

# Protector

by ladyofthemasque

A mysterious warning from the future prompts Snape to protect Hermione from a terrible curse.

## Prologue

Chapter 1 of 10

A mysterious warning from the future prompts Snape to protect Hermione from a terrible curse.

*Author's Note: This story is TOTALLY AU, thanks to the advent of HBP. That's why it's taken me this long to post it. Book 6 thoroughly torpedoed a lot of WIPs I had going at the time, including this one. (You may recognize later scenes from In Annulo, in fact...This story predates IA, and so naturally I stole a few ideas from it.) Also, um...Snape gets a little OOC...but I defend the writing of his character in this fanfic because he's a very complex individual...and we don't really know him all that well, now do we?*

~Lotm

*P.S. As usual, making no money from this, and I'll sick this narsty, forthcoming spell on anyone else who tries...*

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### PROLOGUE

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It was a lousy day to be alive. A Summoning, a bit of Crucio, and very little report to the Order in return, and now a voice he'd tried to avoid hearing all along, drifting through the parlour doorway.

"'...And then he said the strangest thing to me: "One last thing. If you care at all for Harry," ' " came the voice of the Boy Who Lived from the room nearest the front door, " ' "do not go to the Ministry of Magic. You will do him irreparable harm with a foolish display of bravery." ' " "

Severus Snape snorted softly, carefully quiet enough that it wouldn't wake the portrait of that harridan, Mrs. Black. His fingers lifted his cloak from the stand in the hall; it was definitely time to leave. The next set of words stilled him before he could finish donning the black wool.

" 'I laughed at him, of course,' " Harry Potter's voice continued unsteadily, and the Potions Master's ears picked out the sound of a page turning; the boy was apparently reading from something. " 'But this hooded and cloaked man, who wouldn't give me his name though he was obviously of the Order, considering that he was in the bloody house at all, held up a gloved hand and said, "I do not jest. Go to the Ministry, and you will die. I realize it is foolish of me to even try...but I must try. Now finish your diary, Sirius Black. Write down what I have said, if you would have a hope in hell of saving the Boy Who Lived, and with him, the rest of the wizarding world. Even if *you* do not heed my words, someone else might, and they should hear what I have come to say, if they wish to save us all in the days ahead." ...And that was when the man in gray left. I have debated long and hard tonight on whether or not to believe him. I do not think I can, but I have decided to write down his words. I can think of no sane reason for me to leave the safety of these walls, even though I am bored nearly to tears. I've taken to tormenting Kreacher again in recent days to keep myself amused; I caught him snogging a pair of my mother's moldering knickers two days ago, a most disgusting sight...' " "

"...Ewww!" Hermione Granger's voice came through the partially open door as Severus. "I didn't need that image in my head!"

"Neither did I," came the voice of the youngest male Weasley.

"...I wonder what this spell is, the one that the cloaked figure mentioned?" Ginny mused aloud.

"Yeah, what was the name of it, again?" Ron asked. "What's it say in the journal?"

Severus flicked his cloak around his shoulders, drawing the silver clasps together. He dismissed the matter as foolishness, though the warning implied was potentially intriguing, if it really was from Black's diary, written before he had indeed gone off to the Ministry of Magic just a few months ago. Still, the Potions Master wasn't about to spend another minute inside this horrid place if he could help it; 12 Grimmauld Place reminded him all too much of his childhood home, though at least there weren't any house-elf heads mounted on the walls. And he wasn't about to spend one minute more around those four children than he had to; he'd see them all too soon tomorrow evening, after they arrived at the school on the Hogwarts Express.

"Here it is again. Mortav...*mortuavvizzi cuorum*..."

Shock dropped the cloak from suddenly nerveless fingers. He wasn't consciously aware of moving, but he moved, as swiftly as an attacking adder. The door flung wide with a bang as Severus strode into the room, heart thudding hard in his chest as he searched quickly for the sight of a wand in the idiot youth's hand. There wasn't one, thankfully, just a red leather diary. All four of the youths jumped and whipped their heads his way, however. They flinched once when they realized who had stormed into the parlour...and winced a second time when Mrs. Black started screeching out in the hall, woken by the crack of the door against the wall containing her portrait.

"...Do *not* speak those words aloud, boy!" Severus hissed over the caterwauling harriid as he stopped in front of the quartet and yanked the small, red-bound book from Potter's startled fingers. "That is a *particularly* foul piece of Dark Magic! Had you a wand in your hands, one of your foolish friends could've suffered a fate so horrible, a Dementor's Kiss might've been preferable!"

Flipping the book around, he eyed the opened pages, then flicked back a leaf, reading the entry. It talked of a tall, grey-shrouded figure, the voice patently disguised by a spell, interrupting Sirius' evening. The journal entry was dated the night before the debacle back in June that had cost the foolish man his foolish life.

"...Give me back that book!" Harry Potter demanded, glaring at his teacher as he stood up from the armchair he had occupied. Someone out in the hall managed to get Mrs. Black quieted down again.

"Sit!" Severus snapped, not even looking at him.

"That is my godfather's diary!" Potter reached to snatch it back. Severus blocked his hands, then grabbed him by the arm and hauled him close. For a moment, their noses almost touched.

"You know *nothing* of the Dark Arts, boy! Let an expert handle this matter!" A shove knocked the boy back down into his chair.

"Yeah, an *expert*, all right! How much did you originally toady up to Voldemort to get so *good* at those Dark Arts?" the youth sneered.

"...Harry!" The sharp rebuke came from Granger before Severus could retort. She glared at her best friend, surprising Severus with her furious defence. "Professor Snape is only trying to help!"

"We don't need *his* help!" Potter snapped.

"Well, it's supposed to be *my* curse, and / say we need his help!" she shot back, hands going to her hips as she straightened up on the ottoman. "You don't go to a chimney sweep for masonry lessons, if you want to learn how to properly carve stone! You go to a sculptor!"

That silenced the youth. Severus, reading the diary, discovered she was right. The stranger had warned Black that Hermione Granger was going to be a target for the Cuorum Curse at the end of her seventh year, and that her destruction via the Dark spell would cause the Boy Who Lived to falter and fail at the crucial moment, causing the Dark Lord's victory. This was the primary fate that the stranger in grey had prophesied, a particularly gruesome fate, unless someone who could apply the proper counter-spell chose to protect her. The comment about Black not going to the Ministry was apparently thrown in for free. *Utterly useless, at that; the idiot went charging off anyway, despite the warning from this stranger, and the one I myself tried to give to him. Fool.*

Miss Granger looked at him expectantly as he lifted his gaze from the pages of the book. "...Well, Professor? Do you really know what this spell is, and what the counter-spell might be?"

He stared back at her. The trust in those light brown eyes unnerved him. The trust, and the faith. Miss Granger honestly believed he could help her. Him, the black-hearted bastard of Hogwarts, who loathed and was despised by her and her friends. She trusted *him*...

Honesty prompted him to say, "Yes, I do, Miss Granger, to both of your questions."

"I don't even know why you have to worry right now about something that's not even going to happen for two more years," Ron muttered.

That made Severus frown with impatience. "The counter-spell to this particular curse can take *years* to apply, Mr. Weasley, and it *must* be applied in advance. That's assuming, of course, we can find the correct person to activate the necessary protections." He looked down at the book in his hands. "I need to speak with the Headmaster..."

He turned to leave, but Potter's voice stopped him.

"I want my book back!"

A pained look pinched his face and rolled his eyes *Of all the idiotic...*! Severus twisted the journal so that the page with the entry header faced him. "*Look* at the date, boy! If this entry is authentic, this is clearly the work of someone who was meddling with Time! Or did you not notice the significance of that particular date, the night before your godfather foolishly ran off to the Ministry and got himself thrown through the Forbidden Door?"

Potter surged to his feet again, face screwed up with anger, fists clenched at his sides. "Only because *you* goaded him into going!"

"He did so of his *own* volition, Potter, ignoring the very warning this stranger came to deliver to him! Ignoring the warnings that / gave to him, less than a day later! The man was rash and headstrong, the same as you...one would think you'd at least *try* to heed the lesson to be learnt from his fate, unless you *want* Miss Granger to suffer a fate worse than a swift, clean death! You'll get the damned book back when we're through examining it, and not one moment more!"

A final glare at the dunderhead...clearly, turning sixteen hadn't improved his faulty wits in any way...and Severus started to turn away. His dark gaze caught Hermione Granger's worried, tawny stare, making him hesitate. He wasn't sure how she would react to what the curse and its counter-curse entailed, once she knew exactly what would be involved; discretion might be wise at this moment.

Yet he couldn't just leave her there, fretting over the unknown. He had to be a bastard to the world, but in this moment, looking at that trust that still lurked in those tawny brown eyes, enhanced rather than dimmed by the frown of worry pinching her brow, he couldn't be one now. Keeping that trust and faith intact would be essential to

ensuring the counter-spell could be successfully applied, protecting her from future harm. Even if her idealism was her greatest and most vulnerable weakness.

"I do know what this particular curse entails, Miss Granger, and how to counter it. If the warning is authentic, you may rest assured I will do everything that I can to help ensure the counter-spell is implemented. It is not a fate I would wish on anyone, save perhaps the Dark Lord himself." A stiff nod, and he swept out of the room, heading back towards the kitchen, hoping to catch Albus Dumbledore before the meeting of the Order finished breaking up and everyone left.

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The knock on the classroom door two nights later was followed by the door being opened. Miss Granger stepped through cautiously, head first for a quick peek, then the rest of her. Severus, glancing up from his work, waited until he had finished adding the next ingredient before beckoning her closer with an impatient flick of his free hand. He stirred the requisite number of times with the oak spoon clockwise, then extracted it and stirred the same number of times counterclockwise with an ebony spoon before extracting that one as well. The cauldron was tiny, no bigger than an infant's head, and cast from heat-shielded silver. Next to it was an identical cauldron, empty and glowing faintly blue.

She approached the desk he was using, eyeing the various ingredients, alembics, and jars arrayed on no less than four tables around him. "What are you brewing, Professor? It looks very complicated."

"It is. You are lucky I can actually brew this particular potion. Put your left hand over the cauldron after I have separated it, which will be after the powdered galingale has dissolved," he ordered her, stirring this time with a golden spoon after glancing at the potions book lying open next to the cauldron and shaking a brownish-tan powder onto the surface of the bubbling, pea-soup like brew from a glass cup holding the pre-measured amount. "You'll know it's the right time when the potion turns cerulean blue."

The door opened again, and a tall, silver-bearded wizard stepped into the room. He swept the chamber with his blue eyes, peering over the tops of his half-moon spectacles, but said nothing as he closed the door behind him. Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was no fool; he knew how complicated this particular potion was, and clearly did not want to interrupt his Potions Master. Thankfully, Miss Granger was equally astute, and did not ask any further questions as Severus worked, stirring this time with an iron spatula, which seemed to thin out the viscous, gloppy fluid inside the small silver cauldron.

Setting the spoon aside, he donned a dragonhide glove and waited until the pea-green liquid turned a pale powder blue, then quickly divided half of the potion into the second, miniature, stasis-enspelled cauldron. Setting the first cauldron back down on the lab table, Severus drew off the gloves, opened a small porcelain box lined with velvet and removed what he wanted, while the first potion slowly darkened; the other, frozen in time, stayed a soft, pale shade of blue. Motion out of the corner of his eye told him she had done as requested, holding her hand over the original brew. Catching her hand in his, Severus separated out her ring finger from the others, gauging the colour of the potion. The moment it darkened from cerulean towards a definite azure, he jabbed her finger with the golden needle he had selected.

"...Ouch!"

She jumped a little, instinctively trying to tug free, but his grip was implacable. Squeezing her injured finger, Severus coaxed three fat drops of blood to fall from the wound, then thrust her hand back, motioning her back from the cauldron as he himself leaned out of the way. Thankfully, she was a smart student and stepped back almost a full body-length from the table, imitating his lead. The potion darkened to a cornflower blue, then started to roil violently. Dark purple seared its way inward from the edges, the colour changing in a ripple of sizzling, pale pink sparks. Those sparks collided in the center of the potion, exploded outwards across the surface, shooting a column of bright, pale pink light up and out of the cauldron, tracing indescribable, fast-flickering runes on the ceiling.

The colour of the streaming light began to shift and change, first searing to pale blue, then to a pallid orange, and a pale lavender. However, that pallid, purplish hue shifted abruptly to a rich amethyst. Severus glanced up from the roiling surface, not expecting the sudden deepening of colours, and caught the Head Girl sucking on her injured finger, her tongue apparently working over the site of the injury to soothe it. That was what had darkened the potion's beaming light.

The cauldron continued to cast its thin, sparkling beams of light upon the vaulted stone ceiling of the dungeon-level classroom. A vivid, blazing gold was next, followed by a fiery red, an emerald green, and finally a moon-bright silver. Golden sparks shot up through the silvery glow, forming a lattice. The silvery glow faded to pewter grey, then to black, sort of an anti-light ray pattern before it finally vanished. That left the gilded lace-thing hanging in the air for a moment before it, too, dropped down into the cauldron. A glance down showed the first cauldron's contents had turned clear. The potion was complete.

Miss Granger pulled her finger from her mouth, swallowed, and ventured a tentative, "That was rather beautiful; I've never seen anything quite like it. But...what was it for?"

"Did you suck the excess blood from your finger?" Severus asked her instead, noting that her finger wasn't bleeding anymore.

"Yes...was I not supposed to?" she asked worriedly.

"It...changes the results a little," he admitted, glancing briefly at his employer. Albus merely shrugged, hands clasped in front of him as he stood to one side, silent witness to the proceedings. At her concerned look, Severus shook his head impatiently. "It's nothing you need worry about right now, Miss Granger. Undoubtedly your Gryffindor courage will find the altered results amenable."

"What altered results?"

He fetched a silver chalice and a dragonhide glove from his supplies, ignoring her question. Donning the glove, he picked up the cauldron and poured its contents into the broad-mouthed chalice. Setting the still-hot cauldron down again, Severus held out the goblet, which was comfortably cool to the touch; all of the heat had remained concentrated in the cauldron. "Drink this, and tell me who you see."

"Professor, I don't understand," she protested, frowning at him. "You wrote me a note, telling me to come down here half an hour before curfew, but you didn't explain why. Now you stab me for a drop of my blood, tell me that sucking on my finger will change a potion which you expect me to drink, and you still do not tell me why. I want to know what the potion is for, and why I need to drink it!"

The Potions Master held his temper; he was unaccustomed to being spoken to by sixth-years in such an impatient, impertinent manner. Still, this future-warning, which Dumbledore had determined was genuine, necessitated a certain level of discretion and tact. Lots of discretion and tact. "It's a highly complex matrix designed to discern the specific person who will be able to apply the counter-curse to the Curse from Black's diary, Miss Granger. It requires three drops of your own blood to attune the potion properly to your specific needs.

"The suckling of your own blood intensified those needs, through an inadvertent application of sympathetic magic. You will notice that the second cauldron is preserving the other half of the elixir to await confirmation of the identity of whoever you will see, once you drink your half of the potion. *If* that person also sees you in their vision, then we will know the vision was true, and the potion was brewed properly."

"Well, I doubt the potion's been brewed *incorrectly*," Miss Granger snorted, folding her arms across her chest. "You were the one who brewed it, after all."

The compliment in her words held back his tongue from demanding a more polite and respectful tone of voice, though the slight cough from the Headmaster let him know Albus found her sardonic retort to be amusing. "...Nonetheless, it is the only gauge of such a complex potion. Drink, Miss Granger," he ordered her, holding out the chalice once more. "Drink it slowly, one sip at a time. The longer you take to consume the potion, the more time you will have to study the details you will see."

She accepted the cup from him, her fingers brushing over his for a moment. Ignoring the uncomfortable tingling of his nerves, Severus looked over at his employer. Dumbledore pulled a scroll and quill over to him from some of the supplies on the table beside him, seated himself on one of the student's stools, and dipped the point of his pen in a nearby inkwell. Ready to record her observations, the old wizard nodded.

Lifting the goblet to her lips, she sipped, frowned softly, and licked her lips. "It tastes like...like chocolate caramel... It's surprisingly pleasant."

"Not all brews are hideous upon the tongue, Miss Granger. What do you see? That *is* what we are interested in, not what you might taste," Severus corrected her, impatient to get the matter finished.

"Eyes. Very dark eyes. Narrow." Another sip, and she related more. "Dark hair. Black, or a deep brown. Black, I think. Longish, and kind of messy, like it needs a good brushing, but mostly straight... Long hands, black sleeves...jacket sleeves; I can see buttons on the cuffs... A nose, thin and sharp, something like a long beak," she added between sips. On the next swallow, her eyes widened with dawning recognition. "It's...it's you, Professor! I'm seeing *you*!"

Severus felt the blood drain from his face, and glanced sharply at the Headmaster. Albus arched a brow, and spoke for the first time since entering the room. "...Kindly turn around and face the far wall, Miss Granger, and tell us again what you see, once neither of us are within your visual range. Just to be sure you aren't under any undue influence from our presence."

She turned obediently, drank the last of the chalice's contents, and stated firmly. "...I'm seeing Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master, hovering in front of me. Shoulder-length black hair, black eyes, pale skin, those hands, that nose, even all the little buttons on his frock-coat!" Turning around again, she blinked at him. "Does this mean you're the person who can apply the counter-spell, Professor?"

"The potion...must have been brewed incorrectly," he managed to state through the impact of his shock.

"There is only one way to tell, Severus. Complete the other brew," Albus directed him quietly. Firmly. "If you see her in turn, then you will know it was brewed true."

Unhappy, Severus selected another golden needle from the case. A flick of his wand terminated the stasis spell. Holding his left hand over the cauldron, he waited until the liquid started darkening again. When it started shifting from cerulean to azure, he stabbed himself, squeezing out three large drops of blood. Quickly, he removed his hand, making sure no more of the crimson liquid could stain the surface. Once again, it roiled briefly as it turned a deep, strong blue and then shifted to a dark purple. Sparks erupted in a ragged ring of pale pink, rippling across the surface to the center, before exploding upward in beams of pastel light.

Pastel, not deep-hued. Though he'd long since quelled the urge to lick his fingers to soothe them when pricked...it was too dangerous to do so when most of the ingredients that he worked with were inedible, and many of them toxic when swallowed raw...Severus stuck his injured third finger into his mouth and sucked the blood from the wound, probing it with his tongue, ignoring the ache of the injury. The hues immediately deepened in response, tracing their rapid, indiscernible runes on the curved ceiling overhead. Vivid pink gave way to orange, gave way to brown, to purple, to shimmering gold, crimson red, emerald green, and finally liquid silver.

Golden sparks shot up into the air, forming a latticework nearly, perhaps even completely, identical to the complex latticework that had hung over the other cauldron a short time before. The silvery light faded to black and winked out; the sparks fell back into the small mouth of the cauldron, turning the liquid inside to something thick but clear. Fetching a second sterling goblet, Severus donned one of the dragonhide gloves again. This was one of the few potions that was brewed entirely without flames under the cauldron, but the potion did have certain extremely thermal reactions of its own during the brewing stage. Only by brewing it in enchanted silver and pouring it into more silver did one control and neutralize those heat-generating properties. Those properties still took some time to cool, however.

Setting the small cauldron aside to cool, he stripped off the glove, waited several moments, then gingerly tested the metal with a fingertip to make certain it was cool enough to touch. It was. Severus picked up the goblet, and hesitated. A pointed look from Albus encouraged him to continue. Turning around so that he, too, would not be unduly influenced visually, Severus sipped at the liquid.

"Well?" the girl behind him asked.

"...Brown eyes, Miss Granger. I see light brown eyes."

"I, er, meant the taste, actually. Is it chocolate caramel?" she asked, curiosity colouring her voice.

"No. It...it actually tastes like chocolate and cinnamon, to me," he admitted reluctantly after a moment to consider the flavours on his tongue.

"How peculiar," the Headmaster observed. "I shall have to try that combination, some time. What else do you see, Severus?"

"Curls." It was a flat statement, as sip by sip the image of a certain, annoyingly intelligent know-it-all formed in his line of vision, hovering between him and the racks of shelves awaiting the influx of student cauldrons in the coming term. "Sun-streaked brown curls. Ink-stained hands. A red-and-yellow school tie...an impertinent mouth and a matching nose... I see Hermione Granger."

He didn't even have to finish the last mouthful of the brew to know her half of the brewed vision was true.

"Well, you don't have to sound so *unhappy* about it, Professor," Miss Granger pointed out from behind him. "This simply means you brewed the potion correctly. That you're the one who can save me from this Cuorum Curse, whatever it is. Now all you have to do is apply the counter-spell, and everything should be fine again. Right?"

Severus looked down at the goblet. It wasn't in him to waste the rest of the expensive, difficult-to-brew potion, though for a furious moment he wished he'd never even started it. Knocking it back, he swallowed the dessert-flavoured liquid, then flung the second chalice violently across the room, releasing his rage at being trapped like this. He was already halfway to his office door when the cup banged into the shelves and clattered across the floor. Slamming the heavy oak panel shut, Severus crossed to his desk and slumped into his seat, burying his face in his hands. He could still see her, though; Hermione Granger, resident school know-it-all, Gryffindor prefect and a sure-fire candidate for Head Girl next year, hovered in the darkness behind his eyelids like a three-dimensional stained glass window, glowing from within like some bloody wizarding-world saint.

Lit by the inescapable truth revealed in the draught he had made.

He could hear the murmur of voices beyond the door. He tried not to care what Albus was telling her, though from the lack of any shrieking or yelling, it was clearly not the full truth. After a moment, the voices stopped, and a few moments after that, the door to his office opened. Slipping inside, the Headmaster quietly closed the panel behind him, but not before Severus could hear the classroom door being shut, too.

"You've confused the poor girl, you know," Albus admonished him in the silence following his entry. "She knows nothing about what this curse and its counter-spell entails."

"...Would you like me to enlighten her?" Severus retorted from behind his palms, feeling trapped under a swirling vortex of emotions. Stunned, that he would see anyone at all, after sipping that brew. Elated, that he had seen someone. Shocked, that it was her, of all people. Alarmed that she had seen him, too. Concerned, that he would have to personally apply the counter-curse, given their situation...and angry, that Fate should play such a necessary trick on him. Angry, too, on her behalf, even if it was necessary.

Albus had given in and told him about the prophecy last night, after the Sorting Feast had finished and the students had gone to their dorm-rooms to settle down for the night. Tomorrow, new classes would begin, evoking a new year of hell for him. This was just the bittersweet icing on a poisonous cake...they needed Potter, the son of his childhood nemesis, to be a weapon against the Dark Lord...and they needed Miss Granger to survive intact for Mr. Potter to be a functional one.

"...Would you like me to tell her exactly what the Withering-Heart Death entails? Would you like me to tell her what the only known *counter* for that foul curse involves? I know very well what she and her ilk think of me," he growled. "The task we've been set is *impossible*!"

"It is only impossible if you continue to mistakenly believe it is impossible," the older wizard chided him. "You hold this image of yourself in your mind that just isn't true..."

"...I *know* what I am!" Severus shouted, lifting his head out of his hands with a scowl. "And the blasted girl knows it, too...the potion was brewed wrongly!"

Albus leveled his protests with a quelling look. "You *know* that the potion was brewed true."

A groan, and Severus buried his eyes in his hands again, denying the stinging behind his tightly closed lids, the remorse choking his throat. "I wish it weren't true..." He wasn't sure what he wished weren't true, either the fact that he had to arrange the counter-spell with a girl too young to understand its necessity, or the fact that the way he was perceived would work so heavily against him in that task. "How can I do this, Albus? *How* can I save her, appropriately? I cannot act openly, for so many bloody reasons...such actions would instantly arouse all sorts of suspicions as to my motives and loyalties, it would put my career in jeopardy, plus threaten my pride when she either screams in fear at the very prospect, or worse, laughs in my face...yet how can I succeed any other way?"

"You do have two years, Severus, to bring this matter to its necessary conclusion. I suggest that you start your campaign now, and wage it subtly, increasing it with strength as time passes."

"How?" was the Potions Master's only retort.

"She needs to know who you are, Severus. The real you. The one you've hidden from everyone. Including yourself. I'm afraid you will have to get to know the real you, too, if you would have hope of succeeding. You've lived a life of carefully constructed lies for so long, you've never acknowledged that some of those lies were also aimed at yourself."

"That still doesn't tell me *how*," Severus grumbled, sliding his hands down his face, feeling too weary at the moment to protest his employer's insights.

Albus reached across the desk between them, picked up the eagle feather quill, and shifted a piece of parchment his way. "There are ways, Severus. We need merely brainstorm a few ideas. Discretion of course must be at the top of the list... Some form of communication must be established with the girl...rather, with the young woman," he acknowledged with a dip of his head as he started to pace on the other side of Severus' desk. "She is almost seventeen, after all. And of course, nothing with even the slightest hint of impropriety should be discussed until her eighteenth birthday, next year...but you must start the process of communication *now*, so that she will come to both understand and trust you. More than she currently trusts in you, I should amend. She already trusts you quite a bit, right now...but she doesn't know how you think, feel, or are inclined to react when you aren't acting out some designated part..."

Severus stared at the feather in his hand. An idea was taking shape. It ran a high risk, since it would be partially bound up in a lie...in a string of half-truths, which were technically half-lies...but it was a possibility. Calculating the risks, he decided it was his best chance for success. As Albus prattled on, throwing out suggestions left and right, Severus picked up his wand, muttered a charm, and bent his head over the parchment, writing. When he had nearly finished, he paused a few moments in thought, then scrawled something at the bottom. Turning the parchment around, he slid it across his desk towards the Headmaster. Silently inviting him to read it. Albus broke off what he was saying, glanced down at the page, then frowned and perused it more carefully.

When the old wizard began chuckling, Severus knew he'd found his solution.

## Chapter 1

### Chapter 2 of 10

"Neither snow, nor sleet, nor rain, nor dark of night..." Hermione has mail!

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She received another one, with the advent of the breakfast mail. Every fourth day, regular as clockwork, Hermione received another one. Sometimes they were thick packets, dozens and dozens of sheets thick. Other times they were a bit on the thin side, though rarely less than four sheets. Only the first one had been a single sheet. This one looked like it was but a single sheet, too, which concerned her a little. Tucking the latest letter into an inner pocket on her school robe, the Head Girl eyed her two best friends, but they weren't interested. Their sixth year, they'd wondered who the bloke was that kept writing to her like a ruddy Muggle clockwork, but these missives from her mysterious pen-pal were something she just didn't want to share anymore. That the letters had continued through the summer and now into her second week back at school was simply old news to them.

After breakfast, in the twenty minutes or so of time before her first class of the day...Advanced Transfigurations...Hermione retreated to a niche outside McGonagall's class, sat on the stone bench, and opened her letter. There was indeed only the one sheet, but the neat, copperplate handwriting reassured her. It wasn't a termination of their correspondence, so much as a request for a refresher.

'Dear Mione,

*I beg your forgiveness for such a short missive, but I have only one thing to say, today: a request to make of you. I know you said you saved all of my correspondences. I would ask of you to spend the next few days rereading that correspondence, in your spare time. You need not read every single word, but I wish to remind you of how far we have come in our friendship. Your birthday is approaching, and I would have another, more serious request to make of you once you have officially turned eighteen.*

*I know I will be re-reading your own responses to me, in the interim. Your letters have at times been the only things that kept me sane in a world slowly going mad. They have been my secret hope...as hackneyed as that may sound if it were to be said aloud. You know I am not a man given to hackneyed, trite phrases, but you have given me hope, and much more. I would have us both remember how much these letters have come to mean to both of us, before your birthday...and my new request...comes around.*

Yours,

Rus

*P.S. Try not to let your extra-curricular reading interfere with your homework.'*

Hermione had to laugh softly at that. He knew how much she read, how voraciously and quickly she could absorb information, and how well she could retain it; he knew very well how quickly she could churn out her homework assignments, too. Most nights she could be found curled up with the most obscure treatises from the school library, including ones checked out from the Restricted Section, scanning and absorbing anything and everything. It was only when she had been hospitalized at the end of last term...a bad habit leftover from her fifth year, tangling with yet more Death Eaters...that she hadn't been able to read much, due to the various healing draughts making

her too sleepy to focus for long.

She would only need to skim over his letters to recall even the smallest of details, though she would probably read many of them word-for-word anyway. He had such a dry, witty sense of humor, it was always fun to read and re-read his more amusing correspondences. Tucking this one-page note into her pocket, she gathered her book bag and readied herself for class, wondering what his serious, special request might turn out to be.

...

*'Miss Hermione Granger;*

*I tender an apology for writing to you so brashly, without a formal introduction...but I am at my wits' end. I have no one else to confide in, save for my employer. He is an old wizard, a good, solid friend...if annoying as hell, half of the time...but he is a very busy man, and cannot spare enough time for a true conversation, the kind that ranges around the world, touching upon every possible subject. I need someone who is my intellectual equal, and though it is decidedly hubris to say so, there are very few who can match me, wit for wit.*

*When I made my concerns known to my employer about lacking a suitable confidante (oh, alright, I whinged about being lonely; I'll be brave and admit it), he offered up a name garnered through one of his colleagues as a suitably intelligent conversationalist: your name, to be specific. The details he gave me were vague: sixth-year student at Hogwarts, prefect, Muggle-born, tops in her classes, an avid bibliophile, and quite mature and level-headed for her age. The lattermost qualities stood out in my mind, though the first one gave me a moment's pause. But, after careful and lengthy consideration...the first quality unsettled me, since I haven't been a student myself for many years, and am not certain as yet how much we'd have in common because of the age-gap...I have made bold to write to you and ask you this simple, singular, and very serious question:*

*...Will you please be my friend?*

*Yours Sincerely,*

*Rus*

*P.S. Just tell the school owls 'take this to Rus, please', should you deign to reply. They'll know who I am, and where to find me, as I am a member of a certain fire-and-feather association I know that you also know about to some degree. Given I am also one of a certain mutual acquaintance's spies, my identity and such are not widely known, not even among the others,, but the head of that association will be able to vouch for me all the same if you have any qualms.*

*I beg you to take pity on me, Miss Granger. I'm about ready to start up a conversation with a flobberworm out of sheer desperation. Certainly few of my colleagues and underlings would come even halfway close to such a lofty level of intellect as that. ~Rus*

...

*'Hermione;*

*Thank you for finally giving me leave to address you by your given name. Yes, I'm stuffily formal, but I am a bit older than you. Not terribly old, per se...I'm not a white-beard by any means, though sometimes after I've had to deal with Order business, I do feel disgustingly old and ill-used...but a bit older. My family was also quite a bit old-fashioned in many regards. It wasn't a pleasant childhood, but they did dent some good manners into my obstinate skull at some point along the way. Though I am not inclined to stir myself towards those I dislike, I do like you and have tried as best I can to be polite to you in these letters. Politeness equating formality, of course. In fact, the more I like you, the more formal I want to be; I suppose in a roundabout way it's a way of saying that you've earned my respect. (As you may have guessed from the way I comment sarcastically on most of my colleagues, that is not an easy thing for anyone to do.)*

*But what I really want is friendship, and formality isn't very conducive to true friendship. Yes, I know I ramble a bit in these letters, but I'm never really quite sure what to say, until it comes splattering out of my quill onto the page. Sometimes I have to erase things, since they're either too revealing, or too irrelevant, but I try not to do that too much...I did warn you in an earlier missive that I'm a bit of a perfectionist. You have no idea how relieving it is to just say what I really want to say to someone...and to be able to say something kind, something nice, is a rare luxury in such tension-choked days. Or maybe you do; you do seem to enjoy splattering your own ink heedlessly across the page, some days...please take that as a compliment, not a complaint! I may hate it as wasteful prattle when others do it, but you always have something interesting to say, even when you're rambling on about nonsense...Merlin, I can be such a foot-in-mouth arse sometimes. Forgive me. (And yes, I left this mistake in deliberately, just for you.)*

*Truth is, I could read ten thousand of your most rambling sentences far more enjoyably than ten solitary words of most others' writings. I'm glad you sent me a copy of your latest essay for your Arithmancy class; your premise on Modern Topographical Geomancy Vs. the Ancient Art of Origamancy was fascinating to read. I wish my life here in Research & Development allowed me to study more outside my own particular specialty, but it unfortunately does not at this point in my life.*

*Oh, someone destroyed another experimental project, today. Actually destroyed the workbench, too. At least we got rid of that fumble-fingered, flobberworm-spined fellow that used to work here a few years ago. You'd probably have liked the gentleman; pleasant enough chap in conversation, loyal to his friends, an honestly amiable fellow...but give him a complex task under heavy pressure, a deadline, and a stern task-master... Well, it was a pity it took him until he actually left my department before he wised up enough to know where his real talents lay, and stiffened his spine sufficiently enough to firmly go after what he needed to pursue for a suitable choice of career. I understand he's doing excellent work in his current field; I've a colleague who keeps me updated.*

*But anyway, the workbench was destroyed, and as the supervisor, it was up to me to muck out the mess of it. I do wish these underlings of mine would be more careful in their work! Every time I go through yet another monthly departmental review, I keep flinching from the fiscal fiascos I have to report. Replaced workbenches, replaced equipment, replaced supplies...a never-ending round of tedious waste. It's only the rare employee who actually has a talent for the sort of R&D we do that keeps me going, and with very rare exception, it usually takes denting departmental procedures and safety issues into their heads for at least a minimum of two or three years before I can even begin to see who would be good enough to move on to the advanced projects, where the truly delicate work begins.*

*Here is where I insert a heavy sigh...*

*I have appended for you a transcription of several pertinent passages from an old Transfiguration text I ran across in my personal library; it deals with animate-to-animate transfigurations with vastly different masses and the difficulties entailed therein; I thought it might be useful for you in that essay you said your Transfigurations professor assigned your class, in your last letter. I wish I could loan you the book itself, but it's very old and delicate, and I cannot bring myself to trust its safe delivery to owl-post. I hope the copied material I'm sending contains something useful for your research; if not, it should still make for a good read.*

*Yours,*

*Rus'*

...

