to forget, I have degraded myself to being the *plaything* of a man who couldn't give half a Knut if his woman was satisfied as long as he got what he came for!"

Her hand flew up to cover her mouth. Oh! Did she just say that in the presence of Professor Snape, dreaded Potions master of Hogwarts? Oh, gods. She certainly had not intended to reveal so much, but once the ball starts rolling, it gains momentum. Strangely, though, the admission had lifted a weight from her heart.

"So, am I to understand that Mister Potter was rather selfish when it came to your ... needs?"

She barely noticed him lean toward her so that he could whisper the last bit into her ear. It shot wisps of pleasure down her neck, sinking beneath the dwindling bubbles.

"It's a pity," he purred, "that in those five long, wasted years, a woman as beautiful as you has not properly been appreciated."

Her next breath was swallowed in the softest yet most passionate kiss she had ever experienced. She didn't move a muscle, afraid it would end, and when he finally did pull back, she discovered that the simple act of breathing had abandoned her. With her mind suddenly infused with lust, she met his smoldering gaze, only to feel the sparks of electricity dance in between them.

~

## Release

Chapter 4 of 10

Severus teaches Hermione the art of letting go.

*A/N: This chapter is dedicated wholeheartedly to my dear friend and trusty admin, SouthernWitch, who keeps me afloat on my bad days. Sunshine, this Severus is for you. May he grace your dreams forever.*

---

~ **Release** ~

She shook her head in the slow realization that she had succumbed to a martini-haze.

When had he removed his robes and coat? His starched white shirt was even partway undone. She watched without protest as he reached out and traced the outline of her collarbone, teasing the tender skin at the base of her throat. When his hand wound its way beneath the surface of the water and lightly brushed across her left breast, she lifted her eyes to watch his face.

He didn't meet her gaze at first. He looked intent upon the feel of her skin, tracing the logical path beneath the bubbles. His fingers were like magic, eliciting feelings of warmth and sharp pangs of desire. Every nerve seemed to sing, trying to lure their prey in with their mesmerizing song.

His palm held the weight of her flesh, squeezing slightly, as though testing a piece of fruit for ripeness. The sigh that escaped her lips brought his attention to her face, and half-lidded eyes met his own. Keeping eye contact, he drew the tips of his fingers upward until they met at the skin surrounding her nipple. His thumb skirted the edge, almost teasingly, and then all five of his fingers pulled abruptly on the peak, twisting it just the right amount to send a stab of pleasure into her stomach, taking her breath away.

Turning her in the tub so that she faced him fully, he bent over the edge and took her taut nipple into his mouth. She moaned as his tongue circled and prodded, as his mouth created suction and tried to pull the tip of her breast deeper into his mouth. His hair became the only source of leverage that kept her afloat in the tub as he turned his attention to the other side.

She never knew that such a simple act could produce such feelings. She had never had someone treat her with such care, relishing her, devouring her, making it as pleasurable for her as it was for him. Each suckle, each stroke of the tongue, plucked nerves that vibrated straight to the point between her legs. Her blood boiled, and her skin glowed with desire. She wanted more. She wanted him.

"Severus," she whispered, not wanting to interrupt such wonderful feelings, yet desperate to make him understand how much she wanted him and how much she needed this. It had been so long since she had felt anything this good.

With great difficulty it seemed, for his movements were achingly slow, he pulled away from her body. The whimper that left her lips was purely involuntary. Perhaps so was his self-satisfied smirk. With great care, he laid her back so that her head came to rest on the edge of the tub.

"Yes, Hermione?" His flirtation was mild, imparting a sense of humor through the haze of his seduction. "Your every wish is my desire. All you need to do is tell me what you want."

Pulling her hips to the surface, his fingers clutched the bones that cradled the fire, which burned low in her abdomen and shone in her eyes. He began to stroke the delicate skin between her thighs and brush against her curls, stoking the fire, breathing life into the flames. She murmured unintelligible sounds of encouragement, begging to be touched. Her hips flexed in a wordless invitation... *More*.

The moan that filled the room was not her own. It was his: a deep, animalistic growl that made her even more needy for his touch. He was enjoying giving her pleasure, and that was the most sensual thing she had ever experienced in her sexually-deprived existence. That primal moan made the last of her clinging inhibitions fade and her mind melt in a cacophony of senseless supplications, praying for him to continue, to never stop.

She returned to her senses briefly as her hips rose to the surface, pressing her against his waiting mouth. His tongue turned the heat up on the fire as it slid upward with a long, broad stroke. She shuddered and her toes curled; it was extraordinary. It was glorious. My God, how could anything that felt this good be so terrible for a man to ...

"Wait," she pleaded breathlessly. "No. You can't..."

"I can and I will. Unless this..." He slowly swept his tongue between her lower lips and twisted it around her clitoris. "...doesn't feel good. Tell me you don't like this, and I promise I will stop."

Briefly, it occurred to her how unfair it was for him to turn her brain into mush when she was trying hard to get her point across.

"Mmmm ... but, Severus, you...you can't...I mean I don't...Harry told me..." *Oh gods*, at this point she no longer cared as long as he kept doing what he was doing.

"Ah, so that's it," he murmured against her skin, sending vibrations through to her abdomen. "Mister Potter told you what? That he didn't like it? That he found it distasteful? Is that it?"

He punctuated his question with his pointed tongue, once, twice, and then three times in succession to divert her attention toward him and away from that self-centered prick of an ex- fiancé. She could no longer form words; she could only nod her head, which she did forcefully while biting her lip so as not to scream out for more.

"I happen to enjoy doing this," he said with another twist of his tongue and then a quick flick across the tip. "Your flesh is sweet on my tongue. It's as succulent as a

perfectly ripened peach."

He pushed her legs open wider and wrapped his lips around the exposed flesh ... and sucked it in. "Don't hold back, Hermione," he whispered to her between nibbles. "Don't let the lies he told you take away from the pleasure I can give you. Let him go."

At that, he rolled her clitoris in between his lips and ground his tongue at the base, forcing her hips to rise completely out of the water and a scream to burst from her throat. He pulled every last ounce of pleasure she had been forbidden to feel from the deepest recesses of her body.

The tongue that could so easily cut a person to shreds was now healing her psyche and bringing her the most intense pleasure she had ever felt. She was never going back. She didn't want to go back, not after discovering what pleasure was, how good a man could make her feel ... how good Severus Snape could make her feel.

Somewhere beneath, her climax was building where his mouth and tongue feverishly worked. It sparked and grew, encompassing her entire lower half and spreading down to her toes. She felt like her skin could no longer hold this much pleasure in, and she knew that she was about ... to ... burst. Just a little more. Gods, yes, just a little bit more. And, with a flick of his tongue and a slip of his finger, she exploded against his lips, tears of pure bliss dampening her cheeks.

"Yesssss," he hissed against her, pressing his tongue against her, feeling the violent throb of her orgasm. "Mmmmm," he hummed. "Gods, you taste so good."

Her body paused, frozen at the simple words that came from his mouth, and she squealed. She couldn't believe it ... his words shot through her, arresting her climax and sending her to a higher level, making her climax anew, harder than before. She panted and squirmed against his mouth, and he held on tightly and caressed her swollen flesh until the spasms subsided.

Eventually, his lips found other places to roam, brushing the inside of her thigh, climbing to the swell of her belly, up toward her breasts, and finally to her mouth. He pulled her body to his, holding her as her breathing steadily slowed.

In her ear, he whispered, "Never let anyone tell you differently: You are so beautiful."

As if gifts were pouring from the heavens, showering her with pleasures and praises. After all that had happened, after being so distraught, what had she done to deserve this? What had she done to deserve Severus Snape's attention? A lone tear trickled out of one of her eyes, and gently he removed it, watching the emotions play across her face. It wasn't a tear of sadness, but one of happiness.

That was when she noticed that Severus was reclining halfway in the tub.

"I'm getting your shirt wet," she murmured against his shoulder.

"I don't care," he whispered. Her hair was damp and smelled faintly of cinnamon and nutmeg.

"Severus?" His name coming from her lips made him embrace her tighter.

"Yes, Hermione," he answered softly, ready to grant her anything she wished, hoping that she would never ask for him to let go.

"Take me to bed."