'Mione;

*Yes, I take the daring liberty of shortening your name. I think after six months' steady correspondence...four of it calling you by the mouthful of 'Hermione', and two more before that under the horridly formal version of 'Miss Granger'...I can finally get away with it, yes? ...Don't you arch your brow, young lady! I already gave you the liberty of being able to address me by a nickname of my own a long time ago. From the very start, in fact. And don't think you will get me to change my mind, either. I like the version 'Mione'. It could've been 'Hermy', after all...and no, you may not strike me down for calling you that, because I will not do so. It's too undignified for you. (You have my permission to seriously hex your friend Ron the next time he does so, however. I quite understand your vexation.)*

*Speaking of Ron, I am glad you have followed my advice on avoiding dating him at this point in your life. Primarily because I'm glad to see you agree with me that he's just not your type. Excellent material as a friend, but definitely not suitable as a boyfriend...could you imagine him wanting to snog you after having one of your infamous blazing rows with him? He would've calmed down and forgiven you, yes, but I think I know you well enough that you'd still be blazingly mad at him, and he's not experienced enough to realize that women take longer to calm down than men do, after an argument. With so little intellectually in common with him, you would not have been happy. You've said it yourself: endless droning Quidditch talk bores you to tears, as much as you might enjoy attending an occasional game, and your endless self-burial in various tomes exacerbates his impatience with such matters. Definitely not a match made in heaven. I'm glad to hear you've realized you need intellectual stimulation on a par with emotional, et cetera. He'll continue to make a fine friend, once he gets over the dejected part of his bruised pride, and his embarrassed-angry snit.*

*At your age, you still need to figure out who you yourself are, and what you really want to be. Throwing in a boyfriend...a young, equally confused, overly hormonal male...on top of all of that is just too much of a distraction right now. Get your own affairs in order, before you even contemplate having an affair. There. A bit risque to speak about it so bluntly, but you have my opinion on the matter. Besides, if I may dip my other little-toe into the freezing-cold waters of Untouchable Subjects, with the way the war is bound to heat up in the next few months, you really cannot afford to be distracted by confused emotions and burgeoning hormones. I made similar and worse mistakes myself at that age, due to confusion and hormones and teen-aged angst, mistakes I sincerely hope to steer you around so that you do not fall into the worst of the traps that abound.*

*I will trust you to keep your wits firmly about you for other reasons, too. Harry is in a dangerous point in his life; he's feeling the urge to rebel, which even I must admit is a natural enough instinct in a teenaged boy who is still learning how to become his own man. But rebellion at this stage would be flat-out dangerous. It isn't a matter of telling him to go right and watching him go left; that, we could compensate for, here in the Order. It's that when you tell him to go right, and he chooses to go left, or straight ahead, or up or down or even doubling back, that's when the danger of unpredictability will place not only him, but everyone around him, in serious jeopardy.*

*I wish I could tell you more about what's coming your way, but the head of the Order does not think it wise. I am finally beginning to agree with you that you would be far better prepared if you were better informed...last year's debacle springs instantly to mind, with the loss of Black from our ranks. I am amazed, after hearing your recounting of how your various activities have turned out, that you and your two best friends have indeed surmounted so many difficulties, figured out so many mysteries, and gotten yourselves both into and out of so much trouble with relatively little pain and suffering (Black's regrettable fate and your hospitalizations aside). Yet I confess my heart pounds in my chest whenever I think about what trials and troubles you might face by the end of this year, or even by the end of the next.*

*I care about you, Mione. I honestly care about your safety and welfare. I wish I could tell it to you in person, to show you how much your friendship has come to mean to me, but that's just not possible at this point in time. I do want you to survive long enough for us to reach that point in time, however, and I am glad you are so diligent in your studying, since it will help further prepare you for the difficulties that still lie ahead.*

*I am so tired and heart-weary of this damnable war. The thought of having another friend injured by it is sometimes unbearable to contemplate. I want there to be a day when I can be free to face you, and know that you are still safe and well. Of course, I'd like to know I'm still safe and well by that point, but there are no guarantees where my precarious situation is concerned.*

*Please take every possible care,*

*Rus'*

...

Hermione wasn't sure if a letter from her unseen friend would arrive on her birthday or not. It was three days after the previous letter, not four, and she'd only sent off a response just yesterday. A small pile of birthday greetings and letters from friends and relatives arrived with the morning post, but it wasn't until she had gone almost to the bottom of the stack that she found the familiar copperplate scribble of her name, Miss Granger, on the packet.

Impatiently, she tucked it into her robes, finished reading the others as she ate her breakfast, and hurried out of the Great Hall. It was a Thursday, and that meant Double Advanced Potions. There were no convenient niches within which one could sit and read quietly outside of the Potions Master's realm, so she slipped into the classroom, sat down at her desk, and fished the letter out of her pocket. Just as she broke the seal, the door opened.

Glancing over her shoulder, Hermione saw it was Professor Snape. He strode into the room, door swinging shut behind him, and frowned at her. No doubt taking offense at her presence so early in his classroom.

"Thinking you can ask even more questions if you come in here all the earlier, Miss Granger?" he mocked sardonically, moving up to his desk to begin organizing his work for the day.

For Snape, it was an almost polite enquiry. "No, Professor; I just have some correspondence to read."

He paused for a moment, then marched towards his desk. "Well, read it quietly."

There was a pointed edge to his tone...but not as much of one as she might've expected. Bemused, Hermione did as requested. Unfolding the parchment, she read Rus' latest missive. It was only three sheets long.

'Mione,

*Happy Birthday, my dear.*

*You should know better by now than to expect me to stick something extremely silly and frivolous on my felicitation, such as an exclamation point. If I ever write anything and put one of those silly exclamation marks with a heart for the point on anything, you have my permission to cast the Cruciatus Curse on me until I see the nightmare-sized error of my ways. Putting an endearment in the phrase is as far as I will go...but that endearment does say a lot on its own, doesn't it?*

*You are eighteen now, and I have promised you a very serious question. I feel I have come to know you very well, and I hope you feel the same way about me. I care about you deeply as a friend...but I find myself drawn to you on other levels as well. To be frank, you have seduced my mind with your intelligence, amused me with your wit...which is thankfully as sardonically dry as my own at times...and enchanted me with your charming personality; because of this, the rest of me wishes to take notice and respond to your other admirable qualities as well. So my question is, in my own formal, fumbling sort of way:*

*May I court you?*

*I'm not making concrete plans at this early of a stage, but you should know that I value our friendship too much to treat a relationship with you lightly, nor would I aim for anything less than honourable intentions, should we prove even more compatible...damn, that came out sounding unbearably stuffy, didn't it? I honestly thought about erasing it, but eventually we will meet in the flesh, and one cannot erase words that have been spoken nearly as easily as those inked on a page. And I tend to get dreadfully stuffy and formal whenever I'm nervous, or treading on uncertain ground.*

*Yes, you make me nervous. My palms actually sweat when I merely contemplate revealing myself to you. I would never want to admit this nervousness to your face, being a regrettably proud man, but a relationship must have at least some absolute honesty in it...not all by any means, or you'd run screaming from me, and that would break my heart...so I am going to try to be absolutely honest about my feelings when they are written down, at the very least. Thus from now on you will get an increasingly unedited (save for such glaring spelling and grammatical errors that I may catch; I am a perfectionist, after all) version of my thoughts splattered in ink on these pages for you to peruse.*

*Please send me a response, whether it is a yes or a no. I fear I will be unbearably irritable (a trait I also display when nervous or frustrated) in my workplace until I know the answer to my question, so I ask you to respond one way or another as soon as is convenient. Please do not hesitate to write a refusal, if you cannot abide the thought of our association morphing into a more romantic relationship. I want first and foremost to remain your friend. I simply think we can build something even greater beyond that, using our friendship as the foundation for more than platonic, letter-based friendship.*

*It is your right to refuse if you so desire, after all. But be advised that it will also be my own right to try and coax you into changing your mind...and if it is a 'yes', I can feel my heart pounding with hope at the possibility...*

*Hopefully yours,*

*Rus*

*P.S. Please do take pity on those around me and respond as quickly as possible. I will be unbearable until I hear from you, though I will endeavour to hide my discomfort until I know whether you wish to remain merely friends, or explore something more.'*

Breathless, Hermione shifted back through the sheets and stared at those four words, written at the very bottom of the first page. *May I court you?* They echoed and ricocheted in her head, dazing her mind. *May I court you may I court you may I court you may I court you may I court you...*

"Class is about to begin, Miss Granger. You may wish to put away your correspondence and pay attention, if you are to be your usual know-it-all self in class, today."

The dry voice startled her out of her reverie of wonder. Blinking, Hermione realized with a blush that the Potions Master was standing behind her right shoulder. Perfectly placed to have read the page. Blushing hard, she cleared her throat and asked hesitantly. "Er...did you...?"

"...Read it?" he asked, arching a brow at her. "You should be reading class-related texts in this room, Miss Granger, and not waste your opportunity to learn. Deal with it appropriately, or I will take points from your House."

He moved away, heading back to his desk. She folded the letter and started to tuck it back into her school robes. An impatient noise escaped the professor as he turned to face her.

"I said, deal with it *appropriately*, Miss Granger. Whoever your correspondent is, if he asked that particular question, a lady would know well enough to reply as soon as possible, and put him out of the misery of his uncertainty. Or did your parents *not* raise you properly?"

The look he raked over her was just contemptuous enough to sting her out of her amazement. Double amazement, since he was not only advocating that she reply, as in write a reply here in his classroom, but that he was being nice about the idea of someone wanting to court her, the little Miss Know-It-All who had plagued his classroom with questions for years. She stared at him for a moment more, then fumbled through her bookbag, drawing out parchment, quill and ink.

"Who is this gentleman, anyway? I presume it's neither of your two immature colleagues; their style isn't subtle enough to court a woman by correspondence," the Potions Master added with a mocking tone, disconcerting her even further by his willingness to discuss the matter. "Do you even know who he is?"

"His name is Rus," Hermione managed without too much of a stutter, her heart skipping a beat at the thought that Rus had been lying to her all along about his identity. She'd considered the possibility before, but not for over half a year. "He says he works with the Order of the Phoenix, sir...do you know him?"

His mouth tightened a little. "I do."

Hermione looked up at him, at that. "Is there something wrong with him?"

"Something wrong?" he repeated, arching his brow again.

"You...looked like you don't approve."

"I can neither approve nor disapprove, Miss Granger. You are legally an adult, and are free to do as you please in your personal life. So long as it does not interfere with your classwork, I have little enough to say about the matter. I simply know that his position as one of the spies for the Order is particularly precarious...and that as a spy, he is a man of deceptions. How much do you know about him?"

"I know a fair amount, since we've been corresponding regularly for roughly a year and a half by now," Hermione admitted, glad that he knew who Rus was, even if it was Severus Snape who knew who Rus was. "And I usually send my letters by owl, and just tell the school owls to go find him...in the summer, they just show up a couple days after his letters arrive, and hang around my house until I have a letter to send. Apparently he worked out something with Professor Dumbledore, regarding that." Again, she blushed. "We...haven't actually ever met. We've just been pen-pals with each other, until now. I...wasn't expecting this, exactly. Not that it's a total surprise; we've grown rather...erm, well, I won't bore you with the details of our friendship."

"There is an Order meeting, tonight," he stated, catching her off-guard with the change of subject, and the uncomfortable tone to his voice, and the look to match it that ghosted over his face. "I could deliver the letter, and report back to you on his reactions as he reads it, so you would know if his interest is genuine or not."

"He's a member of the Order," Hermione pointed out. "Doesn't that make him trustworthy?"

"Are you really that naive, Miss Granger?" he asked her, arching a brow. "Do you really trust everyone who is in the Order?"

"Yes," she replied honestly, without thought.

His brow lifted even higher. "*Everyone*, Miss Granger?"

A flush stole over her face as she realized he meant himself as well...and that he knew very well how most of the Order members felt about him...that they'd use him, but most of them didn't completely trust him, being both a Slytherin and having been a Death Eater by choice, long ago. It was possible, she knew, that a spy could get into the Order, as they had a spy or two in the Dark Lord's camp...but he was enquiring about himself in specific. Firming her shoulders, she lifted her chin, stared levelly into those dark, bottomless eyes, and gave him the absolute truth.



"There *might* be a spy or a turncoat lurking in the Order, Professor; it is possible...but that turncoat *isnot* you, sir. I trust you."

His sallow cheeks flushed, and his eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Well...aside from the high recommendation of Professor Dumbledore's trust and faith in you...only a madman would subject himself to the risks of being a double agent, for neither side would treat you kindly, if they knew you were a spy for the other side. Dumbledore may seem like a very nice old man, but he's also a very powerful wizard. I don't think you're foolish enough to cross him...and I think you honestly regret now whatever drew you to join the Death Eaters long ago."

He studied her in silence for a long moment, then asked crisply, "Do you think to idealize me, Miss Granger? That I'm really some poor soul seeking redemption for all my regrets?"

"No, sir. I think you're a very complicated man, who undoubtedly has many reasons for whatever you choose to do. There's nothing wrong in having several motivations for doing something; it's simply efficient, and I've never known you to be a wasteful man."

The Potions Master studied her again. And surprised her. "...Five points to Gryffindor for your perceptiveness, Miss Granger. Now, finish your letter before the others come to class."

"...You won't read it, will you?" Hermione dared to ask him.

"In order to judge his reaction, Miss Granger, I would need to know what your response to his enquiry is," he retorted dryly. "However, a simple verbal yes or no will suffice. You may leave the gushing poetry...or the livid insults...to the eyes of your 'pen-pal'."

She looked down at the blank page in front of her, and contemplated her pen-pal's offer. The silence between them was a bit tense, and thick. It was a little awkward, making up her mind in front of him. She admired Professor Snape for being a master of his subject, though she could do without his irascible temper and sarcastic insults. She trusted him, yes, but he was not one of her friends. Discussing her private life around him was...difficult. It helped that he turned away, moving to the chalkboard and flicking his wand over the surface, scribing the day's notes upon its surface.

Finally, she picked up her pen and began answering Rus' letter. "...My answer is 'yes'. He may court me."

The flicking of his wand slowed for a moment, but his voice was its usual crisp self. "He is older than you, Miss Granger. I am surprised you would choose to date someone who isn't a lot closer to your own age."

"The boys my age, Professor, are immature, inexperienced, and intimidated by my status as a 'know-it-all'...and they mindlessly prefer to date creatures with more beauty than brains. The only reason most of them seek me out is because, to them, I'm a walking, talking Encyclopedia Magica. 'Hermione, what's the answer for this?' 'Hermione, what's the answer for that?' " she mocked herself, pausing in the middle of her relatively short reply as Professor Snape continued writing on the chalkboard. "The rest of the time, it's 'Hermione, shut up! We don't need to know that!' No one has yet to realize the best way to get a know-it-all to shut up is to kiss her...though I suppose I wouldn't *want* a kiss from some fumbling, immature boy who wouldn't know his...uh..."

She fumbled to a stop, blushing furiously. When the Potions Master glanced over his shoulder at her, she quickly ducked her head, trying to hide her embarrassment at having spoken so freely and sarcastically in front of him. To her surprise, he answered her equally frankly.

"Most boys *wouldn't* know what to do with a young woman, Miss Granger. You are astute to realize this while you are still surrounded by them, and can avoid the pitfalls of associating with them."

He drew in a breath to say more, but the classroom door opened and a trio of Advanced Potions students came in the door. That effectively ended one of the nicest conversations she'd ever had with the man. Hermione felt oddly disappointed. For the first time since coming to Hogwarts, Professor Snape had treated her almost kindly. Scratching out the rest of her reply, she checked the note to make sure it said what she wanted to say.

'Dear Rus,

Yes, you may court me.

*Be advised that, if a relationship of any kind is to work between us, I am bound to ask you at least ten thousand questions, and will be expecting honest answers to ninety-nine percent of them, complete answers to at least eighty percent of them, and fully detailed answers to at least sixty percent of them.*

*I will, of course, strive to reply with an equal level of honesty, completeness and attention to detail to your own barrage of questions. And I'll admit myself to being very nervous about answering them. I am still rather young, though I do consider myself reasonably mature for my age, and you've mentioned before that you're older than I am, somewhere around forty, as you once said in a letter. As we move into a more personal stage in our correspondence, I cannot help but worry that you'll find me lacking, compared to those women you know who are closer to your own age and life-experience.*

*But I will take faith in the fact that, despite all the flaws I've revealed to you over the past year, you're still apparently interested in me. So, as I'm about to start classes for the day, I'll leave you with just one question:*

*What do you look like?*

Yours,

Hermione'

Folding the letter, she used her wand to seal it with a daub of wax, and tucked the letter into her Potions book, setting up her desk so that she would be ready for the day's lesson. There it sat, tucked into the front of the tome, as she chopped and grated, squeezed and measured, stirred and boiled, until the draught of the day was finally bottled. All through class, she wondered how she could get the letter to her professor, and with it a request, without anyone being the wiser.

Finally, she resorted to knocking over the bottle of dried, crushed pixie petals when she was putting all of her ingredients away. Shooing Ron and Harry on ahead of her, she scooped the petal crumbs back into the bottle with a spell, taking her time to clean up every last scrap, until the room had emptied. Corking the bottle, she took it and her letter to the storage cupboards, then took just the letter up to the Potions Master's desk.

"Here's my correspondence, sir," she told him. As he reached for the letter, she held onto it for a moment. "I would...I have one request. I've asked him a question, about what he looks like. I'd like you to answer that question after I've read his answer. I trust you to be honest in your evaluation of his looks, and to comment on how far he might stray from the truth, once I've received a reply."

Dark eyes regarded her for a moment, then he snorted, taking the letter as she released it and tucking it into an inner pocket of his robes. "I am not a female, Miss Granger. I will not be able to give you any perspective on what a young woman might find attractive in a man."

"No, but you're really good at describing the characteristics of a potions ingredient," she pointed out. Then stared at him in breathless shock as he twitched, his face twisting into an unfamiliar expression for a moment, before bursting into laughter.

Hearty laughter.

Severus Snape laughing was an astonishing sight. Aside from the revelation that the man had an actual, non-sardonic sense of humor...though she couldn't figure out what was so funny about her comment...all the scowl lines on his face had somehow transformed themselves into laugh lines. It was a good look for him. Even with those overly yellow, somewhat crooked teeth exposed as he laughed, it was a good look for him. Certainly his eyes sparkled like black lightning, fine little lines appearing at the corners of his eyes.

A heartbeat after he met her gaze, his breath caught in his throat, his laughter stilling mid-gusto. A second after that, his whole expression collapsed, like a folding-chair being put away, returning to its normal, closed, tightly shut expression. If her heart hadn't still been racing, Hermione wouldn't have had any proof at all that he'd smiled, let alone actually laughed. Disappointment rushed through her, slumping her shoulders. To her surprise, a disgusted sigh escaped his lips.

"...Do not look at me like that, Miss Granger. You of all witches should be smart enough to know why that must never happen again. Nor will you mention it to anyone else, 'lest I be forced to give you the nastiest detention my mind can devise."

He meant his seemingly out-of-character burst of laughter, and his position as a spy, with every one of his seemingly cold-hearted moves calculated and planned to the nth degree. Hermione bowed her head. "I understand, sir. I'm sorry I made you...you know."

"Hopefully, there will come a time when such precautions are not necessary, but that time is not now. In the meanwhile, I can hear the chatter of my next batch of dunderheads approaching. You will be late for class, if you do not run. Do not expect me to give you a note excusing your tardiness, Miss Granger...or for being caught running in the halls."

"No sir. I *do* understand, sir," she added truthfully, before retreating back to her desk. The door opened as she shouldered her bookbag, the first knot of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw third-years entering the classroom. They made way for her as she exited as quickly as she could without actually running, carefully not looking back at the man behind her.

## Chapter Two

*Chapter 3 of 10*

Oh, no--Snape has found out about Rus! The gall of the man, prying into Miss Granger's private correspondence like that...

II.

...

Severus watched her go, fingers itching to reach into his robes and pull out the letter, to open it and read for himself what she had written. But he'd given his word; the meeting was tonight, and he'd promised to not let the letter be opened until this evening. The opportunity for him to be, well, not nice exactly, but less nasty than usual, had come into his grasp, and he had seized the moment carefully. It was exceedingly rare for him to be so alone with the Head Girl, in a moment of time when no one could spy upon them, not even her friends.

Her responses had been gratifying; Severus believed she might actually understand the position he was in, as a spy, as the head of Slytherin, as the reputedly cold, unfeeling, black-hearted bastard of Hogwarts. After a full year of carefully lowering his guard in writing to the young woman, through one carefully phrased admission at a time, after seeing her respond to his slightly kinder attitudes in this rare moment of privacy, he finally believed the counter-spell to the Withering-Heart Curse might actually work. He hadn't been jesting when he'd told Ronald Weasley that the counter-spell could take years to apply. The Withering-Heart Death was a horrible curse to suffer, almost unheard-of even in the Dark Magic circles where he still prowled as a spy for the Order...and originally mostly for little more than pure academic interest and an interest in learning all the various counters, than for the reasons usually attributed to him by others. That was where Lord Voldemort still roamed. Not in search of counter-spells, but in search of the Darkest of Arts themselves, anything to fuel his mad quest for power over the wizarding world.

Still, Severus was a man of discipline. The letter stayed untouched in his robe pockets all the way through supper. When he rose at the end of the meal, his eyes strayed to Hermione Granger, whom he had glanced at covertly only a handful of times throughout the meal, carefully never more nor less than he had looked at the other students. Her gaze met his before he could look away. Deciding quickly on how to respond, Severus lifted his hand to his robes, brushing his fingertips over the spot where the letter was hidden. Sliding his hand off of the crinkling parchment, he adjusted his robes as if that had been his intent all along, and moved away. If she was as smart as she seemed to be, she would interpret that simple gesture as a reassurance that he had not forgotten his promise.

The letter stayed in his robe pockets throughout the meeting, too; Severus gave his report and patiently listened to those matters that were relevant for him to hear, but left as soon as everything important had been said, as it would have been out-of-character for the taciturn Potions Master to linger for the socializing that sometimes happened afterwards. He did withdraw into the downstairs washroom immediately after leaving the meeting, though, locking the door behind him for a moment of privacy. Extracting the letter, he cracked the seal as he stood before the sink, and read the neatly penned lines she had inked that morning.

His mouth curved in a slight smile, as he read her required percentages of honesty in his comments. That left him with a hundred or so lies he could get away with telling her. Not that he'd give her quite so many...unless one counted all the half-lies he'd hedged so far...but if she protested after finding out who 'Rus' really was and what he really did for a living, he could always point out that he'd simply used up his quota of lies ahead of time.

Less than his quota, actually. Even his pen-name could be considered a form of the truth, in a certain light. She'd asked for his full name, and he'd demurred, citing his position as a spy. That was true; he was a spy, and 'Rus' was a part of his full name, so it technically wasn't a lie to call himself thus. And his lies about his employment and co-workers were technically only partial lies...teaching students the art of potion-making was very much a case of Research, with all those essays, and Development, from all those attempts at getting a potion to come out right. Not to mention his students were in a sense his underlings in that he could order them about, and that the other professors were other 'departments' in that they were handling the other areas of knowledge waiting to be researched and developed by their students.

Alright, it was a very big stretching of the truth. But there were plenty of real truths buried in all the things he'd told her. His emotions had been true. Muted in some cases...especially in the beginning, toned down to an acceptable level for her to read, so that he wouldn't scare her off with his blunt honesty...but his reactions and thoughts and feelings had been transmitted with increasing honesty as their communications had progressed...and with the need to reveal the truth of himself, came a mellowing of himself as he unburdened his secret stresses to a remarkably sympathetic soul.

Hermione Granger now knew more about Severus Snape than almost anyone else, and perhaps even more; Lucius had known the truth of him fairly well in his youth, and Albus those parts that lay in his adulthood, but Hermione knew a lot about both parts of his life. The only topic they'd avoided entirely was why he'd joined the Death Eaters, and why he'd quit following their creed. She knew he was posing as a Death Eater, one of Dumbledore's spies in their ranks, but that was about it. The one time she'd asked, he'd gently pointed out that it was too early in their relationship for a revelation that intimate and intense.

She would eventually ask again, though, especially now that they were moving their acquaintance to a more intimate level. The young woman was inherently, interminably curious. She thrived on learning, took joy in expanding her knowledge, reveled in absorbing and integrating everything she ran across in her studies. If he were free to be the teacher he could have been, Severus would have gladly taken her under his wing as a special protege. As it was, he could not do so openly, though he'd done his best as Rus to encourage her curiosity even as he'd denigrated her know-it-all-ness in class, doing his best to stay in-character.

Tucking the letter back into his pocket, Severus regarded his reflection in the mirror. The lamplight showed a thin, hatchet-like beak of a nose, black stringy hair that he never bothered to comb save once a day when he rose in the mornings, and narrow eyes that were so dark, even he couldn't always tell where his pupils ended and his irises began, save under the strongest light. Pallid skin with a yellowish cast to it that suggested he could actually tan, if he ever bothered to laze about in the sun...which he never did; looking almost as pale and unhealthy as a vampire was an excellent addition to the rest of his unpleasant, consciously intimidating appearance...and of course the stark black of his clothes, which didn't do anything to bring colour or life into his complexion.

There was that slight touch of white at his throat and sleeve-cuffs from his undershirt, but that was about it. White only looked good on someone with enough of a tan to contrast the paleness of the fabric, anyway. His lips were too thin, the planes of his face too stark and angular, the lines of his age beginning to show in grooves around his mouth, and that frown-dimple above the bridge of his nose. The forehead was firm and straight, not the least bit sloping, but it only made his face look thin and uncompromising. The rest of him wasn't much better; about the only thing he could say for his genetics was that it hadn't given him a middle-aged pudding-belly. Of course, he himself had also helped contribute to that fact, but his physical inheritance was the one thing for which he could thank his bastard of a father.

Every single morning, like clockwork, Severus put his body through a series of warm-ups, stretches, and exercises designed to keep him as physically fit as possible. Yes, magic was the preferred method for the Dark Lord to torture his followers, but it was a fact that the greater shape a particular body was in, the better it could withstand such rigors. He knew very well that the chances of his surviving the end of the war were slimmer than most, given his position as a spy, but Severus wasn't above using anything and everything within his power to assure that chance existed, short of going back to Voldemort's side. Casting subtle protection charms which he applied with every single button fastened on his clothes, taking care of himself physically, keeping his Occlumency powers as sharp and secretive as ever, it was all a part of his efforts to survive.

There were any number of things he'd do to survive the war, really; technically, writing letters to the Head Girl wasn't one of them since it was to help her survive, not himself, but at least the other reasons kept him in good enough shape that he wouldn't embarrass himself or her with a middle-aged pudge. And being in a fit body ensured he would be in good shape to enjoy the aftermath of the war...provided he survived. There was no point in spying against the Dark Lord if Severus didn't want to live in a Voldemort-free world afterwards, and he most definitely did.

Eyeing his unchanging features one last time, Severus sighed quietly. There really wasn't much to recommend about his looks, other than the fact that he was physically fit. No tooth-whitening charms, no tanning spells, nothing could be changed about his appearance without it being noticed and reported by someone. She would have to be content with himself as he was...which was a nerve-racking prospect.

Making sure the letter was safely tucked in his pocket, Severus used the facilities, then left. Penning his reply could wait until he returned to the castle. He was, after all, an expert at biding his time with a semblance of patience, after so many years of waiting for Voldemort's predicted return.

...

*'Dearest Mione;*

*Your agreement makes me giddy...I don't quite know where to start! I am like a kid handed the keys to Honeydukes for a week, a feeling I haven't enjoyed in years. I am also feeling the utterly unnatural urge to splatter the page with a veritable flood of ink, from all the questions I want to ask.*

*I shall compose myself, however, and answer your question first, before progressing to my own. What do I look like? Ah, you ask me the one question that makes me so nervous, the barbs on the quill in my hand are clumping together from my sweat. No doubt you have built up an image of myself in your mind of a prince of a man, someone who should match physically to my towering intellect, my sardonic wit, and my brilliant friendship with you. But to say that I am the proverbial Tall, Dark and Handsome would be a lie.*

*True, I am somewhat above average in height, though I'm not nearly as tall as my tallest colleague; I suppose that's enough to qualify me for Tall, though. As my hair is black and my eyes are a sort of midnight grey (it's the Black Irish meets Moorish Spaniard meets Transplanted Greek meets more Black Irish on the various sides of my family), I suppose I also qualify for Dark. But I am not Handsome, by any stretch of the imagination. My nose would make an aardvark stare in shock, my teeth would make a dragon shiver in revulsion, my complexion is the envy only of vampires, and my general build suitable merely for comparison to models of skeletons. At least when compared to most wizards my age...the one thing I don't have is a pudge, and I am understandably proud of this singular fact. I am not quite as scarred as the cadavers used by apprentice mediwitches, but that's not for want of the Enemy's habit of unleashing his displeasure on those around him. And while I am lucky to have the use of all of my limbs, someone somewhere along the way hacked off over half the usual allotted sense of humor one normally gets in life...so I almost never have impulse nor reason to smile. (We are in a war, after all, and mine is a most precarious situation.)*

*Until I started exchanging letters with you, I had no reason to smile, that is. You make me want to smile, Mione, and though I must be careful who I smile around (spies do not generally go about smiling, unless the situation demands it), it is a feeling I had almost forgotten existed naturally, once upon a time in my life. If I would be your prince, my dear, you will have to accept me as a frog-prince at best, warts and all. (If you're wondering about the presence or absence of real warts, I shall leave the answer to that line of enquiry a mystery for now, just in case I've already scared you with my self-description.) I will say that I am better-looking than the average troll...but only tied at best with the most handsome of their lot.*

*So, call me Tall, Dark, and Ugly, for now. I suppose I could take better care of my complexion, use some charms to fix my teeth, and find a competent wizarding salon to do something with my hair...but a spy cannot afford to change their physical character, either. Not without inviting unwanted enquiries. However, when we finally meet in person, I promise I will take the time to show myself to you in the best possible light that I can manage within those constraints, tidying myself up and so forth. Of course, you probably now have a mental picture of a neatly combed, skelatinous troll in a nice set of wizarding robes...still as ugly as sin, but at least making an effort...but that cannot be helped. My mind is my most handsome aspect (which is why I first approached you through these letters), and I'm afraid you'll have to be content with fervently admiring that.*

*I will probably bring a blindfold to our meeting, too, so you will have the option of not looking upon me, without fearing to give offence; the only redeeming physical characteristic I have is my voice, which I am told is passably pleasant to listen to, and positively enjoyable on the ears in comparison to the impact of my face upon the eyes. Either that, or I could use a glamour of some kind, to assure a positive reaction when we're out in public together, should there come a time for such things in our acquaintance. It will not be the first time I've disguised myself by one means or another. Still, there's a foolish part inside of me that wishes you would not need the blindfold for long...*

*As for the way that you look...I did take note of your appearance one evening at Headquarters late this last summer. You weren't paying attention to me; I was passing by a doorway, and caught a glimpse of you through the crack between the door-jamb and the panel of the door itself. You were seated at a table in the parlour, a look of concentration on your profiled brow, pouring over some text...no doubt studying in advance for your return to school, and your seventh year.*

*I know your hair is a rich mixture of chestnut, with its golden highlights, walnut undertones, and auburn hints in sunlight. I know that it is waist-length, and very curly, forming a thick curtain of ringlets that made me want to tangle my hands in your locks, and bury my face in the mass of it, to try and discern by scent and texture alone what you use to make it gleam with such health and vitality. I know your nose is slightly pert at the tip...I did see you in profile, after all...and that you have the habit of nibbling on your lower lip when lost in thought, a habit which makes it appear rosy and glistening, as if begging to be kissed...*

*I think I might frighten you, if I continue my observations in this vein. That is not my intent. But to be absolutely honest, I hadn't really considered you as an adult in my mind, until that moment. There was such an air of seriousness about you, of mature contemplation, that all previous glimpses of you in the past were set aside in favour of this one moment in time. It is a memory I treasure, trite though that may sound.*

*Though you were clad in Muggle attire, a tee-shirt and dungarees, you held yourself with a grace and assurance beyond that which I have seen in any other female of your years. In rereading your half of our correspondence, I find this impression of such thoughtful maturity mixed with wry, youthful humor to be even more compelling than ever, as seen when re-read in a short time rather than over the weeks and months it took for our friendship to blossom. Though I had held an image of you as a child during most of the time that I have known of your existence, I confess I cannot think of you as a child any longer. You are a woman: intelligent, charming, brilliant, mature, and teeth-achingly beautiful. Not conventionally beautiful, I will allow for honesty's sake, but enchanting to me all the same.*

*I know, you would ask me which one of the Order members I am, and if you have ever spoken with me face-to-face. I cannot answer those questions just yet; my position is still too precarious to have undue curiosity aimed my way...I know you, Mione; your curiosity would gnaw upon your thoughts even greater than it already does now, if you knew exactly who I was. You might actually want to contact me directly if you knew, and that would not be a good idea at the moment. It would not preserve the secrecy of my position. There will be a time when we shall meet, you have my word of honor on this, but that time has not yet come. So, we shall leave my description at Tall, Dark, and Ugly for now...and yours at Young, Mature, and Beautiful. If putting 'young' and 'mature' into the same set of descriptives isn't an oxymoron, that is.*

*So, on to my own questions for you: When we destroy the Enemy (I am not usually optimistic, but as I said before, you give me more hope than I've held previously), what are your plans for the future? I don't mean career-wise; you've already stated you'd like to go into Research with the Department of Magic, and you of course know that I approve of this idea. I mean romantically, relationship-wise.*

*Do you see yourself interested in things like marriage, children, raising a family of your own? How many children if so? Give the longer life-spans of wizards versus Muggles, would you want to put off having children for a while, to focus on you career first, or would you rather take a break from all that studying and be a mother first? Yes, I realize I'm diving right into these questions, but please don't feel pressured by them, or assume these are things I'd demand of you. It is your body and your future, after all. I simply want to know.*

*For myself, I hadn't really considered myself fatherly material, in the past. The life of a spy is one big contraindication of a successful job at fatherhood; certainly, not knowing if I'll live through the end of the war doesn't encourage me to want to put a wife and children into jeopardy, or leave them vulnerable to any surviving enemies after I'm gone. Another is that I am often impatient with my underlings, and am terrified deep down inside of yelling at a young, helpless child out of similar habit, or worse. You know my own childhood tales, and why I am loathe to chance such a thing happening. Trapped in my role as I am, the things that I want to do versus the things I have to do also contribute to the problem. Once the Enemy is dead for good, I would be under far less stress than I am now, and would be free to change my character without worry of it affecting my persona when I spy...yet I wonder if I can actually change, to become a better man, habits being so easily ingrained, yet so difficult to remove.*

*I look at Arthur Weasley, and I sometimes envy the man his easy parenting skills around his sons and his daughter. I realize of course that this ease came with seven times' worth of practice over several years, but he started out a good man, from a good family. And he has Molly, who undeniably rules their roost like an iron-clawed mother-hen, keeping him and their boys firmly in line. (Please do not mistake me; I do like the woman, and admire her. I just think she's a bit...intense at times.)*

*For that matter, what sort of marriage do you envision? Have you even thought of such things? I know that I do not want the cold, verbally and sometimes physically cruel arrangement my own parents had. I would also not want to be the sort of husband who raised his wand against his wife, yet these are the things I fear I might do...and they terrify me when I think of acting that way around you...we are in some part the product of our upbringing, after all, though I would try to strive with all my best intentions to be otherwise. My own parents' marriage was truly a piss-poor example to follow, if you'll pardon my language. I've tried to observe other's marriages for better examples to follow, the Weasleys' among others, but my current position doesn't allow for much in the way of useful interactions with married couples.*

*I also know that I am very much used to quiet and solitude. I admit to being lonely, once the day is done and I've retired to my domicile. But I wouldn't want a chatterbox of a wife, I think...a conversationalist, yes, but not someone who speaks solely to hear her own voice. That is one of the things I admire about you; your conversations are usually quite relevant and fascinating. Your repertoire of topics isn't limited to the latest issue of BeautyWitch, or the different charms on how to clean and polish a cupboard. And you love to sit quietly and read, and can find contentment in doing so. Moreover, you do not mind if someone else just wants to sit and read for a while.*

*I wonder if our reading rates are the same. They must be close, since you've absorbed so much knowledge in your young life, and I know my own rate is quite swift. I have this image in my head, of an intimate moment in my quarters with you. (Get your mind out of the gutter; we're fully clothed in this one). We're on my settee in my private parlour; I'm leaning against the arm of the sofa, my legs stretched across the cushions. You are nestled between my thighs, leaning back against my stomach and chest. Together, we're supporting some erudite, dry-as-dust tome, some paving-slab-sized Treatise on the Ancient Arte of Whatever...and we're reading it together. Occasionally we might discuss what's written on each page, but most of the time, I imagine us just murmuring to each other to see who's finished the current set of pages, and the rustle of the parchment as we move on to the next pair.*

*I know it is not a conventional definition of intimacy, but to me, it is an undeniably intimate image. Not in the usual, hormonally-charged sense, but in the sense of personal space, and how each of us could spend our spare time in privacy together. I cannot imagine sharing such a close activity with anyone else...I cannot imagine any other unattached woman of my acquaintance being willing to simply sit so still for so long, for that matter, never mind read something so academic in nature, once they have escaped the bonds of mandatory education. In that regard, I believe you and I have more than enough in common to understand the value of such a moment in time as the seemingly simple activity of sharing a bit of reading.*

*That's not to say I do not have other sorts of intimate images in my head regarding you, physical ones as well as mental and emotional; I am a man, after all. But those images can wait to be discussed in another letter; I fear it is late, and the man who couriered your reply for you grows impatient to have this missive completed. So I shall merely state once again how deeply pleased and relieved I am to know that you are interested in carrying our relationship further. We will meet in due time, I promise you, and see if you can abide being around someone as horrid as me. In the meanwhile, I am very glad to be,*

*Yours,*

*Rus'*

Hermione looked up from the letter in her hands. It wasn't the lengthiest she had ever received, but it was quite telling. The seal had arrived intact, making her glad Professor Snape hadn't read her correspondence. He'd found her in one of the corridors, sneered at her friends, and stated brusquely that he 'had a matter to discuss with the Head Girl'. When she had acquiesced, he had led her wordlessly down to his dungeon-level office. Once there, he had said nothing, merely handed over the letter now in her hands, and had sat in continuing silence as she read its contents. Continuing, until she reached the end, and met his gaze.

"...Would you like my assessment of the man, now?" Professor Snape enquired in a somewhat bored tone.

"Yes, please. Thank you," Hermione added politely, on pins and needles as to his reply.

"Supra-average height, sub-average looks. Don't go out into public if you don't want to be stared at for your poor taste in companionship while in his company."

Hermione arched a skeptical brow at him. "That is hardly an accurate summation of his qualities as a potions ingredient, Professor. That would be like...like calling a bezoar just a rock found in some animal's stomach."

His face twitched again at her dry-voiced chiding, but he did not laugh, nor smiled more than faintly. Still, one corner of his mouth did curve upwards discernibly. Emboldened, Hermione dared to tease him,

"If our positions were reversed, I'd have to give you a 'T' for Terrible, Professor, as that was a truly terrible summation...a first year could do better, and I could easily subtract twenty points from Slytherin for such a poor effort!"

His eye narrowed, and she realized she had gone too far. Until he spoke, leaning forward and lacing his fingers together. "Miss Granger, if you are ever to do that again, *try* to refrain from even the slightest hint of a giggle mid-speech. Five points from Gryffindor for a lackluster display of intimidation."

She stared at him, trying to come up with a reply. Finally Hermione blinked, frowned, and retorted, "I wasn't trying to intimidate you, Professor! I was sharing my sense of humor!"

*Oh, that was bloody brilliant*, she winced to herself in the next moment. *Now he'll snap that he doesn't want me sharing anything with him, or something like that, and take off even more House points...*

"I'm afraid I do not have much of a sense of humor, Miss Granger...but...his natural eye-colour is akin to the ink of an eskellian gall...without nearly as much lividity...his flesh the colour of boomslang skin that's been freeze-dried, the texture of his hair not that far off from century-plant fiber, his body as heavily scarred as a rutillated quartz crystal, and his nose could rival the protuberance of a cassowary's, save that it has been damaged at some point along the way."

The blood drained from her face, interrupting her bemused enjoyment of his potions-ingredient listing of Rus' appearance; it was a good thing she was already seated, since Hermione doubted her legs would have supported her, had she been standing. A damaged nose and a heavily scarred body? "Good god!...Rus' is Alastor Moody?"

Professor Snape blinked. The blank shock on his face was such a rare sight, it instantly reassured her. Clearing his throat, he shook his head slightly. "No...no... It's definitely *not* Moody. The nose," he added, gesturing vaguely at his own face, "is merely broken, not half-eaten away. I sincerely doubt you've ever really noticed the fellow exists, let alone looked twice at him. He's not the sort to draw the eye of a young witch." Another blink, and the last of his shock melted away, his usual cold efficiency returning as he reached for one of the scrolls stacked on his desk, no doubt to begin grading them. "If that is all, Miss Granger...?"

She knew a dismissal when she'd heard one. Rising, she nodded, retreating towards the door. "Yes. Thank you, Professor."

"Do not think to make me a habitual courier of your correspondences, Miss Granger," was his reply. It wasn't as sharp as it could have been, and she glanced back at him, her hand on the knob of his office door.

"Sir...?"

He looked up from the scroll, uncorking a jar of red ink, quill in hand. "What is it, Miss Granger?"

It wasn't a friendly-voiced question, but it wasn't entirely an impatient one, either. "Erm...what's your opinion of Rus' character? Your own opinion of the man."

That made him pause, and sit back in his chair. "He...is taciturn to his colleagues, impatient with lackwits, and...a lonely man. But very intelligent, and very good at what he does."

"Which is...?" she asked, fishing for more information.

"He is a spy, Miss Granger. He is very good at deceiving people." A slight twitch of his face made her wonder if he had been about to wince at the end of that pronouncement. Even odder was his amendment, appended before she could turn back to the door. "But...he seemed very taken with your letter. Even when I observed him in a few less-than-guarded moments during the course of the evening, he was taken by it; he could hardly stop himself from re-reading it."

"If anyone can reach the parts of him he shares with almost no one, I think it could be you...and if you tell a single soul that I am advocating a relationship between a student and a man who's twice your age, I will not only deny it as an absurd fallacy, I shall deduct a hundred points from your House," he finished, jabbing the tip of his quill pen at her. "You may add a hundred hours' of detention to that threat, too, if you tell either of the boys you still somehow manage to call your best friends after all these years that I am playing...*matchmaker*...even in the smallest part."

"I won't say a word, Professor," she promised quietly, and slipped out the door. Wondering at the change in the Potions Master's behaviour. *Odd, how...nice...he's being to me...*

*Severus Snape, Matchmaker... Ha! I couldn't tell anyone about this even if I really wanted to*, she thought as she headed up out of the dungeons. *No one would ever believe me!*

...

The letters passed between her and Rus with doubled frequency...they now came every other day, rather than once every four days. Most of them were at least somewhat shorter on average, though not quite cut in half. Still, they were fun to answer, as well as nerve-racking, thrilling, embarrassing, and fascinating, given the increasingly intimate nature of their contents. She told him she wanted to get settled in a career first before having children, and that quiet evenings reading together was something she would enjoy...and that tucked onto a couch with him, sharing a book...even fully clothed...was indeed a very intimate image to contemplate in her own mind. Breathhtakingly intimate in a positive way, for she had no one else in her life who would even think of something as simple as reading a book while nestled together, fully clothed, as 'intimate'.

But as he had written, there were other forms of intimacy, too, and a little bit at a time, a little further with each letter, they explored those other things. All forms of intimacy, from longing images of just being able to relax with someone at the end of a hard day, to teasing questions about whether each of them preferred a shower or a bath, and if the latter, with how many bubbles. They even discussed how much each of them liked kissing, and what parts of previous romantic interests they'd kissed. Hermione had to admit she didn't have much experience beyond kissing and a little caressing in those areas that were mostly socially acceptable, whereas Rus admitted in his letters that he was 'reasonably experienced' in the '*joue d'amour*', as he called it, the game of love.

That had led to what started out as a set of questions prompted by her curiosity on sex and lovemaking. From there, it progressed to a clinical discussion of what actually happened during sexual congress. That discussion evolved eventually into teasing suggestions of what each of them liked to do to find and feel pleasure...and what they thought they could do to the other person, too. Which had in turn led to the mortifying letter in her hands.

It started out simply enough:

'Mione;

*You will definitely not want to read this letter out in a public area. In fact, you might want to read it in the safety of your dorm room, in the privacy of your four-poster, with the curtains drawn and a silencing charm laid upon them. I intend to tell you what I can do for you, and you will want to be somewhere private yet comfortable, at a time when you can be alone with yourself...and this letter...for an hour or two...*

However, she had skimmed the rest of the letter, and now her face was quite red, and she was trying very hard to not let the Potions Master know how embarrassed and...and...other things she was feeling, right now. Thankfully there were at least another ten minutes before most of the other students would arrive for class, hopefully time enough for her to regain control of her face-colour, but...*sweet Merlin!* The things written in this particular letter....!

"...Is something wrong, Miss Granger?"

She jumped, flustered, and quickly folded the pages, stuffing them back into her robe pocket. "Er...nothing."

"Nothing? You're blushing, Miss Granger. You do not normally do that," Professor Snape observed dryly, but without the usual edge of sardonicism he employed during class-time.

The more time she had spent down here in the mornings, waiting for the others to arrive, the more Hermione had observed him acting almost pleasantly towards her. She still couldn't pinpoint whatever had urged him to do so, and he was still cold and cruel towards her whenever anyone else was around...but he was quite bearable when they were alone together. And if she asked him things about her increasingly amorous pen-pal, he usually replied after a few moments of thought, confirming the things written in Rus' letters to her.

It was almost like having another confidante in her life. Maybe even a friend. But there were some things one just didn't share with a friend, some things one definitely didn't tell a teacher, and some things one absolutely did not confess to Professor Snape. Cheeks hot, she mumbled, "It's nothing."

"Do I have to confiscate that letter, to find out for myself what it says?" he enquired silkily, leaving the chalkboard with its scrawl of class notes in favour of strolling over to her front-row desk.

Hermione clutched her robes closed, blushing even harder. "It's...*intimate*, Professor. I really don't think you want to read something that...intimate."

"Hm. An intimate letter, written to the Head Girl of this facility? Perhaps it *should* be confiscated anyway, on the grounds of being corruptive literature."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. She almost said *you wouldn't dare*, but that would be like the proverbial matador's cape fluttered in front of an enraged bull. The man was a spy, for heaven's sake; he threw on challenges and dares. Instead, she tightened her voice and replied as menacingly as she could, "...Try it, and I'll reveal to Lavender Brown, the greatest gossip in Gryffindor Tower, your most humiliating secret...Mr. *Matchmaker*. It'd be worth the lost House-points *and* a hundred hours of detention, combined!"

Black eyes glittered down at her as he growled back, "Ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger, for such a Slytherin-esque threat." Again, the corner of his mouth quirked, this time because of the way she gaped at him for the points *added*, not subtracted as one might've assumed. "I'm glad to see I am finally corrupting you, after years of putting up with your baser, lamentably Gryffindor-ish tendencies."

"...And I'm just as glad to see that I am corrupting you, too, sir," Hermione managed to retort smoothly, though her face still felt overly warm. This time from the fact that he'd just given her what was probably the most House-points any Gryffindor had ever earned from him since he first started teaching at this school.

His brow arched warily. "How so?"

"You're being nice to me, in private. That's far more Gryffindor-ish than Slytherin-esque, in style."

This time, she didn't cringe mentally in anticipatory fear that he'd retaliate at her brashness. She did flinch internally when he folded his arms across his chest, settling into an intimidating stance, but lifted her chin with an external show of bravery. Or perhaps it was stubbornness, refusing to back down in the face of his dark, glittering stare.

He didn't speak immediately though; instead, Professor Snape shifted, strolling around the end of the table between them. Hermione turned her head to watch him, wary. His arms were still folded across his chest; with the way he kept them there, she didn't think he was going to go for his wand. What he did do unnerved her even more, however. Stopping behind her right shoulder, he leaned his long body over, until she could feel his breath gently warming the curves of her ear. He smelled of peppermint, with an undertone of coffee; his clothes carried the ever-present herbal mixture of potions ingredients, some sweet, some spicy, some pungent, and a hint of the same soap the house-elves used on all the students' laundry. Hermione wondered nervously what he was going to do, as he stayed that way for a long, silent, tension-building moment.

And then he spoke, devastating her.

"Do you know what Rus' voice sounds like, Miss Granger?" he enquired softly, deeply, his voice reverberating as much in her blood as in her ear, though how that was possible she wasn't quite sure.

Shaking her head slightly, she waited for his explanation, unsure if it would be wise to turn her head and look into those eyes. Not from this close a distance, at any rate. Truth be told, she hadn't even considered what Rus would sound like. Only now did she realize she had been remiss in seeking out certain relevant bits of information. No images or photographs, wizarding or Muggle, true, but then he'd refused that when she'd tentatively asked for an image of him early in their correspondence. Still, she could have asked for other things.

Hermione had no idea what Rus sounded like, because she had no recordings of his voice. The closest they had come had been when they had covered their respective tastes in music long ago, and had discovered to mutual delight that they had a more than reasonable amount of overlap. But to finally contemplate the sound of her pen-pal's voice, with a man who knew who Rus was... *But the question is, why is he suddenly willing to tell me what Rus sounds like?* Hermione didn't trust the Potions Master's motives. *He's been nicer to me, true, but this is going above and beyond the simple courtesies he's shown me. What does he want?*

"Your correspondent has one redeeming physical feature, Miss Granger," Professor Snape murmured in her ear, distracting her from her confusion. "His voice. It is low, soft, smooth...most witches even find it seductive. Well, on the rare occasion it has been unleashed pleasantly upon them, imparting those special sweet nothings shared between two potentially interested parties.

"It has been likened to the same sort of rich, dark, high-quality chocolate I have noticed you covertly nibbling after some of your trips into Hogsmeade." That surprised the Head Girl. She had no idea the Potions Master had noted her gastronomic activities so closely. "You rarely buy the same sickeningly sweet candies of your contemporaries, but always go straight for the bittersweet, and the spicy-sweet. Imagine such a voice wrapping around your senses, penetrating your defenses, stroking your nerves and stoking the fires of your imagination with all the power of that delectable New World aphrodisiac as you read this...*intimate*...letter of his.

"In fact, it is said, and even the Headmaster agrees, that Rus sounds remarkably like...*me*."

Hermione shivered, feeling her belly clench with desire and her heart thud with trepidation at the comparison.

"*That*, Miss Granger," he murmured with an undeniably sexy purr to his voice, pulling back from her ear as she flushed and tried to rub the goose-spots from her arm as surreptitiously as possible, "is my revenge for you daring to call me *nice*."

*Oh holy mother of Merlin!* Hermione didn't know when her eyelids had drifted shut, but they had, and she was having a hard time summoning the will to open them. She was having a hard time controlling the urge to pant, and she certainly had no control over the tension in her belly, nor the tightening of her nipples, nor the ache in her breasts and between her thighs. Any minute now, the other Advanced Potions students would come traipsing into the classroom, and she had to get her hormones under control. Really.

Because she had *always* thought Professor Snape's voice was like true bittersweet chocolate, not nearly sugary enough for most others to enjoy, but perfect for her own palate, trained from childhood to eschew most forms of sweets by both of her dentist parents. And now she was going to have *his* voice reading Rus' letters in her imagination, whenever she read them again. That meant all those intimate things in his latest missive, about stroking herself and imagining her hands were Rus' hands, touching her breasts, tickling her stomach, rubbing the damp secrets kept between her thighs...all of that would be tainted by the image of Severus Snape, Potions Master,

directing her to do everything, instead.

Her face burned again, this time with shame. Not because of what he had done to her, but because of what she was doing to herself. Maybe it was involuntary, and maybe it was just a sign of how secretly twisted she was, but Hermione couldn't help feeling aroused by the thought of Professor Snape's voice ordering her to do all of those things. God, she wasn't going to get calmed down before the other students arrived! *Hagrid clad only in a cooking apron*, she thought desperately, and flinched, shying away from even the remotest possibility of seeing the hairy half-giant's thighs and arse...*urgh!*

Great; now she was sick to her stomach...but at least it had killed her libido.

...

*Dammit, you're an idiot!* Severus swore at himself as he retreated to the far side of the room, faced the wall, and wriggled the tip of his wand past the placket of his trousers, brushing it against his underclothes. "...*Frigeo!*"

The discreet, *sotto voce* hiss was accompanied near-instantly by an abrupt chill spreading across his boxers, taking most of the heat out of his loins, and with it, the evidence of his erection. His damnable hormones were at fault. He wasn't supposed to have moved so quickly into this phase of his seduction plan, writing that letter and sending it to her on a weekday. Hell, he wasn't supposed to make her think of his voice, Severus Snape's voice, whenever she contemplated her pen-pal lover, Rus. Never mind that they were one and the same man. The grimace she'd sported mere seconds after he'd withdrawn wasn't very heartening, either.

His actions certainly weren't supposed to make him hard with longing for her, aroused by his own shameless verbal seduction of the young woman. Adjusting one of the cauldrons on the stone shelving, Severus wondered how he was going to overcome the mistake he had just made, rushing everything like that. The classroom door opened as he wracked his brain, and a pair of Ravenclaws entered the room; they didn't see him, standing on the wrong side of the aged oak panel, but he could definitely hear them.

"...in Hogsmeade, this weekend. I'm running low on spare quills."

"Well, I'm looking forward to a hot mulled cider. Pumpkin juice may be full of vitamins, but it just isn't the same as something hot to drink on a cold December morning, and Madam Rosemerta makes a much-better-tasting pick-me-up than any Pepper-Up potion Madam Pomfrey ever handed out..."

Hogsmeade. Rosemerta. The Three Broomsticks...which was an inn as well as a pub. Which had private rooms for rent. Which he had rented on the rare occasion he had wanted to get away from the school and all things children-related for a few hours at a time. Usually he'd Transfigured the bed into a fainting couch much like the one his mother had favoured for her own migraines, and rested there while sipping a headache draught and wondering when his miserably stressful life would finally take a turn for the better.

He couldn't, daren't meet her there openly. But an invitation to a clandestine meeting, carefully timed and choreographed to minimize witnesses...that could work. Part of his mind working on the problem, hashing out the details and specifics, Severus swept up to the head of the room, ignoring the slightly damp chill around his loins as his boxers slowly unfrosted. Yes, he would strike quickly, and accelerate the timetable even further. Knocking her off-balance might actually give him the time to insinuate himself fully into her affections. With a few precautions...providing she cooperated...he might be able to make the unveiling of Rus' true identity bearable for her. Might.

It had been a long time since Severus had bothered to pray...at least, sincerely...but he did so now.

## Chapter Three

*Chapter 4 of 10*

Hermione meets Rus...and explodes!

III.

...

Hands stuffed in her pockets, letter clenched in her fingers, thoughts chasing each other in fruitless circles, Hermione mounted the stairs to the upper floors of the Three Broomsticks. After the debacle of trying to hold a secret meeting over at the Hog's Head Pub on the other side of the wizarding village, she knew it was wiser for the two of them to meet here, and was grateful Rus had realized this, too. The noise and bustle of the crowd crammed into the public room downstairs would guarantee far more privacy than the alternative location; conversely, the fact that the boisterous lot downstairs was a lot more friendly and law-abiding ensured that, should she scream for help, that help would come running.

*Provided there isn't a silencing-charm cast on the room*, Hermione thought morosely. Then chided herself. *He's in the Order. Professor Snape knows him. He's not going to force himself on you, you silly little twit; Molly Weasley would have his guts for garter-strings faster than you could say 'Howler'!*

It wasn't exactly going to be forcing either. Well, sort of... On the one hand, the contents of his second-to-last letter had been so salacious, she had touched herself under the direction of those neatly penned words and brought herself to a heady orgasm not once, not twice, but no less than seven times in the past four nights. The first night, she'd done it only once, and had been mortified by how turned-on she had grown. Mainly because she'd read the instructions in the letter, following through with them, knowing they flowed from Rus' pen...but heard the words spoken in her mind with Professor Snape's own voice. That had been Tuesday night. Wednesday night, she'd tried to resist, but couldn't. That had been just the once, too.

After a Thursday of double Advanced Potions, listening to her teacher lecturing nearly the whole class long...she'd frigged herself twice that night, imagining his voice as she re-read those instructions on how to stroke and cup her breasts, how to tease the dip of her navel with an essence-moistened finger, how fast or slow to plunge two fingers into her tight canal. Last night had been twice more, and this morning, well, she'd been in such a heated state, waking from an erotic dream involving two men who had crossed each other visually, both of them looking like Severus Snape...a sort of formally-clad wizarding version and an oddly casual, Muggle-clad one...she had actually *imagined* that Rus was the Potions Master...and had mortified herself with an explosive climax that had made her grateful her curtains had still been warded with the lingering silencing-spell she'd applied hours before.

Room 28. Second floor, near the back of the hall. Far from the noise of the pub on the ground floor. Ten-thirty a.m., not more than half an hour into her Hogsmeade trip. Pulling out her watch to double-check the time, she extracted Rus' latest letter next, consulted the instructions, placed her hand on the wooden frame, and murmured the words Rus had written, ones that would permit her to pass through the wards. "*Duodans luchambon.*"

The plain weathered wood sparkled for a moment, and the latch clicked, the door opening under her light touch. Peering inside, she found a largish room inside, one divided into two sections, a bedroom half and a living room half. Aside from the wardrobe, mirror, and four-poster bed...a very popular fixture, in the wizarding world...over by the windows, and the table, chairs, settee and armchairs grouped by the crackling hearth, the room was empty. Curious, she stepped inside. The door swung shut behind her, latching and sparkling again. All she would have to do, Rus' letter had explained, was call out 'exit', and the door would open again, the wards banished...but unless she did so, no one could enter or leave without the proper password for each activity.

Still, not wanting to leave just yet, Hermione removed her woolly cap and took note of the tea-things set out on the table. A bit early for tea, but almost perfect for elevenses. There was a kettle steaming softly as it hung over the fire, and a plate of biscuits had been set out invitingly. A folded bit of black fabric stood out against the bleached linen of the tablecloth, along with a folded bit of paper stood on edge so that it formed a little tent, marked with her nickname. *Mione*. Picking it up, she flicked it open, and read the contents.

*'My dear Mione;*

*I have one more request to ask of you, before we meet face-to-face. It is a peculiar one, I will admit, but I find myself very nervous at the prospect of entering the room, having you spot me, and listening to you scream in revulsion or fear. Hopefully my concerns will prove silly and unfounded...but I would ask that you willingly blindfold yourself. I want to be able to get all the way into the room and let the door close so that the wards will give us privacy; if you scream while they're still down and the door is still open, things might go very badly for both of us. Especially as it would shatter my perceived identity, and ruin my effectiveness as a spy in the Enemy's lair, if your startlement draws the attention of others. I cannot take any risks of my true identity being divulged to others through this meeting. The Order has too few people who can spy upon the Dark Lord to threaten that anonymity.*

*There is a silver bell on the tea-tray. Ring it when you are blindfolded; it's charmed to alert me even through the wardings. I thank you in advance for following these precautions, even if you think them silly, strange, or possibly unnerving. I will explain what I can when we finally meet; I promise you this. All I can ask is that you give me just a little bit more of your trust. I will do my best to make it up to you, if you will still let me, once we have met.*

*Yours,*

*Rus'*

Could she trust him? Dared she trust him? Would she trust him?

Debating long and hard with herself, Hermione finally sighed, pulled out the chair that had its back to the door, and sat down. She chose that seat as a further sign of her trust in him; she knew well that sitting with her back to the door, blindfolded or not, made it nigh impossible for her to hit an intruder with a hex, even if she was aiming that hex while literally blind. Setting the note aside, she carefully noted the placement of the little silver bell, and picked up the scarf. Black silk; how elegant. Tying it over her eyes, Hermione debated how tightly to pull it, and left it just a little bit loose, so she could look down the sides of her nose and react, if need be. She'd have to tilt her head back to see anything above knee-level, but she wouldn't be left completely in the dark, either. Tipping her head back, she located the bell with a bit of squinting, then leveled her head, grasped the handle, and rang it firmly.

Her heart pounded as she waited for a response. Thirty or forty seconds later, her ears picked out the sounds of the door opening and closing quietly, and the snapping of the wards as they crackled magically back into place. She almost asked if it was him, but worried that someone might've heard her speaking the wards and followed her inside. Instead, she cagily asked, "Who is it?"

No one knew why she was up here, after all. Hermione had only told Harry and Ron that she was meeting someone to 'discuss books and things', and had done so while they were in the Quidditch supplies shop down the lane. Suitably distracted, her two best friends had let her go without a quibble, and now she was seated here, blindfolded, waiting for a reply.

"Rus."

The single word sent a frisson of excitement, apprehension, and yes, a little lust through her body. In one word, one short syllable, he had proven his voice low, husky, and rich. She heard the sound of clothing rustling, and bit her lower lip. *Was he...?* "Erm...hello, Rus. May I take off the blindfold now? I haven't screamed or anything, and the wards are up again now that the door is shut, so it should be safe to do so...right?"

"Not yet."

"Are you...getting naked?" she asked nervously, as she heard more sounds of undressing.

Rus had a husky laugh, just a few chuckles at most. "No. Just getting comfortable."

*My, he does sound like Professor Snape...if Snape could ever let himself have a sense of humor.* She hesitated a moment, then carefully stood, and fumbled near-blindly at the fastenings of her cloak. "I'll admit it is a little warm in here. The fire feels nice, on such a snowy day."

Hands took the edges of her cloak from her as she finished unclasping it. Hermione couldn't see him when she discreetly turned her head a little to either side; he had to be directly behind her chair. He took the jacket that lay underneath, as well, reaching around her with delicate fingers, barely touching the body underneath as he unbuttoned her coat. Her breath caught as he almost brushed those fingers against her breasts as he worked, arousing her with those teasing, tantalizing near-caresses. His voice itself was like a caress as he peeled the coat away and retreated to the coat-tree. "Yes, the warmth feels good. Please, sit."

*Definitely not Professor Snape; he's never bothered to be polite in his life...* She obligingly sat, wishing she could turn her head and tip it back and still be discreet about trying to spy on him before the blindfold came off. Unless he was going to let her take it off now? "If we're going to have tea while we chat, it might go a bit more neatly if I can actually see what I'm supping."

A sound that was a hybrid between a snort and a laugh escaped him, as she heard him hanging her cloak and jacket upon the coat-tree by the door. "Patience, Mione."

Yes, he definitely sounded like the Potions Master...save that her professor had never called her by her full first name, never mind this particular nickname. Nor spoke with such tangible warmth in his tone.

"After a year and so many months, I finally get the chance to meet you in person, and you really expect me to be patient when you continue to insist that I can't even look upon you?" she asked him, turning her head to try and glance his way. She caught sight of a pair of black trousers, and the lower part of a white shirt tucked into them, clothing a lean body...for a man who reported himself as being 40, that belly of his was as flat as a board, and not the least bit inclined to pudge. Exactly as promised. She wondered what he would look like naked, and lamented silently the white shirt and black trousers that lay in her way. "That hardly seems fair."

A hand came into view, the nails trimmed short, as he pressed a finger to her lips. Silencing her, and sending a thrill through her flesh that was twice as strong as the sound of his voice. At last, the touch of his hand upon her body. Peering down through the gaps in the blindfold, she studied that hand as she heard him crouching beside her. There was something familiar about that hand. She *knew* that hand...she knew it from somewhere...

That hand shifted, caressing her jaw-line with gentle but firm fingers, turning and tilting her head slightly as he knelt beside her. Just enough to see a chin and a pair of thin, equally familiar lips blotting out what little view she did have. And then he kissed her. He kissed her, and it was a dozen times more intense than his hand and his voice combined. This wasn't a boy kissing her; this was a man. He knew exactly what he wanted from her mouth, and he evoked it with skill and hunger. From the sliding, nipping pressure of those lips, to the teasing, devouring strokes of his tongue, coaxing her own into play, he taught her exactly what he expected from their kiss. Everything.



But it was the scent of him that arrested her attention. Male, warm, musky...and faintly overlaid with the odor of herbs, some pleasant, some pungent, some bitter, some sweet. All of them familiar. All of them...all of them potions ingredients. He smelled like the Potions classroom.

Dark hair, dark eyes, pale-complected, scarred, beaky-nosed, voice like a sinful dessert...and his suddenly being *nice* to her, on the very day that their relationship changed...a day he surely must have secretly mocked her for, already knowing what was written in all of those letters he'd sent her...

Stiffening, pulling her head back, Hermione reached up impatiently to pull off the blindfold, angry at the deception. He caught her wrist, stopping her. There was a moment of struggle, but only a moment; he was stronger than her. She stilled, frustrated; if she reached up with her other hand, he'd just capture that wrist, too, and that was her wand-hand.

A moment of silence between them, then that voice, *his* voice, murmured, "...You've figured it out, haven't you?"

"Five points to Slytherin, *Professor!*" she spat, angry and disappointed and humiliated. And sick to her stomach. He *had* been toying with her, all this time. "I don't know what sick little *game* you think you've been playing...!"

"*Game*," he growled, and released her hand in favour of yanking off the blindfold. Severus Snape glared into her eyes as she blinked, startled by how close he still was to her, his saturnine face filling most of her vision even as he dropped to kneel on one knee beside her chair. "Do you really think this is a game? Do you think my *affections* are a mere *game*?"

Catching her other hand, he flattened it against his chest. It was distracting, seeing him in just his shirtsleeves for once. There was no starch, stiff, formal black frock-coat making him look like a repressed black bat as well as a greasy git...but she could feel the pounding of his heart under the warmth of his chest. It matched the rapid beat of her own, roused by the anger in his voice. But as he pressed her hand to his sternum, the anger crumpled in his eyes and faded away. As she stared at him, his head lowered, his hair curtaining some of his expression.

"It was *never* a game..."

"You *lied* to me," Hermione pointed out, emotions unsteady from being tumbled about by this revelation. Her whole perception of the past year-plus, of their correspondence, of all the things he had written about his work, his colleagues, everything, felt as if they were a house built on a rapidly eroding sandbar. "You lied to me about your name, and your job, and your...your *underlings*, Professor *Snape*!"

"I know who I am, Mione." The sound of her nickname, the one Rus...*he* had said he'd preferred, but stated with *those* lips, disconcerted her. Not nearly as much as the black gaze he pinned her with, though, lifting his head slightly to peer at her through the dark locks brushing his face. "But more, I know what others *think* I am. You would never have taken me seriously, nor given us a fraction of a chance, had I approached you any other way."

"...Us? *Us*?" Hermione retorted, feeling beset by her affection for Rus, and her distress that it was *Severus*. "You're my *teacher*, for god's sake!" That one point, she could not get past. She could not believe he was the kind of man to take advantage of one of his students...he just couldn't! "What was any of this, if not a game to toy with my affections, and mess with my head?"

Again, she tried to tug her hand free as she spoke, but he held it trapped against his breastbone, pressing himself into her palm. He tossed his hair back and stared into her eyes without any curtaining between them. "*If* it was a game, then it was one that has been played in deadly earnest. Do you remember the diary?"

She frowned in confusion at the bizarre segue. "The what?"

"The *diary*," the man kneeling beside her chair repeated impatiently. "Sirius Black's diary! From the summer right before your sixth year?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"And do you remember the potion I brewed, the weekend you returned to school?" he added, prompting her memory. At her nod, he continued. "Do you remember who you saw when you supped of it, Mione? *Me*. Do you remember who I myself saw in return? *You*."

"I don't understand!" she protested. In her confusion, she no longer struggled to free her fingers from their trapped position between his chest and his covering palm. "What has that to do with any of this?"

Professor Snape's hand...*Severus'* hand...caressed the back of hers. His voice was quiet, low, and intense as he explained. "The Curse that the stranger reported, which Black wrote into his diary, it is called the Withering-Heart Death. It is an ancient piece of Dark Magic, and if it were not so rare, virtually unheard-of in this day and age, it would be classified as an Unforgivable by the Ministry of Magic. When cast upon a target, it acts similar to the way a Dementor can suck all the joy and happiness out of a person. Only with this Curse, it tears out all of your emotions, and does so quite literally, starting with the strongest, most positive ones a person can feel. If the process is stopped mid-attack, if the spell is disrupted by attacking the caster, or interfering with the magic...the victim *cannot* feel those missing emotions anymore, once they have been extracted and eradicated.

"The capacity to experience those emotions once they have been stolen away is literally *gone*, Mione. And with the Curse draining away the positive emotions first, even if you stop the spell, the wreckage is often too great to allow the witch or wizard so affected to continue to live," he told her bluntly, pinning her in place with those dark, intense eyes, a contrast to the warmth of his heart, and a compliment to the intensity of its beat. "Without tenderness, without compassion, without joy or happiness or consideration for others, what is left behind of that person becomes worse than a sociopath. Worse than a psychopath.

"Pain and darkness consumes their soul, as their darker emotions grow without restraint or counterbalance to fill the void in their heart. It would be far better to let the spell run its course, sucking all of the emotions out of the victim until they literally dropped dead from the emptiness inside, than stop it mid-curse and doom them to such self-destruction...and the destruction of those around them who still love and care for them."

Hermione stared at him, aghast. "That's horrible!"

"That's the Withering-Heart Curse," he stated flatly. "There is only one known counter-spell to it. To fill the victim ahead of time with the one emotion that is vast enough to slow the initial stages of the extraction process, providing enough time for the spell to be broken during its casting. Time enough for the curse to be ended before it can actually begin."