"Your wish is my desire, beautiful one," he answered. And he picked her out of the tub, with bubbles still clinging in certain places, and carried her to the candle-lit warmth of his bedchambers.

~~~~o~~~

The flame of the few candles that he had scattered throughout the room danced across the walls, bathing everything in an ideal glow. Her skin took on a golden hue, and so it was that she finally felt sexy for the first time that night...perhaps even for the first time in five years.

Severus laid her across his bed, watched as she sank into the velvet covering, and decided what he was going to do next. One of his hands ascended to the top of his collar, slid down the length of shirt that was already open, and began to undo the rest of the buttons. With intense curiosity, she watched his chest slowly come into view. He peeled back the fabric, removed it from his shoulders, and tossed it aside.

Every moment seemed to her like a slow dance, a deliberate action meant to titillate her senses. She propped herself on her elbows, displaying herself for him as he did the same for her. How she wanted to reach out to touch his chest, bathed in the same glow as hers, so different from its natural paleness. How she wanted to playfully toy with the sparse down that flirted the edge of his nipples and traveled beyond the confines of his trousers.

His trousers. The image of him earlier in the bathroom, relieving himself when he thought she wasn't looking, made her realize that there was nothing beneath those trousers ... except for skin. She followed the trail of hair downward to the top of his pants, where his hands now rested, and held her breath. She wondered vaguely if it was by design that the lower half of his body fell in the shadows. She could not see what lay beyond his hands.

This strip tease by a man whom she would have never thought capable of such an act filled her with newfound desire. She could feel the dampening already between her legs. She wanted to feel him there, nestled inside of her tightly. She wanted to feel the pleasure she knew he could give her.

Subconsciously, her right hand traveled across her stomach at the thought of him being ... right there. Her knee bent, opening the way for her fingers to slide between. It was only when he moaned in approval did she realize what she had done...what she was doing. A blush rose in her cheeks, but she did not stop the circling of her fingers over her already-sensitive skin. Deciding to make a show for him, she slowly spread her lips, displaying the most intimate part of herself for him. She had never performed this way for a man before...she had never performed like this for anyone. This was her most private act, and she was sharing it with him.

She let her middle finger slide down and then up, caressing her clitoris, as she focused on the hands that were now unfastening his pants. He held them closed for a moment, pausing to enjoy her reaction. Then, he looked into her eyes.

His gaze was full of raw desire. He wanted her, and he knew that she wanted him. Nothing could be better than this, a mutual desire of the same thing, a mutual pleasure. Satisfied still that she wanted this as much as he did, his pants fell open and dropped to the ground.

Good gods. If she had thought his size was impressive when he was flaccid, it was something to be admired when he was erect. He cupped his testicles with his left hand and pushed them upward against his shaft. It was a beautiful picture. One that was most appreciated, and one that caused her fingers to rub a little faster.

It wasn't that he was long, for though he was gifted in length, that wasn't where her concentration lay. No, indeed; it was in his girth. Sitting up, she abandoned her own flesh for his. She reached out and wrapped her fingers around his erection. Her eyes swam in delirium when her fingers didn't even meet her thumb on the other side. She slid her legs off the edge of the bed, hooking one around his, entrapping him in a quasi-embrace.

She licked her lips and remembered his earlier intimate kisses upon her own body. She had done this only a few times before and had disliked it immensely. However, with Severus, she suddenly felt the urge to wrap her lips around him and bring his passion to greater heights like she knew it would. She actually wanted to taste him. It surprised her and fueled her passion like she never thought it would. Slowly, she took him into her mouth, stretching her lips to accommodate him. Her tongue rolled over the ridge that separated the shaft from the head, and his hands instantly brought her motions to a halt.

"Tonight is supposed to be about you," he said, bringing his lips lower to meet her own.

She fell backwards onto the bed with his lips feverishly kissing her mouth, her chin, the line of jaw that reached up to her ear, and then finally the ear itself. He ran his

tongue along the outer edge from the lobe around to the twisting path that disappeared inside the shell. Delicately, he tasted the skin and then breathed gently across it, sending shivers down her spine.

"Yesss," she heard a voice say, and then realized that voice was her own.

He held himself above her body on hands and knees, but this declaration of need prompted him into action. Lowering himself, he turned both of their bodies over in one swift move, sitting her on top, giving her all of the control.

His erection lay hot across his belly, waiting for what was to come, looking as though sooner would be better. She looked down at it nestled between her curls and his, feeling the hardness as the base of his shaft pressed up against her clitoris. Tilting her hips, she ground herself against him, forward and then back. Her eyes nearly rolled back in her head, savoring the direct contact this position afforded.

"Ah," he moaned in approval. "Do that again."

She did as she was told, and his hands rose to cup her breasts that hung between them. He cradled their heaviness, kneading them carefully, pressing his thumbs gently...but not too gently...over her nipples, worshipping them. He dragged a fingernail across the tip of one and felt the pressure increase down below.

The tension forced her hips down a little tighter, putting even more pressure on top of him. Her desire made him wet, more than ready for her. She threaded her fingers at his temples, combing the hair back from his face, and descended upon him, kissing him with such force that it caused both of them to moan into the other's mouth.

Breathing heavily between kisses, tongues found lips and lips meet teeth and teeth met whatever skin they could find. It was hard and needy, the both of them finding what they desired from each other. Their mouths mimicked the frantic movements that slowly built through the action of their bodies as they pressed and rubbed against each other. Losing all sense, they could hardly think what to do next as their bodies drove them to come to a single conclusion.

It was Severus who found the strength to pull back. "Hermione, I want you ... now." It was a command, and it was delivered quickly and in between harsh breaths. All she wanted to do was obey.

Reaching between their bodies, she pressed her hand between his erection and his stomach, easily raising it up and sliding down upon it, sinking slowly, savoring every inch of him as he stretched her wide and filled her deep.

"Ooooooh, gods...," she crooned above him. "Oh, yessssss."

She pulled up, ever so slowly, giving their bodies time to adjust to each other. Desire filled every crevice of her brain, and she couldn't see straight. No, this wasn't going to do. Sinking down on him suddenly, an act that made Severus groan and gasp simultaneously, she flattened against his body and forced him to turn on top of her.

"Severus," she whispered as his knees found purchase between her legs, "make love to me."

The request was so full of passion, so needful. It wasn't a demand. It was a plea. He knew she needed this to eradicate every last awful memory of the day, and he was going to do this for her.

Grabbing one of her ankles, he hooked it over his shoulder and surged forward. He penetrated deep, sheathing himself fully and then pushing into her more. She felt him all the way into her stomach and beyond just a little, as if he were asking her to open her heart and share her soul. Anything. She just wanted more. She needed him more than anything.

He turned his head and nibbled the inside of her calf, pulling out and pushing in, in a slow steady rhythm, teasing her, knowing she wanted more, yet holding back. She tried angling her hips to receive him deeper, to thrust onto him as he pushed into her, but he wouldn't allow it.

Growling in frustration, she forced him into action. "Damn it, Severus! Fuck me ... now!"

That's all it took. Sweet lovemaking turned into frantic coupling, and he let her leg fall beside him as he attacked her with his mouth and began battling with her tongue. He was nearly crushing her with his weight, but it only added to the excitement she felt as he pressed into her over and over, strangling the flow of blood in her veins except that which flowed between the connection their two bodies made.

The room was filled with the sounds of short gasps and sharp cries, both of them too occupied to say anything, saving their energy, concentrating on making this last as long as possible, building the tension as high as it would go. Words were no longer possible. Only their bodies spoke to each other as each stroked and caressed and fell into the other. It was sheer pleasure ... nothing had ever felt this good. Ever.

Coming close to the end, Severus snaked a hand between their bodies and commanded, "I want you to come ... when I tell you to."

His thumb circled between their tightly pressing bodies, moving faster as he pulled out, almost stopping when he pushed home, never relenting. Her cheeks were flushed a glorious red. She was almost there, almost ready ... oh, gods, she was going to ...

"Now, Hermione. Come ... now!" Severus shouted.

Suddenly, her body collapsed around his, drawing him deeper, convulsing around him, constricting him, letting him go, wrapping him in a grip of pure passion. He pushed into her a final time and let himself follow, falling into her, releasing inside of her just as she released around him.

Finally, their kisses slowed and the passion fell into a slow simmer ... and then, they collapsed into each other's embrace and that of a peaceful slumber.

---

*A/N: What a way to end a chapter. No afterglow. Ah, well. I'll just let that sit with you all a while, and we'll deal with the after-issues next chapter.*

*So, Sunshine, did you like your Severus? Hmm... what do you think: keep him or toss him to another witch?*

## Pleasure

*Chapter 5 of 10*

Hermione learns that she can indeed please a man.

~ *Pleasure* ~

Sometime in the middle of the night, between dreams filled with Severus' fingers, tongue and other newly-desired male body parts, Hermione awoke to realize that the heat pooling between her legs was not the result of another dream. Instead, it was Severus who was slowly drawing her to him with delicately circling fingers. As she stirred beneath his touch, he nuzzled her neck from behind and murmured into her ear.

"I hope I didn't wake you."

"Mmmm...", she replied, enjoying the half-awake desirous state she found herself in.

"Because if you'd rather go back to sleep, I can comply." Severus withdrew his hand and cuddled her close instead.

Hermione twisted in his arms. "Mmmm, *no*, was what I meant ... I mean, you *did* wake me, but I'd rather not go back to sleep."

Facing him in the dark, she could just make out the outline of his nose and the dark circles where his eyes were no doubt trying to penetrate the darkness. She tilted her head upward and kissed the corner of his mouth, encouraging him to continue whatever he had been meaning to start.

"Mm-hmm," he replied suggestively. "Then, what *would* you rather be doing?"

His right hand traced the curvature of her spine until it rested upon the rounded flesh of her bottom. He tucked her body closer and hooked one leg around her uppermost thigh. Caressing her bum and then slowly inserting his fingers between the softness of her inner thighs, he resumed the activity that had awoken her.

Her heart beat a few beats faster, wiping even the memory of sleep from her mind. She nearly forgot that he had said something and was awaiting a response.

"I'd much rather be doing *this*," she said.

Well, that wasn't completely honest. There was a lot more than just *this* she'd rather be doing. Taking his cue, she let her left hand wander across his chest blindly.

"And this," she added as her hand reached the soft down below his belly button and brushed against the tip of his erection. Angling her fingertips downward, she crept down his length and cradled the soft sac lower down. "And this."

"Mmmm," he replied predictably.

From where she was cradled against his body, she was able to place her lips against the base of his throat without stretching upward. Gently, she extricated herself from his embrace and rolled him onto his back. In the darkness, she let her hands slide from his shoulders to his chest, thumbs feeling for the small, tight peaks. When she found them, her mouth descended upon one and suckled it between her lips.

"Thank you," she murmured as she abandoned one nipple for the much softer other.

Severus didn't reply immediately; instead, he let her give his other nipple its due attention. Then, he placed his hands on her shoulders and tried to sit up, drawing her upward to meet his waiting lips. When she pulled in the opposite direction, placing a kiss in the slight-concavity of his breastbone and continued in a southerly direction, he dropped back onto the bed.

"Whatever are you thanking me for?" he murmured, sending vibrations through her lips as her lips brushed across his diaphragm.

"Well, one, for being my knight in shining armor earlier tonight." She nipped lightly at the tender skin just below his ribcage. "Two, for letting me stay here until I find my own place." His navel retracted as her tongue rimmed the edge. "But, most notably, three, for showing me what a mind-blowing orgasm feels like."

At this point, her chin bumped into his waiting erection, and she angled her head to take him into her mouth. He moaned as her tongue flicked just under the edge and swept around to the fuller side of the head. Carefully, she let the tip slide in until she felt the ridge go past her lips. He didn't taste too terribly, though he certainly tasted like something, considering what they had been doing just a few hours earlier. She wondered if some of what she tasted on him was what she tasted like.

Severus' hand stilled the actions of her lips and tongue and stopped her head from descending further. "I don't want you to do anything you don't feel comfortable doing."

Wrapping her hand around the base of his shaft, her lips released him in order to answer. "*want* to do this. I know this is ... um, well, a lot more than I'm used to, but I'm not adverse to the idea."

He chuckled at her admission. "If a certain *someone* weren't involved in your wealth of experience, I may be curious as to how *much* more. As it is, I'm not curious at all."

"Hmmp," she responded, her mouth already having resumed its activity.

Both of Severus' hands rested on her head, but neither made any effort to guide her technique or her pace. He left it totally up to her, for which she was infinitely grateful. He was certainly a mouthful, especially since she had been cursed with a relatively small mouth...*something Harry used to always complain about* she reminded herself.

Shaking her head to dislodge the self-defeating thoughts, she then reminded herself that he was probably comparing her mouth to Ron's gargantuan spread, and she choked through not paying enough attention to the task at hand. Severus groaned above her, giving her an idea.

Letting her hand take over while she calmed her gag reflex, she planned her next line of attack. A few deep breaths through her nose, and she felt ready for what she wanted to do. She kept the slow movement of her hand going, hoping that would make up for what her skill lacked. Then, she let her mouth sink over him again. This time, she opened her throat mid-yawn and pulled him in deeper. When the tip of his head butted against the back of her throat, instead of gagging, she swallowed, constricting her throat around his head. Then, she released him and pulled back, winding her tongue around him a couple times, readying herself for another go.

She set up a rhythm this way, between her hand and her yawning-swallowing technique and the swirl of her tongue. And Severus was by no means silent amidst it all. He was, in fact, quite vocal, urging her onward, letting her know that what she was doing was very pleasing. At some point, he had taken his hands from her head and buried them into the sheets. It had significantly taken the stress off her scalp, for he had started to wind his fingers rather painfully in her curls. She had more than a sneaking suspicion that he was trying to keep from asking more from her than she was ready to give.

"Hermione ... Ah, Hermione ... Hermione ...?"

She realized that she had become hypnotized by the rhythm almost a little too late. As she raised her head to ask "What?" her chin was showered with the proof that what she had been doing was indeed quite pleasurable for him.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in surprise, letting her hand finish what her mouth had begun, soothing him, feeling his pleasure abate in the darkness.

Then, feeling bold and more than a little curious, she gathered her hair back with one hand and leant over to taste what still remained on the tip of his slowly softening flesh. It wasn't bad, certainly much different than Harry tasted ... better even.

"Mmmm ...," he groaned.

"Now, now," she scolded. "That's what got us into this mess in the first place."

He laughed outright at that, which made her sit up abruptly, not having remembered ever hearing him laugh before. Chuckle, yes; laugh, no. She heard him fumbling at the side of the bed, mumble a cleansing spell, and then toss the wand with a clatter to the floor. She yelped as he yanked her down to lay with him, nestling her in his arms.

"Now, it's my turn to say 'Thank you,'" he said as she burrowed into his embrace.

"Whatever for? You did the same for me. Turn about's fair play."

"All the same, it was perfect. I wasn't sure you'd feel okay doing something like that ... so soon." He added the last bit quietly.

She knew he didn't want to bring up Harry and what brought her to be in his rooms, but it had to be talked about sometime. There was no need to begin this relationship...if that's what indeed this was...by being afraid to talk to each other about things.

"Don't worry about me," she said thoughtfully. "I think I had been miserable in that situation for so long that I detached myself years ago. I just didn't realize it until tonight. I know I don't have the experiences I could have had if..."

"Experience is not what it's all about, Hermione," he interrupted. "It's determination and willingness. You definitely have plenty of that. I'm glad that he didn't take that from you as well."

"Yes. Well, I didn't feel very willing when I was with him. I started to doubt myself. I guess I sort of assumed that I would feel the same way with anyone else as I did with him," she confessed.

"Well, do you?"

"Oh, gods, how can you ask me such a question? Of course not! I cannot even begin to express how alive you've made me feel tonight. I have felt things I don't even *remember* feeling before with Harry. I mean, for starters, you don't force me to do anything. You are just as concerned about my pleasure as you are yours. I can honestly say that I do not remember Harry ever giving me an orgasm." She sighed.

"You know what, Hermione? I'm beginning to feel sorry that I didn't spoon-feed that boy's arse to Voldemort when I had the chance."

She giggled and hugged him to her more tightly. "You know what, Severus? If Voldemort hadn't been the scourge of the wizarding world, I almost wish you would have."

"Mmmm ...," he concurred. "Glad that's settled."

"You know what else, Severus?"

"No, I don't know what else, but I expect you are about to tell me," he said.

"I'm feeling very *unsettled*," she said, hoping he'd catch the lilt in her voice.

"Oh, really?"

She felt him twitch against her hip and smiled. "Yes. As a matter of fact, I was thinking of fixing it myself, but..."

Severus growled and flipped her onto her back. "Not a chance," he answered right before he captured her mouth with his, devouring her with fresh passion.

She could almost taste the flavor of his mood.

---

*A/N: Just a little something for you all. The developing (sexual) relationship between the two. The 'getting to know you' phase, as it were. Soon, I'm afraid, Harry must be confronted. I just couldn't leave the fun part too quickly, you know ...*

## Confiscation

Chapter 6 of 10

Confiscation of the heart ... and confiscation of a different kind.

~ **Confiscation** ~

The rain had stopped sometime during the night. Not that they had noticed when it had, for when Severus and Hermione were not making love, they were wrapped in each others' arms, sleeping soundly.

Hermione awoke first, curled in Severus' embrace with one of his sinewy arms holding her tight across the midsection. Her eyes slowly opened to a sight she had never before seen: a gentler, more relaxed Severus Snape. When he was asleep, the deep lines that usually creased his brow and grew deeper as the day progressed seemed to just melt away.

It was ironic. Here was a man who was oftentimes hard and cruel in his public persona, but in private, he was soft and caring. If she were to tell anyone that Harry was the exact opposite, no one would believe her. It was strange, but all those years she stared at Harry sleeping by her side, she never saw him as soft and caring ... especially toward the end. She had mostly felt a longing of what she wished could be and an underlying sense of regret of what wasn't, and it had colored her perception of him greatly. She sighed; why was she in bed with Severus and still thinking about Harry? It made no sense.

"Is something wrong?"

Hermione looked up, startled that Severus was awake. "Mm, no. I'm just a little impatient with myself is all."

"It'll take some time to let go of the past. Give yourself time." Severus gently moved a few sleep-wild curls from her forehead.

"I know. Well, logically I do. But I've never been patient with myself when it comes to new ideas."

He chuckled. "Why doesn't that surprise me?" Reaching down, he laid both of his hands upon her bum and pulled her against the hard heat of his body. "What would you say to putting some of that impatience to good use?" He accompanied his words with a few gentle thrusts of his hips, not giving her the chance to misunderstand his innuendo.

His voice had dropped to a half-whisper, half-growl...and it had the most extraordinary effect upon her. Like liquid, desire poured throughout her entire body, igniting her senses as it went. She felt the need for him so strongly. A shift of her body to place a kiss upon his chin made her hip brush against the only thing that lay between their bodies ... the only thing she longed to be within her body.

"You know, at this rate we'll never get out of bed," she whispered, stealing upward toward his mouth for a proper kiss.

"Is there a rule somewhere that states professors...or their guests for that matter...must rise at a specific time? Because I wasn't made aware of such a rule, and if there were one, I most definitely would not care," he stated in a tone that brooked no argument and that sent shivers traveling down her spine.

The only answer she could muster was to press her lips against his in a silent plea for more. With each placement of her lips and each response from his, she reminded herself, *This is Severus Snape I am kissing*. The thought sent little sparks of lightning to the parts of her that remembered the fervent caresses of the night before ... those of the amazing man who now had her pressed into the bed with his fully aroused body. She tried angling her hips into a more amenable position for him to gain entrance, but he stayed just outside her reach, frustrating her.

"Oh, please, Severus," she whispered.

"Please, what?" he teased both with his body and words, moving against her but never quite letting her have what she most desired.

Hermione whimpered as she felt him ... almost ... touch her right where she wanted him to be. "Please, I need you," she said between breaths, which had grown heavy, and kisses, which were growing heady. She could survive on merely the taste of him. She was pretty certain they could live solely off the sustenance gained as their mouths devoured and their teeth sank into the musk-laden skin of the other.

"Hmm." He sampled the soft skin behind her ear, tender for only a moment, as he gently grazed against her, down where the heat was coming to a boil. "Is this what you want?"

"Mm-hmm," she answered desperately, the pitch of her voice rising slightly with the urgency of her desire. "Right there."

"You sound a little impatient," he said, baiting her, frustrating her to the point where she felt like screaming.

She certainly was impatient, and she was quickly becoming a little irate at being forbidden satisfaction. Her hands grasped the roundness of his arse, and in a brief but fleeting moment of lucidity, she appreciated how the flesh fit nicely in the palms of her hands. It was perfect for squeezing, for kneading, for pulling him toward her ... into her. His back was stronger than her arms, however, and he froze his position just out of contact, not allowing her to pull him that last, scant centimeter.

Hermione screamed. "Ah, Severus!"

Which made him chuckle ... which in turn had his point involuntarily nudging against the flesh so desperately waiting to be satisfied.

"Impatience never accomplished anything, Miss Granger," he growled in his classroom voice ... a voice that sounded more seductive now than it did foreboding.

"Oh, please, please, please," she chanted, his tone making her want him now more than ever. "Fuck me, Professor. Fuck me."

Severus growled and pressed his lips frantically against hers, and as he sought entrance between her chanting lips with his tongue, he found her equally receptive below. Hard, their bodies met. Swift, they found their pace. It was a fast-paced game of give and take, as they pulled and pushed against each other, two bodies striving for the same thing, both of them wanting more ... desperate for what the other had to give.

Hermione knew her climax was near. His teasing had her shuddering almost before he entered her. She could feel it quickly building, and she suddenly found herself unable to breathe and kiss him simultaneously. There was nothing left to do but toss her head backwards and gasp for air, as each of Severus' strokes aimed to perfectly hit the mark, that spot that was intended to be reached by the right man ... the one that fit perfectly, the one that she called 'lover.'

She raced toward the precipice, oblivious of all else except how good he was making her feel. Then, just as she neared the top, she hesitated, aware of her selfishness and wanting to give a little back to the man who brought her there. For a while, she simply enjoyed the sensation of him winding her that little bit tighter as he neared his own orgasm. But the tighter she got, the more she wanted to give in. The heat of her loins pooled within her head, and she felt it get tighter ... and tighter.

It was his litany of, "Hermione ... Hermione ... Hermione!" that had her crashing back to earth so hard that she almost wept with emotion and sheer relief. He didn't stop repeating her name until he had completely spent himself inside of her. And still, her body embraced him as he relaxed into his post-orgasmic bliss.