She could hardly think, her mind was in such a whirl of thoughts, many of them clashing and conflicting as she tried to wrestle the pieces of her broken perceptions into some semblance of order again. "What...what emotion?"

"Love."

The pieces scattered from her mental grasp. Hermione sat there, staring at him. Dumbfounded by his revelation. "...*Love*?"

"I said love," he confirmed bluntly, and she felt his heart skip and pound for a few beats under her palm at his sober confession. "Only true love can withstand the extraction process, for it is the only emotion that is endless. Bottomless. *If* it is true."

She could feel her own heart racing, as he continued.

"That potion I brewed...there are perhaps twelve Masters at most around the whole of the wizarding world, besides myself, who could brew it correctly. But its purpose isn't to act as a counter-spell to the Curse," the Potions Master informed her with only a hint of arrogance for his success; his demeanor and the subject were both too sober for self-congratulations. "Instead, it reveals to the drinker who their true love is. The only person who, as I said originally, can counter such an ancient, forgotten, forbidden magic with any guarantee. And, as I told your friend the afternoon that the diary was read...the counter-spell can take years to bring into effect.

"I knew you wouldn't understand what needed to be done, at that early point in time. You were too young, and too wrapped up in who you thought I was, to make an honest effort towards the cure. You'd have resisted it with all your might, because of what I am. I knew you'd rebel at the very idea of trying to build a relationship with me. I *know* what people think of me," he added firmly, though there was a faint look in his eyes that made her heart ache. Pain. The kind of old ache in his eyes that told her he'd long since come to terms with its presence. She'd never seen so much emotion in his eyes before, but realized he really was serious, taking this risk in revealing it to her. Implacably, he continued. "I have *cultivated* that image, as a part of what I need to do to keep people from guessing my true feelings, and my true loyalties. But aside from the way I hedged around names and identities, every last one of the emotions I poured out to you in my letters, all of my thoughts, my feelings and my reactions...those were all true."

Severus pressed her hand more firmly over the rhythmic warmth of his heart, and her own skipped a beat in response.

"You *know* me, Mione; you know me now as no one else does. Not even Albus Dumbledore knows all the things I've told to you...though the old bat does come closer than most," he amended dryly, almost lightly. His free hand lifted to her face, his knuckles brushing the softness of her cheek. "You know me. As I know *you*. And what I know of you, what I've learned of you...I can finally see why the potion showed you to me, of all the witches in the world."

She pulled her head back slightly, remembering. "You were angry, that day. You didn't like me. You didn't like the thought of...of having to *court* me."

Dark eyes bored into light brown, as those thin lips twisted slightly. He wasn't conventionally handsome; he could in fact qualify for Tall, Dark, and Ugly...but there was too much of the Rus she had come to know in the man kneeling next to her, speaking to her, for her to see him as ugly as he'd painted himself. She hadn't considered him truly ugly to begin with, but this revelation...Hermione didn't know what to think, her mind feeling somewhat numb and shell-shocked as she listened to his reply.

"You are my *student*. I would no more consider courting a student of mine under normal circumstances than I would of crawling back to the Dark Lord with an earnest desire to rejoin his madness. I had no idea the brew would show me to you, nor that it would show you to me, proving itself true. And no, I didn't like you, then. I didn't *know* you, then," he emphasized firmly. "It's easy to dislike someone you do not know, and to continue disliking them out of apathy and disinterest. It takes courage and determination to set aside old prejudices and seek out the truth of an individual, to come to know them as they should be known."

Her initial shock, outrage, and embarrassment were finally receding. She didn't feel numb, however, though surely she should have felt that way, given the magnitude of this revelation. All the clues had been there, from that shortened version of his own name to his commentaries on the doings of his 'underlings'. *And Research & Development...that one was actually quite clever, since his students technically are researching and developing their Potions skills... Merlin, how do I feel about him,* Hermione asked herself, as he fell silent, waiting for her to process everything he'd said, everything he'd revealed, *now that I know Rus is really Severus? He's not acting like I know he would act, like he should act...but that is the word for it, isn't it? Act. Which is the act, and which is the real Severus Snape? The cold-hearted bastard of the school, or this half-stranger kneeling before me now?*

She licked her lips, unsure what to think. His eyes tracked the movement, dipping to her mouth and following the path of her tongue. It was a very male thing to do, a very you-female, me-male thing for him to do, and just that simply, the sexual tension was back, hovering between them. The tension that had been there during their first kiss, their first touch...the first sound of his voice, upon entering this room. Unbidden, she recalled the words in his previous letter, and heard them in her mind in *his* voice, without any doubt as to their originator's identity.

*...and while your left hand is gently tweaking your nipple, I want you to circle your right forefinger through your wetness, to tease your clitoris for me for just five strokes...no more...and then bring it up to your lips, painting them with your own desire, to tease me into wanting to kiss you until you cannot feel your thighs, let alone your knees...*

*This* man had written that, and so much more. She felt her face flushing at the memory. This man...the greasy, gitty, black-hearted bastard of her school. She'd pleased herself to the thought of things that Rus, Severus, wanted to do with her. This man, who had painted himself as Tall, Dark, and Ugly when asked to describe himself. She remembered nearly ever single word he'd penned...and everything he'd said. He'd described himself as ugly not once, in the letter, but twice, in person.

Yes, he knew what other people thought of him...but Hermione didn't think he was ugly. His face was a little too stark, his nose a little too long for him to be called truly attractive, but she'd always thought it held just enough character in it to be intriguing, and surely that was enough to call it handsome. Lifting her hand from the armrest of the chair, Hermione hesitated, her fingers hovering an inch from his jaw. He didn't move, but she did feel his heart suddenly thumping again in his chest, beating firmly against her other hand.

Shifting forward, she closed the last of the gap between them, touching his cheek. It was smooth along the upper half, and faintly raspy along the lower half, where the faintest blue-grey hints of a beard-shadow could be seen, now that she was this close to him in a room filled with more daylight than his dungeon-level classroom normally contained. An inane thought flitted across her mind. It escaped her lips before she could censor it.

"You lied, you know. About your skin," she added for clarification as his expression turned cautious, wary. "It's not the least bit like freeze-dried boomslang."

He blinked at her. That was an inane thing to say...but it was an opening, a start to a conversation that didn't involve serious recriminations. Silly ones, maybe, but not serious ones. Hermione waited breathlessly to see if he would take her unwitting bait, hoping he would.

The corner of his mouth twitched up after a moment of thought, accompanied by a second blink. "...And my hair?"

She looked up at it, and lifted her fingers to the thin, black, untidy locks above his high, flat forehead. If he'd combed it this morning, the walk to Hogsmeade had long since disheveled it. Daringly, Hermione gently tugged his head down, her heart skipping a beat as he complied without protest. He wasn't going bald on top, she was relieved to note, though his hair was as thin and straight as hers was thick and curly. The texture, however wind-tangled, was still a lot softer than expected. Silky, as she gently finger-combed it. A bit less greasy than expected, too, but then he hadn't spent the morning with his head stooped over his students' steaming cauldrons...and she recalled a promise he'd made to make himself presentable enough, the day they would finally meet.

"It's definitely softer than century-plant fibers. Another lie, then."

"And my eyes?" he asked, lifting his head to look up at her again; he had sunk back on his heels to lower his head far enough for her to comfortably inspect his hair.

Even with the winter sunlight glowing through the gauzy curtains hanging over the windowpanes, there wasn't enough light to really tell what colour they were. Removing her hand from his chest and drawing her wand, Hermione muttered. "*Lumos*."

He winced a little, blinked from the nearness of the glow, but held his ground. After a moment of adjustment, he even widened his eyes, deliberately giving her a good look at his irises. Hermione peered at them, shifting her wand a little, watching the pupils contract. It was astonishing, when she finally discerned their colour.

"...I can't believe you were right, in your letter. They *are* dark grey. A sort of dark, charcoal-gray. I could've sworn they'd be dark brown, if anything," she muttered, amazed. He really had told her the truth, in his letters to her. Aware that her wand was still glowing brightly, she extinguished it. "*Nox*... I've never seen such unusual eyes." Tucking her wand back up her sleeve, she reached up, hesitated only a moment, then touched his nose. Stroked the length of it as he held warily still. "I'm afraid your nose is another lie, though the eyes were a truth. It's a little too big to be a real cassowary's beak, and not nearly black enough...but it suits your face. At least, I can't imagine you with any other sort of nose; it would look all wrong, otherwise."

His hand came up, capturing hers in a gentle cage of her fingers, drawing them away from his face, back down to rest against his sternum. "Should we call that one half a lie, then?"

...He was teasing her. That had to be it. At least, Hermione hoped that was what he was doing with her. The way how he narrowed his eyes and let his gaze drift down to her lips as she licked them again made her think of other things. Blushing, she sat back in her chair, gently tugging her hand free. Or rather, tried to tug it free; Severus...she couldn't think of him as Professor Snape right now, not while kneeling in a white shirt, pressing her palm to his chest...still didn't let her hand go. He kept it trapped against the white cotton of his shirt, against the hard warmth of the lean flesh underneath.

"Erm...what do we do now?" Hermione asked, floundering a little in her inner turmoil of conflicting emotions, impressions, and lingering confusion.

"Given the Curse is known by the Dark Lord, the prophesied threat to your existence is still valid. What we *should* do, Mione," he instructed her, still using that nickname for her, though she got the impression he had to restrain himself a little from saying 'Miss Granger' out of formal teacher-student habit, "is what we have been doing. Getting to know each other, and encouraging the development of our feelings towards each other." His gaze drifted over her face for a moment, before returning to her own. "I must admit, this is the most agreeable counter-curse I've ever attempted to implement. Your mind alone is enough to fascinate me...I truly meant every compliment I ever wrote to you."

Memories assailed her. Painful memories. "You called me an insufferable know-it-all. Numerous times through the years. And worse things."

The look he leveled at her was a firm one. It emphasized his words. "And I apologize for any hurt I may have caused you...but you must realize that every time you open your mouth in class, you intimidate all of the other students. If there is a know-it-all in the classroom, the other students will come to rely upon that person providing all of the tough answers for them, so that they need not study nearly as hard to look for those answers themselves. And when the know-it-all gets all of the corresponding credit, that gives the others little motivation to study further than the absolute minimum. It is a lesson that I didn't learn myself, as a know-it-all student...but which I learnt over the years through my observations as a teacher.

"But I could not give you this advice openly, for that wouldn't have been in-character. And you frustrated me...a pupil smart enough to be a true pleasure to challenge and teach, yet Sorted into a House I have never gotten along with, and could never favour openly in any way, given I am the head of its acknowledged rival. You will also note that my demeanor towards you in the classroom and the halls of the school has not changed one whit. It cannot afford to change, publicly."

"Save for recently," she pointed out, "in those rare moments when we're alone together. In the mornings, in your classroom...you were nice to me then."

Even though it technically wasn't a question, there was one in her tone, just a little bit. He didn't answer immediately. Instead, he freed her hand from his shirt, saluted it briefly with his lips, then rose and moved to the other chair at the table, the one across from hers. Seating himself, he extracted his wand from his sleeve. "*Accio* tin."

Something flew out of the robes hung on the coat-tree, thumping into his hand. Another flick of his wand, and the gently steaming kettle lifted from the warming hook at the fire, levitating over to the table. Shaking out the dried contents of the small, lidded tin into the tea- strainer, he went through the ritual of brewing a properly prepared pot of tea. When he touched the handles of the sugarpot and the creamer before filling the first cup, she shook her head; obligingly, he served her a cup of straight tea. To her surprise, he added a spoonful of sugar to his own. The Potions Master had never struck her as a sweetener-in-his-tea sort of man. It was a tap-leveled spoonful, not a heaping one, but it was sweetened tea all the same.

The fingers that had stirred all those cauldrons with great precision through the years stirred his tea precisely eight times, then set the spoon aside and lifted the cup to his lips. Only after she had done the same to her own, finding it fruity in flavour with a citrusy-spicy bite that she liked, did he speak. "...I find it increasingly difficult to treat you as I should treat you, given our perceived positions. Yet I must.

"I compartmentalize my life, you see. When I am a professor, I am a professor renowned for terrorizing his classes and favouring his own House," the wizard across from her admitted dryly. "When I am in the Enemy's presence, I am indistinguishable from any loyal Death Eater. When I am reporting to Albus Dumbledore, I am his most valuable and appreciated spy. When I am stalking through the school halls, I am the terrifying, black-hearted bat of the dungeons. Only in the privacy of my heavily warded chambers could I ever simply be myself, before now. As I do not receive visitors in my quarters, save for perhaps the Headmaster on rare occasion, I have had virtually no one to be myself *with*...until our correspondence began.

"I found being free to be myself a liberating, and yet grounding experience. After one too many years, a spy can lose himself in the roles he must play...and I came close to losing myself, to forgetting my innermost identity, immersed as I was in each of my various roles. But through our exchange of letters, I have been able to find myself again. I *wanted* to share more of myself with you, and once your birthday came and the Headmaster's restrictions were lifted, I could not help but seize the opportunity to show you in person something of how I really felt, in those rare moments in the mornings when we were alone together."

"The Headmaster's restrictions?" Hermione enquired, puzzled as he sipped at his tea. "What restrictions?"

"You mentioned how improper it is for a teacher to interact with a student in a non-professional manner," he stated delicately. "Yet the Headmaster and I knew that the final confrontation would occur at some point around the end of this, your seventh year in school. I had less than two years to implement the counter-spell, to teach you to love me, and to teach myself to love you. Though it is just now the start of December, we don't know how many months we have left. It could be four, it could be eight. Or two, or three, or seven. You could be out of school by a handful of days, or still in it with several weeks to go. We have no way of knowing.

"With this uncertainty in mind, Albus decreed that, as your birthday falls in September, early in the school year, I could encourage a strictly platonic friendship between us until the day you turned eighteen, to secure a strong foundation for our relationship, and at the same time heed as many of the rules of the school's policy on proper conduct between a professor and a pupil. But, after that point, I could pursue the...other aspects of the counter-spell, exploring more intimate emotions than a mere platonic friendship would allow...which would include engaging the previously forbidden level of physical needs in our relationship."

That made her blush. Hermione sipped at her tea to try and cover it. She nearly choked as she recalled some of the most recent...and daring...things she had written to him. Things about physical *needs*. Things about how he should touch himself, in the privacy of his own bedchamber, the way she wanted him to touch himself as he thought about her.

If he noted her flushed cheeks, he didn't comment. Thankfully. "If there were no Curse to fret over, but that potion had still been drunk for other reasons, revealing us each to each other...I might have opened a covert correspondence with you. And I would have considered being kinder to you in those rare moments when we were alone and unobserved, as I have been recently. But I would not have crossed the boundaries of professional behaviour while you were my student; I would have waited until you had passed your N.E.W.T.s and exited the school for the last time, and only then worked on pushing back the boundaries of our platonic communiques.

"I would have courted you slowly, carefully, the kind of draught that takes a thousand days to brew. I would have given you the respect, and our friendship the consideration, that it is properly due. And I would have broken the truth of my identity to you more gently than today, and given you time enough to come to terms with these revelations. But we do not have a thousand days. We may not even have one hundred; there is no way to tell, given the vague warnings contained in the diary.

"There are only two ways to proceed, from here," he concluded after taking another sip. He paused, resting his cup and saucer on the table. Legs crossed, elbows braced on the armrests of his own chair, he laced his fingers together, the picture of intellectual contemplation. The only thing keeping his demeanor from being coldly clinical was the warmth in his eyes, the flicker of emotions on his face. They were glimpses into his true thoughts that Hermione knew from her past observations of him that he didn't normally reveal to anyone, let alone a mere student.

"And those are...?" she prompted, curious. And a little distracted, when he licked his lips; she could remember all too clearly the kiss they'd shared, back when she'd been blindfolded.

"Option one: we put an end to our tenuous relationship, and you take a vow to stay out of harm's way. No haring off on adventures with your two best friends, no standing at Harry's back with Ron during the final confrontation. Even if you have to be locked up in a tower, or a dungeon closet, or in house-arrest at Order Headquarters, you will

stay out of harm's way until Voldemort is dead."

That made her set down her own teacup and fold her arms across her chest. "What gives you the right to think you can keep me away from my friends at the moment they'll need me most? And don't tell me it's because you're my teacher, because that has nothing to do with this matter."

"I *take* that right; it is not given to me," he retorted arrogantly, holding her gaze steadily. "I take it because I love you."

If she'd been drinking her tea at that moment, she would have choked. As it was, Hermione still felt the urge to splutter. Her cheeks burning, she tried to come up with something to say, but could only find her mind absolutely blank. Hell, there was nothing she *could* say to an astounding revelation like that. Severus Snape, greasy git of a Potions Master, the black-hearted bastard of Hogwarts, did *not* go around professing his love to anyone. Least of all know-it-all Head Girls still under his jurisdiction as one of his pupils. There were certain constants to the universe, after all, and that had been one of them.

'Had been', being the operative words. Clearly, the paradigm of the universe had shifted. The urge to hyperventilate passing, Hermione attempted a reasonably calm question. "...And the second option?"

There, she was proud of that. It came out smoothly and steadily. Almost rationally, in fact, with little to no hint of the turmoil making her head and heart reel.

"Option two: we accelerate our relationship. With absolute honesty this time," Severus acknowledged wryly. "Daily notes to each other, instead of corresponding only once every two to four days. Notes written truthfully, with the naming of names, the describing of situations exactly as they happened, with no holds barred in our thoughts, reactions, feelings, or commentary on everything and anything we feel the need to discuss...though for safety's sake, they should be written in a way to keep them from being read by others' eyes. I would not care to have my actual, honest thoughts written down where anyone else could read them, and learn where my true loyalty lies.

"We will also arrange time for...intimacy. On various levels. The Headmaster will have to be informed, of course, but arrangements can be made to link your chambers to my own. That will help ensure absolute discretion on both our parts."

Hermione grimaced. "Does he *have* to know? That we're...?"

Those dark eyes blazed with something at her words; it wasn't the lightning-like laughter she'd been before, but something equally sharp and hot. His tone, however, was even and calm. "Albus already knows about our situation; I even let him know that I was going to be meeting you here, for the revelation of my identity. The moment I learned that the Enemy knew the Cuorum Curse, a year or two before his fall at the Potter's house back in Godrick's Hollow sixteen years ago, I informed the Headmaster of it, and what it would take to counteract the spell successfully...and the dire consequences of failure.

"I have seen the Dark Lord use this ancient Curse three times before on some of his own followers, and twice more on victims, though thankfully not since his return to power. Each time, the victim was left in a partially erased state, emotionally...and each time, the Death Eaters eventually had to kill the...the *experiments*, as he preferred calling them."

"Why would he want to extract positive emotions from someone?" Hermione asked, confused on that point.

"The Dark Lord doesn't believe in love. He doesn't think it has any value, save as a negative drag on the emotions he does value: ambition, greed, hatred... Compassion is also a waste of time to him, as well as some of the other feelings in the brighter end of the emotional spectrum. No, he sought to create the perfect Death Eaters by extracting those qualities," Severus enlightened her grimly. "The results were...inhuman, to be polite. He soon saw its potential as a torture, however, and turned to extracting emotions out of his victims. I have thankfully not heard one whisper of his using this foul curse since his return at the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament...but he has the knowledge, and he has the will. He may indeed use it again, when the moment is right...and if that mysterious visitor's words are as prophetic as feared, he *will* attempt to use it on you, to distract young Mr. Potter so that he will falter under the weight of his grief, and fail in his task at the crucial hour.

"Either you must be protected by a deep and abiding love when that day comes, or you must be safely ensconced elsewhere. There are no other viable options, for all our sakes. Even back when the curse was first revealed, before I knew you, I knew how valuable your presence would be at Harry Potter's side one day. But...now that you know who 'Rus' is, I will not presume to dictate what happens next. As you so aptly said, back on the day the diary was first read, this is your curse to deal with, thus the decision of how to deal with it is entirely up to you. Which leads us to your decision: which will it be?"

Hermione had no idea how he could possibly be so calm about all of this. She *couldn't* abandon her friends in the battles to come! Being threatened by a three-headed dog, petrified by a basilisk, chased by a werewolf...with mental apologies to Remus...being cursed by a Death Eater, threatened by centaurs and giants and Death Eaters and all sorts of nasty things, none of it had slowed her down. None of *this* was going to slow her down, either.

*Besides*, Hermione decided daringly, *he is the same man I fell in love with, in my letters. The same man who was kind to me recently, before the other students came around for their classes. The same man that I heard in my mind last night, the same man whose written words gave me such pleasure...*

It was getting rather warm in the room. Hermione wondered if her Gryffindor bravery would give her enough courage to take off the jumper she was wearing...which would expose the camisole and brassiere she wore underneath. Deciding she wasn't quite brave enough for such a brazen action without at least a little fooling around first, she picked up her tea and sipped from it. Those dark eyes...*who would've guessed his eyes were dark grey?*..tracked her movements. Watching her like the proverbial hawk. It was then that she realized he wasn't entirely as calm as he appeared to be over what her answer might be.

Putting him out of his misery, she set down the cup and saucer, cleared her throat, and spoke. "I think I'll take the second option. Proceeding with our relationship, I mean. I'm not one to sit back when my friends are in danger...and, er, I count you among that number, now." It was odd, but she blushed a little at that revelation. Clearing her throat, Hermione continued. "And if I am not there, then Vo...the Dark Lord," she amended as he flinched a little, clearly not liking the dreaded, forbidden name spoken aloud in his presence, "might turn the Curse on someone else, someone like Ron, whose emotional breadth still hasn't quite matured enough to embrace something as vast and profound as true love...why do you look so smug?"

He did look smug, smirking as he picked up his saucer and cup. "I had thought you would choose this course, Mione, based on something you said earlier; I am merely pleased to know that I guessed correctly. I am not smug."

Well, that was an honest answer. "You are not 'merely pleased', Severus," Hermione retorted, daringly using his first name. "I've seen that smug-git look in your eyes plenty of times before, you know! You're about as smug as a Slytherin can get, right now!"

"If I am as smug as you say, do you really think there is anything you could do about it?" he challenged her softly, sipping at his tea, those dark eyes glittering over the porcelain rim.

Her brash, Gryffindor courage finally raising its head, she lifted her chin and retorted without thinking, "Well, I could always *kiss* that smugness away!"

# Chapter Four

Chapter 5 of 10

Where they went from there...wow...at least, until someone else mucks things up.

IV.

...

The teacup rattled against the saucer as he quickly lowered it from his mouth, though thankfully he didn't splutter his tea back into the cup. A moment to compose himself, and he swallowed. It was the least composed she had probably seen him, outside of those rare moments when his rage had escaped its leash during a stressful situation in her presence. Certainly the saucer and teacup rattled again, as he returned them to the table with an imperfectly steady hand.

Severus kept his gaze on the china until he was certain it was safely placed on the table. Only then did he look up, meeting and holding her gaze. Uncrossing and bracing his feet, he shifted the chair back with a soft shuff of wood sliding over carpet, and settled his wrists with studied carelessness on the armrests.

"...I am entirely at your disposal for such an experiment."

Those tawny eyes widened in surprise, and she nibbled enticingly...if unwittingly...on her bottom lip as she considered his offer. He watched as, her cheeks turning a becoming shade of pink, she glanced down at the table, no doubt uncertain as to whether or not to take up his counter-challenge. Her eyes alighted on a puddle of black silk, and sharpened. Severus could see it coming, as she smiled slightly and picked up the scarf he'd laid out for the blindfold. He watched her rise with youthful grace from her chair and move around the table, fingers busy unknotting the fabric they grasped. Resisting the urge to watch her, he listened to her move behind him. There was a pause, then she spoke.

"We, er...need ground rules. For right now," she clarified, and brought the blindfold down into his field of vision. Her hands trembled slightly but visibly, and her voice sounded breathless from her daring. Still, he could see why she'd been Sorted into Gryffindor as she continued briskly. "You don't remove the blindfold until you want the game to end. Unless I take it off for you, of course. And...we behave ourselves, since this...since this is technically our first...date." Merlin, that was a weird word to apply to one of her professors. Swallowing, Hermione clarified her meaning. "No hands straying underneath each other's hemlines, or unbuttoning anything on the other person. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Severus felt a mixture of responses to her suggestions. He didn't know how long he would be able to withstand her rules, not being able to slip his hands under the fabric shrouding her flesh. He'd stroked himself to completion several times over the past few nights, thinking about what she might have done after reading his most salacious letter to her, and re-reading her own reply, following her innocent but arousing directions for achieving his own pleasure. Even now, he was thinking of what he would do to her if he were free to do so. The possibility of being blindfolded and at her mercy was unnerving to a man who was used to being in control of everything around himself...but he wasn't about to say 'no', either. Only a fool would say no at this point, and Severus was no fool.

She wrapped the cloth around his head, just tight enough that it would be difficult to see down the sides of his nose. He knew from how easily the blindfold had been removed from her own head that she'd used that trick to see at least a little bit of what was going on, earlier. Not that he could blame her; caution was a good habit to develop. But after she knotted the blindfold in place, she did nothing. Cocking his head slightly, Severus stilled his lungs, listening for her breathing.

She was behind him. No, she was moving, coming around to his left. She was...within arm-reach, he determined, and lifted his left hand from the armrest, stretching it out. Within inches, he encountered something knit-textured...and softly rounded.

She squeaked. Apparently, it was her breast. Severus smirked, shifted forward in the chair, and scooped his arm around her ribs. Dragging her carefully, if firmly, onto his lap.

"You...you cheated!"

He knew she could see his smirk, since he didn't bother to hide it. As she squirmed a little, he wrapped his arms around her warm, soft, slender curves, hitching her closer to his chest; she was bigger in his lap than he'd imagined. That pleased him; he didn't want a child in his arms. He wanted a woman...and she had the curves to qualify, thank Merlin. "You merely said I couldn't take off the blindfold, Mione, unless I wanted the game to end. You never said I had to sit here and be passively pliant under your every command."

"Well, I...*urgh*, this chair arm is poking me in the thigh..." A sizzle of sound...no doubt from the flicking of her wand...and the chair shifted shape under them. Severus found himself sinking from a surface of firm, smooth-carved wood into soft, springy cushions as the hardwood chair softened into what felt like a broad recliner. "That's better. I definitely had certain ideas on how this was supposed to go, you know."

Hermione squirmed again in his lap, pushing away from him. Severus grunted and tried to catch her again. "Where do you think you are going, woman?"

"Nowhere, but here." She returned, but not by sitting sideways on his lap as before. Instead, with remarkable bravery, he felt her straddling him. The armchair, or whatever, was deep and wide enough that she was able, by dint of some enticing squirming, to snug herself firmly over his lap. To the point where, if she rocked forward just a tiny bit more, he could have enspelled their clothing elsewhere, and thrust into her body. If she hadn't been wearing those thick Muggle jeans, if he hadn't been wearing his woolen trousers...and if he hadn't already read her confession of being a virgin, not a dozen letters ago. He caught her hips as she squirmed again, holding her firmly still. Severus wondered if she'd felt his erection, and was doing it on purpose.

"If you keep that up, Mione, you are going to make me think you lied about your inexperience, in your letters." His voice was husky, moreso than he'd intended, but it froze her in place and gave him time to calm himself down.

Until the witch deliberately swirled her hips, rubbing herself against him. A surprised grunt escaped him. Catching her hips firmly in his hands, Severus stilled her for a moment...then ground up into her. The sound of her breath catching in her throat was sweet. Letting himself smirk, Severus eased his head forward as he guided her movements in counterpoint to his own. Sure enough, he encountered the nubbly-soft knit of her jumper, somewhere between the curve of her breasts and the arch of her neck. Nuzzling his way to her throat, he teased her with the tip of his nose, and little licks of his tongue. Her fingers tangled in his hair, and with surprising aggression...he didn't know why he should be surprised; she was a Gryffindor after all, scion of a very brash House...she tipped his head back and claimed his mouth with her own.

Severus couldn't imagine a more erotic kiss than this: blindfolded, straddled and pinned in place by a sexy young witch determined to have her inexperienced but enthusiastic, exploratory way with him. She investigated his lips with her own, and he gladly reciprocated. She squirmed a little on his lap, and he squirmed back. She panted and whimpered slightly as he slid his hands up to her breasts, cupping and massaging them through the nubbly knit of her jumper, and he groaned faintly,

encouragingly when she placed both palms on his shirt of her own volition, exploring and rubbing the muscles of his chest beneath the crisp fabric.

Her fingertips brushed over his cotton-covered nipples, making him shiver. When she did it again, Severus felt the same thrill streaking through his nerves a second time and groaned out loud, deliberately releasing a sound of pleasure into her mouth as they kissed, letting her hear how much he liked it. He knew she was inexperienced, after all; if he didn't show and tell her what he liked, she'd never learn how to please him.

She was a quick student, as usual; emboldened by his groan, Hermione did it a third time, this time gently raking her fingernails over the tiny nubs pebbling under the stimulation of her touch, despite the fabric that lay between her fingers and his flesh. He wanted to return the touch, but the thickness and texture of her jumper was too awkward to work through effectively. Frustrated, Severus sucked on her lower lip, thinking quickly. The exact rules of this little game were...

...Ah-ha. A loop-hole. Smiling to himself, Severus flicked his thumbnails over the general region of her nipples...it was too damned hard to tell their exact placement through her thick jumper at the moment...then shifted his fingers to the buttons of his shirt, continuing to share a hot, tongue-tangling kiss with the innocent vixen straddling his lap. It took her a few moments to realize what he was doing. In fact, it wasn't until her hands, still roaming over his torso as she caressed him, encountered the bared skin of his chest that she noticed.

Their kiss ended as she stilled her hands and pulled back. A sharp intake of air told Severus that she was startled. While she was distracted, he peeled the edges of his shirt further back, tugging the tails out of his waistband. Her voice was breathy, yet breathless as he released the last two buttons. "What...what are you doing?"

"Come now, Mione; you're an intelligent woman," he chided her mildly. "You said we couldn't unbutton each other's clothes...but you said nothing against undoing our own."

"That's not what I meant, with that rule," she protested. It was a weak one, without much effort or conviction behind her words.

Severus smiled, imagining her tawny, perpetually curious eyes examining his chest. Yes, for a man in his prime, he had an excellent physique; he could all but feel her eyes caressing his skin, felt his nipples pebbling at the very thought of her staring at them for the first time. "I am not only a Slytherin, my dear, I am the Head of Slytherin. A House renowned for its members' ability to manipulate the rules to our personal advantage. Not to mention I thought you might consider it a sign of my trust in you, for me to bare all of my..."

His words died as he felt her fingertips caressing the left side of his ribs, tracing a ragged, roughly diagonal path down his side. He'd forgotten about that. He'd forgotten about it, and about her possible reaction to the sight of what her skin now touched.

"...For me to bare all of my imperfections," he finished quietly, carefully. He didn't want her to know how nervous he was at the thought of her rejecting him for those imperfections; that wasn't the sort of thing a man cared to reveal, though he'd bare his soul in other places for her to peruse.

"What happened?" she asked him gently, shifting her hand to trace another scarred patch of skin, this time a set of pockmarks over on his right side.

"Those were from a Potions accident early in my career. The other one...I displeased the Dark Lord."

"It looks recent," she observed, returning her fingers to the long, purplish scar angling down his left side.

"It isn't. I earned it years ago."

"Does it still hurt?"

That wasn't a question he'd answer for anyone, under normal circumstances. But, this wasn't a normal circumstance. Quelling the protective urge to tell her to mind her own business, Severus managed a truthful, "...Occasionally. If it's bumped hard. But I've grown used to living with some level of pain."

Her palm pressed very gently over the old injury, warming it. "I wish it didn't hurt you."

"There is a potion available in recent years that could fix the problem, removing the ache and the scar that causes it...but it has its uses, as is," he confessed. "If I feel the urge to be nice to someone, or to laugh at something humorous, I need only secretly prod myself on that side, and the urge vanishes under the resulting ache. A light touch does not bother it," he reassured her as she started to withdraw her hand, no doubt thinking she was painning him. "The ache is contained in the deeper tissues."

"When the war is over, will you take the potion for it then?" Hermione asked him.

"Probably, but until then, I live with it. Does it...repulse you?"

"No; rather, it evokes my compassion and sympathies. It looks a lot like the mark of Dolohov's curse, back from the end of my fifth year," she murmured, gently tracing it with her fingertips. Tickling him. "Only I had that wound across my chest and shoulder, before it faded and vanished."

"It was the same curse," he confessed. "Applied by the Dark Lord, but in a less damaging area than where you yourself were struck."

"Why did he strike you with it?" she asked.

Severus knew she would ask that question. He knew he had to answer, and he also knew he couldn't predict how she would react to that answer. His only choice was to give her the truth. Edited as to the details, and tersely delivered, but the truth nonetheless.

"...He wanted me to rape and torture someone. I refused. He punished me until I complied. With the torture, not the rape," he clarified as he heard her suck in a sharp breath. "It's nearly impossible for a man to rape someone if he is not stimulated by the act...and I was not." He could feel the tension flexing and fading in her body, and didn't want her to misunderstand him. There had to be nothing but the truth between them, in private moments such as this. "Mutually consensual play-acting is one thing, Mione. I like to be able to throw a little titillation and spice into an encounter once in a while with a mock-struggle, even a little experimentation with bondage, and I enjoy the stimulation of someone feeling helpless in the face of a lover determined to give them pleasure, whether I'm the binder or the bound...for it could just as easily happen with the woman being the dominant one...but *only* the consensual kind of play-acting appeals to me.

"Being blindfolded is a form of helplessness, and I am not normally a man inclined to feel helpless in any situation," he reminded her, feeling her fingers gently tracing the lines of his ribs and the muscles of his abdomen. "Yet I sit here, knowing you have a distinct advantage over me in being able to see, that you could do almost anything to me and I would not be able to react adequately in time, rendering me somewhat helpless and at your mercy...and I find that thought stimulating." He heard her snort and smirked. "Laugh if you will, but you could cast a body-bind on me, and tickle me, and I would not know you had drawn your wand until it was too late to counter the spell.

"But I also know that if I requested you to stop, you would. And that if you requested it of me, were our positions reversed, I would stop. That is the nature of such consensual play; it is only fun when both parties agree to it, and abide by certain rules. When one is in the Dark Lord's service, refusal is rarely an option. I tried to refuse what was demanded of me, and was punished for my refusal. I then complied with what I could do, to get him to stop hurting me. When I had finished doing what he wanted...he struck me down with the curse as a final punishment for trying to defy his will. After that, I knew I would be wise to not refuse to do anything else. Not without coming up with some reason that would satisfy the Dark Lord sufficiently enough to not punish me again."

"Is that...is that what led you to defect to Professor Dumbledore's side?" Hermione enquired carefully.

"No. But it was one among the many straws being laid upon the proverbial camel's back...and I would rather not further talk about such things at this moment. It isn't exactly conducive to the original mood, if you hadn't noticed," he added dryly, tugging the edges of his shirt back into place. Certainly his arousal had literally as well as figuratively diminished.

Her hands stopped him. "Why are you covering yourself?"

"So that my scars do not repulse y..."

Her fingertips covered his lips. "They don't repulse me, Rus."

The sound of his spurious nickname on her lips suspended his heartbeat for a moment, before making it skip into double-time. Abandoning his shirt, he gently caught her hand, kissing her fingertips, her palm, her wrist. The cuff of her knit jumper prevented him from going any further, but he deliberately teased the edge of it, licking the exposed skin with the tip of his tongue. He could smell a faint sandalwood-like perfume from whatever soap she had used that morning, along with the natural perfume of her skin. Caressing her knitted sleeve, knowing the touch was unsatisfactory for both of them, he laved the bared section of her wrist with kisses, making love to what he could of her flesh to make up for it.

His efforts paid dividends; she shivered under his touch, squirming restlessly on his lap as her breath hitched in her throat. A moment later, she freed her hand from his grip and brushed her fingers against his brow. They glided past his ears, following the edge of the black silk barring most of his sight...and unknotted the blindfold. He blinked as she removed it, adjusting his eyes to the glow of the winter sunlight filtering through the curtains at his back. That glow, coupled with the dark red of her sweater, gave her chestnut curls auburn highlights. In direct sunlight, he knew there would be glints of gold, but here and now, her hair looked more sultry than sunny. Beautiful. He debated whether to kiss her immediately, or to play with those luscious curls first.

And then she surprised him. Biting her lower lip for a moment, Hermione crossed her forearms, and grasped the hem of her sweater. Pulling the jumper up over her head, she freed her long curls with a tug of her head. Underneath the sweater she was wearing a pale pink camisole. The garment was made from thin silk with a sweetheart neckline emphasized by a deep-pointed triangle of soft lace, and held in place by quill-thin, satiny straps. They did nothing to obscure the matching pink straps of her brassiere, nor was the material opaque enough to hide the fact that the cups of her bra were also quite lacy.

He never would have guessed the Head Girl enjoyed silk fripperies like these; she always dressed casually when she was out of her school uniform and clad in Muggle clothes, downplaying her gender around the others in the school. Of course, she did have two males as her two best friends, males whom she just wasn't interested in as potential boyfriends; the outer layers were probably protective camouflage. Still, it was very effective; who knew she'd been hiding such feminine undergarments under such slouchy clothes?

Severus studied her figure, gauging her charms without touching her just yet. Her breasts were comfortable handfuls, apple-sized, neither too large nor too small. And, without the bulk of her jumper getting in the way, Severus could see the soft nubs at the crests of those mounds. Her nipples. Their very existence begged him to play with them, to stimulate and fondle and suckle their soft-hard tips...

He wasn't some impatient, fumble-fingered boy. He was impatient to explore her body, yes, but Severus could curb his needs. Lifting his gaze to hers, noting the shy blush contrasting with her brave stare, he shifted his arms. Touching the backs of her hands with his fingertips, he glided them up the soft skin of her forearms, tracing meandering patterns on her skin. Shifting to the insides of her arms, he teased the delicate flesh at the bends of her elbows for a few moments, noting when she shivered how her breathing shuddered a little, and how her nipples tightened visibly. Only then did he trace patterns up her biceps, trailing his fingers over the tops of her shoulders, skimming over those straps to the muscles of her back.

Here, he firmed his touch, gently massaging the tension in her shoulders and spine. Eyes drifting closed, she moaned softly, swaying with his ministrations even as she leaned back into his hands, letting him know how much she was enjoying his touch. Working his fingers down her spine, Severus smirked a little as she leaned further back...thrusting her silk-covered breasts up into range. The unwitting invitation was too much to resist.

Lowering his head to her camisole, Severus captured one of those pert curves with his mouth. Stroking the material with his tongue, he laved the peak as she gasped, startled. As his fingers continued to massage her spine, working their way down to the small of her back, Severus dampened the double layer of material with his saliva until it clung to the flesh underneath. His ministrations exposed and defined the darker circle of her nipple from the paler expanse of her breast, when he pulled his head back to check his handiwork.

The sight enflamed him, as did the blush colouring her cheeks when he glanced up at her face. Clutching her hips, Severus rubbed their loins together, dipping his head back to her breast to tease and torment it some more. The texture of the silk was both an impediment and an enhancement of the experience; he longed to strip off camisole and bra and taste her flesh directly, but restrained the impulse. These were her rules; she trusted him to abide by them, and he would abide...but he would also do his best to make her want to remove her clothes herself, which was thankfully within the letter of those same rules. So far, it was working well; without the wool of her jumper getting in his way, he could caress and kiss most of her flesh, either directly or through her thin undergarments.

Turning his attention to her other breast, he suckled on that peak as well, dampening the layers of pale silk until they, too, clung to the underlying flesh. She writhed on his lap as he divided his attention between the two moistened peaks, her fingers threading through his hair, tugging lightly on his sable locks whenever he did something that particularly pleased her. Such as suckling as much of one soft mound into his mouth as he could, then gently scraping his teeth together until they nipped at the turgid little peak. Or flicking his tongue rapidly across the other peak, teasing her nipple with a slow circling around the saliva-dampened tip, then flicking it again, and again. Her squirming against his lap told him how much she liked those things, as did the way she whimpered, and licked her lower lip, and scrunched her eyes shut to better focus on the sensations generated by his touch.

Severus liked the squirming best; her hips had a natural rhythm, a sort of figure-eight motion that drove him higher and hotter with each circling twitch. It was easy to imagine what she would be like, writhing on his lap without any barriers of clothing, inexperienced fumbblings, or lingering shyness. He sucked harder on her breasts at the thought, ignoring the ache in his slouched back as he guided her hips into rubbing against him a little harder, a little closer in his lap...her fingers tugged harder on his hair, her breathy, soft moans growing louder. He could smell her now, a rich, musky, feminine perfume, warm with body-heat. Her passion had been stirred by the way her cotton dungarees were rubbing over his wool trousers, by the way she was rocking the apex of her thighs over the apex of his loins, stimulating both of them.

Nose twitching, Severus inhaled deeply. The scent of her arousal drugged his senses, until he had to release her nipple from his lips and drop his head back, resting it against the high, cushioned back of the broad armchair cupping them; as she continued to rock against him, he struggled to control his panting. The sight of her hands gliding over the curves of her breasts, fingers released from his hair to play instead with her abandoned nipples, tweaking them herself through the damp silk clinging to each peak, that was his undoing. Clutching at her thighs, Severus ground himself up into her, shuddering as his stomach tightened and his eyes closed in ambushed ecstasy.

"...Ah, god, Mione! Ah, god...ah...*goddess*," he grunted huskily, panting heavily as his stomach tightened again with an aftershock, his lower abdomen coated in wet warmth inside his clothes. He thought he was too insensate to do anything but blush at such an adolescent gaffe...but her own moan and shudder snapped his eyes open. The bucking of those nubile hips, that peculiar hitch to her breath...he prayed that could only mean one thing. That she, too, had climaxed just now, sparing him the ignominy of being the only one affected by their mostly-clothed lap-dance.

The sleepy way she opened her eyes after a few seconds, and the blush that stole down over her cheeks to her throat and collarbone, confirmed the matter. Confirmed it, and kept him firm inside his dampened trousers. Lifting a hand to her jaw, he caressed it lightly, keeping her chin lifted so that she would meet his gaze.

"That was unexpected, and embarrassing...but divine," he murmured, grateful for the support of the deep, high back of the easy chair. Unless there was an emergency, Severus doubted he would be able to make his muscles move very far for the next few minutes. A wry twist of his lips and he confessed honestly, for the sake of soothing her own embarrassment, "I normally have a lot more self-control over the culmination of my pleasures than that. I'm a full-grown man after all, not some clumsy teenager who can't even wait to get out of his pants before climaxing. But I'm afraid you'll have to take my word for it...and if you dare laugh at me over this, I'll have to hex you on principle alone. Just to give you fair warning."

She blinked, blushed harder, and licked her lips. "I'm not...I'm not going to laugh. It would, erm, be hypocritical anyway, since I also just...ah... I'm wondering...does this mean our tea is over, for the day?"

"Oh, I could brew a second pot in a minute or two if you like, without any trouble," Severus reassured her, smirking at the perfect opportunity for an innuendo. "And perhaps

even brew up a third about ten to twenty minutes after that one is done, though it might take me a few hours to recuperate enough for a fourth brewing, today."

He enjoyed the way she blushed harder than before. "That isn't what I meant, exactly. I..."

"...Mione?" a half-muffled voice called out. Severus stiffened and Hermione sat up, staring past the edge of the chair at one of the windows. "...Hermione? Is that you?"

"...It's Harry!" she gasped, stiffening, then quickly crossing her arms over her breasts, since the angle at which she sat probably left most of her camisole-clad body exposed. "He's on a broom outside the window!"

Gritting his teeth, Severus fished out his wand and snapped his wrist. The shutters banged shut on the outside of the building, darkening the room. The heavy curtains also rattled together on their rods, darkening the chamber that much further. In the flickering light of the fire, Severus met her gaze with a disgruntled glare, voice slowly rising out of a quiet growl despite his efforts to control it. "I have been trying very hard to get over my prejudices against that boy, and the associations I have with him because of his father and how much he looks like the git...but I am tempted right now to hex him so hard, not even the Dark Lord would think him a threat, afterwards!"

She stared down at him, chewing on her lower lip in worry. "You're not *really* going to hurt him...are you?"

"...Don't tempt me," he muttered gruffly. "For your sake, I shall do my best to refrain. But I remind you that I am in love with *you*, not with the Bloody Boy Who Bloody Lived. Yes, he is your best friend, and yes, I've realized through our letters that he's not nearly as much like his father as I'd like to think, to be able to remain trapped in my former cocoon of grudge-wrapped hate.

"But right now, he is a bloody twit...and if he were on the school grounds, I'd give him the worst detention possible for being a Peeping Harry!" Severus growled. "Don't bother to deny his voyeurism, Mione; we're on the second ruddy floor of this inn. He shouldn't be flying close enough to the windows to take a look inside and recognize whoever is beyond them. Especially through gauze curtains that should've sheltered us from a simple, casual look during a simple, casual fly-by."

"I wasn't about to protest," she concurred, frowning softly. "He *shouldn't* be this close to the Three Broomsticks, I'll agree with you on that... God, this is going to mess things up horribly! I don't think he saw any part of you except maybe your arm, from the angle of the chair and everything, but he's going to want to know if it really was me, and what I was doing in here with someone, and...and why I've got my jumper off, and who I was meeting..."

"You'd better dress and go." Her disappointed look warmed something inside of him. Pulling her close, Severus brushed his lips against hers. She deepened the kiss with a sigh, and he permitted it for a few moments, returning the teasing strokes of her tongue with ones of his own. Ending the kiss, he urged her off his lap. "Really, you need to get dressed and leave; if I know the idiot, he'll try to come tearing up here, looking for you. Even if the room's warded against intrusion, his presence and persistence will draw the curiosity of others, making it difficult for either of us to escape unnoticed. And he'll probably think it heroic rather than annoying, saving you from the attentions of some unknown, unapproved soul. Or at the very least, he'll claim it's his right to be nosy about your private business, as a concerned best friend."

"You're probably right...though his nosiness won't be nearly as appreciated as he'd think. As if I needed saving from being snogged by someone else," she snorted, picking up her discarded sweater from the floor. Righting it, she tugged it into place, while Severus used his wand to clean himself up without having to remove his trousers. Popping her head through the neckline, she pulled her hair free, adding, "Especially if it's someone I *want* to be snogging." A pause and she looked at him uncertainly, tugging absently on the hemline of her jumper to get it to lie smoothly in place. "Er...when will we meet again? In private, I mean?"

He knew she meant meeting in private like this, not seeing each other in the halls and classrooms of the school. "I'll talk to the Headmaster about the necessary arrangements. In front of everyone else, *nothing* will change," Severus cautioned her as he rose from the chair once he was clean, catching first her eyes, and then her hand. His thumb caressed the back of her hand in counterpoint to his words. "I will still be the greasy, gitty, black-hearted, sour-tempered, Gryffindor-loathing bastard I've portrayed all along.

"You in turn must continue to be the obnoxious, bossy, know-it-all Head Girl with too many questions and too many answers for her own good. No secret smiles, no furtive looks, *no* attempts to communicate anything that would be out of character with me directly. Not where anyone could witness it...and that includes the occupants of the wizarding portraits. Our safety, our very lives, depend on our acting ability. It isn't what I want to do, Hermione, but it is what I *will* do, because it is necessary to do it...do you understand that, Miss Granger?"

She nodded her head, chewing on her lower lip once more. "I understand, Severus; I really do. I don't like it, but I'll do it. Just...how long until you've got that special way to communicate worked out, sir?"

Grateful she understood...to the extent of making a point of differentiating between the addressing of him as 'Severus' and 'Sir', as he had between 'Mione' and 'Miss Granger'...Severus mulled it over, releasing her fingers. "Within a few days at the latest. I'll let you know when everything has been arranged."

Nodding, she padded over to the coat-tree and pulled down her jacket. Severus followed her, removing her cloak and holding it for her as she finished buttoning the coat. Draping her in the dark folds, he wrapped his arms around her from behind, feeling the rasp of the tightly woven wool against the strip of his flesh bared by the unbuttoned edges of his shirt as she leaned back into his embrace.

"I will miss you, even though I know I will be seeing you at supper in just a few more hours. It's not the same as being able to hold you," he murmured next to her ear, kissing the curls sheltering it. "And...I want to thank you. For not screaming and trying to hex me, when you realized it was me."

"Well, it was a close thing," she muttered. If it weren't for the hint of a laugh in her voice, and the slight curve of her mouth, Severus might have thought she was serious; as it was, she was probably only half-serious. No, not very serious, he decided as she twisted in his embrace, facing him with a charmingly ambivalent smile, somewhere between shy and salacious. "The holidays are coming up...and I'm staying on the school grounds.

"I told Harry and Ron it would be as much to keep myself close to the school library for studying, as to keep the two of them company...but even I know that all study and no play makes Mione a very dull girl. And we do have an appointment to keep," she reminded him, making Severus frown softly in confusion. "With your sofa? And a big, dry-as-dust book culled from the school library about The History Of Something-Or-Other?"

It took him a moment to recall the first 'intimate moment' image he had written to her, back in September. "...Ah, yes. Though if it's to be a book that's new to both of us, perhaps I should look into ordering something from Flourish & Blotts. I'm fairly certain that, between you and I, we've read most of the good books in the school library...'good' by our standards, that is," he added with a last, slight smile, before eyeing her soberly and speaking with some of his usual crispness. "I'm giving you a homework assignment, Miss Granger: I want a list of all subjects you're interested in reading. No less than fifteen different general categories, each with a minimum of ten sub-categories of subjects that are of specific interest to you."

She nodded soberly, though there was a hint of merriment lurking in her eyes as she agreed obediently. "Yes, Professor Snape. When would you like the list turned in to you, sir?"

"No later than eight o'clock tonight, sharp," he directed her. "I've a few free hours tomorrow in which to Apparate to Diagon Alley. Bring it by my office, and don't be late, or I'll assign you a detention."

Her tawny brown eyes gleamed at the possibility.

Severus cut that thought before it could finish budding. "...A detention served with Argus Filch, you naughty-minded girl." Kissing her disappointed pout, Severus pulled back, keeping the contact brief. "You'd better go, Miss Granger, while we both still have our wits about us."

Nodding, she turned to the door and twisted the knob. Nothing happened. She did it again, jiggling the handle. The door didn't budge. Severus, recalling what was wrong, nudged her aside. Positioning himself so that the door would shield him from view when opened...he still hadn't fasted his shirt, let alone donned his frock-coat over it...the



Potions Master fixed the problem with a single word.

"Exit."

Magic sparkled across the door, releasing the wards with the simple command. Twisting the knob, he opened the door, glancing warily through the small gap between the door and the hinge side of the frame as she stepped through. Just in time to see her stepping in front of a pink-cheeked figure bundled in wool, glasses still somewhat steamed from the transition from the cold streets of the village to the warm corridor of the inn.

"...Oh! Harry! I didn't expect you to come up here." Her voice sounded suitably surprised.

"Hermione! I saw you through the window, and I wanted to know what you were doing up here."

"Harry James Potter, do you mean to tell me you were *peeking* through the windows of this inn? And where did you get that broom, anyway?" Hermione demanded sharply. "That's not your Firebolt!"

Severus let her close the door behind her, pressing his ear to the panel so he could hear the Boy Who Lived as he was deliciously put on the defensive.

"I was test-flying it, and while I was testing the braking-charm, I came to a stop outside the windows, and that's when I saw you...and you were naked!"

"I was *not* naked! I have on a pink tank-top under my jumper. It was warm in there, so I took off the jumper to cool down for a little while. And you really need to get that broom back to the shop, before the owner thinks you've stolen it."

"Like I'd steal anything!" the other Gryffindor snorted. "But why were you up here, Hermione? Who were you meeting...?"

Their voices were growing fainter, more obscure. She was leading him away from the door, no doubt herding him back down into the more public areas of the inn. Severus strained to hear her reply, wondering how she'd classify their assignation.

"I was simply meeting an old friend of mine..."

*You'd think I had gray in my hair... 'old', indeed* Straightening the edges of his shirt, Severus started re-buttoning the material. Time for him to gather his belongings and vacate the room. A flick of his wand when he had dressed transfigured the armchair back into the original wooden one. Another flick evaporated the tea; the biscuits he swept into his kerchief and tucked into a pocket of his cloak to take with him. Albus would appreciate them, when he visited the Headmaster to arrange for the necessary means for the two of them to continue exploring a relationship together.

All in all, their face-to-face meeting had ended spectacularly well. From the moment she had complained about Professor Dumbledore having to know about their advancing into the previously forbidden level of physical intimacy...before she'd officially made up her mind...Severus had guessed she would say 'yes'. Elation had filled him, at the realization. There was only one insect threatening to mar the perfect potion of this meeting: he'd leapt out onto a limb earlier, telling Hermione that he loved her ...but she had yet to reciprocate. She *had* to requite his love for her, to admit it and return it with equal fervor, or the counter-spell to the Cuorum Curse would not take effect. As much as he still considered young Mr. Potter to be a prat...and now a Peeping Harry...Severus knew the Boy Who Lived needed both of his best friends at his side, giving the young man enough emotional stability to hopefully prevail.

Nervousness, uncertainty and worry put him in the appropriate mood to scowl as he checked the room one last time to make sure it was clear of their presence, before stalking downstairs and striding back through the more populated sections of the inn.

## Chapter Five

*Chapter 6 of 10*

Consequences are a pain in the--

V.

...

"Professor Snape. Will you please accompany me to my office?"

Severus hadn't expected to be met by the Headmaster in the front hall the moment he entered the castle. Nodding his acquiescence, he followed the white-bearded old wizard up to the corridor with the gargoyle statue. It took effort to not roll his eyes at the muttered password of 'marshmallows', but somehow the Potions Master refrained. He also restrained himself from asking why he had been summoned like this. Something in his employer's tone of voice and curt, if polite, words told him this wasn't simply because the older man knew they'd have to discuss the success or failure of what had happened down at the Three Broomsticks.

Indeed, the portraits of the former Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts were all awake and aware when he entered the Headmaster's office, instead of pretending to be dozing in their chairs. That was not their usual method of operation. But after closing the door behind them and activating a ward against spying, Albus gestured him to a chair by the hearth, not over to his desk. So this was still a somewhat serious matter, but not a formal, official one.

Removing his cloak and settling himself in one of the seats, Severus composed himself, crossing his legs and resting his elbows on the padded leather arms, allowing him to lace his fingers lightly over his frock-coated stomach. A stomach which growled, but that was mostly because it was almost lunchtime. "What did you wish to discuss with me, Headmaster?"

"Hogwarts School Charter, under Article VII, the Teacher's Code of Conduct...Section C, Paragraph 4, sub-section a," Albus clarified when the younger wizard's forehead pinched into a puzzled frown. "In specific, Thou Shalt Not Snog Thy Students...to paraphrase the legal jargon."

He flushed and looked down at his clasped hands. "Oh."

"I do realize this was not even considered, let alone discussed, when we were plotting out how to go about saving Miss Granger from the prophesied Cuorum Curse," Albus allowed. "But it nevertheless remains a problem that, the moment you crossed onto the school grounds, the fact that you have kissed Miss Granger...and a little bit more besides...registered in the spells set long ago to sense such things. Spells set to alert the Headmaster of any student-professor transgressions. Which they have done."

Severus didn't know what to say, other than an uncomfortable, muttered, "...Bugger."

"No, that one didn't show up in the report I received," the Headmaster corrected him, gesturing at one of the silvery instruments whirring and whirling on one of the nearby shelves.

He flushed harder. "I didn't mean it like *that*, Albus."

Blue eyes twinkled briefly at him over half-moon spectacles, though his employer's expression was still quite sober. "I know you didn't, Severus. That was merely my pathetic attempt at injecting humor into the moment. The allegations are unfortunately quite serious. Now, there are some sub-clauses that are normally used to guide the Headmaster in how to handle a situation like this, once it has been investigated to make sure it was consensual on both sides. I presume it was consensual on both sides?"

Clearing his throat, Severus nodded, damning his burning cheeks. "Yes. Yes, it was consensual on both sides."

"I will take your word for it, given that I do know the unusual background of this matter. The first and most commonly used method for handling for cases of mutual, erm...corruption of the proper student-teacher relationship is, of course, termination of employment for the teacher, and expulsion for the student...but we cannot afford to do that, since that would put both you and Miss Granger in grave danger. Though it is true the School Charter does make allowances for VII.C.4.a, in those instances of Magical Mistake Management governed under the rules of IX.C.4...I do not think that sort of will suffice."

"Section H Magical Mistake Management?" Severus enquired, arching a brow. He mostly knew that section of the Charter because of having to fill out all those bloody requisition forms to replace all the equipment Longbottom had destroyed through the years, before finally having the good graces to drop out of Potions after his abysmal O.W.L. scores. He knew it had also covered the Weasley twins' version of magical mayhem...but it covered sexual situations, too? "MMM actually covers a sexual situation?"

"Well, they had to amend the rules after a certain incident in 1417, when a couple of Advanced Potions students spiked the ipicrys at Christmas-tide with an aphrodisiac, which everyone, staff and students alike, drank unwittingly. In large quantities, apparently because the addition made it, ah, extra-tasty," Albus related delicately, clearing his own throat. "And there have been a few other incidents throughout the centuries, all with utterly mitigating circumstances...but they have *all* been related to magical mistakes, mishaps and mayhem made here on the school grounds, which MMM covers. And it does so for those activities in a way that is *post*-fact...not *pre*-fact, unfortunately.

"Alas, the situation you and Miss Granger are in is not due to a magically-made mistake. It is a preventative measure...and the Hogwarts Charter does not cover preventative measures. Sexual relations between a teacher and a student are forbidden. A kiss, an embrace, these are disciplinary measures. But though my instruments tell me Miss Granger is still...er, physically undamaged..." another delicate cough, "...they also tell me that both of you...ah...enjoyed a moment of bliss, shall we say? And your, erm, moment of mutual bliss in her presence, I am afraid to say, is specifically listed as one of the grounds for termination of employment as a professor of this school. However you may have gone about it, and regardless of her lingering physical...intactness. Because it was mutual, consensual...and intentional, the rules are very clear on what must happen next."

"Ah." Chest tight, Severus eyed his employer. His soon to be ex-employer. "Headmaster, I assure you, I've never been even marginally tempted before, so I never bothered to do more than skim through Section C Paragraph 4. If I had known...if I had *realized*..."

"Yes, yes, you wouldn't have done it; I believe you, Severus," Albus dismissed. In doing so, his casualness was reassurance enough for the younger wizard on that point. As were his next words. "If there is one thing I can rely upon, it is your innate sense of honor in such matters. In fact, I'd forgotten about it myself, until the instruments started clattering and clanging for my attention. After all, there hasn't been a case of VII.C.4.a here at Hogwarts in over twenty years.

"The point is, there's only one provision left in the damned Charter that'll side-step my having to fire you. And we both know we cannot afford to lose you as the Potions Master. Voldemort..." Severus winced at the name even as Albus continued calmly, "...needs you to spy upon me, and I need you to spy upon him. If you're fired, you won't be able to spy for him upon me, even if it's only to give him carefully falsified information. Which means you'll lose your effectiveness in the Dark Lord's inner circle, and that means you won't be able to effectively spy upon him for *me*."

"Yes, yes, I know how perilous my situation is. What is the cure, Headmaster? Or is there one?" Severus enquired dryly. "Don't bother to sugar-coat it, or take forever to get around to it. The sooner we fix the problem, the better. Assuming there is a fix, which is the only reason I can think why you haven't just sacked me and finished the matter, already."

Albus Dumbledore swallowed. Even with the beard blocking any view of his throat, the action was both visible, and audible. "Yes. The, ah, cure. You, er..." He coughed, cleared his throat...and under the threat of Severus' impatiently arched brow, blurted, "...You have to marry Miss Granger. Today. Before night falls."

Severus stared. He felt as if he'd been smacked in the back of the head with a Bludger bat...and smacked in the chest and gut with a Bludger. Or maybe he was the ruddy Bludger, being battered about by the long-departed Weasley twins. His mouth opened, closed, opened again. No sound came out.

"It's quite simple," his employer stated, giving him a sympathetic look. "The Charter was written back in a day and age of arranged marriages. Sometimes those marriages took place while some of the students were still at school...sixteen was usually the age picked for finalizing the wedding arrangements, and if the intended spouse of a particular student happened to be a teacher as the wedding-day drew near, well, allowances had to be made. Of course, some of the rituals and ceremonies involved in the means and methods of marrying someone back in those days included the possibility of having the, er, consummation before the ceremony itself," Albus hastily enlightened him, almost babbling in his effort to fill the Potions Master's stunned silence. "But always, the ceremony and the consummation took place on the same day.

"Now, I realize you don't have much time left, given that it's almost the winter solstice and the sun will be setting at around half past three this afternoon, and that I don't know how well things have progressed between you and Miss Granger, relationship-wise...though one would think from what the wards and instruments have told me that..."

"...Enough."

The single word, accompanied by the flick of his palm quickly raised, cut off the older wizard's monologue. Albus fell silent, thankfully, though he did eye his young colleague warily. Severus lifted his fingers to his temple, closing his eyes as he massaged at the migraine threatening to form. If it was a migraine, what he needed was a few hours in a quiet location, with a bottle of the bitter but effective remedy he usually brewed for such moments.

What he would get would be an acceleration of his and Hermione's relationship akin to the kick of a Firebolt thrown from a dead stop into full, breath-stealing speed, when one was expecting the smooth, steady, reliable acceleration of a Clean Sweep 7. *If* he could get her to agree to the marriage. He thought she might agree to it, if she knew his job was at stake...but he hated the thought of her feeling pressured into such a drastic step by mere circumstances. She was enough like him, he'd learnt through their correspondence, that he knew she would feel the same way.

Still, there wasn't much choice in the matter. Save for one thing. Opening his eyes, Severus regarded his employer. "How do we keep it secret from the wizarding world? If the Dark Lord gets wind of this...if any of his Death Eaters hear about it..."

"...Gretna Green."

Severus frowned and twisted his head to glance at the portrait of the Headmistress who had spoken. The painting said Isolde Marsh-Leighton, 1789-1874. "What did you say, madam?"

The woman, lean and striking with steely grey strands streaking her dark, chignon-pinned hair, gave him an impatient look. "You marry over the anvil down in Gretna Green. It's just north of the border between Scotland and England, and it has been a very popular place for eloping couples to marry for centuries. In fact, it's the way how I

married my own husband, since my odious uncle-in-law was trying to force me to marry his bastard son, to keep control of my late mother's finances. The Muggle ceremony is perfectly legal in the wizarding world, and is supported by the Ministry of Magic to help further wizard-Muggle relations, and pacify all the Muggle-borns out there who want Muggle-style marriage ceremonies, but no one in the wizarding world ever pays any attention to what actually happens in the Muggle world, so no one will be checking the civil records, and thus no one will likely never notice your names in the registry files.

"The best thing about Gretna Green," she continued briskly, "is that there's no waiting period. Just an appearance before the civil clerk to get the paperwork, a visit to one of the chapels, a return visit to the clerk to hand back in the pertinent papers, and voila! You're married in less than an hour, if you don't hit any long queues at some point along the way. You'd better get going, too, young man, if you expect to be able to make the sundown curfew," she added tartly, eyeing Severus with a speculative look. "It may be almost noon, but as Albus said, sunset comes early in Scotland, this close to the solstice. Oh, and don't forget to wear Muggle clothes, if you don't want to stand out while you're down there. The more the two of you can blend in with the other Muggles, the less likely you'll be remembered by anyone."

Severus glanced at Albus. The aging wizard shrugged, spreading his hands. "It makes sense to me. One question does beg to be answered first, however: did your meeting with Miss Granger end in an amicable enough manner that she would be willing to go through with such a, er, drastic measure?"

Brow pinching, Severus mulled it over for a moment, then sighed. "...If nothing else, she'll do it out of a sense of duty and loyalty."

"Yes, I do believe we can count on her to do the sensible thing, especially if it's the right thing to do," Albus agreed.

"This situation isn't exactly romantic, though," Severus grimaced, thinking of how he could possibly approach the Head Girl without making a mess of the situation. Two years ago, he'd have hexed anyone who would've claimed he'd one day say the word 'romantic' in the context of a relationship that he himself was involved in, and maybe even use an Unforgivable if they suggested he actually mean it. Now, it was simply a useful word, a fact and a facet of his quest to save Miss Granger from a fate worse than the Killing Curse.

Indeed, Severus had held monthly discussions with the older wizard for the last year-plus, on how his relationship with Hermione was progressing. At first they'd been painful to relate, since he wasn't one to divulge the details of his personal life to anyone, but by now it was simply a habit to dissect the matter with his employer and friend, even if it was such a formerly loathsome and awkward subject as romance. It was important, though, since losing or keeping his job would greatly impact the outcome of the war, and failing to complete the Withering-Heart cure would equally impact the war.

No one else in the Order was placed as high in the Dark Lord's organization as Severus was; his position was too valuable to lose to an archaic technicality. No one could deny, either, the strength of the impact of Hermione's relationship with Potter. Between her and Ronald Weasley, they were the other two points of the triangle of strength on which the Boy Who Lived depended in his escapades. Without her at his side, Harry Potter would indeed weaken, falter, and fail. They had the mysterious man in grey to thank for knowing in advance about that.

"I do worry how it will impact our relationship later," he added, glancing at his aging friend as he pulled himself out of his thoughts. "She might agree to it out of a sense of duty, but she is a young woman. Being female, she needs some romance to reassure her feelings for me, and being young, she needs some romance on a second level to reassure her of my own feelings for her. Being told we have to get married or she'll be expelled and I'll lose my job and my position in the war-effort isn't nearly romantic enough. Yet she's too smart to think I'd ask her to marry me in a sudden, grand fit of passion."

Albus coughed abruptly at that last bit. Severus gave him a brief, dirty look, but didn't argue the point. He knew well that most people would choke, too, at the thought of Severus Snape and 'fit of passion' coexisting in the same sentence, never mind a 'grand' one. The real irony was...she made him feel that way, sometimes...the 'fit of passion', that was. The 'grand' part hadn't existed until today, but then that was what had gotten him into this latest trouble, apparently.

"...Well, I'm sure you'll be able to handle it adequately, my boy," Albus demurred, albeit with an apologetic look as he finished clearing his throat. "I'm afraid you haven't got enough time to handle it spectacularly, if you're to make the deadline."

"'Adequate' is unacceptable, when it comes to seducing Miss Granger's heart," Severus stated bluntly. He was too much a perfectionist to aim for anything less. It had taken him a bit of adjustment to come to terms with being her potion-proven true love, but he'd accepted it. Rising from his seat, he adjusted his frock-coat, picked up the cloak he had draped over the back of the wing-chair, and nodded his head to his employer. "But as I have no choice, I shall have to improvise. You may wish me luck, this time; I fear I shall actually need it."

"Hmph. Amusing," Albus' voice chased after him as he strode toward the door. "You never ask for luck when you go off to face the Dark Lord, but you do when you go off to face the Head Girl. That's twice today that I've had to wish you 'good luck'. And good luck a third time, too, which is the 'charm', according to the Muggle world."

"Best you alert Filius to this new form of magic," Severus retorted, settling his cloak on his shoulders after clasping it in place. He reached for the handle, but the Headmaster's exclamation caught him off-guard.

"Oh! You'll need a Portkey to take you to Gretna Green, since it's unlikely either of you have ever been there before. Hold on just a moment...let's see...ah, this will do... *Portus*." Carrying the object over to him, Albus handed it to Severus. The Potions Master glanced at the Portkey and pocketed it as Dumbledore explained. "It's set to take you to an alley behind the clerk's office, and within walking distance of the various chapels. When you're done with it, the Portkey will bring you back to wherever you departed from, and then cease functioning. Be discreet, when activating it. We don't want the Ministry of Magic noticing any unauthorized Portkey usage."

"I will be careful," Severus promised.

"One more thing," Albus added, and muttered a summoning spell. Opening the box that wafted into his hands from one of the shelves lining his large study, he pulled out a wad of cash. "Some Muggle-pounds, to pay for everything. Consider it a wedding-gift, of sorts..."

Severus wasn't very familiar with Muggle currency, so he couldn't tell how much he'd just been handed. Still, there was a lot of it. Stuffing the thick stack of paper into his robes actually required him to break it up into three smaller packets to hide the unruly lump of it. He would have to pass it to Hermione to count and manage. "Thank you, Albus. If there's any left over from paying the clerk and the vicar..."

"...You will buy her something nice," Albus directed him firmly, shoos him out the door. "Go find the young lady, Severus. You've got less than four hours to make her your wife, and secure the future of the wizarding world."

...

"Miss Granger."

Hermione jumped, flushing. Her heart thudded in her chest, as much for the coldness in that familiar voice as for the warmth it conversely flooded through her. Setting down her mug, she glanced over her shoulder, peering up at the Potions Master. "Ern, yes, Professor? Can I help you?"

"The Headmaster wishes to see you."