~~~O O~~~

They awoke again sometime before lunch. It was a lazy awakening. Both of them were fully alert, and they knew they ought to really get out of bed and greet the day. Their bodies were exhausted. No longer did a simple touch ignite such a desperate desire for more. Though when Severus finally did rise out of bed and hold a hand out to help her up, the sight of his body, flaccid though he was, made tiny thrills of pleasure shoot from her stomach to her loins.

She smiled up at him and accepted his hand. Then, her stomach growled ... loudly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, laughing a little and holding her stomach in embarrassment, trying to stifle its complaint. "I guess some lunch would really be good right about now."

"I'd say so." Severus smirked.

They entered the bathroom together, and Severus let go of her hand to walk over to the loo. For a second, Hermione was reminded of the night before when she had, unbeknownst to him, satisfied her curiosity as to what he hid beneath those austere robes. Her lips curled up in a secretive smile, one that Severus did not miss.

"If you think I don't know you were peeking last night, you are mistaken," he said while he relieved himself.

Shocked, Hermione forgot completely what he was doing...right in front of her, no less...and started to sputter. "But...I didn't...I mean I didn't mean to..."

"Oh, you most certainly *meant* to." He smiled and shook off the last few drops, at which Hermione's brows raised a fraction.

"Well, okay. I *did* mean to. But what do you expect? I had a bit to drink, and you have to admit that there is something mysterious about a man who always keeps himself buttoned up against the world..." Hermione smiled sweetly at him.

"Indeed." He hesitated a moment. "Well?"

"Well, what?" she asked, confused at his expectant stare.

"It's your turn, is *what*. You can't tell me that an entire night of lovemaking has robbed you of your bodily functions."

She blushed. He expected her to ... do that ... in front of him? Sure, she was standing naked in front of him, and one would *think* that going to the loo would just logically follow. But she wasn't sure if she was ready for that quite yet. Harry used to walk in on her all the time, and it just reminded her of how hypocritical he was, never letting her enter the bathroom while he was using it.

But Severus wasn't Harry. And Severus wasn't asking her to do something that he hadn't already done himself. Not to mention, she really did have to go ... and it was becoming too uncomfortable to really argue the point with him. She threw him an acidic look, tipped the ring down onto the toilet, and sat down to relieve her aching bladder.

Smirking, Severus turned away to wash his hands.

"Don't smirk at me, Severus Snape," she scolded as she quickly finished and joined him at the sink. "That wasn't easy for me, you know."

"I do know. But now that we have overcome that little obstacle, we will be completely comfortable with each other, don't you think?"

He cupped her chin and turned her to face him. He was right. She was certain this would be much easier the next time. And it was certainly better than waiting to use the bathroom since there was only one in his quarters. Her smiling lips invited him to kiss her soundly, and he took his leisure with the task.

Her stomach growled again.

Severus laughed. "Okay! Okay, I surrender! Let's go to lunch. What do you say to The Three Broomsticks instead of the Great Hall this afternoon? I don't feel like braving my colleagues' stares at the moment. I want you all to myself."

She wondered for a moment at his ability to say the right thing at the right time. Severus Snape was either a true gentleman or a true Slytherin. She hoped it was a combination of the two.

"The Three Broomsticks it is, and the quicker the better. You don't happen to have a Floo connection?" she asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid not. Dress quickly. I'll Apparate us once we reach the gates."