Puzzled, Hermione blinked down at her plate. She'd just been served a grilled chicken-swiss-and-avocado-on-sourdough sandwich, seasoned chips, and a mug of hot chocolate with a generous dollop of whipped cream. The kitchen staff here at the Three Broomsticks was not adverse to the occasional special order, and they almost managed to make her favourite sandwich taste exactly like her mum could make it. After her unusual tea with Severus, and all the side-stepping she'd had to do to get Harry, and later Ron, off the scent of her mysterious 'old friend', she'd been in the need of a little comfort food.

"...Now, sir?" she asked, glancing up at him again. "I've just sat down to lunch."

"Now, Miss Granger. You may pack it up for the walk back to the school, if you cannot bear to be parted from your...sustenance." The disdainful look he raked over the

seasoned chips and pan-toasted sandwich was not lost on her tablemates, which included not only her two best friends, but a handful of other Hogwarts students.

"What's she in trouble for?" Ron dared to ask, clearly ready to leap to her defense.

"The Headmaster's reason for summoning her is none of your business, Mr. Weasley," Professor Snape returned curtly. "Had he wanted you to know, he would have included you in the invitation. Hurry it up, Miss Granger. I have other, more important things to do today besides escorting you across half of Scotland."

"It's *hardly* half of Scotland, between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade," Ginny Weasley muttered, as Hermione fished a handkerchief out of a pocket and used it to wrap up her food. From the dark look the Potions Master gave the redheaded girl, she hadn't muttered it quietly enough, but he didn't comment.

Standing, Hermione murmured her farewells to the others, promising to meet up with them later. A moment to tuck the food into a pocket of her cloak, another to pull out her woolly cap and settled it on her head, and she was ready to go. Following Professor Snape out of the pub, she fastened the cloak over her shoulders, wincing at the bright sunshine glinting off the snow-draped landscape as they left the shadows of the village behind. No one was on the road to or from the school, thankfully, and when they were well out of earshot of the last possible building, she cleared her throat and spoke. "So, erm...Professor. What's this summoning about?"

"We have a problem in need of handling."

"Oh? The Headmaster isn't upset at our...relationship, is he?" Hermione asked him furtively, barely muttering the words as she glanced about, making sure they were still alone. The only sounds were the crunching of snow under their boots, and the distant twitterings of birds as they hopped about the icy lacework of branches in the trees lining one side of the path. The other side showed the iced-over lake that snaked from the banks of Hogsmeade all the way to the foot of the cliffs defining Hogwarts.

"No. But the School Charter is." The tall, dark, enigmatic man striding beside her sighed heavily. "Hermione...I wasn't going to ask this until after you had graduated, when the ethical implications weren't quite so severe. Ethical implications by modern standards, that is. But then we're not dealing with modern standards at the moment and...and I'm bloody well babbling, aren't I, Mione?"

"Yes, you are," she admitted gently, bemused by the sight of his slightly flushed cheeks. "What's wrong, Rus?"

"Article VII, Section C, Paragraph 4, sub-section a. Thou Shalt Not Snog..."

"...Thy Students," she finished in tandem with him, flushing a little herself. "I'd forgotten about that one."

The look in his eyes as he glanced at her showed relief and puzzlement. "...You know about that?"

"It was mentioned a couple of times in *Hogwarts: A History*. Starting with the Infamous Ipicrys Incident of 1417," Hermione confessed, smirking slightly. Harry and Ron had always underestimated the value of reading that book, and now it seemed as if Severus had, too. Her smile faded a little, as she recalled the impact of VII.C.4.a on their own situation. Her teeth caught her bottom lip, chewing on it a little. His brow was pinched in an unhappy frown, and all she could think of was how to find a way to make it smooth out again. "So...you've got two choices. Either be fired, or...or marry me."

"Before sundown," he agreed grimly, and glanced at her as they trudged along. His dark gaze almost looked grey, in the bright light. Almost. Certainly his sincerity pierced all the more sharply, despite the harsh white light reflecting off the snow-banks around them. "I would give you more time to make up your mind, if I could. But I will let it be your choice. I *can* find a way to survive and still be of some use to the Order..."

"Alright."

Severus stopped in his tracks. Hermione did so as well, politely turning to face him. He stared down at her. "You don't want to marry me?"

"...No, sorry," she blushed, speaking quickly. "I meant 'alright' as in 'yes, I'll marry you'. If...if that's alright with you."

He studied her, blinking. "You agree, as quickly as that?"

She shrugged. "You wrote back on my birthday that you wanted to increase the intimacy of our relationship beyond the platonic level, but that you also had honourable intentions in mind as your ultimate goal, at the same time. I know it's a bit of a leap of faith, considering I'm still reconciling Rus with Severus...but I choose to place my faith in you. Or rather, in us."

"Mione..." he whispered, staring down at her with a dazed look in his eyes.

"I've already considered carefully what it might be like to marry the man I conversed with, in all those letters. And I have contrasted what differences there are between Rus and Severus. There aren't that many of them," Hermione admitted with a shrug. "Certainly none of them important enough to quibble over, now that I've given it some thought."

"It's...it's not very romantic, when you put it like that," he startled her by protesting, wrinkling his beak of a nose a little.

"Romantic?" Hermione enquired carefully, eyeing him askance. "You didn't strike me as overly romantic, in your letters. And certainly not in person. Charming, when you put your mind to it, but not romantic."

"It's not for me; it's for you," he corrected her. Then hesitated, flushed a bit, and muttered, "Though I wouldn't be adverse to a little romance, now and again."

The corner of her mouth quirked. *Severus Snape, closet romantic...who knew? Then again, he is a self-motivated matchmaker, too...* A glance around them proved the pair of them out of immediate sight of anything sentient. Gryffindor courage, and a touch of Gryffindor recklessness, made her catch and lift his gloved hand in her own. Pressing it to her sternum, moulding it to the upper swell of her breasts, she smiled coyly at him. "Severus Snape, would you do me the honor of consenting to be my husband this day?"

His mouth parted, closed, parted, and closed again. Licking his lips, he finally managed to say, "Yes. I would like that very much. Even without the Charter pressing the matter. But...you have my reassurances that I will not press the matter, once the legalities are complete."

*Is he saying what I think he's saying? That he won't touch me? That this will just be a marriage of bloody convenience? How...how positively Victorian!* Torn between wanting to laugh in his face, and throw his offer...however gentlemanly...in his face, Hermione confined herself to quirked brows, a bemused smile, and a pat of the hand pressed to her breasts. "...We'll talk about that after we're married. Speaking of which, where are we going? Vegas?"

"Where?" he asked, frowning in confusion as she released his gloved palm.

"Las Vegas, Nevada, home of the drive-thru wedding chapel?" she clarified.

"No, Gretna Green. We'll marry over the anvil. There's no waiting period in Scotland. And...it's a traditional location for Muggle elopements. Which this essentially is, since we cannot risk anyone getting wind of a wizarding ceremony," he added, gesturing for her to trudge further up the road with him. "Both are legal in the wizarding world, but the Muggle side of things is usually overlooked by our kind, and Gretna Green was suggested as the best place to handle the matter swiftly and discreetly. Albus has crafted a Portkey to get us there and back. I was thinking we could use it from within his office, to further the fiction that he sent me down to the village to fetch you for a meeting."

"That was clever of you; I honestly thought Professor Dumbledore wanted to see me for some reason," Hermione admitted, trudging over the footprint-packed snow, glad

he wasn't making her stretch her legs to keep up with him on the somewhat slippery footing. "I suppose we'll have to manufacture a reason for him summoning and detaining me for so long, in case the others ask."

"Actually, I thought of an excellent excuse on the walk down to the village," he offered. "A legitimate one, too. A few days ago, the Headmaster discussed with me the possibility of your submitting certain of your essays as theorem papers to some of the trade journals of the wizarding world. Your take on using that new shortcut in Arithmancy to calculate the probable outcomes of various ingredient substitutions in the art of potions-making was quite advanced. Rife with possibilities. You really should polish up some of your ideas and get them published for others in the fields of Potions and Arithmancy and so forth to experiment with and dissect, to see if the theorem holds true regardless of the proportions and the ingredients. You may still be a student at the moment, but you're fully capable of becoming a colleague, in my opinion."

His undiluted praise made her feel as if she were glowing brighter than the sun on the snow. A distant crunching alerted both of them to the approach of someone from the school, a quartet of Hufflepuffs bundled up against the cold, making the trek down to Hogsmeade. Hermione schooled her expression into blankness, then into a slightly worried, somewhat pinched frown. A glance at the Potions Master showed him glancing down at her. A brief, slight nod of approval for her expression, and he pinched his own brow into a scowl. The Hufflepuffs spotted them, started a little with nervousness when they recognized the Potions Master, then gave Hermione sympathetic looks as the two groups passed each other.

Nothing more was said between the two of them, as they returned to the school. Making their way up to the gargoyle entrance, Severus murmured the password and swept up the stairs as they started spiraling upwards. Hermione followed, but when they stepped into the short hallway at the top, he held her back from the Headmaster's office with his arm. In fact, he touched her sleeve and guided her to one side, into an alcove painted with an unmoving fresco of a flock of dragons in full, flaming flight.

"We'll use the Portkey from here, and return to here," he told her, fishing a fist-sized disc from his pocket. She recognized it after a moment as a cork coaster, the kind of thing one would slip under a mug or a glass to keep it from dripping condensate all over an heirloom table. "And...we should dress in Muggle clothes. Would you Transfigure something appropriate for me, since you would know better what that would be?"

Nodding, Hermione drew her wand. A rumbling growl stopped her. Glancing around, she looked for the source. It rumbled again; belatedly she realized it was his stomach. "Er...I take it you're hungry?"

"Yes. I have the biscuits from our tea in my pocket...and you have your sandwich and chips in your own. It's not much of a wedding-luncheon, but it might suffice to pass the time, if we have to wait in a queue somewhere...I *will* treat you to something better than an impromptu picnic, when it is finally safe for us to do so," he promised her.

His earnest, sober words made her smile wistfully. "I'm not ashamed to be seen with you in public, Severus, whatever you may have tried to tell me about your appearance. But you're right; it'll have to wait until the Enemy is firmly dead. Now, hold still; I'm going to give you Muggle clothes."

"Must you look so gleeful at the prospect?" he asked her warily.

She smirked, doing her best to copy his trademark version. "Oh, I've been dying to get my wand on your wardrobe for *years*, Rus. Ever since fourth-year, when Professor McGonagall loaned me that book on how to Transfigure clothes. And I have the perfect outfit in mind!"

Whipping her wand through the air, she concentrated and muttered. Transfiguration was more about mental discipline, not about fancy words, which was the province of Charms. A wizard or witch had to firmly and forcefully picture in their mind what they wanted the object at hand to become at the end of the Transfiguration; the words were just a conduit for the spell. She was very good at Transfigurations, and had been practically from the start. Six-plus years of diligent, disciplined practice had only added to her skills. So, when she envisioned Severus in his new clothes, his old ones obeyed with alacrity.

His black wool cloak altered into a black, calf-length leather duster with a shoulder-cape, more classic in cut than trendy, but still attractive all the same. His frock coat became a shorter sports-coat, his trousers black slacks, and his white shirt a black turtle-neck jumper. A swish of her wand over herself, and her own clothes also transformed. Her black school cloak became a knee-length grey wool coat, her burgundy jumper into a fuzzy, cream-knit, ankle-length dress, the kind with a soft roll for the neckline, and her jeans shifted into thick, woolly tights patterned in a darker shade of cream. Her snow-boots she transformed into nicer looking leather ones, changing the colour to a buttery-gold cream that complimented the dress. As a final touch, she Transfigured the woolly cap she'd tucked over her curls into a much more charming, foxfur-brimmed pillbox hat.

The appreciative look in his eyes as he assessed her change in clothing reassured Hermione. She thought the dress would be warm and comfortable, and it was, yet the cling of the knit flattered the modest curves of her figure. It also looked just special enough for impromptu wedding-attire. His own garments would pass muster for an elopement as well, she decided, yet not stand out too much on a wintry Saturday. Nodding to herself, Hermione tucked her wand back out of sight. "Shall we go?"

He checked his coat pockets, and nodded, holding out the coaster for her to touch. When she had grasped it, he enquired, "...Ready? *Impleta!*"

They banged and swooshed, jerked by the Portkey across half the length of Scotland. More than half the length, really. Landing in a snow-dusted alleyway, both of them quickly looked around, making sure they'd arrived unnoticed. Satisfied, Hermione released the coaster, and daringly tucked her arms around Severus' elbow as he tucked the coaster back into his pocket, out of sight. Once that was out of the way, they looked like any other Muggle couple on the winding streets of the little town.

## Chapter Six

*Chapter 7 of 10*

Gooooooooo-ing to the anvil, and we're...going to get maaa-aaa-aaaried! (Yes, I'm having fun with these chapter summaries. Suffer. ~Lotm)

VI.

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It didn't take them long to find the entrance to the registrar's office, though it did take them half an hour to wait in the queue. Severus surreptitiously handed Hermione one of the stacks of paper-money, and let her handle the residency paperwork, listing their place of residence as her parent's home, for lack of a better Muggle-world location. A bit of obfuscation was necessary, as Hermione distracted the clerk with some well-timed questions; Severus muttered a charm to make the man think he had seen Severus' identification papers, while at the same time Hermione coaxed him through the process of inputting Severus' identity into the government's database, doing a little subtle spellcasting herself to get him to cooperate...his records being absent was just some temporary glitch in the computer system, she was absolutely sure...

The fee requested for processing the license proved to be the least burdensome aspect. A third of the money Severus had stuffed into his pockets, the third that he passed

to Hermione to pay for it, proved to be literally over a thousand pounds. Severus was a little dazed, since even he knew the exchange rate between Sickles and Pounds wasn't that great a difference in parity.

For her part, Hermione could barely contain her astonishment, counting out the necessary money and receiving the change from the clerk. Only when they had stepped out into the winter sunshine again did Hermione whisper incredulously to her fiancé of less than an hour the amount she was carrying. A discreet check of his pockets proved to hold similar amounts in the other two stacks he had pocketed from Albus' generous hands. His first instinct was to hand as much of it back to the Headmaster as possible, and Hermione muttered as much to him, being of a similar mind...but then Severus remembered the look in Albus' eyes when the older wizard had bidden him to purchase his wife-to-be 'something nice', and deferred the decision. He would find her 'something nice'.

In something of a daze, they perused the chapels available. One of them had an opening in an hour and a half, while a couple of the others within walking distance were already booked for the day. That was well within their margin, and the two of them decided it was worth the wait to have a guaranteed time-slot. However, it was still a bit of a wait. Determined to follow through on his employer's orders, Severus directed Hermione back outside after securing their appointment.

Guiding her down the street, he drew her into a jeweler's shop. He couldn't wear rings as a Potions professor; the presence of a metal on his fingers might run the risk of tainting an ingredient somewhere along the line. He also couldn't wear a wedding-band as a Death Eater. She couldn't really wear any rings herself, not openly while she was still his student...but after a bit of muttered arguing, he got her to pick out a wedding-ring anyway. She chose one cut in a relief of orange-blossoms that circled the band, and he selected a long length of sturdy gold chain to clasp around her neck, meant to discreetly hang the ring beneath her clothes while she was still attending school. The rope-style chain had to be custom-cut from a thick spool, and fitted with a sturdy, soldered-on clasp by the jeweler. That took up most of the hour, though only a small portion of their wedding-money.

While Hermione watched the jeweler working, and asked her inevitable plethora of questions, Severus perused the display cases, his employers' admonition about a wedding-present still in his mind. There was a wide range of jewelry, from the elegant to the charming, from the intricate to the plain. He knew Hermione's ears were pierced, and thought about the earrings on display. One of the items for sale, he almost dismissed, but something in the inch-long composition drew his eye back to it before he moved on to the next case. Double-checking, he blinked and stared, then blushed. A glance at Hermione showed her still occupied at the other end of the shop, chatting amiably with the jeweler, so he gestured the other clerk over, muttered what he wanted, and managed to get the clerk to wrap and ring up the purchase for him before she could notice.

Christmas was coming, after all. Last year he'd gotten her a stack of rare editions for her to read, a safe, platonic gift from a pen-pal. This year...well, their relationship wasn't platonic anymore. He had new books tucked away in his quarters to give to her, but this was a little something extra that he couldn't resist.

Once the chain and ring were pocketed, they left the jeweler's and returned to the chapel. Since the place didn't have signs prohibiting food or drink, Severus and Hermione sat in the foyer on a padded bench, sharing his pocketful of biscuits, her chips, and the sourdough-chicken sandwich while they waited. Neither spoke much, hyperaware of the Muggles within hearing range...but their eyes met every once in a while, his dark and glittering, hers tawny and warm. Sometimes she blushed, sometimes he smiled. Sometimes she grinned, sometimes he smirked. Once in a while a frown would pinch the brow of one or the other, witch or wizard, but a shared glance or a touch of a hand to elbow, forearm or knee smoothed it away.

And then it was their turn. The previous wedding party lingered, a Mr. and Mrs. Derek Campbell; needing witnesses, Hermione asked them...catching them between kisses...if they'd be willing to stay a few moments and fulfil that requirement. Mrs. Katherine Campbell eyed the age-difference between Hermione and Severus somewhat askance, but she and her husband willingly complied, wrapped up in their fog of newly-marital bliss thoroughly enough to not really care in the end about someone else's May-to-December relationship.

The ceremony was short, devoid of most of the trappings of a full Anglican church service, yet poignant all the same. They clasped hands literally over an anvil, though it was hard to see the stout, dark metal under the plethora of flowers and greenery bedecking the heavy iron mass. When it was done, they kissed over the anvil, too, a soft, gentle kiss, mindful of their audience. The appropriate papers were signed by all involved, and Hermione admired the ring on her finger as they walked back to the clerk's office, waited once again in the queue, and had their papers copied and filed by the registrar. Taking the original sheet plus a spare copy with them, they returned to the alley, grasped the coaster when they were alone, and Ported back to Hogwarts.

The sound of voices from the Headmaster's office told them they were not alone. A swish of her wand at each of them, and Hermione Transfigured their clothing back to normal. Severus smoothed his clothes, took a deep breath, then took the lead, heading for the door. He gestured for her to follow him inside. His brisk knock was followed by the Headmaster's raised voice bidding them to enter.

Professor McGonagall was in his office, when they entered. She eyed the approach of the Potions Master with equanimity, but eyed the Head Girl's presence with confusion. "Miss Granger? What are you doing up here?"

"I...Professor Dumbledore wanted me to think about submitting some of my papers for publication in trade journals," she cobbled together quickly, glancing at the Headmaster to make sure he would go along with the idea. "Since some of them involved Potions theories, I asked Professor Snape to give me his honest assessment of the possibility...and to my surprise, after reviewing my papers a second time, he said the idea had merit."

"Of course, she'll need to actually *test* her theorems, before daring to submit any of her ideas as articles in the truly serious journals," Severus disdained. "Which means she'll need to spend time in the Potions lab. I told her she shouldn't bother getting her hopes up, since I don't have the time to supervise such nonsense, but she seemed to think you would heartily approve of the idea, Headmaster," he finished in a bored voice.

McGonagall beamed at Hermione, and looked at her employer expectantly. "This is wonderful news! I've already thought a couple of her Transfigurations essays were of publication-quality, myself."

Hermione, glancing at the portraits, caught sight of one of the redoubtable Headmistresses peering at her, not bothering at the pretense of being asleep. The woman mouthed some words at her, then pointed at her hand, or rather, at her ring-finger with an enquiring look. Guessing that the woman wanted to know if she and Severus had been successfully married, Hermione turned just enough to hide her actions from the others and lifted her left hand into view. Displaying the ring. It didn't take much thought to acknowledge the various past Headmasters and Headmistresses were aware of the situation between her and Severus, after all.

The painted, stately woman clasped her hands together, beaming, then quickly settled into a fake nap as Professor McGonagall glanced her way. Hermione stuffed her hand into her pocket just as quickly, vowing to put the ring onto the necklace as soon as she discreetly could. As much as Minerva McGonagall was a member of the Order of the Phoenix, as much as she knew how valuable Severus' position as a spy was, she'd probably hit the roof with a full and furious blast of her Scottish temper, the moment she learned the Potions Master, Head of Slytherin, had just married one of her Gryffindor pupils.

"Well, Miss Granger? Have you anything to say to Professor Dumbledore's approval?"

"...I promise I'll do my best to not let you down, sir," she cobbled together, wishing she hadn't missed whatever the Headmaster had said.

"I believe Hogwarts' reputation will be safe in your hands, Miss Granger," Albus praised her. "I'll expect a list of the papers and copies of the originals that you think are suitable for publication to be placed in my hands before the end of the year. Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape, if you can think of any papers of Miss Granger's that stood out in your minds as suitable for publication, do let her know. I'll also speak to Professor Vector about Miss Granger's Arithmancy performance, since those were among some of the original works brought to my attention."

It was something of a dismissal. Hermione turned to go. Severus, however, lingered. He fished inside his clothes, pulling out a folded piece of paper. "Here's that copy you wanted of the paperwork we were discussing earlier."

Handing it over, he waited while Albus unfolded the Muggle photocopy and perused its contents. Nodding, the Headmaster refolded it and slipped it into his desk drawer, pulling out a thick manila envelope in its place. "Thank you, Severus; I'll deal with it appropriately when I have a free moment. Study the contents of this on your way out; it regards the next step in your current project."

Mystified, Severus accepted the package, nodded, and left. He found Hermione lingering out in the hallway, listening through the partially open door as Minerva questioned Albus about Severus' fictitious 'current project', and his vague reply that it was something to help prepare for the final confrontation with the Dark Lord. It was the truth, after all, if vaguely phrased.

"What's in the envelope?" Hermione whispered as he shut the door behind him, her curiosity an inevitable part of her. She was busy, he noted, stringing her ring onto the rope-chain he had bought for her and looping it around her neck. A practiced flick of her hand tucked it underneath her jumper as he watched. Then again, she had practice from her year with that Time-Turner, he recalled.

Glancing at the door, Severus opened the envelope and extracted two small boxes, one bearing his name on the lid, the other hers, and a folded sheet of paper. Craning her head, she moved to stand at his side, reading the letter along with him as she took the boxes so that he wouldn't have to balance them while trying to keep the letter open.

*'Dear Severus & Hermione;*

*First of all, congratulations on your marriage. I realize it is highly unconventional, poorly timed in regards to normal conventions, and bound to cause both of you headaches in the months to come, between the need for secrecy and the logistics of trying to keep your relationship hidden from all others, versus your need to nurture your liaison together, but you have my felicitations all the same.*

*To aid your efforts, I have arranged for two methods by which you will be able to interact. Enclosed are a pair of experimental communications bracelets. You will officially be testing them on behalf of the Order, albeit anonymously, as far as everyone else is to be concerned. A snap of your fingers will summon a special sort of stylus-pen; you need only focus on what you intent to write, and scrawl it on any reasonable surface, and the letters should appear in front of your own eyes. By starting out with the writing of the name of a specific person who also wears one of these bracelets...so far, the three of us are the only ones who have one of these enchanted articles...and by concentrating upon that person as the recipient, the letters you write in this manner will appear before the eyes of whoever is so addressed. They will be translucent and hopefully not too distracting, but that is part of the testing process.*

*Your daily need to write to each other as you continue building your relationship will be ideal circumstances for testing the rigors of this hidden communications method. Miss Granger, the idea actually came from the Muggle Inter-Net thingy, in case you were wondering. Fascinating concept... I'm told these bracelets work very much like that 'instant messaging' thing I've heard tales about, so you should be able to master its use very quickly, and be able to instruct Severus, too. And then hopefully be able to teach the rest of us how to properly use it!*

*The other half of the assistance you will need lies in a pair of specially enchanted cheval-mirrors that have been settled into your quarters during your absence this afternoon, replacing the original ones. They are in actuality an attuned pair of Portals, which will permit both of you to step through from one suite to the other without being seen. You need only touch the frame and murmur either "Rus's room" or "Mione's room" to be able to see into the other location...and to step through the mirror from one location to the other. Please be mindful of the passing of time, when you do so.*

*Again, my congratulations to both of you, my sympathies where appropriate, and my cautions to keep these secrets, including your nuptials, as carefully and discreetly as you can.*

*Albus Dumbledore.*

*Post-Script: This letter will self-destruct the moment you let go of it, so please re-read the instructions one last time before they vanish. A.D.'*

Severus and Hermione exchanged a look, then bend their heads to the note once more, carefully memorizing every word. Only when Hermione nodded her permission did Severus release the paper, letting it waft halfway to the floor before it suddenly flashed and vanished, leaving only the faintest trickling of dust to fall to the hallway floor. The boxes vanished, too, leaving Hermione holding both bracelets with a disconcerted blink.

"Well, Miss Granger; we have our assignments." Liberating one of the bracelets, Severus eyed it, then pushed up his sleeve cuffs and held out the bluish-silver metal, its links made of chased rectangular sections alternating with tiny coil-wrapped links. "Your assistance would be appreciated."

"Of course, Professor." Fastening it around his wrist, she watched him tug his cuffs back into place, then held out her own. "Would you...? Please?"

Obliging, he fastened it around her own wrist...then tugged her close, kissing her briefly before murmuring in her ear. "Keep the remaining money. It's a wedding-gift from Albus. Buy me something nice for Christmas, if you like; you've still got an hour before sundown and the end of your Hogsmeade day, if you hurry. And don't forget your other assignment. The list of book-subjects, my office, eight o'clock sharp."

"I do remember, Professor. You'll have your list," she promised.

Another swift kiss, and he turned and descended the stairs. She hurried after him, catching up to him before the stone steps started spiraling downward. The door to Dumbledore's study opened, a voice called out to them, and Severus flicked out his wand, stopping the rotating steps as Minerva bustled out into the hallway. Affecting an impatient look, he waited for her to join them, then set the stairwell in motion again. The trio descended back into the public sections of the school, as McGonagall asked Hermione about some of her better Transfiguration essays. Snape stayed his usual, taciturn, silent self.

...

*\*Mione,\**

Hermione jerked her head up from the jumble of old homework scrolls she was sorting. The hovering, pale blue letters flickered and spread across her vision, glowing like the blue of a gas-fire, and shimmering like an opalescent smear of oil across water. She blinked, but the lettering remained in her vision.

*\*I will have a pair of Slytherins in detention, when you arrive at 8. I will consequently be in the classroom, not in my office.\**

Severus. The iridescent, spider-neat scrawl in her vision belonged to Severus. She blinked again and concentrated on the words as they arrived, apparently literally as he wrote them.

*\*Remember, do not treat me out-of-character; there will be time for that later. Let me know you have received this,*

*Rus\**

A terse note, at best. The topmost words started to fade out. Hermione snapped her fingers quietly, concentrating. A bluish-silver stylus appeared in her hand. It looked much like a mechanical pencil, save that the little cylinder at the tip where the lead would come out was actually rounded over, allowing the tip to glide over the surface of the nearest scroll with ease. It also caused a blue-fire line of ink to appear in her vision. Concentrating again, she composed her reply.

*\*Rus,\**

She had to pause there; a rectangle flowed into view, transparent enough for her to see what was going on around her...not much, given she was seated at her desk in the Head Girl's bedroom...but solid enough for her to manipulate. The rectangle contained little icons, picture-symbols, and a glowing little quill that she supposed was the magical equivalent of a computer cursor. One of the icons was an envelope with the letters 'mm' on it, one was two simple figures of heads and shoulders with a two-way

arrow between them, the other was a trio of heads within the arc of a circular arrow. She puzzled it out, and decided she wanted the envelope, which was the icon currently encircled by a glowing golden light, was for straightforward mailing. *Not e-mail, which is short for electronic mail, but...but m-mail, I think, for magical mail* she decided, deciphering the letters. *How clever...*

Bending her head to her desk, since it was her default writing position, she tapped the envelope with the stylus as soon as it lay on the surface of the desk in her vision, and composed the rest of her reply.

*\*...Rus, message received. I'll just snog you extra hard later, to make up for it.*

*Your Mione\**

A moment of thought, and she added in post-script,

*\*P.S. I'll have the prospective essays with me to discuss as well, to cover the reason why I'm down there.\**

A small pair of scroll-icons had appeared at the bottom, one marked Send and the other marked Cancel. She tapped the 'send' one with the cursor-quill. Setting down the stylus, she reached for a scroll...and watched the inkless pen fade quickly from view. So that was how it returned itself to the bracelet. A pen that could never be lost, so long as the bracelet wasn't removed from her wrist. Given the complexity of the catch, she didn't think it would be easy or quick to remove, let alone that it would fall off accidentally. Shortly after the pen faded, the lettering of her own note faded as well. It was replaced a moment later by more of his handwriting.

*\*Beloved Mione,*

*You over-achieving Gryffindor. You were only assigned that project today! You have until New Year's to complete it!*

*Affectionately,*

*Rus\**

That was a challenge she couldn't pass; a snap of her fingers, and Hermione scrawled a reply. This time, she tapped the two-way symbol. Two names came up: Albus, and Rus. She tapped on Rus, highlighting his name briefly in a sparkle of golden light. As suspected, a transparent image of a scroll appeared in her vision as the sparkles faded away, and her words appeared on its surface as she started to write again.

*\*Beloved Rus,*

*If I get it and my other bits of homework out of the way now, that leaves me more time to spend with you later, and gives me something to do for now to keep me from fretting about tonight!*

*Mione\**

His reply was swift.

*\*Mione, I told you I wouldn't pressure you; you have nothing to worry about! Rus.\**

She smiled slightly, remembering her thoughts to the contrary, from earlier. *\*I'm not the least bit worried. I'm talking about sexual frustration fretting, not shy, reticent, virginal fretting. I'm a bloody Gryffindor...if I'm scared about something, I tend to leap out and grab it, to conquer my fears!\**

She waited for his reply, wondering if the icon allowed her to get away with not using his name, even if it was only his nickname; her words did leap up on the scroll, but she had to make sure he received them.

*\*Mione, I intend to remain a gentleman, and allow you to make the first moves. But only when you are ready. Though if you want to leap out and grab me tonight, like the lioness you are...I am entirely at your disposal for that experiment, too. Rus.\**

*\*We're in chat-mode, Severus...that two-headed, two-ended arrow thingy that's glowing at the bottom of the scroll. You don't have to keep writing my name at the moment,\** she informed him. *\*Or even your own.\**

*\*You will have to explain it to me when we are together in person, then... Unfortunately, I have papers to grade, what with the end of the term looming so near. I will see you tonight.\**

*\*Ttfn.\**

*\*... Ttfn?\**

*\*Ta-ta for now. It means bye.\**

*\*Oh.\**

Hermione suppressed a giggle into a grin, as their words faded out. She dropped the stylus, and it and the scroll faded from view. The thought of teaching Severus Snape, pureblooded wizard, all about Muggle chat-room conventions was an amusing concept. She even wondered if the creators of this system had included the concept of 'smiley' emoticons, but marshaled her thoughts sharply back to her previous tasks. There were plenty of scrolls for her to sort through, before she was due to bring him her assignments, tonight. She wanted to have all of her homework out of her way, before seeing him tonight.

...

Sure enough, when she entered the Potions classroom, there were two third-year Slytherin boys in the room, one scrubbing the floor and the other scrubbing the desks, sweaty from their efforts and damp-splotted from the cleaning water being sloshed about magiclessly. They were miserable-looking, too, clearly unhappy about having to scrub everything by hand like a pair of Squibs. Hermione couldn't summon much in the way of sympathy for them. It wasn't that they were Slytherins; it was simply that, if they...as Slytherins, a part of his usually overly-favoured House...had done something horrible enough for Professor Snape to assign them a detention, they surely deserved their misery.

Skirting the puddle of the one working on the floor, she approached the desk. Severus looked up from the scrolls he was grading. "You're five minutes early, Miss Granger. I said 8 o'clock, not 7:55."

"I merely thought you'd appreciate getting this over as quickly and painlessly as possible, Professor," Hermione replied just coolly, knowing he was speaking this way because of their audience. Opening her book bag, she extracted the scrolls within it. "Here are the copies of the Potions essays I thought might be suitable for the project the Headmaster wants me to do. I thought...I thought the sooner they were in your hands, sir, the sooner you could read and have done with them."



"I'll get to them over the holidays. I have more important things to concentrate on right now than the pretentious, scribbled babblings of an insufferable know-it-all." Bending his head, he snapped his fingers, clasped the silvery-blue stylus that appeared, and scrawled, *"Mione, forgive me..."*

"I...understand, Professor. I will let Professor Dumbledore know you have received my proposed Potions scrolls. So long as the selections are made by the deadline, that's the important thing."

"Go," he ordered her impatiently, before scratching the stylus across the page as she turned away. *"Mione, you clever girl. Threatening me so subtly with the Headmaster's disapproval, if I don't attend to these scrolls by New Year's Eve. Are you sure you shouldn't have been Sorted into Slytherin?"*

It wasn't easy, controlling the urge to smile as she swept past the two sullen Slytherin boys. She put a little extra swing into her walk, just for the Potions Master's benefit, in case he was watching her depart. As she left, more words scrolled into her vision.

*"Mione...be ready to step through the looking-glass by 10 o'clock..."*

She let the smile bloom as soon as the classroom door was closed.

...

Hermione cocked her head at her image. *Too ruffy?* A flick of her wand. *Too lacy?* Another flick. *Too see-through?* Yes, definitely too see-through... Face red as she looked away from the clear details of her nipples and knickers, she flicked again, concentrating. *Too slinky?* No, it's sophisticated, but not overly so. *I like this one. Let's see about the colour, then. Too pink?* Yes, too pink. *What else should I wear, though? Red? Blue? Green? Ooh, silver...that's a part of his House-colour; I think he'd appreciate that. And I do look good in silver.*

A flick changed the sheath-style nightgown, held in place by spaghetti straps, from the pale pink of her camisole to a simmering silver. A tap lengthened the side-slit, drawing it all the way up to the curve of her hip, baring a strip of her leg...and the elastic leg-band of her pink silk knickers. *Too much skin? Down a few inches.* The seam repaired itself under the prodding of her wand. Now it reached just below the curve of her hip. She didn't like that, though, and restored the higher version. Prodding her knickers, she Transfigured them to something even more wicked than lace-edged briefs. The material morphed into a silvery tied-on style. Fluffing out the bow so that it nestled outside the edges of the gown, she eyed her reflection. The satiny bow gave the nearly unadorned slip-dress a delicate, feminine air, and yet a slightly naughty feel to it, too.

It did make her reconsider her gown, though; turning around, Hermione aimed her wand carefully as she glanced over her shoulder, scooping her hair out of her way with her free arm. A prod of magic, and the solid back of the gown became a web of silvery lacings, baring her back all the way down to her waist. The straps over her shoulders, still spaghetti-thin, became bow-ties. Facing the mirror again, she contemplated what to do with her hair as she let it fall back down around her shoulders, some of it bouncing down her back and a few ringlet-like locks draping over her breasts.

Her image faded and dissolved even as she lowered her arm, toying thoughtfully with one of her curls. It was replaced by a foreign room, and a black-clad body. A stunned, gaping, black-clad body, one hand clutching convulsively at the frame he was touching, the other hand fumbling up as well to the far side of the frame to brace himself. From the pallor of his face, she'd rendered him both breathless and speechless.

Hermione smirked. She liked seeing the unflappable Potions Master caught so fully off his guard, and deliberately...and courageously...trailed the chestnut curl caught in her fingertips down over the peak of her breast, using her own hair to tickle the silky, shimmering material and the flesh that lay underneath. He swallowed, closed his mouth, and shifted his hand from the frame into the plane of the mirror. It emerged on her side of the glass.

A thrill of trepidation coursed through her, and a mixture of uncertainty and excitement. Placing her hand in his, Hermione allowed him to assist her across the threshold. The plane of the mirror felt like a cool shower as she stepped through; the warmth of the bedroom beyond was a comfortable contrast. In fact, it was warmer than her own room, making her wonder at his need to keep his classroom so icy-cold. *Probably to help preserve all those ingredients, and to cut back on excessive heat during the brewing process...I know that careful, exacting temperature control is a concern for some of the more advanced potions, and heating something up is easier to control than cooling it down...*

*Why the heck am I thinking about potions, when I should be thinking about my h...my husband? I can't believe I'm still having a hard time thinking of that word, let alone saying it!* Hermione steeled herself to say the 'h' word, over and over if necessary, to desensitize herself to it. Their marriage had been very swift, as swift as the revelation of his identity as her secret correspondent; she wasn't surprised some of the impact was only hitting her now. It was one thing to think about being with him intimately when she was alone. Thinking about it had been stimulating enough for her to craft herself a slinky, sexy nightie like this. It was a different matter to actually be alone with him, in his quarters, knowing that the only practical, hands-on knowledge she had of sex were a few snogs from different boyfriends. The rest of her knowledge came from watching a few love-scenes in movies during summer breaks, and reading a lot of books on the subject, some of them technical, even clinical, the rest nothing more than trashy romance novels.

And his letters. Rus'...Severus' increasingly erotic letters. She had read those, too. *Oh, and there was this morning's encounter, in room 28 of the Three Broomsticks. That definitely counted as practical, hands-on experience...* Hermione realized she was mentally babbling, and focused on his bedchamber as a tangible anchor to settle her thoughts. It was somewhat like her Head Girl suite, she realized. Wardrobe, bureau, bookshelves, two doors, one closed but no doubt leading to a bathroom, the other standing open, giving her a glimpse of what looked like a sitting room with yet more bookshelves.

The tentative touch of a warm palm on her waistline made Hermione aware of just how low she'd Transfigured the back of her nightgown. Part of his hand lay on the silk, and part covered the skin of her waistline, somewhat webbed from the fanciful lacings crisscrossing her spine. Strange, how a simple touch on her back made her abruptly aware of her front...and aware of how taut her nipples were growing.

Could she do this? Could she consummate their marriage with a man she knew very well, yet didn't know nearly well enough? Hermione was at least willing to try, even if she didn't know how far her courage and nerves could be steelled for the task. It helped that his voice...that liquid, bittersweet-chocolate voice...flowed over her nerves, soothing her from the ears inward.

...

"This, as you can see, is my bedchamber. Allow me to give you a tour of the rest of my domicile, such as it is. That door over there leads to the bathroom. It is a utilitarian room, sink, toilet, shower, and bathtub, nothing to be excited about. You'll have need to see it sooner or later, I am sure, so you can admire it then," Severus murmured, taking her right hand in his and keeping his left hand on the small of her back. Guiding her in front of him, he pushed her gently into the sitting room. "This is my parlour. The door over there leads to a spot in the dungeon corridors roughly halfway between my office and the entrance to House Slytherin. I'll show its location to you another time. Preferably over the Christmas holidays, when there will be fewer chances of our being noticed together in the halls. But you should really use the mirror to come and go from my quarters, to minimize the threat of anyone noticing us interacting with each other out-of-character."

It was a casual conversation that he offered, dry and slightly witty, but utterly platonic in topic. He'd seen the momentary panic in her eyes. Well aware of how tenuous their relationship still was, he didn't let the sight of her in that sexy-as-sorcery slip of a nightgown tempt him out of his plans for the evening. And it tempted him, especially when he noted the sway of her young hips as she moved into his sitting room, her silvery-clad hips moving in a natural, subtle sashay that complemented the lacings of the gown peeking out from between the soft tangle of her chestnut curls.

The soft exclamation that escaped her lips when she saw all the crowded bookshelves ringing the room soothed and excited him. With unconscious volition, she picked up her pace, releasing his hand and padding straight for those shelves. When she lifted her hand and trailed it slowly over the spines, caressing each volume as she tilted her head this way and that to read the titles, Severus experienced an unfamiliar pain in his heart. It wasn't quite envy, being a bit more personal than that, but it wasn't quite

jealousy, either; they were only books, after all. But he did feel a mixture of the two, along with a deep longing to be the subject of so much attention and devotion.

Padding up behind her, Severus cleared his throat softly, reaching up to capture her hand. "Now, now, Mrs. Snape. You'll make me jealous of mere books, caressing them as lovingly as that. This *is* technically our wedding night; you shouldn't be turning to another love in your life to fulfil all of your pleasures. Not quite so soon in our marriage, at least."

She blushed, as she glanced up at him over her shoulder "I...sorry. I just love books. You, ah, know how I am."

"Mmm, yes. And you know how I am, too. But there is more to life than reading and learning. There's exploring and experimenting, too."

Letting warmth, even a touch of humor colour his words, Severus pulled her gently away from his shelves, over to his settee. Positioning her just so in front of the sofa, he dropped down onto the seat, twisted to brace his arm against the rolled, padded armrest, swung one booted foot up onto the cushions, and guided her down between his parted leg and knee. She blinked, hesitated a moment, then turned to parallel him. A scooting squirm, and she snuggled up against his groin, reminding him that he was still hard from that breathtaking moment when he'd touched the mirror and triggered the Portal.

Lifting her legs onto the couch, she squirmed a bit more, demurely recovering her right leg when that breath-stealing, high slit in her gown exposed the whole limb. Severus took a moment to compose himself, then lifted and planted his left boot on the cushions, cradling her in place. A touch of his hands, somewhat unsteady, guided her into laying back against his chest. She settled, squirmed, settled again, then sat up with an impatient sigh.

"I can't get comfortable. All those buttons keep poking me in the back!"

Severus dropped his left leg back to the floor, giving her room to twist around and face him. Here was a gilded opportunity to get her accustomed to touching him. "If they offend you, wife, then I suggest you undo them and remove their presence. You should do it personally, to make sure the job is done correctly. I know how much of a perfectionist you are."

She blinked, blushed, and licked her lips with a visible trace of hesitancy. But, being Gryffindor, Severus knew what she would do. Sure enough, she nodded, cleared her throat, and reached for the topmost button. "As you wish...husband."

He felt his heart skip a beat. From his own perspective, Severus was going to use the title of 'wife' as much as feasible when addressing her in private, partly to accustom her to their new relationship, partly to accustom himself to addressing and treating her as such...and partly because he liked the possessive, primitive sound of the word. Apparently, his young wife had the same idea. To accustom herself to saying it, himself to hearing it...and was that a faint spark of desire in her eyes when her lips parted and touched, forming the two-syllable word?

Endure. That was the word for what Severus had to do, as she gingerly unfastened the first button, and then the second. Her fingers fumbled a bit on the third, making her blush. He schooled his expression, tending it carefully so that it remained gentle, so that the habitual frown he normally wore around everyone...including her, in public...stayed firmly locked away. When she fumbled worse on the fourth button, and started to stammer an apology, Severus slid his fingers over hers, silencing her. Lifting each hand to his mouth in turn, he kissed her flesh, letting his eyelids drift shut as he focused on soothing the tremors in her hands. The shifting of her weight told him he had succeeded beyond expectations, for she leaned into his chest...pressing her soft breasts against his hard body...shifted their joined hands out of her way, and brushed her lips against his.

He could endure this, too. Hell, he could enjoy it. Freeing her hands, Severus slid his own along her arms, over her shoulders, and down that damned, devastating latticework laughing called the back of her nightgown. Sliding his hands over her derriere, Severus could just manage to cup her curves, rocking her subtly, gently into their kiss. Rubbing her against his wool-covered groin. She ended their kiss with a sound akin to a whimper, only softer. A shift and she pulled back, sitting up just far enough to be comfortable as she reached for his buttons again.

Opening his eyes to slits, Severus enjoyed the sight of a frown of concentration shaping her face. The expression was very familiar; it was the one she wore whenever she was crafting a complex potion in his classroom, or composing one of her numerous essays up in the school library. It was enervating and yet humbling at the same time, knowing he was the focus of her current attentions. With the trembling of her fingers eased through their kisses, she worked efficiently on his buttons, unfastening them. Her hands slid up the opened seam, pushing aside the folds of black wool as she caressed his abdomen, his chest, and finally his shoulder, pushing the coat halfway down his arms.

That trapped his arms, but Severus didn't move to free himself. Not when she slid her fingers up over his shoulders and down the planes of his chest, stroking him from collarbone to waistline. Her fingers collected over his navel, slid to the nearest shirt-button, and started unfastening that as well. He didn't have the heart to stop her, though he'd had something else in mind, bringing her here rather than staying in his bedchamber. No, he didn't have the will to stop her, as the tickling slide of her hands stimulated his nerves, hardening his flesh. When she pushed his shirt, too, over his shoulders and dipped down to press her mouth to his sternum, dusting soft, slow kisses in a path towards one nipple, he decided enough was enough.

It wasn't easy, getting to the wand tucked up his sleeve as she kissed her way to his other nipple; her actions were inexperienced and therefore a little hesitant, but willing to experiment on his flesh. Disciplining his mind, Severus flicked his wand, concentrating through her ticklish explorations. His clothing Transfigured off of his body, parting as each piece fell away from his limbs and reforming seamlessly as the wool and cotton slumped limply to the settee and floor. He left his boxers on, so as not to startle her; as it was, she gasped softly, lifting her head and blinking down at the revelation of most of his body.

The pockmarks on the right side and the purplish scar on the left of his torso weren't his only scars. He had pale white scrapes on his calf from his encounter with a certain three-headed dog, another scar from a childhood injury on his left, and a stab-wound high on his left thigh, still somewhat pink and relatively recent, garnered just last summer. And the Death Mark, the hated brand scarring the flesh of his left inner forearm. But it wasn't his scars that her fingers traced, nor revulsion or even flinching in her eyes. Instead, he found his breath robbed from his lungs as she traced the definition of his muscles, the tautness of his thighs, the clenching planes of his stomach as her fingertips tickled it, the bulge of the bicep that tensed automatically the moment she slid her palm all the way up to it in an exploring caress.

He wasn't some overgrown Muggle body-builder; Severus had put all of his efforts into strengthening his lean frame simply so that he could survive, not compete for some silly trophy. But he felt, under her gaze, that he had won a prize. Far more lean than muscular, his body still had a great deal of tone and definition from his daily efforts...and from the look in her eyes, Severus now had a new reason to keep his body fit. She liked it. That was motivation enough for him.

Her gaze traveled down the length of his chest, noting the sparse, fine black hairs, the thin treasure line that led into the waistband of his boxers. Black, of course. No dingy grey briefs for him, these days. And, despite the wonderings of some of the more adventurous students...every year the rumors reached his ears...there weren't any silly serpents printed on them. Plain, straight black. Tented black, at that. Drawing in a breath to tell her they had other things to do, Severus found the words arrested in his throat, and the thoughts frozen in his mind, when she shifted a little for balance and wrapped her hand around him through the soft, dark cotton.

Her fingers didn't stay respectfully still. They shifted and flexed, testing the warmth and the hardness of his penis. Unable to stop himself, he dropped his head back with a groan, twitching his hips up into her grasp. It had been so bloody long since he'd felt even such a simple, questing touch from another hand...

Somehow he made his left hand shift and grip her wrist. Halting her in tentative mid-stroke. As far as Severus was concerned, he was *not* going to ejaculate in his clothes again today. He couldn't help the husky growl of his voice as he ground out, "...I don't believe in repeat performance of that kind, *wife*. Not after doing it once already, today."

Her fingers tightened for a moment around his shaft, making him lift his head and open his eyes, giving her a stern warning look despite the pleasure that shivered through him. She let him go, somewhat subdued by his glare. Pulling her hand up to his mouth, Severus turned it just so, nuzzled it for a moment with his nose, then licked her from the soft skin of her wrist, up through the centerline of her palm, to the base of her fingers. Where he prodded rhythmically with the tip of his tongue, caressing her between her middle and ring fingers as he held her gaze.

That made her tremble, the breath shuddering out of her lungs. Taking her middle finger into his mouth, Severus laved it with attention, suckling and licking it, before slowly drawing it from his mouth. "Now that I have your attention... I actually brought you out here for something else. Turn around, and lie back."

Hermione eyed him warily, then twisted and settled back against his chest and stomach. She shifted a little, sighed impatiently, and craned her head back. "There's something *else* hard that's poking me in the back. Shouldn't I...erm...take care of that, too?"

"Hush. *Accio* scroll." Lifting his leg back up onto the cushions, Severus caught the roll of parchment that flew into his hand. Proffering it over her shoulder, he waited until she took it before explaining what he wanted. "Untie it, roll it open, and read its contents aloud."

"Yes, Professor."

## Chapter Seven

*Chapter 8 of 10*

The Wedding Night...which sort of got previewed earlier, but hey, pobody's nerfect! (Though that nightie nearly is.)

VII.

...

"I am not your professor right now, Mione. Not in here," Severus reminded her, lifting a hand to stroke her curls. The weight of her body against his chest was warm and comforting. As intimate as he'd imagined. "Within these walls, I am merely your husband."

"You couldn't be 'merely' anything, even if you tried," Hermione retorted, unwrapping and unscrolling the missive. She glanced over the contents, and blushed. "Erm...you want me to read this aloud?"

"Please."

A polite, respectful, request from the sour bastard of the dungeons wasn't something one normally expected to hear. Hermione wondered for a moment at how different he really was, in private. Licking her lips to moisten them, she began.

*"Instructions for the Care of Severus Sebastian Granger-Snape when in Private:*

*"Treat gently, unless begged to be playfully, consensually rough.*

*"Hug frequently. A minimum of half a dozen hugs per day are necessary to keep your Granger-Snape healthy and happy...please remember to embrace high on the chest, or very low around the waist, to avoid putting pressure on a certain scar.*

*"Kiss frequently. Suggested areas include the lips, the nose, the forehead, the throat, and the hands, in no particular order. Other areas should not be neglected either, ranging from nipples to knees, nape to groin.*

*"Worship the nose. Your Granger-Snape is sensitive about its size and shape, and thus must be reassured constantly it isn't overly hideous."*

Severus slid his hands from her shoulders to her ribs, massaging her lightly through her nightgown as she continued to read his handwriting aloud.

*"Stroke the hair. Your Granger-Snape is unable to change its plainness and greasiness (a result of hovering over steaming potions all day long), but loves having his locks gently tugged, petted, and to be scratched behind the ears and along the nape. Also, gentle scratches under the chin are not amiss, especially late in the day when the evening's stubble has reached that dreadfully itchy stage, and early in the morning before your Granger-Snape has had a chance to shave.*

*"Massage the back. Granger-Snapes are notoriously high-strung, with stiff, proper posture. Backrubs are necessary to induce bone-melting pleasure.*

*"Licking the Granger-Snape is usually recommended in most instances, but not after eating liver-and-onions, milk-based products, or other odiferous foods, unless proper dental hygiene techniques have been utilized as well. Suggested locations for licking the Granger-Snape include the lips, the throat, the ears, the elbows and wrists, between the fingers, the sternum and nipples, the navel, the loins, the knees, the ankles, and the toes.*

*"Suckling on the fingers, toes, nipples, throat, earlobes and loins of your Granger-Snape is highly recommended.*

*"Care should be taken to avoid tickling the soles of your Granger-Snape's feet; spasmodic jerking, shouts of laughter, and dangerous thoughts of retaliation may ensue.*

His hands shifted from her ribs to her breasts, gliding up under her arms. Using just his fingertips, Severus circled the nubs that were her nipples, stimulating them. Her voice faltered, her breath hitched, and her head arched back a little. He could see little goose-spots prickling down her arms, and was content with his effect on her. Cupping her breasts fully in each hand, he gently massaged her flesh.

*"E-Endearments should be used spontaneously and somewhat frequently, but not excessively, nor gratuitously. They will be treasured all the more by your Granger-Snape if they aren't overused.*

*"Teeth should definitely be used on your Granger-Snape, but used relatively gently; he enjoys love-bites during foreplay and lovemaking, but cannot risk being bruised or marked at this point in time, even if his normal mode of dress would hide almost any mark his owner cares to make..."*

Hermione's eyes fluttered closed at the word 'owner'. Well, it was a combination of that and the way he was gently rolling her silk-covered nipples between his forefingers and thumbs. Her eyes flew open again as he scraped his thumbnails over the tips of her breasts.

"Continue, my wife. Read the rest of the instruction manual," Severus murmured, enjoying her reactions to his written words and his careful caresses.

Dazed, Hermione eyed the scroll somewhat warily. The instructions grew increasingly more explicit, the further down she skimmed. It was the final instruction that made her pause, however. Licking her lips, she read it silently, memorized it, then lobbed the scroll at the low table in front of the settee before reciting the last line in a husky voice,

*"...Love your Granger-Snape with all of your heart, for he loves you with all of his."*

Severus smiled, shifting one hand to her forehead, smoothing her curls out of his way. Pressing a gentle kiss to her temple, he slid his hand down her cheek, throat, and shoulder, winding up with her breast caught in his palm once again. "Ah. The best part. Do you like the manual? Do you think it will be quite useful?"

She liked the way his hands were caressing her through her Transfigured nightgown, making it a little difficult for her to think. Still, Hermione gathered her wits, covering the backs of his hands with her own. "I'm afraid I didn't read all of it. I was...distracted by someone playing with his own new Granger-Snape without reading her instruction manual, first. Of course, I haven't written it, yet..."

"Well, until you do, I suppose I'll have to experiment very carefully in the meantime, and see how my own Granger-Snape reacts. I do have one question," Severus murmured, the organ in his chest beating a little faster, in trepidation.

"And that is...?"

"What...what does the last line of your own manual say?"

There. He had asked the question foremost in his mind. In a roundabout manner, but it was asked. *Does she love me yet?* Severus wondered as she didn't move, and didn't respond. Not for a while. *...Or am I pushing this moment too fast, and too far?*

Hermione knew she hadn't answered, yet. She knew also that the man she reclined against was all but holding his breath, he was so still and quiet himself, waiting for her answer. He had leapt out onto a limb this morning, declaring that he loved her. Of course, he had done so in an arrogant way, claiming the right to protect her for her own good without consulting her...if she had chosen to retreat from their relationship, now that she knew who Rus was. *But I didn't choose to retreat, she remembered. I chose to leap, too. And really, why should he be any more courageous than me?*

*My mother once told me that love, real love, was a choice. The "in-love" phase of a relationship is fleeting at best, lasting a few years if one is lucky, and shorter if one is not. It's mostly useful for creating a bond long enough to get to know someone, for the slow-building but long-lasting sort of real love to take root and grow within one's heart.*

*Am I in-love with him? ...Yes, a bit...more than a bit,* she acknowledged with a blush as his hands moved slightly underneath her own, sliding the silk of her gown over her areolas. *But do I love him?* She'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop this afternoon and this evening, for him to revert to his usual nasty self when they were alone...but he wasn't being nasty.

She knew Professor Snape was a private man, keeping his true thoughts and feelings very much to himself, but it occurred to her that she really was beginning to see Severus' actual innermost thoughts and feelings, through his letters to her as Rus, and through his actions now, holding very little back from her. *And I like this man* Hermione decided. *I like this man very much. But is that love?*

Squirming carefully around in his embrace, she twisted onto her hip, turning her upper body so that she could look up at his face. It wasn't a handsome face, no, but it had character and strength. This wasn't a boy she'd chosen to marry; this was a man, experienced, intelligent, and confident, all traits that she admired. Those midnight eyes weren't cold; they were warm, warmer than she had ever seen them before today, though there was a trace of worry in them, too.

*Goodness! He actually fears my answer; he's lowered his defenses for me, farther than I've ever seen them, and he knows he's taking a serious chance in exposing his vulnerabilities. I think I could honestly break his heart, with the wrong word or phrase...* Her heart ached at the thought, and that made up her mind. Squirming just a little bit more, she wrapped her arms around his chest, resting her cheek on his skin as she embraced him. His own arms closed hesitantly around her. *Poor thing, Hermione thought as his arms tightened after a moment and a sigh escaped his chest. He hasn't been hugged very often, has he? No one to give him any affection, physical or otherwise...no wonder hugging was listed so high in his silly, wonderful 'instruction manual'!*

*...I'd better answer him, shouldn't I? Before he thinks the wrong thing.* A final squeeze, and she lifted her head, meeting his gaze. Some of the fear and worry had eased, but not all of it. Holding him with eyes and arms, Hermione revealed her choice. "My manual says *almost* the exact same thing as yours."

He licked his lips. "...Almost?"

"Yes. Just some different pronouns, nothing to worry about," she dismissed as lightly as she could, given her heart was pounding in her chest.

Severus felt his heart squeeze in a harder than normal beat. Lifting his hand to her hair, he smoothed a few of the curls back from her face, cupping the back of her head. If he read her right... It wasn't enough. He needed the actual words. "Say it. Please..."

She couldn't resist such quiet pleading. Wriggling a little higher, so that their heads were almost level, Hermione looked into his eyes, drew in a deep breath, and said it. In fact, she said it several times, in several ways, to make sure he understood her. Instinct said this self-contained man was secretly a man of many emotional insecurities, and her feminine instincts said the best way to heal those insecurities was to be very, very thorough when addressing them. So Hermione firmly and irrevocably addressed them.

"I love you, Severus. I *choose* to love you. I am in-love with you. However many ways it can be said, Severus Snape, I do love y..."

The hand at the back of her head tightened in her curls, pulling her mouth to his. His lips captured hers, conquered and plundered her mouth. The lump digging into her stomach, which had diminished somewhat over the past few minutes, soon prodded her with increasing insistence once again. It was hard and somewhat uncomfortable, but exciting to her, too. She could have given in to the moment very easily...if it weren't for the way he clutched her to him. That put a little too much stress on her back, for her shoulders and chest were aligned with his, but her hips and legs were still lounging sideways between his thighs.

Uncomfortable, Hermione pulled back, breaking their kiss. The confusion and worry in his eyes made her heart ache. *He must be thinking I'm trying to put an end to this...* Shifting her hand to his lips, she murmured, "Shh...I just think there's a better place to do this than on the settee...don't you?"

Midnight eyes darkened and gleamed. Releasing her, Severus helped her to sit up, then stand. Rising after her, he made her squeak in surprise when he swept her up into his arms, cradling her against his bare chest, wand clutched in the hand hooked around her knees.

Blinking in surprise, clutching quickly at his shoulders, Hermione managed a coherent, "...Severus, put me down! I'm too heavy!"

"You're not too heavy, Hermione. And even if you were, I'd be glad of it; you're certainly not a child anymore...a fact for which I am deeply grateful," he muttered, striding into his bedroom. A thump of his heel closed the door. "It's bad enough you will still be my student for all intents and purposes for several more months...I look forward to the day when we are free to be ourselves."

Setting her on her feet next to the bed, he released her arms from his neck, kissed each of her palms, then reached for a pair of small silver goblets set on his nightstand next to a small, empty bottle, and a shallow little jar. Picking up the goblets, he dropped his wand in their place. Offering her one, he saluted her with the other and knocked back its contents. A shudder of distaste, and he set the emptied metal cup back down.

In a show of absolute trust, Hermione swallowed her own as well, and did so without asking first what it was. She, too, grimaced and licked her lips in disgust at the flavour.

Copying him, she returned her cup to the nightstand next to his own. Only then did she finally enquire, "...So. What was that?"

"A contraceptive. I wasn't sure if we'd go this far, tonight, but I didn't want to leave anything to chance." Catching her hand, Severus tangled her fingers in his, tugging her gently up against him. His dark eyes searched hers, half-shuttered but glittering with emotion, with need. "This is your last opportunity to leave, Mione. If you stay...I may slow down if you ask me to, but I do not think I will be able to stop. If you do stay, Hermione, this marriage *will* be consummated. I'm only a man, and I can only withstand the temptation of you for so long."

His voice, low and husky, promised a night of things she didn't even know, yet. Shivering, Hermione freed her hand from his. This was the point of no return, for both them. She did feel a little nervous, even scared, but looking up into those dark eyes, into a gaze that had terrified her in years past, Hermione suddenly felt calmness welling up from somewhere deep within her soul. This was the right moment, the right man, and the right thing to do.

Holding his gaze steadily, without any trepidation, she reached up with both sets of fingers and tugged gently on the bow-ties of her nightgown. The satin cords slipped free of their knots...and the silvery dress slithered down over her body, puddling at her feet. Baring her from head to hipbones, from thighs to feet, and showing off the silvery, bow-tied knickers girding her loins.

Every inch of Severus' body hardened. Her nipples had budded, rasped by the falling material; her breasts were neither overly large nor undeservedly small, handfuls begging to be caressed. He wanted to trace his fingers, his lips over the line of her ribs, the dip of her waist. Those satiny little ties to either side begged to be drawn free, silently pleaded for that scrap of material guarding her final secrets to fall as well as her gown. Every muscle and pertinent organ of his body hardened with the conflicting desires warring within him. To grab her and take her and sate himself within her, and yet to take his time, an eternity if need be, to bring her own passions to an equal, feverish boil.

Her hands lowered to her sides, then plucked at the ties of her knickers, preparing to release them. Severus struck quickly, catching and holding her wrists. Manacled them, he gave her a dark, fiery look, and a single, growled word.

"*Mine.*"

Breathless at the primitive, fierce, primal expression carved on his face, Hermione watched as he dropped to his knees. Shifting her hands away from her sides, he released them and feathered his own fingertips over the satiny bows. Resisting the urge to giggle, Hermione held her breath, watching those long fingers toying with the ties. Slowly, he pinched one of the ends dangling from one knot and tugged, until the bow unraveled with a little jerk. His other hand did the same as he switched attention to that side, until only the half-knots of the ties and the positioning of her legs kept her knickers in place.

"Part your thighs."

It was a soft command, but it speared straight through her belly, igniting twists of lightning through her nerves. Lips parted as she panted in anticipation, Hermione shuffled her feet apart until they were spaced wider than her shoulders. Unsure where to put her hands, she finally lifted and clasped them behind her neck.

Severus made the mistake of looking up, tracking the movement of her arms. The position she unconsciously took, the stance of a surrendering prisoner, shot a fierce, possessive lust through him. His control snapped. Grabbing the front of her knickers, he tore the ties free and flung them away with his right hand. Twisting, he ducked between her thighs, bracing his weight on his left hand. She squeaked at the touch of his cheeks between her thighs, instinctively widening her knees, giving him more room to maneuver. *Perfect.* Groaning, drugged by her scent, Severus buried his face in her delicious, thoroughly damp folds.

Hermione gasped and wobbled. This was...this was... This was a hell of a lot more intimate than she'd ever experienced, before! A groan dragged its way out of her throat as she lowered her hands for balance. All she could grasp was his chin, as he licked and sucked, so she slid her hands up her stomach, instinctively cupping her breasts. She *needed*, stronger than she'd ever felt any other, similar need before under her own self-explorations. Flicking, licking, moist and warm and wet, circling, suckling...her hips bucked. Unable to take any more of it and still keep her balance, Hermione staggered free and half-fell, half-crawled onto the bed.

Down on the floor, Severus growled as his prey staggered away, escaping him. But she wasn't escaping him; she was climbing onto the bed, flushed and panting. Severus' eyes glittered with possessive emotions as she flopped over onto her back, knees parted, hands stroking her breasts, her belly, her thighs with a soft, needy moan. Shoving his boxers off so that he wouldn't have to contend with them later, Severus crawled after her, licking his lips to savour her salty-sweetness. She was his to pursue, after all.

Catching her by the ankles when he reached the side of the bed, Severus pulled her firmly across the coverlet, making her squeak. Kneeling on the floor next to the bed, he hooked his hands under her knees and pulled her thighs up and wide. Without preamble, he reburied his mouth in her crevasse, suckling and licking, claiming his prerogatives. Hermione shouted in surprise, a wordless cry followed by a gasping shudder. Her hands clutched at his head, digging into his hair. Little massaging motions and sharp tuggings encouraged him as he loved her flesh with his mouth, savouring her taste, growling softly as he marked her with his lips and his teeth. The one thing he carefully did not do was penetrate her vaginal opening, but everything else, yes, he did plenty of that.

Hermione writhed as pleasure speared through her nerves. Abandoning his hair, she clutched at the covers, trying to anchor herself as her world spiraled dizzily out of control. Words crawled out of her throat, half-delirious, half-pleading. "Oh, yes...yesss...higher...harder! Sev...Severusss, oh god! Almost...almoosst...more more more moremoremoremoremohhhhh god! Oh *god*, Rus!"

Head arching back against the bedding, body stiffening, Hermione cried out wordlessly as her orgasm swept over her, the most powerful one she could remember enduring. Breath shuddering in her lungs, every muscle trembling, she quivered as she soared. Then slumped as she fell. He didn't stop, though. Quivers rippled through her body, triggered almost randomly by the effects of his continued feasting.

Severus couldn't stop himself. Her feverish cries incited him, and her flavour enticed him. She was here, she was in his bed, and she was his; he was finally doing what he had fantasized about for the past few months, what he had finally allowed himself to fantasize about after her birthday, and it was as good as he had hoped. With her thighs draped over his shoulders, twitching occasionally in time with the clenching of her depths and the grunting of her inarticulate cries, his hands clutching her hips, he carefully, hungrily, greedily nuzzled her moisture from her depths with his mouth.

It had been too long since his last sexual encounter, not counting this morning's little adventure. Shortly after drinking that complex, revealing draught, Severus had debated visiting a wizarding brothel down in Diagon Alley that he had used in the past when his physical needs had grown too bothersome to ignore. He had debated the matter, and finally discarded it. If Hermione was slated to be his true love...if he even had a fated true love, a truly mind-boggling concept...Severus had decided he would not muck about with that fate by fooling around with someone else who would mean nothing to him. Even before they'd exchanged more than half a dozen letters, he'd known instinctively that it would not 'mean nothing' to her. Self-administration had become his only outlet.

But now she was here, in his chamber, in his bed, in his arms, and his long spell of celibacy was blissfully at an end. One thing was absolutely, unequivocally certain in his mind: he'd give his wife the best damned time of her life while she was in his bed, even if he had to castrate himself to do it. Luckily, he didn't think that would have to be an option. Severus sucked her juices from her skin, then withdrew his attentions. Later, he'd do more of this to soothe her femininity, but that would be after her deflowering.

Whispering a collection-spell against her inner folds after several moments, Severus removed his face, licking his lips to savour the last lingering bits of her unique, musky flavour. With the pads of his fingers, he tickled her labial folds, swirled and teased the peak of her clitoris. But this position wasn't conducive to what he wanted to do next; it was time to move both of them fully onto the bed.

Abandoning her lower half, Severus rose, scooped her into his arms, and placed her in the center of his bed. But on the coverlet wouldn't do. As she pushed up onto her elbows, he pulled the bedding down, making her squirm to get it out from under her. Stretching out beside her, Severus reached toward her thighs as she twisted onto her side. He intended to stimulate her some more. Her own arm got in the way, as did the startling, thrilling feel of her own fingers brushing against his turgid flesh. Desire burned through him, making him suck in a sharp breath. She hesitated, uncertainty clouding her gaze about whether or not to continue her explorations.

Severus debated the moment, her uncertainty versus her curiosity, and made up his mind in a single heartbeat. The last thing he wanted to do was make her feel inhibited in their marriage-bed. Claspings her wrist, he kept her from retreating. "Please continue, Mione. I liked that."

She searched his gaze, as if gauging the sincerity of his urgings, then shifted her eyes to his nakedness. Relaxing onto the bed, Severus released her hand, giving her free rein to touch him. Another hesitation, and she shifted her hand to more neutral territory, high up on his chest. Her fingers played with the fine dusting of dark hairs that feathered across his pectorals before gathering into a thin dark line that plunged down past his navel to his groin. She didn't follow that path yet, though. Instead, she shifted a little closer, and examined his chest more intensely.

He'd known it would be erotic to be the focus of her concentration; she was very much like him in that regard, passionate about whatever she chose to study. Now she was studying him, and it was arousing and titillating to be the focus of her attentions, coupled as they were with her innocent, exploratory touches. His breath sucked in again as she ghosted her fingertips over one of his nipples; that made her glance quickly at him for confirmation. Normally a taciturn man...it was never wise for a spy to be verbose...Severus forced himself to say the words she needed to hear. They emerged in a rough, aroused tone.

"That felt very good, too. I...felt it up in my throat, under my chin...and down in my belly, into my groin. They're very sensitive," he added, gesturing vaguely with one hand at his chest.

She blushed, but caressed his areola a second time. Her fingers took their time, circling the tiny nub of his nipple. Tiny, compared to hers. Severus found the idea of reaching over to caress her own nipples in return a tempting one, but resisted. Instead, he tucked his arms beneath his head. This was her opportunity to explore him, and he would let her do so unhindered and undistracted. She flattened her hand against his chest, feeling the beat of his heart, then slid it over his pectoral muscles. Meandering down to his abdomen, she traced the line of his ribs; the leanness of his muscles made each ridge stand out a little bit more, giving her little dips and swells to investigate.

Her fingers tickled the fine line of hairs down the center of his stomach, then dipped into the shallow well of his navel, exploring its semi-puckered state. That made him shudder; all the nerve-endings of his lower stomach, so close to his jutting arousal, warned Severus just how close he was to embarrassing himself again. Debating briefly, he decided it was wisest to let her fondle him to a climax; right now, he couldn't trust himself to take her maidenhead properly, as he had planned in advance, nor to last long enough to teach her to enjoy the delights of intercourse. *Better to climax first, and be able to last longer on the second bout...Merlin, won't she ever get around to touching my ruddy prick?*

Impatient with the way she stroked his left hipbone carefully, almost shyly, which was near enough she didn't run the risk of brushing against his rampant manhood, Severus shifted his right hand free of his head. Reaching down and across his body, he caught her wrist, lifting her hand in his. "As delightful a torment as your explorations may be, Mione, you need to summon your Gryffindor courage and...grasp the most important issue at hand."