Hermione found her wand and spelled the clothes...which she found clean and folded on the bed...onto her body faster than Severus managed. Smirking at the saucy thought that it must be all those buttons that slowed things down, she inserted her arm through his and they went off to lunch.

~~~o o~~~

Lunch never tasted so good. Perhaps it was the company that made the pot roast and steamed vegetables taste so much better. Hermione certainly never remembered Madam Rosmerta's food tasting like this. She and Severus kept up steady conversation both about things important to them and things not so important, even once commenting upon how beautiful the weather was today. And not once did Severus' sharp demeanor appear. In fact, he was relaxed and spoke with an ease of tone that invited more conversation, regardless of the topic.

His personality still shone through, of course. She could definitely see how Professor Snape was the same man as Severus Snape, who sat across from her. It was sort of like watching an actor in different roles and noticing how his mannerisms were the same. It was as entertaining as the conversation itself.

Hermione sat sipping her café latte and smiling contentedly. She didn't notice Severus staring at her until he cleared his throat.

Looking up at him, she saw the amused look on his face. "Hmm?"

"Hmm? Is that all you have to say? I mean, you're sitting there with this grin on your face and..."

"I am *not* grinning!" But she most definitely was by that point. "Okay, well, maybe I am a little. But I can't help it. I'm..."

"Happy?" he asked, a hopeful note in his voice.

"Yes," she replied. "Happy. I am happy. *You* make me happy."

He reached across the table and held her free hand. "Good. I'm happy as well."

They sat there smiling at each other in silence, not really having to speak, feeling very comfortable and at peace with themselves and each other. More than once, Hermione marveled at the fact that she felt so relaxed around Severus, and more than once, she compared how she felt with how she always felt with Harry.

It was while they were walking the streets of Hogsmeade, arm in arm, that it suddenly dawned on Hermione how right it felt to be with Severus. Never mind that their relationship had not progressed very far. She had known him for ages, although she was certainly finding out more about him as the minutes wore on. She had never felt this way about anyone she had dated before; there had always been something that didn't seem quite right. Not with Severus.

When they reached Honeydukes, Hermione stopped. "Oh, I have a craving for dark truffles. Can we go in?"

Severus noticed that Honeydukes was a little crowded, even though none of the Hogwarts students were there this particular weekend. "How about I go across to the post office to send an owl while you go inside? I forgot that I meant to order some rare potions ingredients, and I can only get them by owl order."

Patting his hand, knowing Severus was coming up with any excuse not to have to enter Honeydukes, she said, "You go ahead. I'll try not to be too long."

They parted in the middle of the street to go their separate ways. When she reached the door of Honeydukes, she looked over her shoulder to see Severus waylaid by a wizard outside of the post office. He glanced in her direction with a grimace, and she smiled in response.

Before she was able to open the door, however, two pops of Apparation sounded: one on her left side and one on her right.

"Hold her!" exclaimed one familiar voice, which turned out to belong to none other than Harry Potter. From the other side, she was gripped tightly by freckle-dusted arms.

"What are you doing?" she shouted, struggling in Ron's not-so-friendly embrace.

"Saving you from that greasy git," Ron said nastily.

From behind, she heard a shout from across the street, and for a brief moment, she felt sure that Severus was going to come to her aid. But the boys were quicker than she expected. Before she could utter another syllable, Harry and Ron Disapparated with Hermione in their arms.

~



# Deliberation

Chapter 7 of 10

Outwit ... outplay ... outlast

~ Deliberation ~

When Harry and Ron arrived at their destination, Hermione was still struggling in Ron's arms. He held her tight, her chest against his Quidditch-hardened one, so that she could not flail her arms or escape before they had the tiny apartment warded. When the dank rooms were properly secured, he lowered her feet to the floor to stop her from kicking him in the shins, something she had been trying to do since they Disapparated from Hogsmeade.

"Grab her wand, Harry," was all he said through teeth gritted from the effort of keeping her still.

"What are you...get your bloody hands off me, Ronald Weasley! And don't you dare touch my wand, Harry Potter!"

Hermione screamed, twisting in Ron's not-so-friendly embrace, doing everything in her power to make him let go, but he was too strong for her. Ron just held her tighter. Harry approached, and like the adept Seeker that he was, he filched her wand from a pocket beneath her robes without too much difficulty.

"Keep her still," Harry grunted above the sounds of scuffling feet. "I need her to drink this."

Tucking her wand in his back pocket, Harry pressed her body between his and Ron's to cease her movements and to keep her from seeing exactly what it was she was about to drink. His arm circled around her head, trapping her chin in the crook of his elbow. She flailed more, but with both Ron and Harry holding her, she had even less hope of release. When Harry grabbed her chin and forced the edge of the bottle against her lips, her screaming stopped and her mouth shut up tight. She wasn't going to let anyone force her to drink something when she had no idea what it was. The gods only knew where they obtained it from. She had a sneaking suspicion that it wasn't legal if they had to force her to drink it like this.

"Come on, Hermione. Open up. The potion is for your own good. It's safe. The man at the apothecary told me that it's used frequently on brainwashing victims."

"For the *last time*, I have NOT been..."

Harry took advantage of the argument and tilted the vial into her open mouth. She spat the contents onto Ron's shirt.

"Aw, come on!" Ron yelled indignantly. "This shirt is new!"

"Just hold her, Ron. You know how to use a wand; clean it later," Harry growled. His patience was growing short at Hermione's resistance. He swore under his breath, mumbling something about Snape and a cauldron that would have had Mrs. Weasley scouring his mouth out with soap.

"Open ... your ... mouth," Harry said in Hermione's ear and forced her jaw open. Before she had a chance to breathe, he administered another dose of the potion and clamped her mouth shut, holding his hand over both her mouth and nose and giving her no choice but to swallow. She thrashed between the bodies of her kidnappers, desperate for air. Only when her throat swallowed reflexively did Harry let go, leaving Hermione to gasp for air in Ron's arms.

"Might as well let her go, Ron. I have her wand now, and the wards will hold her. She isn't going anywhere." Harry set the bottle of mostly-drunken potion on the counter of the kitchenette and patted his back pocket to reassure himself that her wand hadn't fallen out.

The second Ron released her, Hermione dropped to all fours and began retching. The potion tasted worse than anything she had ever tasted before, and even worse, it seemed to have left a film on her tongue and teeth. However, all the retching seemed to do was fill her nostrils with the potion as well. She couldn't rid herself of it.

"Try all you want, Hermione. It's spelled to stay down," Harry said calmly, waiting for her to finish her dramatics.

"Bastard," Hermione spat, wiping away tears on the sleeve of her robes. "What gives you the right..."

"We love you. That's enough of a right. Someone had to save you from that pompous, self-serving, Death Eater of a git."

Ron spoke the last few words with such hatred in his voice that it started the adrenaline pumping through Hermione's veins. She stood slowly, keeping an eye warily on the two men, and took stock of her surroundings. The windows were boarded, the light was dim, the room was dingy, and she had no idea where they were.

"Where are we?"

She tried to mask the anger in her tone. The only reason they had released her was because they knew she wouldn't be able to Apparate. Harry had said something about wards. The only way she was going to be able to escape was to make them drop their guard. She had to make them believe...somehow...that this potion was working, even though she knew it wasn't going to do a thing, except maybe give her a stomachache. She scraped her tongue on her teeth, trying to get rid of the taste in her mouth.

"Someplace no one will find us," Harry stated matter-of-factly, walking over to the sink to draw a glass of water from a lime-encrusted tap. "Someplace safe where you can recover from your ... ordeal."

"The only ordeal I need recovering from is finding you two in bed together." Her lip curled at the mention of their infidelity, and she would have gladly knocked the glass of water from Harry's hand if she hadn't needed a drink so badly.

"Yeah. Well, I'm sorry you found out that way. I..."

"Sorry I found out that way? You're sorry I found out, but you're not sorry that you cheated on me? This was the ultimate betrayal, Harry. And now I've not only lost you and what we had...or didn't have as it turns out...but I've also lost the only other friend I felt close to."

"We were going to tell you," Harry explained softly, handing the glass of water to her.

Hesitating momentarily only because Harry still had not addressed anything she had said, she took the glass. The water was cloudy, but anything had to be better than what she had just drank. She took several long, deep swallows, trying to wash away the acrid taste of the potion, and found it at least to be cool and mildly refreshing.

"So, how long does it take for this potion to *supposedly* take effect?" she asked.

"The man said it varies with the individual, but generally not longer than a couple hours," he answered, shrugging.

"Ah." Hermione nodded and looked away, deciding it wasn't worth it to say anymore to either of them. They wouldn't believe it if the potion looked as though it worked immediately. She needed to bide her time and say as little as possible in the meantime.

She fiddled for a minute with the glass in her hands until she noticed the abandoned potion bottle sitting on the counter near the sink. Casually, she walked over to the sink and flipped the tap open to rinse out her glass and wash her hands...making a face when she discovered that there wasn't any soap. She made sure to place the glass next to the bottle, although she was pretty sure that neither Harry nor Ron were paying any attention, and when she had finished and closed the tap, she palmed the tiny bottle and stuffed it in a pocket.

Her eyes roamed around the filthy little apartment. The walls were peeling paper. The floors were smudged and crusted in places with dirt that had been there for ages. The whole place smelled as though it hadn't been occupied for months, maybe years. It certainly hadn't been cleaned in as long.

"If it's any consolation, Hermione," Ron spoke up suddenly, drawing her attention to the ratty, torn-up old sofa upon which he had perched, "I'm sorry we betrayed you ... but you have to understand, it wasn't something we planned. We ... it ... there was one night a long time ago, while we were still at Hogwarts, and we never spoke of it again until..."

"Not that it really matters anymore," she interrupted, "but how long has this been going on?"

Ron looked over Hermione's shoulder at Harry, and she turned around just in time to see Harry shaking his head and mouthing, "No."

"What?" Hermione was trying to remain calm, though it wasn't easy. "Don't think you've lied to me enough? Oh, sure. What's another lie on top of the scads of lies you've told me already? What an excellent way to win me back, Harry."

She stalked over to where a window should have been and stared at an abnormally shaped knot in one of the nailed-up planks of wood. Not even a chink of light dared to sneak in between the planks; they were too closely placed. There was no hope of glimpsing even a tiniest bit of the surrounding area.

Harry and Ron had their heads together on the other side of the room, whispering to each other. The occasional word slipped across the room, but not enough for her to hear the entire conversation. She tried to piece together what they were talking about from words such as "apologize" and "potion" and "leave." The only thing that made sense was that they were waiting for the potion to take effect so they could leave, and that they knew she wasn't about to move past what had happened without a real apology.

Not that either of them knew how to apologize. What sort of apologies had those been? Harry obviously didn't think he did anything wrong; he only apologized for her finding them together. And Ron ... Well, Ron's apology was better, but he had started to make excuses for his behavior, which negated the apology in her opinion. Without doubt, any sort of close relationship with either Harry or Ron had been damaged beyond repair. Still, if they apologized sincerely, perhaps she could find it in her heart to forgive them someday...just not right away, and certainly not for a long time.

But she had to concentrate on getting out of there. Whatever plan they had come up with, the only way she was going to get out of there was if they believed the potion was working. And the only way they were going to believe that was if she stopped arguing with them and started treating them like she had before ... before she had the misfortune of finding them in bed together.

But the potion was not working like they thought it would, though it was no surprise to her. If it truly was a potion given to brainwashing victims, then they had procured it illegally. Either that, or Harry had gotten it from someone in Knockturn Alley; in which case, it was probably as effective as sugar water. Honestly, Harry was always a little too gullible. Whether the potion was real or a dud, she had not been brainwashed, and therefore, it would not work on her. So she was forced to drink that putrid substance for nothing. Well, not nothing. If it was going to get her out of this nightmarish situation, then she supposed it was for a reason.

She didn't feel any different at all; there wasn't even an aftertaste in her mouth anymore. What she did feel, however, was intensely angry at Harry and Ron. How dare they add insult to injury by abducting her and accusing her basically of not being sane...no, of not having the *intelligence* to make the decision of who she spent her time with. How dare they insult Severus by accusing him of brainwashing her, when he was the one who took care of her after her so-called friends had broken her heart and scattered the pieces.

Taking a slow, deep breath so neither Harry nor Ron would notice how angry she actually was, she decided it was time to start the game. She had to appear like she was willing to listen to them. She had to look like she was coming around to their way of thinking. Sighing inwardly, she turned around, only to collide directly into Harry's chest. Her first instinct was to step backward and mutter an apology, but he wouldn't let her move away. Unwelcome arms wrapped themselves around her body in an embrace that was sickeningly familiar. Her body stiffened in response.

The only thing that kept her from pushing him away was the warning that blared top-volume throughout her brain: "Make him think his plan is working!" That meant she had to accept his embrace. Slowly, she forced herself to relax, and when Harry realized she wasn't going to try to escape, he gathered her closer.

"I've missed you so much, Hermione."

The words were spoken into the bush of her hair and in a tone she hadn't heard for years, since perhaps the first year they were together. She wondered suddenly if this thing between Harry and Ron had been going on for all these years. Could she have been so *stupid* not to see it? Was she really that blind? Or perhaps she had wanted to be blind. Denial was definitely a strange thing.

Her body softened in Harry's embrace...as much as it was going to get...allowing him to hold her, to caress her shoulder, to nuzzle her hair, to sway slightly in a manner that comforted only him. Every little thing Harry was doing, she analyzed, and it left her wondering what exactly he was up to. It wasn't until he kissed the top of her head and then tilted her face up to meet his that she discovered at least part of it.

She almost pushed him away, so repulsed was she by his advances. She desperately wanted to. This was so wrong! It was almost like she was betraying Severus, even though he would undoubtedly understand she was merely doing what it took to get herself out of there. It was pretty much a forgone conclusion that this was all going to be up to her; no one was going to be coming to her aid.

When Harry's lips met hers, she felt sick to her stomach. She forgot to react at first, her lips seeming to have frozen. But Harry's lips moved his against hers, coaxing her to respond. It was a test. It had to be. If she didn't follow his lead at least a little bit, this would end up dragging out much longer than she could handle. With great difficulty, she forced herself to match the movement of his mouth, albeit stiffly. She couldn't help the tears that began forming in her eyes.

When Harry stopped kissing her, she was relieved and silently and collectively thanked the gods. But then, his hands took up where his mouth had let off and began to roam her body. He grasped one of her breasts over her clothing, and he buried his face in her neck. She turned her face so he wouldn't notice the grimace of distaste on her face. The only thing occupying her mind was a single phrase that played over and over: "Please, stop."

She withstood it because she had to. Under this much pressure, she really didn't see how she had any other choice. And it wasn't just the fact that Harry was touching her so familiarly that bothered her...it was that he was treating her like he had throughout their entire relationship, and she had just never seen it until now. He took what he wanted from her, taking pleasure in his own actions and just assuming that whatever he was doing must be good. But he never bothered to really take the time to make sure. Not that she wanted him to do that at this particular moment. Right now, she just wanted him to leave her alone.

Finally, when his hand lingered too long...and painfully...over her breast, she ended the charade. Anything beyond this would just be above and beyond what she should have to endure. She scrambled for an excuse to make it look as though she really wanted this even though she was pushing him away.

"I'm, uh ... I can't ... it's too much ... too soon," she lied.

She turned away, facing the covered window once again. What she really wanted to do was scream. How dare he violate her body on top of everything else! How dare he think that he had any right to her body anymore! She felt anger that she had let him do this much ... felt ashamed that she had cheated on Severus. But she knew that wasn't what had actually happened. That knowledge, however, did nothing to stop her from wondering if Severus would be angry if he knew.

Severus. *He must be so worried right now.* Suddenly, she felt a desperate need to have this whole ordeal over with as soon as possible. She was going to have to lay it on thick and let Harry and Ron know that they had done the right thing to force-feed her that potion. She would actually have to admit that Severus had brainwashed her. And it would be a good idea if those words actually came out of her mouth. These two had never been good at noticing subtle cues; mostly they had to have things spelled out for them.

"Listen, Hermione. If it makes you feel better to hear it, I really am sorry. I want you to come home with Ron and me. I want us three to make a life together. Sure, it won't be a conventional relationship, but it's becoming more accepted in the wizarding world and...well, don't you think it would be more ... exciting to have more than one partner? We'd never get bored."

Bored? She supposed that would be his next excuse for being unfaithful. He was bored. Perhaps she hadn't been the best in bed, but he hadn't really allowed her to explore enough to further her skill.

Harry turned her to face him and took both her hands in his. She didn't look up to face him. She felt so detached. What he was proposing was insulting; not to mention threesomes had always been rather disgusting to her as an idea. She was a one-man woman, and she expected her man to be the same way. It was a little sad that Harry had not done the right thing and let her down way back when he realized that he would rather be with Ron than with her. She didn't know what it was now that made him ask her to come home with the both of them. Perhaps it was a sense of ownership. Perhaps he still lacked the courage to let her go. Or perhaps she was just a habit he could not break.

Her ability to analyze the situation proved how detached she felt. She had been so miserable for so long. Now that she was finally admitting this to herself, she knew that all of this was behind her. She no longer needed to hang onto Harry. She didn't need him to prove her worth anymore. Life would go on without him. Subconsciously, she had been detaching herself from this relationship for longer than she thought. She simply did not feel a connection with him anymore.

Not wanting to meet Harry's eyes, for fear that he would read the truth in them, she answered in a small voice, "I suppose we could try that."

Harry and Ron suddenly had her pressed between them, hugging her, their voices stumbling over the other's, reassuring her that she was making the right decision; overjoyed that they were all once again happy and solid in their friendship.

A weak smile plastered itself on her face as they chattered on excitedly. Their words were completely lost on her. Instead, she was focused somewhere far away, where she hoped Severus was waiting for her. Keeping his presence firmly wrapped around her...someplace she'd rather be than where she was at the moment...she started to say the most difficult thing yet.

"Th...thank you. For giving me the potion, I mean." The boys settled down and stared at her expectantly. "I don't know what came over me. I was so upset. Severus was there. I...I guess..." Gods, this was incredibly hard. "I guess he took advantage of my fragile emotional state and convinced me that I would be better off with him. In the dungeons. Like a prisoner." She sent a thousand silent apologies to Severus, withdrawing everything she had just said about him.

"See? I told you that nasty bugger had brainwashed her, Harry. I said it totally sounded like it, that she would never go with him willingly, much less stay with him in his quarters!"

Ron babbled on, while Harry muttered choruses of, "Yeah" and "You were right." Hermione let them go on about her and without her, while she stood there with her eyes closed, praying that they would accept this as enough of a breakthrough to take her home. It was getting late. It had been an incredibly long day, and according to her stomach, it was close to dinnertime.

"Boys?" Her voice was weak, and they didn't hear her at first. She took a couple deep breaths to will away the faint nausea that had settled in her gut after everything that had happened.

"Excuse me!"

Harry and Ron stopped suddenly and stared at her, smiling at having their Hermione back and bossing them around.

"Listen, it's late and I'm getting dreadfully hungry. Unless you have anything worth eating in this place...not that I could eat here comfortably, mind you. You could have at least *cleaned* the room before bringing me here! Could we go...go home and order take-out or something?"

Home? Harry's flat would be the first place Severus would look. If they Apparated there, she could be rid of this whole ordeal much quicker. Still, it hurt to say "home." She liked that flat. She couldn't live there anymore, even if Harry eventually let her have it. There were just too many bad memories now; it felt tainted somehow.

"Excellent idea! How about that new place, Ranolfo's? I heard they make an excellent veal Marsala." And off Ron went again, babbling about food. If there was a surefire way to get Ron's mind, at least, off the fact that she had been supposedly brainwashed, it was the mention of food.

Harry, however, sized her up more closely. He seemed hesitant to leave so quickly, unsure if she was completely cured and if they should maybe stay a bit longer just to be sure.

"Really, Harry," she said by way of encouragement. "I'm okay. I'll be okay."

Satisfied, Harry drew her wand out of his back pocket and handed it to her with an apologetic smile. "I suppose you'll need this, then."

Taking it gingerly from his grasp, her first instinct was to hex the both of them for putting her through this. Then, she toyed with binding them and going to fetch an Auror. But there were still the wards and the fact that she had no idea where they were, and how would she bring Aurors back to a place she had no idea where it was?

Sighing, she smiled her thanks for the return of her wand and waited for Harry to bring down the wards. She would hope that Severus would be waiting for her when they reached the flat and take care of this entire mess.

Together, they Disapparated.

~

## Strategem

Chapter 8 of 10

Sometimes you just have to take matters into your own hands.

~ Strategem ~

"Are you Miss Granger?" a voice asked from the doorway to the flat Harry, Ron and Hermione had Apparated in front of.

Hermione turned toward the voice and grinned from ear to ear, relieved that her prayers had been answered...at least in part. While she would have preferred to see Severus standing in the doorway, wand drawn, waiting to hex Harry and Ron into oblivion, she was quite content to find two yet-unnamed Aurors. It was the next best thing, anyway.

"We've been sent by a..." The male Auror looked down at a notepad, obviously not from this area to be familiar enough with its residents. "...a Mister Snape, who has claimed that Miss Granger was abducted from Hogsmeade this afternoon."

"Severus? Where is he?" Hermione looked around, expecting to see him nearby, wondering why he hadn't come forward yet.

"He should be arriving soon. We've already sent notice that you've arrived safely. He is checking various establishments in and around Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley, thinking that you might have been taken there. He had gotten a little ... impatient ... waiting around here with us. He didn't think we were doing enough, but we can only follow the orders we've been given by the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," the Auror apologized.

"Hermione was with us." Harry snaked an arm protectively around Hermione's waist while reaching around her body with the other, extending a hand toward the male Auror. "Harry Potter. And you are?"

It was obvious that neither Auror had been told who had abducted her. At the mention of the name Harry Potter, the Aurors looked at each other in shock and, to Hermione's distress, awe.

"Richard Weisgard," answered the Auror, who took Harry's hand promptly and began pumping it up and down vigorously. "I am so pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Eugenie Platt." The female Auror reached to take Harry's hand as well, almost pushing Auror Weisgard out of the way. "Might I say, Mister Potter, that we all owe you an enormous debt of gratitude for saving wizarding kind...and Muggle kind as well...from You-Know-Who, I mean."

"Most definitely." Auror Weisgard quickly intercepted the conversation, hoping to get a word in edgewise. "Eugenie and I became Aurors because of your fine example," he added, head bobbing up and down in a vaguely familiar way.

Auror Platt regarded Hermione and Ron carefully. "Well, if you are Hermione Granger, then you must be Ronald Weasley." She seemed pleased with herself for figuring out the identities of Harry's third companion correctly. Turning back to Harry, words continued to tumble out of her mouth. "Our apologies for not recognizing you, Mister Potter. My parents sent me to a lesser-known wizarding school in Germany because of You-Know-Who...they thought I would be safer in a more reclusive area. Anyway, I met Richard there, and I talked him into coming back to Great Britain with me after graduation and working for the Ministry. We only started a week ago; still in training, we are. Can't go against our orders, as we told Mister Snape, or we would have gladly gone with him to search Hogsmeade at the very least. But then we would have missed you, Mister Potter! We learned all about your efforts during the war, as well as yours, Mister Weasley and Miss Granger. I'm afraid we attended a very strict school. They didn't allow us to receive The Daily Prophet, so we saw only the occasional article or photograph while on holiday."

"I cannot believe our luck, Eugenie," Auror Weisgard interrupted. "Not even a week in Great Britain, and we have already met Harry Potter. This is a dream come true!" Richard gushed, and Hermione finally realized who he reminded her of...Colin Creevey. This did not bode well. Harry and Ron were supposed to be arrested. Her plan was unraveling quickly, and she had absolutely no control over it.

"On the contrary," a voice drawled, accompanied by sure, sharp footsteps, "it will be a dream come true the day one of you Aurors is competent enough to do his job."

Hermione could not be more happy to hear that voice. Wrenching herself out of Harry's grasp, she catapulted herself toward the mass of black robes that had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

"Severus! Oh, I can't tell you how happy I am to see you. I..."

"Mister Snape, sir." Auror Weisgard snapped to attention, verbally pushing Hermione to the side. It seemed that the male Auror had a habit of interrupting. While she had found it somewhat of a relief when he interrupted Auror Platt, she did not appreciate it when she had something of great importance to say. "It seems that Mister Potter and Weasley have delivered Miss Granger from the hands of her abductors. Now that she is safely at home, we can be on our way."

Hermione blanched. "But what about my statement? Don't you want to know what happened? Harry and Ron..."

Harry spoke up quickly. "No need. We took care of her abductors. Believe me, they have learned their lesson and won't be foolish enough to try anything remotely like that again. Thank you for all of your hard work. I'm sure you have better things to do than to hang around and talk all day." He reached out to shake hands once again with an ingratiating smile.

"Right. We should be getting back to the Ministry and write up our report," Auror Weisgard answered, shaking Harry's hand happily. "Not that there is much to tell, of course! If you should need anything...anything at all...don't hesitate to call us."

When Severus laid his hand upon Hermione's shoulder, she realized her mouth was still hanging open, aborted words still on her tongue. Snapping her jaw shut, she fumed. This was just so unfair! Harry and Ron were going to get away with kidnapping her. They were going to get away with purchasing an illegal potion...and forcing her to drink it. This was unbelievable!

"I'm sure Mister Potter won't forget either of you," she heard Severus say through the blood roaring in her ears.

The Aurors Disapparated before Hermione came to her senses enough to realize that Severus was just letting the Aurors go. He wasn't doing anything to stop them. They should be arresting Harry and Ron. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen.

Harry's hand wrapping itself painfully around her wrist cleared her head in an instant.

"Let go of her, Snape. She doesn't belong to you anymore," Harry growled in Severus' face.

"Oh? And she *belongs* to you, I gather?" Severus' voice was dangerously low, but he refused to be baited.

"That's right. She belongs to Ron and I. She agreed that we were going to give it another go, the three of us. Tell him, Hermione."

"I didn't agree to anything. Everything I said, I said under duress ... or under *theinfluence* of that potion you forced me to drink," she spat, twisting her wrist out of Harry's grasp.

"It was for your own good. I knew we should have waited longer, given the potion more time to work."

The look on Harry's face was venomous. His eyes shone pure hate, like they had every time he had fought with her in the last five years. She could hear the unspoken words as if he had said them aloud: He was right, and he wasn't even about to entertain the idea that someone else might be right or that there was a difference of opinion.

"What potion are you talking about?" Severus turned Hermione to face him, examining her eyes intently, ready to exact swift revenge if he found she was harmed by

anything these two bumbling idiots had given her.

"They forced me to drink something. Harry *said* it was used on brainwashing victims." Now her eyes were spitting fire, much like Harry's were. "I told them I wasn't brainwashed ... Well, no, that's not entirely correct. I let them think that the potion had worked and told them you had brainwashed me and that I would go home with them. But I didn't know where they had taken me. Harry took my wand ... There were wards ... It was the only way I could think of to get away."

Severus glared at the two boys, who had taken up offensive stances only a couple paces away; as though there would be a chance to grab Hermione and save her once again from the evil clutches of the Potions master.

"Whatever you gave her, you were misled. If indeed you had given her a potion that did what you were told...and a potion like that is a highly illegal substance, monitored under strict conditions by the Ministry...she would be violently ill right now. I suppose whoever sold it to you didn't tell you of that unfortunate side effect? Never mind that when administered to subjects who *haven't* been brainwashed, there would be no physiological...or psychological...results whatsoever."

"You're nutters, Snape," Ron finally spoke up. "Hermione would never have gone with you otherwise."

"How dare you!" Hermione yelled and whipped out her wand, aiming it at the both of them.

Only then did Harry and Ron back down, and only then did they have the decency to wipe the vindictive snarls from their faces, in exchange for something a little more fearful and respectful of the power Hermione wielded. They knew her abilities better than anyone, and it was a little scary being on the receiving end of her wand.

"Do you know what I should do to the both of you? No. Let's start with what *should* have done back at that rat hole of a flat you took me to. *Should* have Petrified you, bound you and left you on the Ministry's doorstep with a note. That's what I should have done. But I underestimated your *charm*, Harry Potter," she said, her words dripping with sarcasm.

"Let's see." She slowly advanced on the two men, grinning ferally when they began backing away. "*Could* strip you both naked, force you into an obscenely compromising position, and leave you in front of The Three Broomsticks for all to see. I wonder how many people would have a good laugh at the boy who lived and his sidekick, mouths stuffed with each other's cocks ... Oh, but I imagine that would make bad business for poor Rosmerta, since so many people would undoubtedly lose their appetites.

"No. I think what *I will* do is hex the both of you...perhaps permanently...with a corkscrew hex ... on your bollocks. I've read how it makes them twist up and tighten every time you try to have sex. Undoubtedly, it's quite painful. Lavender used it on her cheating son-of-a-hag husband a couple years back. He ended up in St. Mungo's for a month. Yes. That sounds just about right. *Intorqueo*..."

Severus trapped her wand hand at the last second, before the last word of the spell left her lips, and whispered in her ear through gritted teeth. "They are not worth it. We *will* have our revenge ... with careful planning and in due time."

Letting her wand fall at her side, she stared at the two men...who looked more at the moment like two frightened little boys at having their manhoods so threatened...and turned away.

"Can we go *home* now? The company leaves something to be desired." Hermione spat, fed-up with everything that had happened...or rather what had *not* happened.

"Best idea I've heard all day," Severus answered and took her hand, Disapparating them both.

~~~o o~~~

Still angry after Apparating in front of the gates to Hogwarts, Hermione turned on Severus, needing to take her frustrations out on someone.

"Why didn't you let me hex them? They deserved it. You have no idea what they put me through, that horrid potion they made me drink. Harry even tried forcing himself on me." *There*, she thought. *That should at least make an impression.*

"Hexes are temporary fixes," Severus said calmly, unmoved by what she had said. "What they did to you is unforgivable. I agree, you most certainly deserve to have your revenge, but it should be well thought out ... and something they should never forget."

Her anger abated somewhat, and she backed down. What he said made sense. She was so lucky to have Severus around with his infinitely cooler head. Perhaps that was what made Slytherins different from Gryffindors. They had the patience to plot out their revenge. She usually went for the more immediately satisfying approach like hexing ... or slapping someone in the face.

"But I don't understand. Who were those Aurors ... and why didn't you insist that they arrest Harry and Ron? I just can't believe how unfair this is!"

Severus grabbed her two hands in his, and his eyes pleaded with her to understand. "I agree that it's unfair. I went to Kingsley first, not through the usual Ministry channels. I told him exactly who had taken you and briefly what had transpired. He told me that there was no way I could walk into the Ministry saying that Harry Potter abducted someone...certainly not you...and be taken seriously. So I did the next best thing and said I hadn't seen who had taken you. And your case was assigned to the two newest members of the team, who were just waiting to get their feet wet."

Hermione sighed. There would never be any public retribution where Harry Potter was concerned. He was held in too high regard with the Ministry. If she wanted to see justice done...if she wanted to feel confident that something like this would never happen again...she would have to take matters in her own hands. *They* would have to take matters into their own hands. She had Severus at her side, and that brought a smile to her face.

Taking the vial of mostly used-up potion out of her pocket, she held it out for Severus to take.

"I think this might be helpful. I took it when they weren't paying attention."

The pride that was so ... Gryffindor-ishly apparent in Severus' eyes made her heart swell painfully in her chest. Suddenly, it became easy to push aside the tribulations of the day and focus on the man who had fought through all the "right" channels on her behalf; the man who searched for her through the not-so-right channels; the man who had spent so much time worrying about her today.

Severus took the vial, tilting it up to the last rays of the sunset. "There's still a few drops in here. Well done. With this, perhaps we can make them pay for what they've done to you."

"What would I do without you, Severus?" Hermione whispered and pulled him down to tenderly kiss his lips.

He bent readily to accept her kiss and returned it softly. Then a second ... and a third. Kisses that turned slightly more urgent and not-so-tender. Kisses that deepened and brought their bodies flush against each other. After a while, she remembered that they were still standing at the gates and broke the connection.

Severus cleared his throat. "I don't know about you, but as much as I'd like to continue this, I would very much like to know what is in this bottle."

"Oh, you have no idea how much I want to know," she replied, taking his hand and pulling him toward the castle.

~~~o o~~~

Hermione wiped the perspiration from her forehead. They had been working for an hour, trying to coax the few drops left in the bottle into giving up its individual ingredients. Severus made a few more quick notations on a notepad next to his worktable and looked up at her with a triumphant grin.

"Now I know it must be something good for you to smile like that," she commented, leaning over him to read what he had written. "Asphodel? Peppermint? Sopohorous beans? Hellebore? Bubotuber pus? Well, at least I won't break out in spots this month. What in the world was this potion they bought anyway? This is nothing I've ever heard of."

"I can tell you what it's not. But more importantly, I can tell you what it was before someone decided to...very dangerously, I might add...alter its ingredients; though to what end, I'm not sure."

Severus paused for dramatic effect. And paused a little too long.

"Well, what do you want me to do? Get on my knees and beg?"

An eyebrow shot up in amusement, and Severus answered, "Sounds like a good idea to me."

"Impertinent Slytherin." She tried to look vexed, but ended up grinning instead. "Well? What do I have to do to get you to tell me...don't you answer that, Severus Snape!"

He laughed. "All right. No need to get your knickers in a bunch." He winked at her when she actually succeeded in looking annoyed. "Now, now. I think what I have to tell you will be worth all the teasing, my dear."

"It better be," she groused, although rather unconvincingly.

"This, although altered from its original state, was once an impotence potion, usually administered by wives who no longer found sexual intercourse with their husbands very ... interesting." He waited for the full effect of his words to sink in. As the implications of this relatively small discovery dawned on her face, he continued. "I have no idea why someone tried to alter it. It looks as though someone...definitely *not* a Potions mater by a long shot...tried to make the effects more lasting. Although why someone would sell this to Harry Potter, I don't know. Of course, there could be a hundred different reasons...."

"I'd say." Her voice had a faraway quality to it that Severus definitely appreciated at the moment.

"It should be noted that an impotence potion is in no way illegal, which should appeal to your Gryffindor sensibilities."

"Indeed." A small smile wormed its way to the corners of her mouth. "And how long would it take to brew something like this?"

"Oh, no more than a week," he answered and smiled, quite happy that her train of thought seemed to be mimicking his own. "But to adjust the properties so that the effects would be more ... permanent, let's say, it might take another week, slightly more."

"Oh, I don't know ... permanent? Do we dare to go that far? I mean, that's a little harsh, even for all that Harry's done to me."

"Where's that Gryffindor courage your house is always touting?" Severus baited her, hoping to get a rise.

Hermione looked Severus square in the eyes. "Maybe not permanent, but how about we make him suffer for every day he let me suffer? Starting from when I started dating him, that would be five years, two months and six days ... Take into account the amount of time it will take to brew the potion, five years, two months, and three weeks."

"Deal." And Severus held out his hand to make the decision binding.

*A/N: I have to thank my glorious admins for offering a couple suggestions, which lubricated my imagination. Especially to phoenix, who suggested that perhaps revenge should come in the form of a potion. (It might seem a bit obvious, but like I said, my creative juices had dried up.) Thank the girls, for without them this chapter would definitely have been some time in coming.*

~

## Retribution

*Chapter 9 of 10*

A well-executed plan yields results.

~ Retribution ~

~

*Round about the cauldron go;*

*In the poisoned entrails throw.*

~

The centuries-old Shakespearean verse echoed in Hermione's head, repeating itself rather annoyingly as she tossed in yet another ingredient and resumed counting stir-strokes. It was long, tedious work developing and brewing this potion. Her and Severus' first two attempts at brewing it had failed; it had mysteriously coagulated just after adding one of the ingredients. The second time it happened, Severus had grabbed his cloak and stalked out of their quarters, mumbling something about "thieving apothecaries," only to return a couple hours later with another vial of the hard-to-get toad venom.

~

*Toad, that under cold stone*

*Days and nights has thirty-one*

*Sweltered venom, sleeping got,*

*Boil thou first i' the charmèd pot.*

~

They were now past the previous point of coagulation. Hermione had announced the milestone just before she was about to add the four drops of venom, and Severus had come to stand over her shoulder, glaring ominously as though if it didn't work this time, he could somehow hex the apothecary-in-question in absentia. Luckily for the man, who had undoubtedly been threatened within an inch of his life, the potion continued brewing without a hitch.

There had been much discussion between Severus and Hermione over the modifications that needed to be made for this particular potion. Its base was a rather simple Deflating Draught. Then, there were the slight complications of making it last for a specific length of time and be attuned only to a specific user...or in this case, *users*. Severus had consulted the Dark Arts section of his personal library, but even though she admitted that Harry and Ron most definitely deserved it, she refused to incorporate the Dark Arts in the brewing process.

Not that she was necessarily above utilizing the Dark Arts when absolutely necessary, she told Severus, soothing his ruffled feathers, it was just that she felt all other avenues should first be exhausted. Plus, she was a little leery of bad karma, however Trelawney-ish that sounded. In the end, what they came up with was Dark Arts-inspired, but could never be traced back to such, for which Hermione was extremely grateful. She would never have aborted the project, but knowing that it couldn't come back to legally bite her on the arse was a huge bonus.

~

*For a charm of powerful trouble,*

*Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.*

~

Hermione glanced down the two-page, double-columned sheet of paper while the cauldron boiled for an indeterminate number of minutes, waiting for the brew to change to a dull-grey shade of green. With her wand, she checked off the ingredients that had already been added, little red checkmarks popping up next to each one. Smiling, she turned the page over and checked off a few more, signifying that she was officially past the halfway point.

One look at the potion, still bubbling over a lowered flame, showed her that the bright green hue was losing its luster, and by her best estimation, she had about five minutes before it turned the proper shade of grey-green. Carefully, she checked the ingredients lined up on her work table, making sure that they were in the proper order all the way down to the final two ingredients...the ones that signified that Dark Arts texts had been consulted: an animated photo of Harry and Ron, kissing, taken surreptitiously only a week ago by Severus as the two men were leaving a night of drinking at The Magic Brew, and a single drop of baboon's blood that was to be added as Hermione waved her wand over the mixture and gave voice to an obscure and rarely used Continuity Charm, modified for their purposes.

~

*Double, double, toil and trouble;*

*Fire burn and cauldron bubble.*

~

The little crystal phials were hypnotizing, catching the flame beneath the cauldron, the yellow-orange of the flame splitting off into deeper reds and harsher violets as it looked through the glass. She looked up and noticed the greyish-greenish hue of the potion and jerked to full consciousness. With heart pounding, she quickly grabbed the next phial with its carefully measured ingredient and dumped it in, counting strokes of the spoon and blindly gripping the next phial in her hand. The next few additions would go by in quick succession, and she couldn't make an error at this critical point. It wouldn't be long now.

Her face settled in fierce concentration, her hands a whirl of add-stir, and she didn't even notice when Severus entered their quarters through his office entrance, having finished classes for the day. He was very familiar with this particular look...he had witnessed it many times before. It seemed to be something she had been born with, a harsh mask of complete absorption in whatever she was doing, a look that said, "Interrupt me and you'll be singing soprano in the boys' choir."

Having no intention on becoming a eunuch, Severus quietly set a stack of parchment down and sidled to stand quietly behind her, making note of where she was in the brewing process. He smiled faintly as her hand gravitated to the precise location of the next crystal-encased ingredient while her eyes remained riveted on the bubbling liquid and her stir-spoon. It proved oneness with her surroundings, a dedication to her work, and he was extremely proud of her, both as her ex-professor and as her lover.

The phials were steadily diminishing now as ingredients were poured consecutively with a mere two or three strokes in between. He admired the steadiness of her hand, the ease with which she reached for the ingredients, and how not even once did she break a sweat like he never failed to do on the more complicated potions. And then, she was down to the last two ingredients: the photo and the baboon's blood. She looked over her shoulder at him.

"We're there," was all she said, not in the least bit surprised that he was standing behind her, not even questioning how long he had been there.

"Do you have the spell memorized?" he asked, even though he knew it was a ridiculous question, and stepped forward to take the phial of the single drop of baboon's blood. He would add this ingredient since she needed to be performing the spell simultaneously.

"Yes. I'm ready."

Hermione drew out her wand with one hand, and with the other, she picked up the picture of her passionately entwined ex-fiancé and ex-friend and tossed it in. The photo curled in upon itself, succumbing to the will of the potion, which boiled passionately on its flame.

Taking one look at Severus, she watched as he tilted the phial and the final ingredient fell in slow motion toward the dissolving photo. At first contact, her wand sliced the air, and she called out, "*Coactum mille nongentos septum dies!*"

~

*Cool it with a baboon's blood,*

*Then the charm is firm and good.*

~

The potion had cooled to a slightly opaque, gelatinous substance. There had been some discussion between the two co-conspirators as to what form the final product would take. It would have a direct influence as to the delivery method of their revenge. When Hermione saw the results, she couldn't help but smile. She had...of course...come up with several ideas based on the various possible outcomes, and this had been one of her favorites. The substance looked exactly like hand lotion. She reached out with a finger to test if it had the expected consistency.

Severus slapped her hand away and barked out, "Are you mad? What if...just humor me...what if it ended up affecting you?"

She smirked mischievously at him. "That is why I am the one testing it and not you."

He quirked an eyebrow at her and then realization dawned. Even if the potion ended *up*not being cued specifically to Harry and Ron, she was a girl. The only thing it would end up "deflating" for the next five years, two months and three weeks would be her swollen ankles acquired from standing too long on her feet.

Hermione smiled satisfactorily and stuck her finger in the lotion, swirling it between her forefinger and thumb, rubbing a little into the backside of her hand. Then she smelled it and screwed up her nose.

"Well, it doesn't exactly *smell* like any lotion I'd want to buy, but it certainly feels like it. It even feels a little greasy once I rub it into my skin. Oh, I hope it doesn't stain my clothes...."

"You're not going to wear it, so I don't know why you're worried. Go wash it off." Severus pointed to a utility sink in the corner.

Hermione did as she was told and grinned as she showed Severus the back of her hand. He came over to inspect it and frowned at her in confusion.

"See how the water is beading where I applied the lotion? It has the properties of oil." She waited, but he still didn't seem to understand. "Of an oil-based*lubricant*?" she stressed.

"Ah ... I see," Severus replied, smirking. And then, he repeated a few seconds later, his smirk turning into a feral smile, "Oh, I see!"

"Yes." She returned his smile. "And I know exactly how it will find its way into their hands...."

~

*By the pricking of my thumbs,*

*Something wicked this way comes.* <sup>1</sup>

~

---

"Hermione!" Ginny hugged her friend tightly. "Oh, I've been so worried about you. I heard what happened and..." She stopped at her friend's doubting glance. "Okay, well, I admit it is entirely one-sided, but I really want to hear your side of things. It's probably a lot more accurate."

"Depends on what you've heard," Hermione said, returning Ginny's exuberant hug.

"We-ell," Ginny sing-songed, "what Harry's said and what I know are two different things." At Hermione's raised eyebrow, she continued. "You know how I just cannot stand being left out of the loop. I had to know what was going on, and Harry and Ron really are terrible liars."

Ginny gave a weak smile, and Hermione took pity on her. "You know about what's going on between Harry and Ron then."

It was a statement, not a question, and purely rhetorical. Hermione didn't need any response; instead, she watched as Ginny's brave façade broke down and held her arms out to receive her tearful friend.

"Oh, Hermione. It's so awful what he did to you...what*they* did to you. I just cannot believe they would betray you like that, and that it had been going on for so long...."

"Yes," Hermione responded, comforting her friend when she should have been the one receiving the comfort. Strangely enough, Hermione realized that she didn't feel the need to be comforted and smiled a little at that fact.

Ginny suddenly pushed her friend away, as if reading Hermione's thoughts. "Oh! Look at me, blubbering all over you, when I should be the strong one. I cannot believe I am the one crying on *your* shoulder. I just have been holding it in for so long, ever since I found out."

"No, I..."

"Do you want tea? Come in and sit down. Tell me all about it. Wait, let me put on the teakettle." Ginny swished her wand dangerously in the direction of the kitchen.

"There. Sit down, sit down." Ginny plopped on the plush, over-soft sofa, patted the space beside her, and took a breath as Hermione obeyed. "Or maybe you don't feel like talking about it? It must be too painful. I simply can't imagine..."

"Ginny!" Hermione interrupted before her friend could get going to where she wouldn't be able to get in a word edgewise any longer. "It's not too painful ... anymore, anyway. I'm angry, especially after the way I found out."

"Right," Ginny said. "After Professor Snape sent you that owl, telling you that Harry was having an affair..."

"What?! No no no, it wasn't like that at all!" Hermione gaped at her friend, incredulous and even more angry at Harry and Ron, if that were even possible. "I came home early from work and walked in on Harry and Ron in...in...in bed." There, she said it out loud for the first time since she confided in Severus that night so long ago.

Ginny gasped and paled, which was exactly the reaction Hermione was going for.

"You do know I've been seeing Severus, right?" Well, of course she did, but Hermione waited for her to nod, which she did with closed lips and wide eyes. "He saved my life that night after I ... found out about Harry and Ron. He took me in. He doesn't demand anything of me, and he is everything I could ask for in a man."

Ginny nodded her head continually as Hermione described Severus' qualities, not only in agreement, but letting Hermione know...abeit silently...that she supported her in her choice of a man. *Good*, Hermione thought. Things were going as planned.

"I don't know if you can imagine how *angry* I am. How I was betrayed by both my fiancé and my best friend. I've lost two people who were very close to my heart, my two best friends." Hermione looked down at her hands folded in her lap, grasping each other until their knuckles shone bright. She whispered, "It's almost worse than if they had died ... because they can go on, taking pleasure from my pain."

"Yes, yes, of course." Ginny patted Hermione's hands very Molly-like, which made Hermione want to smile. Though she didn't dare; she didn't want Ginny to think for one moment that she was over what had happened. She wasn't, but it didn't hurt to play the part to its fullest.

"They just go on, day after day, as if nothing happened, except that they can enjoy their freedom now that I know."

"Exactly!" Ginny said and levitated the teakettle over to the coffee table. Hermione waited while she poured it between the two cups and accepted hers with slightly shaking hands. Completely unplanned. Nice touch.

"I ... I just can't move on...be totally happy, you know...until they feel the pain that I feel, the pain that they caused me, the pain that I still feel every single day."



Ginny set down her teacup and exclaimed, "And so they should! If only there was something we could do to make them feel it, though. But I'm not sure there's something ... oh, I don't know, appropriate, something that would make them realize the injustice of it all...."

Perfect.

"Oh, but /do," was all Hermione had to say to see the mischievous glint return to Ginny's previously teary eyes.

"Ron still has that annoying habit of ... borrowing things from your flat?"

Ginny nodded over the lip of her teacup.

"Can you place this someplace where he'd be sure to find it?"

Hermione produced a carefully packaged and magically labeled tube of lotion from her purse. Ginny reached out and took it from Hermione, glanced at the label, and smirked.

"Ellerby's Emollients Luscious Lovemaking Lubricant." Ginny snorted tea through her nose. Her laughter was the hysterical sort of someone who had recently been crying. Hermione had to fetch Ginny a tissue from the bathroom, both for the tea and the tears that had reemerged and just wouldn't stop.

"Oh. Oh, that's too good. You thought of this?" Ginny said, finally calming down.

Hermione nodded. "Well, Severus and I both did, actually. We brewed it. Sort of altered a ... erm, well, a Deflating Draught to serve our purposes. Let's just say that it's keyed for Harry and Ron, and it should make them pay for as long as Harry made me suffer."

"Ingenious," Ginny said appreciatively. "Absolutely perfect. I couldn't have thought of a better way to get back at those two prats. So this will..."

"As soon as it comes into contact with any part of their skin, it will make a certain part of their anatomy ... well, deflate; rather, it will make it impossible for them to get an ... an erection."

"And this will last for how long?" Ginny giggled, partly at her friend's discomfort at saying the word erection.

"Oh, for a very long time. However long Harry strung me along, making me think that we were going to get married. However long Harry tortured me with his incredibly *awful* so-called 'lovmaking' skills."

"And, of course, this doesn't affect either of them feeling aroused, even though that part of them won't work," Ginny confirmed.

"Right. Believe me, they will feel the pain of every day of hell they put me through." Now it was Hermione's turn to smile.

"I know exactly the place to put this so Ron will find it," Ginny answered, and she got up eagerly to put the plan in motion.

---

Hermione returned to her and Severus' quarters, emotionally drained. It was funny how anger had a way of doing that to her, even more so than a broken heart. Still, it was a very fruitful evening. Everything went as she and Severus had planned. He had coached her, telling her that even though her words may be truth, her body language and her emotions must follow suit. That meant even though she had gotten past the heartbreak, she must make Ginny believe that she hadn't in order to make her empathize and want to participate in the plan wholeheartedly.

After an argument or two, after which they had thoroughly made up, Hermione could see Severus' point of view. After all, it wasn't like she was lying.

Severus emerged from his lab, wiping his hands on his potion-stained apron. Hermione smiled, exhaustedly tossed her cloak upon the sofa, and crossed the room into Severus' embrace.

"How'd it go?" he asked, a little unsure at her less-than-exuberant entrance.

"Successfully. She promised to send me an owl the moment Ron steals the lotion. And a second owl once she gets confirmation that it has worked." Hermione unfolded herself from his arms and collapsed onto the sofa. "But I had no idea how exhausting that would be."

"Not that she needed any convincing, I'm sure. You let her know everything we talked about? Made sure you didn't talk about anything else? No girl talk?"

"No girl talk." Hermione smiled, knowing how much 'girl talk' annoyed him. "And no, she needed no convincing. I got the feeling that she wants revenge as much as I do." She laughed half-spiritedly. Rubbing the bridge of her nose with the heel of her hand, she tried to dispel some of the weariness.

"It looks as though you're ready for bed," Severus said, leaning over to massage her shoulders in just the right place.

"Mmm..." she answered and tilted her head first this way and then that, letting his fingers magically erase the tension that gripped every single tendon. "Bed is the only place I want to be."

"Is it now?" he breathed into her ear, sending delicious shivers down her spine.

His lips whispered against the curve of her ear, nearly touching but not quite, so that she could feel their presence but was left wanting for their touch. Slowly, they slipped down her neck, leaving a moist trail of warmth upon her tender skin, until finally they tasted the sweet juncture of her neck and shoulder.

She felt lazily aroused. When Severus slid an arm beneath the crook of her knees and lifted her, she cuddled against his chest and clasped her hands behind his neck. For a moment, their eyes met, and she was comforted by the softness she found there. She knew exactly where she stood with Severus, and that in itself was more than she had ever had with Harry.

Severus eased her upon the bed carefully, not wanting to disturb the mood that had settled between them, and Hermione shifted her body, burrowing into the down comforter, reveling in the softness that surrounded her both in mind and body. For a brief moment, Severus stood above her, contemplating, and then slowly pulled his wand from his sleeve. It seemed to move in slow motion, each flick of his wrist flirtatious, each swish of the wand sensual. No words were spoken, yet the movement of the spell she knew, and her breath caught in anticipation as the wand stilled. Suddenly, Severus stood before her nude, and she felt the breath of a chill breeze as her skin became exposed to the air.

His body was like a fine marble. Completely smooth, except where short clusters of curls dared to grow across his pectoral muscles. Nearly flawless, except where scars stood out like veins. Each imperfection was perfection in Hermione's mind.

Her eyes traveled from the tight buds of his not-quite-camouflaged nipples down to the pillar that stood out valiantly between his thighs. Skin flushed and eyes filmed over with lust as she thought exactly what sorts of pleasure that particular appendage would visit upon her.

Languidly, he moved to recline beside her, keeping a hair-breadth of space between their bodies, which only made her ache for more. But as much as she wanted to feel his skin against hers, there was something so incredibly arousing about nearly, but not quite, feeling his body touch hers. Instead of closing that last millimeter of space between them, she remained still, wanting him to pleasure her at his own pace, wanting him to do all the work.

It was the touch of a single finger that satisfied her desire and simultaneously lit the fire. A finger that began at her lips, tracing their fine contour, slid down her neck and through the valley between her breasts, traveled across her stomach, and swirled around the dip of her navel. Finally, his hand spread out, and the heel of his palm pressed against the base of her pubic bone. Fingers sought and found their prize, the Portkey to his lover's pleasure.

Her back arched off the bed, pressing her mound hard against his hand. She moaned as fingers circled and stroked and pressed and delved. Willingly, her body accepted his familiar touch, and although her body responded involuntarily, it wasn't against her will. Especially when she ultimately lost control, teetering over the edge, throbbing short, tight and quick. Content, but not yet satisfied.

In between her throes of passion, she felt the tip of his erection settle against her entrance and then plunge within as her muscles momentarily relaxed. It felt so good: the feel of his body against hers, lubricated by a light sheen of perspiration; the sensation of his rock-hardness thrusting deep within her, surrounded by the small tremors of her body that wouldn't abate; the awareness that this man loved her and she loved him more than she had loved any other man in her entire life.

Suddenly, she became keenly aware of everything, as if a bright light had been turned on and she was seeing everything clearly for the first time. Severus Snape was the man she was destined to be with. At that precise moment of clarity, his lust-laden eyes met hers, and in them she saw unadulterated love.

It was as though a burst of electricity passed between the two of them, and for an instant, time paused in its unforgiving cycle, allowing the pair to see each other, to know each other more intimately than ever before. A heartbeat. An expelled breath. An arrested drop of moisture falling from his eyelash and bursting upon her cheek.

Time slid into place as they fell over the precipice together, wrapped in each other's arms, their bodies connecting and reconnecting, trying to make their love last just a little bit longer. In the end, as they slowly wafled down to earth, the only movement between the two was their lips meeting in soft, love-exhausted kisses ... until they finally fell asleep in each other's embrace.

---

Harry entered his flat, worn out and fit to be tied from the constant demands of work. More than anything, he needed some relief from the stress that had been building up since seven o'clock that morning. He had just thrown a handful of Floo powder into the grate when Ron had walked into the room, hair sleep-tousled and morning erection very prominent. He tried to smile a good morning in Ron's direction, but he feared that it looked more like a grimace as he tried to control his body's response.

Floo deposited, Harry stepped out of the fireplace, dusting off the inescapable soot, and realized that the flat was dark. Once his eyes adjusted, he saw that it wasn't totally dark, but that the flicker of candlelight beckoned to him from just around the corner. Setting down his satchel and the stack of papers that always accompanied him home from work, he followed the trail of candles that lined the hallway.

The trail ended at the partially closed door to his bedroom. With one finger, all five senses on high alert, he slowly pushed it open. What he saw could sustain him for a lifetime, he thought, as his eyes soaked in the sight of his lover lying on the bed, waiting for him.

The candlelight flickered, making Ron's hair look as though it were alive, a light of its own, beckoning to Harry to come and make love to him. Harry couldn't resist the call. His eyes drank in Ron's naked form, from the flicker of his orange-red hair to the thickness of his shaft that waited eagerly for some attention.

Harry's fingers flicked open the buttons of his shirt faster than they ever had before. His trousers and underwear were discarded like the nuisances that they were. In a matter of seconds, Harry had joined Ron on the bed, and their naked bodies joined and rubbed together.

It wasn't long before they were equally breathless, skin flushed, erections large and shining with the moisture that signaled their desire. It only took one look between the pair for them to know it was impossible to wait any longer.

From the bedside table, Ron picked up a tube of lotion. Harry's eyes were so unfocussed, all he could make out were the words *Luscious Lovemaking Lubricant*, which sounded positively perfect to him. He positioned himself on the bed while Ron squeezed a generous amount on his hand, lubricating himself while inserting lotion-covered fingers inside of Harry in preparation of the assault that was to come.

But when Ron moved to complete the act of their lovemaking, he realized suddenly that he was no longer hard. He rubbed his shrunken member against the crease of Harry's arse, wanting him in the worst way and completely confused at his sudden deflation.

Harry turned to see what was taking Ron so long, and reached down to begin fondling his own erection, feeling very impatient. But when all his hand found was an uncharacteristic limpness, he knelt up and turned around to find Ron in a similar predicament. Confusion was printed across both of their faces. Then, simultaneously they paled.

Ron grabbed the discarded tube of lotion and looked at it closely. Ellerby's Emollients? He'd never heard of that brand before. It was the claim *Luscious Lovemaking Lubricant*, that had attracted his interest when he had taken it from Ginny's flat that morning. And then suddenly, it dawned on him what must have happened. Harry seemed to have come to the same conclusion as well.

When their eyes met, all they could say was, "Hermione," and groan.

<sup>1</sup> Verses from Macbeth, Act 4, Scene 1

*A/N: A special thanks to cocochristy, who was my final eyes on this chapter. Without her, you'd have all been witness to some embarrassing foibles.*

*And another round of thanks goes to Ashley, who helped me with the bit of Latin for the spell.*

## Endurance

*Chapter 10 of 10*

Sometimes, you just have to wait it out.

~ Endurance ~

Harry was frustrated. It had been one week...a full week!...since the lubricant incident. One whole week of wanting Ron so badly that it physically hurt, yet being unable to satisfy those animalistic urges. Right now, he was feeling *very* animalistic: sexually frustrated and quite angry about it, to make an understatement. Unfortunately, Ron picked that particular moment to enter the room and become the target of Harry's anger.

"Don't even *look* at me," he grumbled as Ron opened the refrigerator and took out a butterbeer.

Ron's eyebrows shot up into his fringe.

"Me? I shouldn't look at *you*?" Ron shot back. "Only every time I look at you, all I can imagine is your mouth around my..."

"Shut up!" Harry screamed. "Don't say it; don't even *think* it! I can't take this any longer! It's been an entire week, and we've not been able to do anything about it!"

"Don't yell at me! If you haven't noticed, this is as much my problem as it is yours!"

They faced each other down, eyes blazing, Ron's face as red as his hair. With an exasperated huff, Harry broke eye contact, rubbing his face with both hands.

"We have to do something about this," he muttered, "before we kill each other."

"I told you four days ago, just go to Hermione and find out what it will take to break this spell ... or whatever the hell it is," Ron said, forcefully shoving all his pent up anger deep down where it manifested itself in a nervously tapping foot.

"That's the thing. Why should I go to her with my tail between my legs like a chastened animal? Is that what I've become? No way. I will not grovel at her feet. I should go to the Ministry and report this; that's what I should do!" Harry's temper was kicking up a notch.

Ron put his hand on Harry's arm only to have Harry jerk his arm away. Dejected, Ron stepped back and stuck both hands in his pockets as if to remind himself not to touch Harry.

"If you go to the Ministry, she'll report the kidnapping, and we'll be arrested. I, for one, would rather grovel at her feet than spend time in Azkaban." Ron sneered.

"Oh, but didn't you hear? Azkaban's so lovely this time of year. The reds and golds of the lichen on the wall are supposed to be breathtaking."

Harry stopped and stared at Ron. It was the first attempt either of them had made at humor in the past week, and although it was rather lame, it did break the ice between the two and forced a chuckle out of both.

"You didn't tell anyone, did you?" Harry asked. "I mean, perhaps we can just wait this whole thing out without giving her the satisfaction."

"Well, I lost my temper at Ginny yesterday, so unless she guesses from that, then no, I haven't told anyone," Ron answered and then, as if realizing exactly what 'telling someone' entailed, added quickly, "Are you nutters? Why would I tell anyone that I am randy as hell but my equipment won't function?"

"Don't worry, mate. I haven't said anything either." They sighed simultaneously in relief. "Like I said, maybe we can wait this thing out...." Harry trailed off. "I mean, how long can this go on for anyway?"

"With Hermione, you never know," Ron answered matter-of-factly. They looked at each other, horrified.

"True... but remember S.P.E.W.? If she fought that hard for the rights of a house-elf, do you really think she wouldn't take pity on a couple of friends?"

"Ex-friends," Ron reminded him. "Anyway, maybe we could make her come to us."

Harry was instantly interested. "Really? How?"

"We go on pretending like nothing is wrong. We've had dry spells before. We can do it. I'm pretty sure Ginny is telling Hermione everything.... Remind me to make Ginny pay for this later, by the way." Harry nodded as Ron continued. "Anyway, if it looks as though the lotion didn't work, Hermione will need to find out for herself. You know how she is."

"You're brilliant, Ron Weasley. Brilliant! We get Hermione to come to us. In the meantime, I know a doctor who can prescribe something to take off the edge. It would be much easier to live around each other if we weren't constantly *wanting* each other."

"How about we do that now? I sort of like talking instead of arguing, but I can't promise to keep my temper in check if I keep feeling like this," Ron admitted.

"I'm ready to leave if you are," Harry replied.

---

The owl tapped its beak on the window to Severus and Hermione's quarters. When Hermione opened the window, a giant ball of brown feathers came tumbling through and landed unceremoniously on the floor, feet up.

"Errol? She's still using that ruddy bird?" Hermione laughed and picked off the parchment before setting the old bird upright. It teetered and began preening its feathers.

Hermione opened the letter.

*Hermione,*

*Remember how I told you last week that Ron seemed to be a little unstable lately, especially since he blew up at me over dinner when I asked him to pass the salt? (Okay, I'll admit now that it was about the tenth thing I asked him to pass me; I felt like baiting him a little. Haha.) Well, Ron and Harry have asked me over to dinner on Friday, which means I'll be at your their flat and have an opportunity to witness them together. For sure, I'll know whether or not they used that lotion of yours. There's no way they could hold out for two weeks and not be at each other's throats. I'll send you an update as soon as I get home from dinner on Friday.*

*Ginny*

*P.S. Sorry for sending Errol. The Avian Healer told me he needed to get some exercise, but suggested I only let him out during the day as his eyesight apparently is not so good. (No kidding.) Perhaps I'll send my next message by Floo, if that's all right.*

Hermione folded the letter and smiled. In two days, she would know for sure.

---

It had taken two hours for Ginny to pick out a dress her brother would hate. It folded across her front and tied at her side, making the neckline plunge dangerously into her cleavage. And, it was bright red. Surprisingly, it didn't clash with her hair. She had been with Hermione in London, shopping for Muggle clothes, when she saw this dress and had fallen in love with it after the quite cute but obviously flaming salesboy had told her how beautifully it went with her orange-red hair. It put a dent in her pocketbook, but it looked as though she was about to get her money's worth.

Ginny Apparated to the front door of Ron and Harry's flat and paused to mentally prepare herself for the evening. Coming to terms with her brother and Harry as a couple was proving to be a little difficult. Not that she had a problem with her brother liking men, but seeing Harry in that light...well, before this happened, she would have bet her life savings that Harry was a staunch heterosexual.

After taking a few deep breaths and making sure that her dress showed all that it was supposed to show, Ginny raised her hand to knock. That's when she heard their muffled voices through the door.

"Come on. Ginny's going to be here any second, Harry. You took your pill, right?"

"I did, but I don't think it's working."

"Yeah. Mine neither. Think we can pull this off?"

"We have to."

"Just think of it this way, at least we'll get through this without the embarrassment of an obvious erection."

"Yeah, there's that."

Ginny stifled a giggle with her hand. This was going to be the most fun she had in a long, long while.

---

When Hermione laughed the third time, Severus had to say something. She had been reading the most amusing piece of parchment for the past five minutes, and he was getting the feeling that she wanted to share.

"What's so funny?"

She looked up. "Oh. Oh, you've got to hear this. This is way too funny. Ginny, she had dinner with Harry and Ron last night. This is her report on what happened."

"I'm on tenterhooks."

"Okay. Let's see. 'Dear Hermione ... Hope you're doing okay ... Say 'hi' to Severus ...' Okay, here's where it starts. She says, 'I had to wear that dress I bought when I was with you in London. You know how it shows off my assets quite well.'" Severus rolled his eyes. "Sorry, Severus. Here, read it for yourself. Start ... here." She pointed as she handed over the parchment.

*Anyway, when I got there, I heard Harry and Ron talking through the door. Let's just say that I knew before I even went inside that the lotion definitely worked. The minute I walked in, Ron saw my dress and glared. He said, "Does Mum know you bought that dress?" I told him that she in fact did and suggested that I wear it on my date with that Euan fellow...you know, that supplier at work I was telling you about, the one with the tight robes? Ron hates him, says any bloke who wears robes that tight is padding. I don't really have a date with Euan, but it's fun to tease Ron. Why else did I buy this dress?*

*All night, they acted as though everything was normal...well, more than normal because they were really laying it on thick. I mean, you should have seen them, sitting too close to each other, brushing hands together when they passed drinks or dishes. It was sickening, really. I had to keep reminding myself of my goal...which had changed from 'find out if the lotion worked' to 'torture Harry and Ron' since I already overheard that it had worked. I knew what they must be going through, and that they probably couldn't wait for dinner to be over and for me to leave, so I did what any good sister would do; I paid a nice long visit with my brother and his boyfriend. Really, I don't get to do that too often, and I really should pay more attention to my sisterly duties, don't you think?*

*Oh, you should have been there. By midnight they were looking quite desperate, but you know, I just didn't feel like I had a proper visit yet. I started talking about this guy who took me out last week, Gavin, and how good looking he was. I thought it would be a perfect topic, you know, to talk about Gavin's perfectly proportionate physical attributes. Then I mentioned how sweet and romantic he was, and I went into detail. Really, I think I should go out with him again, but I thought it wouldn't hurt to have my brother's opinion first. I got his opinion all right. Apparently, I can see 'whoever the bloody hell I want if I would just stop talking and go home.'*

*Here was Ron, all red in the face, and Harry with sweat trickling down his forehead, and I asked (innocently, of course) if anything was wrong. I think if I would have asked this earlier in the evening, I would have gotten a completely different answer. But Harry yelled, 'You're effing right something is wrong! Your dear friend Hermione dosed us with some kind of potion, and you are in on it!'*

*Really, you have no idea how hard it was not to laugh. So I said (still innocently, if you can believe it), 'What makes you think that?' All Harry could do was glare at me. Ron was the one who said, 'We used that lotion you keep in your nightstand, and now ... nothing works. You knew I would borrow the lotion. It just stands to reason that Hermione supplied it.'*

*I swear, I don't know how I kept a straight face. Actually, I was surprised that they were smart enough to figure it out, but I wasn't about to admit to anything. So I told him, 'Well, if it was in my drawer, it serves you right for not asking me if you could borrow it. As for if Hermione was involved, I guess you'll have to ask her.'*

*And then I decided I had tortured them long enough and that it was time to go home. Okay, well, I didn't go home. I mean, I was all dressed up and felt the need to...*

Severus shoved the parchment back in Hermione's direction.

"I think that's enough. What Miss Weasley does in her personal time is her business."

Hermione chuckled. "Yes, well, that's quite entertaining too. Really, reading one of Ginny's letters is better than watching a sitcom on the telly."

Severus gave her a blank stare.

Hermione just shook her head and said, "Never mind."

---

"Harrrrrry," Ron whined.

"Shut up."

"Please, just go to Hermione. Maybe she has the antidote. At least she could tell you when this is going to wear off.if.it's going to wear off!"

"You go."

"I tried. She refuses to talk to me, much less see me. And Ginny won't talk to her for me. Says she doesn't know anything and she doesn't want to get involved."

"Oh, that chit is involved, all right."

"Don't talk about my sister like that."

"Well, if you hadn't stolen that lotion from her flat, we wouldn't be in this predicament."

"And if you hadn't...uh, never mind."

"What?" Harry screamed. "Say it. Say that if I hadn't wanted to fuck one last time that night, Hermione would never have found out. Say that if we had never started this whole thing way back in fifth year, none of this would even have happened. Go ahead, say it! Sure, it's all true. So what? I couldn't stand living with her for one more minute anyway. Not when I wanted you!"

"So go to her."

"No. Forget it. Relationships aren't all about sex. It isn't important."

A tense, heavy silence filled the air.

"Bugger."

"So you'll go see her then?" Ron asked.

"I'll go tomorrow."

Ron sighed. "Good."

---

"I told you yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that, that Hermione does not want to see you, Mister Potter." Severus glared, exhausted, at the man across from his office desk. "In fact, she isn't even in the castle today, so you are wasting your time."

"It seems like all I have is time, Professor. If you think you're tired of seeing me now, just think of how it's going to be when I come back tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that until Hermione finally does decide to see me."

Severus stared at Harry. He was no longer the boy who plagued his existence while at Hogwarts, but here he was threatening to be the man who continued to do the same. The last thing Severus wanted was for Harry Potter to keep showing up in his office every day until the damn potion wore off.

"What is it you want to know, Mister Potter?" Severus asked, defeated.

"I want to know when this potion is going to wear off. Certainly, you must have some idea."

Severus toyed with the idea of feigning innocence, but remembered then that Harry would be back tomorrow asking the same question, asking for Hermione.

He sighed. "Hermione wanted you to suffer as long as you made her suffer. I trust you can do the math, Mister Potter."

Both men stared each other down for seconds on end until finally Harry seemed to be satisfied, although not entirely happy, with the answer.

"Is there an antidote?" Harry had to ask.

"No. The potion is a derivative, and no antidote was created for it," Severus answered matter-of-factly, hoping that this would be enough to satisfy him.

Harry looked down at his feet for a brief moment, contemplating, and then he decided that there was nothing else to say. He would have thanked the man for at least giving him an answer to the questions that had been plaguing him for weeks, but why thank a man who undoubtedly had a hand in his impotence?

Determinedly, Harry turned and left Professor Snape's office, not quite ready to face the next five-plus years in a constant state of enforced celibacy. And he wasn't looking forward to telling Ron.

---

### ***Five years, one month, and six days later***

Harry woke from yet another particularly torturous salacious dream where Ron was going down on his painfully erect cock, feeling his partner's tongue slather all over his length, consuming him ravenously. Harry moaned and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, feeling the desire building like it always did after one of these dreams, and feeling the desperation that nothing could be done about it.

Suddenly, Ron groaned, and Harry felt the vibration through his groin. It was then that Harry realized that this wasn't a dream. He looked down to see Ron's head bobbing up and down over his...quite erect...erection. Wide-eyed, he watched ... and it wasn't long before he thankfully had the first orgasm he had had in over five years.

Ron dazedly climbed the length of the bed to greet a now-awake Harry, who was too spent to say anything. Ron considered the situation for a moment and then realized that he was sporting a rather large erection of his own. And so he did what any healthy, full-blooded, sex-starved male wizard would do in a situation like this.

Ron looked at Harry and said, "Turn over."

### ***An Apparation Point away ...***

"Oh, you look so beautiful as a bride, Hermione," Ginny gushed as she fixed another flower-laced curl around Hermione's headpiece. "And you look so happy. You should have done this years ago."

Hermione smiled at her friend through the mirror. "Yes, well, you know I couldn't have let the past go until my revenge was complete. I wanted to be completely free of my anger and my hate so I could give all of myself to Severus."

"I know, and I think that is part of what makes you such a beautiful bride," Ginny answered and hugged Hermione around the shoulders. "Well, are you ready to be married?"

"I have never been more ready."

"Then let's go find that handsome groom of yours and make this day complete."

"Ginny?" Hermione hesitated.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Thanks for being there for me these past few years, for helping me, for always being my friend. You've helped make these past few years bearable," Hermione said, knowing it wasn't enough. Nothing she said could sufficiently express her gratitude.

"I'll always be here for you ... and Severus too, you know that."

The two friends grinned at each other and then embraced. They were interrupted by a curt cough. They broke apart to see the head of the handsomely dressed, dark-haired groom peeking around the doorframe.

"Severus! You're not supposed to see the bride before she walks down the aisle!" Ginny admonished.

"Yes. Well, if I were to wait for the two of you, this wedding might never happen. The guests are beginning to wonder if I've been stood up."

"I think not!" Hermione shouted and grabbed Severus' hand. "Let's get married. We've certainly waited long enough."

"I'd say," he replied, smiling.

And Hermione pulled Severus to the head of the aisle, where all the guests turned to look at the pair who had waited so long to be married. Somewhere in the sea of people waiting to witness the momentous event, applause began, and it spread throughout the crowd. Face blushing, Hermione looked up at Severus and discovered that even on a day like today he could find it within him to scowl. Her laugh brought her soon-to-be husband back to the reality of the day, and with a small smile, he led his bride down the aisle.

~ The End

*A/N: I felt that poor Hermione had been angry and bitter for long enough. While it was true that Hermione wasn't unhappy for the entire five years she was with Harry, he did string her along, making her think a future with him was possible when he knew all along it wasn't. Even smart girls don't always know when to let go of a relationship, and Hermione was no different. I suppose it was partially her fault for being in denial until the truth was literally shoved in her face. But I'm glad that in the end she found true happiness and was smart enough to make a clean break with her relationship with Harry before finalizing it with Severus. After all, they both deserve some happiness, and I'm glad they will finally have it.*

*And I'm glad this story is over. I've been working on a new story for the past couple months, but I won't be posting it until it is well on the way to being finished. I have been feeling the need to write something of more substance than I have in the past. I hope I will be successful.*

Happy Holidays to you all! 20 Dec 2006