Suiting action to words, Severus moulded her fingers around his shaft, squeezing them just a little to make sure she grasped him firmly. Releasing her fingers, he re-tucked his hand behind his head, stomach tensing with pleasure as she tentatively squeezed him again.

"Erm... This is embarrassing," his young wife confessed, blushing, "but...what do I do? All the trashy novels say I'm...um...supposed to stroke you, but...I don't know how."

Severus let out a silent sigh of relief. At least she didn't find the actual touching of him to be embarrassing, just her own inexperience. Honesty, he decided, was probably the best policy in handling this matter. "To be blunt, you could touch me right now in any way short of trying to physically yank the damned thing off, and I would probably find it highly arousing. But...the liquid, at the tip, smear that around to moisten your hand, clasp me just firmly enough to apply a little pressure, and stroke up and down, circling my shaft as much as you can with your fingers."

Face still charmingly pink, Hermione complied, spreading the droplets of precum over his glans, then attempting to stroke him. His skin caught and pulled, somewhat pleasurably, somewhat painfully, as her hand transitioned from the damp areas to the dry. That made his breath hiss through his teeth, and she looked up at his face quickly. "It's...it's not wet enough, I think."

*Merlin, I'm going to go insane...* Carefully, resisting the urge to clear his throat, Severus suggested as gently as he could, "Then perhaps you should find some other way to lubricate it?"

Half expecting her to leap off the bed and duck into the bathroom in search of a jar of pomade or something, Severus nearly wept when she stared at it speculatively for a moment, licked her lips...and shifted position on the bed, lowering that glistening mouth to his groin.

*Don't cum don't cum don't cum don't cum...* It was a groin-tightening, buttock-clenching mantra, absolutely necessary from the moment those warm, damp lips, and that soft but textured tongue of hers moistened the head of his penis. She licked her lips again...he could see a frown as she analyzed the flavour of his pre-cum...and paused for a moment, then dipped down again, licking his shaft all the way around. When she took him into her mouth again, the pressure of her lips was lighter than he wanted to feel.

"Mione...harder. Suck a little, and stroke a little harder with your lips, and your fingers...holy!" Streaks of pleasure lanced through his body as she complied. She was a fast learner...he hadn't told her to swirl her tongue over the tip of him like that! "Sweet Merlin!"

His stomach muscles crunched. His bollocks tightened, and tingled in warning. He had two, maybe three seconds to save her from himself. Freeing a hand, he delved his fingers into her hair, tugging gently with a barked command.

"...Up!"

She sat up a little, startled as she tried to look at him.

"Stroke!" Severus commanded. Demanded, as she blinked. Pleaded, as she tentatively wrapped her hand around him again, "Stroke...stroke stroke stro...*ohhhh*...Goddess!" His testicles tightened sharply as she complied, his gut clenched, his prick twitched...and the pulsing, shuddering spasms swept his semen out of him, spurting it up in milky-white jets that started a gasp out of her, and dragged a groan out of him as her hand stilled. "More...more, Mione! Keep going!"

He could feel, vaguely through the pleasure rioting through his nerves, the semen splattering warm and wet on his belly as she quickly fumbled her way back to stroking him again. A few drops landed on his thighs, some of it even striking his ribs as her hand stroked him a bit wildly in her startled inexperience. It was all he could do to not clutch her hair painfully tight. Refraining from doing so meant spreading his fingers wide, but he managed it, not wanting to hurt his wife. Severus moaned in pleasure as she continued to stroke him, stiffening his limbs as he thrust up from the hips, rubbing himself against the slick ring of her fingers to prolong his pleasure. She wasn't gripping him as firmly as before, but that was alright; it suited the post-orgasmic sensitivity of his skin.

"Mione...Mione...my own," he breathed as the need to thrust slowly diminished, until it was only her own fingers that continued to gift him with such delightful friction. Sighing as even that slowed into uncertainty, Severus slipped his hand out of her hair. Gently caressing her shoulder and the arm propping her upright, he tugged lightly on her elbow, encouraging her to lie down next to him. When she complied, he arranged things so that his left arm cradled her close. From this close, he could see her uncertainty over the mess he had made on her fingers, her palm, and his own skin. Chuckling, he nudged her close enough to kiss her forehead, enjoying the post-orgasmic bliss seeping through his limbs. "Thank you. That was wonderful."

"Is it...erm..." She gingerly took her hand away from his semi-deflated shaft, eyeing the liquid coating her palm.

"Always this messy?" he asked lightly, and enjoyed her blush. "When that happens, yes. At least to some extent. When I do it to myself, I often cover the tip with my other palm, and try to catch most of it in my hand. That makes it easier to clean up, afterwards." Her face flamed red, and Severus smirked. "What, didn't you think I attended to my own needs? Surely you've masturbated yourself in the privacy of your own bed, late at night?"

"Well...yes, but...it's embarrassing to talk about it," she confessed, speaking to his chest rather than looking up at him.

Severus tugged her a little closer and kissed the curls on the top of her head as the nearest part of her. He quelled the impatient urge to retort that she was a grown woman now, reminded himself firmly that she was still a virgin, and instead said mildly, "It may be embarrassing to talk about right now, yes, but it's completely natural, and perfectly healthy. I'd be more worried about those idiots who denied themselves the task and its delights. *That* would be unnatural and unhealthy. Especially as it's excellent for relieving stress."

She stiffened for a moment. Then giggled, surprising him. A peek upwards, and she blushed, but giggled again. "I, um, don't think you do it nearly often enough, given how stressed-out you normally act..."

"Such daring cheek!" he mock-rebuked her, smiling. "And yes, that would be the truth. To be fair...a rare state for me, I know...I should warn you that your blushes only further rouse the Slytherin urge within me to see how many more of them I can evoke in you, Hermione."

"Hmph! See if I ever blush again, around you!"

He grinned, at that. Shifting his right hand out from under his head again, he smirked at her, trailed a finger through the ropy puddles on his abdomen, and offered her some of the slightly sticky liquid. "Would you like a taste?"

She blushed, hard and fast, just as he thought she would. But, daringly, his young wife stuck out her tongue, lapping delicately at the liquid on his fingertip. She wrinkled her nose a little. "It's very salty, and kind of...it kind of stings, when I swallow. But it's not bad. Not really. Certainly it's better than sushi."

That made him snort in mock-indignation. "Really! Comparing the taste of me to the Muggle oddity of eating raw fish!"

"No, I think that's called sashimi. Sushi is different; it's rice and seaweed wrapped around cooked fish, for the most part. Fish, salmon-eggs, crabmeat, cucumbers..." Tentatively, she trailed her finger through the mess on his skin, and tasted it again. Entrancing him with the simple, sensual act. A slow nod of her head confirmed it. Even the seriousness by which she examined the sample of jism, the scholarly approach, aroused him. "...Yes, definitely better than sushi. Probably not nearly as healthy or as filling, though."

That provoked another snort from him, this time in laughter. "Only you would think of that, Hermione! ...I thank you for making me laugh," he added, tugging her close with his left arm for another kiss of her curls. "Pass me my wand, will you? I wish to clean up a little."

Stretching, she fetched his wand and watched as he tapped his groin, muttering the cleansing charm he wanted. Cleaned from chest to knees, Severus tapped her hand next, cleaning that as well, then let her put his wand back on the nightstand. When she was done with that, she cuddled up next to him, tucking her forearm on his chest and pillowing her head on his shoulder and bicep. One knee even daringly crept over the top of his thigh. He liked the feel of her cuddled against him, including the softness of her breasts. And he liked the way she was being particularly careful of applying too much pressure to the purplish-red gash that was his curse-borne scar. But there was something about her relaxed pose that made him wonder if she thought they were done for the night.

They most certainly were not.

He didn't do anything for another minute or two, however. Partly to allow himself time to recover, and partly to lull her senses with some simple, naked physical contact. Virgins, in his admittedly limited and less-than-ideal experience, weren't likely to be very comfortable with their own nudity, let alone anyone else's. He wanted her to be absolutely comfortable with both of them being naked around each other, and being naked a lot. They were married now, after all.

Finally, he spoke, addressing her softly. "...Are you ready for more, my love?"

Her head shifted at the endearment, letting her look up at him. Severus had used it deliberately. He wanted her to know he loved her, and know it as firmly as she knew that down was down and up was up...as assured as the tug of gravity was on a magicless Muggle. That was the only way to protect her, after all...and as he had gradually fallen for her over their year-plus of steady, secret correspondence, it was the truth. Endearments weren't easy for him to use; they came to his lips after so many years of sarcasm and scorn awkwardly, almost unnaturally. But that was out there, in the halls of the school. Not here in the privacy of his own quarters, where he could finally be himself after too many years of being otherwise. Where he could practice all the sweet nothings he wanted, now that he had someone to practice with.

"Yes, love. Beloved," she returned, trying out the endearment on her own. The second version seemed to fit better; at least, his heart skipped a beat, and she didn't seem quite as hesitant in using it as she had the first. Rewarding her with another kiss, Severus scooted away from her just far enough to comfortably twist into his side, and pushed her gently back against the sheets. Starting with her nose, he bathed her face in gentle kisses. Pleased when she returned them, brushing her lips over his own features with a lift of her head, he mated their mouths together. Hands cupping the back of her head, supporting it for her, Severus took his time in devouring those sweet lips, in tasting that savoury tongue.

Not until her hands roamed and tugged restlessly at his shoulders, his arms and chest, did he shift his attention to other parts of her body. Once again, he took his time in bringing her back into the full expanse of her arousal; the only thing he did not do was sup the dew from her nether-regions; that was collecting at the entrance to her femininity for a very specific reason. The scent beguiled and tempted him, but Severus resisted, biting gently at the inner flesh of her thighs, licking her knees, even sucking her toes until she gasped and shuddered and clawed at the bedding.

As Hermione panted, trying to find enough coherency to plead with him to finish the burning need he had imbued in her flesh with each stroke, each caress, he parted her restless legs, settling his hips between her thighs. Though his earlier release had taken much of his original urgency from his blood, Severus found himself enthralled now by her whimpering voice, that bitten lower lip, the way her hands clutched at his skin, at his arms and his chest. She widened her thighs, lifting her knees so that she could rock up into him.

Sucking in his breath against the need to thrust before he was prepared, Severus reached down and caught her chin, stilling her restless movements, encouraging her to look up at him, to focus on him.

"Mione...I would like your permission to do something," he told her as soon as her eyes blinked and cleared.

"Wh-what?" she managed to ask.

Taking a breath, he plunged into his question, speaking calmly, but feeling himself tremble on the inside, cringing from the thought of a rejection, or worse, a bad reaction to his request. "I would like to collect your maiden's blood. Freely given, it is a very potent ingredient, yet difficult to acquire, and...very expensive to purchase."

She laughed.

From the puzzled look that pinched his face, Hermione guessed he hadn't expected her to start chuckling. But she did. That was such a...such a *Severus* thing to think about, in the middle of lovemaking. "You thinking about collecting ingredients during...erm, all of this, is like my researching it...you *do* realize that, don't you?"

Some of his confusion cleared, and his lips twisted slightly in a rueful smile. "I suppose it is amusing, isn't it? It's just that I have the opportunity to collect the most powerful variant, awakened to the power of your sexuality, but...unpenetrated."

"But...I've, erm, penetrated myself, with a finger," she told him, trying not to blush. "For cleaning and, erm, feminine purposes. Hygiene ones. And been examined by a Muggle doctor, down there."

"Self-penetration isn't a problem. But the doctor...male or female?" he asked her, frowning softly.

"Female, of course! As if I could stomach the idea of a male doctor examining me down there!" she snorted.

"Then you are still pure. Medical examinations do not count, nor do the needs of...feminine hygiene. It is penetration with a sexual purpose, or penetration by a male, that would lessen the quality," he lectured her. Then stopped and flushed slightly. "Not that I would think less of you. This is just strictly from a potions perspec..."

Hermione covered his lips with her fingertips. "I know what you're talking about. And...if you think I qualify for your needs, you have my freely given permission to collect as much as you can."

He shifted his head, freeing his mouth. "If I did that, you would likely kill me for inflicting the sheer pain involved. No, I will be gentle, and only collect what occurs from that much effort, and no more."

"...How expensive is virgin's blood?" Hermione asked, curious.

"Very."

"How 'very' is 'very'?" she pressed. "A galleon a dram?"

"A hundred galleons for a single drop is the cheapest I have ever seen...and there is usually a waiting-list to get even that much." The look he gave her was sardonic at best. "Most witches squander their virginity in quick liaisons with untried youths. Or lose them in Dark Magic rituals, of late," he admitted, not quite meeting her eyes, "but a rape negates most of the potency, requiring that large amounts be used, and forceful means used to collect it. I've...been asked to collect such results more than I care to remember."

"I thought you said you've never..."

".../haven't!" he quickly reassured her. "But I had to be close at hand to collect the...results," Severus muttered unhappily, "as the Dark Lord's pet Potions Master."

Lifting her hands to his face, Hermione cupped his cheeks. "You do what you must, and you do it not only to survive, but to help us bring this war closer to a successful end. Your efforts are not in vain, Rus. And this moment is *not* the same as those." Carefully, enunciating her words clearly, Hermione told him, "I give you my freely granted permission to gather as much of my maiden's blood as you can."

"Hermione...the pain involved...numbing agents, whether they are potions or spells, cannot be used in the moment of rending, because they taint the quality of the ingredient," he warned her. "I cannot collect it painlessly, thus I must collect it gently, and gently is not the same thing as thoroughly!"

"I'm not an idiot; I knew that even doing it the regular way, for regular reasons, it would hurt," Hermione pointed out, giving him a borderline exasperated look. "I even know it will continue to hurt for the first few times afterwards! But all those other times we can use spells or potions or whatever. This one time...I'm telling you that I trust you completely. That I'm giving you my virginity and my virginal blood absolutely freely, as much as you can gather and not actually kill me," she tried to tease. The anguish shadowing his eyes made her humor fall flat. Caressing the cheeks in her hand, Hermione met his gaze steadily. "You can always heal me afterwards, once you've collected what you can. In the meantime, I'm prepared for pain and discomfort. You've given me a level of pleasure I didn't know I could feel, for my wedding-gift. Let this be my gift to you, in return. Take my virgin's blood, Severus."

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...*Author's Whinge: I want my very own Snape, replete with Snape Instruction Manual!!*

## Chapter Eight

### Chapter 9 of 10

The progression of a relationship, the regression of an allegiance, and a flipping-the-bird toward the Baddest Boy of all...

VIII.

...

Thrice given. Severus bowed his head, closing his eyes. He couldn't refuse a permission that was thrice-given. Well, he could...but he wasn't going to turn her offer down. Shifting off of her, Severus uncorked the bottle, readying it for collection, then picked up his wand. He wasn't going to turn her down, but still... "Are you absolutely sure you want me to collect the most I physically can?"

"Yes. Well...the most you can stomach to collect. And being mindful that I know where you sleep at night," Hermione added, a trace of nervousness in her voice.

Leaning over her, Severus braced his weight with his wand hand, and cupped her cheek with the other. "In the same bed as you, Mione." His fingers slid to her forehead, caressing a few stray curls from her brow. "Every night, in the same bed as you." He started to shift his weight again and paused, meeting her gaze. "Don't look down. For both our sakes."

Hermione gave him a puzzled look, but flicked her eyes upward as he shifted again, choosing to stare at the canopy. Severus drew a bracing breath and cast the necessary charm. He'd never used it on himself, but he'd seen it used on those Death Eaters selected for this sort of moment; unwilling virgin's blood wasn't very potent, so it was necessary to gather a lot in order to get the same effect as a few drops of the other kind. Harvesting a lot of blood meant rending the maidenhead brutally, and the best way to do that was with a specific shape...and an increase in size. The Transfiguration hurt a little, tingling from glans to scrotum, but the pain didn't last long. Glancing down at the changes unnerved himself; Severus could only worry about how she would react if she saw the alterations, too.

Grasping himself, he settled the tip against the bubble of liquid, and spoke the second half of the charm, lubricating his shaft as he rested against the opening beyond the spreading dew. Repositioning his hand, Severus gently stroked her clitoris, bracing his weight with his other hand. The angle wasn't perfect, yet. "Lift your legs," he directed her. "Wrap them around my waist."

She complied, cupping her hands around his shoulders as she squirmed a little, getting comfortable. "Is this right?"

Severus nodded. He was at the right angle, now. All he had to do was stroke her back up into another orgasm. Staring into her eyes, he watched her as his thumb circled and stroked, petting the bundle of feminine nerves. She wriggled, moaning softly.

"That feels good... More...faster...yes, like that!"



"Good; feel your arousal. Ride it...yesss," he hissed as her breath hitched, her body shuddering and her eyes rolling shut in pleasure. "Perfect. Now, take three slow, deep breaths..."

Inhaling, she held it, then exhaled a controlled stream of air. It quickly became a moan as he rubbed her rapidly, keeping the mild but still intoxicating pleasure going. A second inhale, and he nodded slightly to encourage her...and thrust while she was still exhaling. The rest of her breath escaped in a hoarse shout. She choked, trying to gasp for air, fingers digging bruisingly hard into his shoulders. Her thighs clenched on his waist, trying to hold him in place. His positioning was too good, and when she drew in another breath through clenched teeth, Severus thrust a second, deeper time. Hermione yelled and grabbed his hair, yanking on it painfully.

"...Dammit! That *hurt!*" she swore, tugging sharply on his hair as he shifted his weight to thrust once more.

"A third time, and we'll be done...breathe, Hermione; keep breathing deeply," he ordered her, bracing himself for the final thrust. "You promised I could collect as much as I could."

The scowl on her face warned him he was going to pay for this moment, but she breathed deeply. He gave her four deep breaths before thrusting a third time, rending her flesh to the hilt. She screamed and yanked his head painfully back. Freeing a hand, he aimed it blindly in the direction of the nightstand, and just managed to grasp his wand.

"*Accio bottle!*" The vial, placed beyond his reach, smacked into his palm. Catching it, he worked it down between their bodies. He'd done this part too often to need a wand. "*Collegium!*"

Magic tickled around their nether regions. Pulling carefully out, feeling fresh liquid trickling and swirling into the vial, Severus waited until he felt nothing more, then thumbed the wire-sprung cork into place, activating the stasis spell cast on the bottle to keep its contents permanently fresh. Now that the painful part was over, he could disenchant his flesh, and soothe her own with the pomade on the bedside table. It helped that she'd finally released his hair, allowing him to lower his head back to a comfortable position.

"*Finite incantatem,*" he murmured, tapping his penis so that it returned to its normal size and proportions. "*Accio jar.*"

Hermione flinched away from him when he opened the jar, smeared something mint-green on his fingers, and reached down between her legs. "Please...don't hurt me anymore!"

That made him flinch, inside. "Shh, shh, this is a healing salve, Mione. It will numb and repair all of the damage. I promise, I will never hurt you like this again. *Never.*"

"You'd *better* not," she muttered, resentment colouring her voice. Her breath hissed through her teeth as he smeared the salve as gently as he could on her abused flesh. "In fact, you'd better just get off me. I don't want to do thi..."

Severus leaned down and covered her mouth with his own, cutting off her words before she could complete that statement. He'd done as she'd told him to do; he'd be damned before she took this moment to her grave as the only memory worth keeping of her first time in his bed. He'd certainly be damned before he'd let her discomfort become resentment and reluctance to ever be in his bed again. Awkwardly scooping more of the salve with his fingers, he worked it into every fold of her flesh he could reach, avoiding only the peak of her clitoris. If he numbed that, he'd have a hard time arousing her again for a while. A third scoop of the cream, and he slathered it over his own flesh. Blessed numbness took most of the edge off his arousal; he had a long way to go to restore her trust in his ability to pleasure her, before he could sate his own needs.

Abandoning her nether regions as the cream absorbed into their flesh, Severus wiped his numbed fingers on the sheets, then used that hand to brace himself over her as he continued to kiss her. She responded only hesitantly, but he kept his kisses gentle; he wasn't going to demand a response until the last of her reluctance had faded from memory. Freeing his left hand, he feathered it over her shoulder and arm, stroking her gently to re-stimulate her desire. He left her mouth after a few more minutes, kissing his way to the corners of her eyes and the damp, salty tracks of her tears.

Trailing his fingers all the way down to her wrist, he lifted her hand to his mouth and sucked on her fingers, making her breath hitch...in pleasure, thankfully, not in pain. It was going to take time and patience to restore her trust in him as a lover, but it was going to work. Time, he had. Patience, he had. Neither in infinite quantity, but there was time and patience enough to restore her trust in him.

Indeed, by the time the numbness left his fingers, she was panting and writhing under the touch of his mouth and hands. Her knees splayed and twitched like the restless wings of a butterfly as he licked the insides of her knees, her breaths turning to gasps as he nibbled on her ankles, her voice rising in moans and her fingers digging into the bedding with need as he suckled her toes. Hips twisting restlessly, she seemed ripe for plucking, but Severus had to be absolutely sure. With the numbness finally gone from his flesh, his own need was acute. Releasing her toes, Severus gave them one last lick, then asked,

"What do you want, Hermione? What do you want me to do?"

"I... I need... I need *something*...something...need...oh, god, Rus, I need you!" she moaned as he licked along the seam of her curling, scrunching, splaying toes.

Lust enflamed his nerves at her passionate demand, but it was a mixture of relief and love that burned in its wake, stronger than mere desire. Settling his body over hers, he closed his eyes in relief as she wrapped her arms and legs willingly around his torso. Hermione dragged his head down to hers, lifting her own so she could pepper his face with hungry, unpolished kisses. It took only a moment to find the right spot, and a moment more to catch her lips with his own, and a breath to sink gently into her body; his breath escaped him even as hers sucked sharply in a last moment of tense apprehension. A moment later, a sigh of pleasure passed from her mouth to his as her body relaxed painlessly into the invasion.

It didn't hurt her. Well, there was a stretching sensation with the first gentle thrust, but compared to earlier, it didn't hurt at all. And when he withdrew and plunged slowly back in again, the rubbing excited nerves Hermione hadn't known existed in there. His mouth left hers, his dark hair brushing her face as he dipped his lips to one ear.

"I promised you," he whispered to her, "I would never hurt you like that again. I will keep my promises to you, my Mione...my own...my *wife*." Each possessive phrase was accompanied by another delving of his flesh into hers. The velvet of his voice wrapped around her senses as he increased the pace and power of his thrusts. "I will bring you every pleasure a man can give to his woman, lift you to such orgasmic heights and plunge you into the sensual depths you have only dreamt about, drown with you in bliss and soar with you in ecstasy. I will give you all of my love, for all of your life, for I will be your salvation...I love you...I love you...*I love you*..."

Her body arched off the bed, wracked with a tight, shuddering pleasure triggered as much by the force of his words as the force of his flesh. Feeling her fingers digging into the muscles of his back, Severus broke from the slower, steady strokes into a rapid pounding, letting himself go. She had found her pleasure in copulation; now it was finally time to seek his own.

Seeking his own pleasure prolonged hers. Hermione clung to him, overwrought with sensations as he plundered her body. His name...his nickname...escaped her throat, half-strangled with the urge to yell. "Rus...Rus Rus Rus...*god! Oh, God! RUS!*"

"...Mione!" he grunted, stiffening as his own climax pulsed out of his body and poured into hers. Collapsing on her, hips still thrusting somewhat erratically, he clutched her to him, burying his face in the curve of her throat. "Love...love..."

"Oh god," Hermione sniffed, not knowing when her tears had started, just that they damped her eyes. She held him tightly. "I love you, Severus..."

He spasmed at her confession, grunting with the aftershock of pleasure it incited. Dragging his mouth up to hers, he kissed her for a long moment, then reluctantly pulled back. Brushing a few wisps of curls back from her face, he looked down at her. She lifted her own fingers, brushing at the liquid streaking his skin. Thankfully she said

nothing about the source of that salty moisture, just cupped and caressed his face.

"...That was beautiful," she finally sighed. Then wrinkled her nose. "But...I think I'm lying on your wand, and it's digging into my ribs. And my ring-necklace is trying to choke me, because it's caught behind my shoulder..."

Severus kissed the tip of her nose, shifting to move off of her. She kissed him back on his own nose, then helped him off, blushing as his softened shaft slipped free of her body. They found the jar and its lid, some of the mint green contents smeared on the sheets, and the vial of maiden's blood. Hermione paled as she picked it out of the tangled bedding, staring at the quarter-cup or more of deep red liquid it contained. Taking the vial before it could fall from her hand, Severus caught her trembling fingers, bringing them up to his mouth for a kiss. "Never again, Hermione. You were very brave, but it will never hurt like that again. I promise."

She blinked, blinked again, then frowned at him. "...Don't be ridiculous, Severus. It will hurt far worse than that whenever I get around to having children. Mind you, I don't want any for at least a few years. I do want some, but I'm not in a ravening hurry to be a mum. Erm...if *you* don't mind having some in the future, that is..."

Knowing he had paled a little himself at the thought of children...him, having children of his own...Severus swallowed his fears. "...I'm certain you will be a good mother. And I hope you'll show me how to be a good father, too. But you're right; we cannot indulge in such things right now. Not while I'm still a spy, and certainly not while you're still in school!"

Nodding, she handed him the vial. "Here's the blood. What are you going to use it for?"

"It's yours, actually. You'll be a very wealthy woman, if you choose to sell all of it," he reminded her. A wry hint of a smile twisted his mouth. "You suffered for it, so you should profit from it."

"How long will the stasis charm last?" Hermione enquired.

"Ten years."

"Then we'll sell some of it and keep the rest, in case we have a need for it later. But...but not right now," she amended, hastily lifting a hand to smother a yawn. "Erm...I'm sorry, but I'm kind of tired. You, ah, wore me out, just now."

Severus couldn't help the smugness that curved his lips into a smile. "Pleasantly, I trust?"

"I'd almost think you didn't need a ruddy instruction manual, on what to do with your own 'Granger-Snape'," she retorted humorously. "But I'll write you one anyway."

"So, what will it say at the top of the list?" Severus asked her, flicking his wand to clean the sheets before twisting and putting it, the bottle and the jar back on the nightstand.

"Oh...hug your Granger-Snape lots, 'cause she's a very huggy person," she offered slyly, pulling the blankets up from the foot of the bed. He caught her in his arms, dragging her down on top of him, embracing her.

"Like this?"

Hermione checked to make sure she was lying on his pockmarked side, not the side with the painful, purple scar. "Mm, it's a start. And kiss your Granger-Snape, anywhere you like, though on the lips and the hands are always good places to start."

"And may I caress my very own Granger-Snape?" Severus offered, suiting actions to words.

She shivered. "Try keeping your Granger-Snape warm in a cold dungeon bedroom. The fire's died down since we started."

A stretch for his wand, a flick of his wrist, and the bedroom warmed. Another flick drew the blankets up to their shoulders. "Done." He paused as she yawned again, then asked, "And if my Granger-Snape is tired?"

"Mmm," she signed, snuggling up against him. "Definitely tuck your Granger-Snape into a nice, soft bed, and murmur in that sexy voice of yours until she falls asleep. In your arms, by preference."

"Every night," Severus promised her. He glanced at the clock by his bed, debating, then stretched and activated it.

"...You're turning on your alarm?" Hermione asked him as soon as she realized what he was doing. "But, it's Sunday, tomorrow."

"I rise and exercise every morning. It keeps my reflexes sharp and my body fit enough to survive." Severus hesitated, then picked up the clock and turned the alarm back by forty-five minutes. "But I'm willing to wake up a little earlier to make love to you first thing. It will make for a very pleasant warm-up activity."

She gave him a skeptical look. The effect was somewhat ruined when he extinguished the candles around them. "Are you going to expect me to get up and exercise with you?"

"It is a good idea. I've found being physically fit allows me to survive punishments and perils more readily than if I were flabby. But you can go back to sleep after we make love in the morning, if you'd rather," he promised, lying back down and gathering her close in the dark. "Now, settled down. We both need our rest, my love."

"Goodnight, Rus." She paused a moment in thought, then squeezed him gently, adding, "I do love you."

"I'm glad you do. More than glad," he amended, squeezing her back, "but I can't think of a word that's strong enough for it. Just...please remember that I love you, even when I'm back to playing the role of the sour, ill-tempered bastard that was all you used to know. Because I will, with no outward deviations from before. And *don't* try to show any love towards me when we're out and about in the rest of the school. I'm afraid you'll have to become as good an actor as I've learned to be. I should probably even give you lessons in Occlumency, just to be on the safe side...though I wish you'd promise to stay out of trouble. I don't want anything to happen to you, and that would simplify the matter."

"Asking a Gryffindor to stay out of trouble is like asking Hagrid to not breed any new creatures," Hermione muttered teasingly. "I'll be as careful as I can; that's all I can promise. After all, I'm a married woman, now. I've got a husband and future children...to think about," she retorted, pausing for another yawn. "Can't leave you a widower, or them without a mum..."

"Go to sleep, my Mione."

"G'night, my Rus."

...

*\* Mione, brace yourself, love. I'm about to be cruel to you. I wish I didn't have to be, but I do, and you're not going to like it. Please do not take this personally. \**

Hermione blinked at the words flaming across her vision. She tucked her hand under the surface of her desk on this, her first day in his class as a secretly married woman, and snapped her own stylus into her hand. Bringing it up, she scribbled on her notes, *\*Rus...I understand, and I won't. Or at least I'll try not to. \**

*\*Good.\** Professor Snape rose from his desk and started strolling between the desks. He made half a circuit of the room before stopping at Hermione's desk. "Miss

Granger, are you aware that the potion calls for *finely* grated arimanth root?"

She glanced reflexively at her textbook. "It doesn't say that in the instructions, Professor."

"If you had all day to dissolve the ingredients, then yes, it wouldn't matter. Five points from Gryffindor for wasting class-time, and start again...and another five deducted for such profligate waste of costly ingredients!"

*That was over the top. She waited until he moved on before snapping out the stylus again. \*Rus, you bastard! Arimanth root is one of the cheapest ingredients available at this school. Professor Sprout grows them in Greenhouse Seven, and sells the excess down in Hogsmeade by the tonne!\**

He didn't reply until he returned to his desk. It took a few moments before he scratched a reply, hitting the two-way symbol she'd explained over the last of the weekend, in her lecture about the Muggle Internet and Instant Messaging. *\*Mione, I told you, you wouldn't like it. And to not take it personally. Professor Severus Snape is a capricious, bigoted bastard who is willing to stoop to find any reason he can to belittle a Gryffindor and slap down a know-it-all. Now hurry up with re-grating your roots; you haven't got all period to perfect the brew... Forgive me?\**

*\*Are you going to be nice when I come down to you?\**

*\*I'll make it up to you.\**

*\*Good. Because otherwise I'd have to short-sheet your bed...and that would make it awkward for me when I climb into it.\**

*\*Do not make me laugh while I'm trying to be a bastard, my love. It would be a terrible breach-of-character.\** He punctuated the words by lifting his head from his writing to give her a brief, black scowl that would've unsettled her in an earlier year. Now she knew it was merely superb acting.

*\*Sorry.\**

*\*You can make it up to me tonight. Now, get to work.\**

...

Hermione glanced up at the ceiling, sighed heavily, and stepped out of the bathroom, knotting her dressing gown around her waist. "I swear, one of these days you're going to leave visible footprints, Severus."

"Who...would...notice?" he grunted between stomach-crunches, black locks flying as he stood inverted on the ceiling, twisting and bending at the waist and knees.

"The house-elves might. And if you give them more work to do..."

"...Please!" Severus snorted, which came out a bit oddly because of his upside-down position. He relaxed his exercises, letting his arms dangle below his head. "I've never known a house-elf to clean a ceiling, unless Peeves was caught writing naughty words on the plaster by one of them. Are you sure you won't join me this morning?"

"I wish I could, but I promised Ginny I'd help her cram before breakfast for her Charms test." Kissing her fingers, she reached up and touched the back of his hand, wobbling on her toes a little. He smiled down at her, and she smiled in return. "I love you, very, very much. Certainly more than the inconvenience of cleaning footprints off our ceilings for the rest of my life."

"I love you more ways than there are stars that swirl in the sky." He paused, then added with a flash of a grin, "Or maybe that's just because of all the blood rushing to my head...no, I definitely love you at least that much."

She sighed extravagantly. "You're making it very hard for me to compose myself back into Miss Granger, Head Girl and snarking-target of the Potions Master."

"If you joined me up here, we could make love upside-down," Severus coaxed, holding on to her fingers.

Hermione gave him a dubious look. After three months of secretive marriage, he could still surprise her. "That's *not* in your Granger-Snape's manual. You know how I feel about heights."

He snorted again. "It's not even fifteen feet, counting up at the ceiling! I could *make* you forget your fear of heights, you know."

"It wouldn't stop there, though," she pointed out, unwinding the towel from her hair and rubbing her curls. "First lovemaking while upside-down on the ceiling in our bedroom. Then maybe sneaking a snog up above the illusion on the ceiling of the Great Hall...and for an encore...on a *broom*, over the Quidditch pitch," she mock-shuddered. "Even if our toes are only five inches off the ground, the thought doesn't appeal to me."

"Well, we can always start smaller, like halfway up a wall," he mocked.

"I'm terrified the Wall Crawl Charm will come unglued halfway through."

Walking over to the side wall, Severus stepped across the corner, angling his body sideways. He strode along the wall to the bathroom door, stooped...relative to the wall...and opened it, then stepped carefully onto the broad stone lintel. "Come over here, my love."

Hermione shook her head, but not to negate his soft command. Rather, it was to dispel the dizzying view of him standing upside-down in the doorway. Tossing the towel at the hamper, she padded over to the doorway. "Yes?"

"Closer, please."

Stepping up to him, she squeaked when he wrapped his hands around the backs of her thighs and tugged her close enough to brush up against him. Reaching up, or down, whichever perspective it was, he unknotted her sash and parted the folds of the dressing gown, then grasped her thighs and tucked his head between them. His lips nuzzled her nether regions, making her suck in a heated, shuddering breath. Fumbling with the waistband of his boxers, she freed his semi-erect shaft, reciprocating lick for lick without hesitation.

It didn't take long for him to growl, push her away, and scramble upright, feet planted firmly on the floor. A mutter to cancel the charm, and he grabbed her again, this time whirling her towards the wall by the doorway, hitching her into his arms, her legs wrapping around his waist and her arms around his shoulders. She sank onto him as he pressed her back against the wall. He grabbed some of her damp hair, pulling her head back so he could suck gently on her throat; any telltale marks would fade before she went back to her student quarters...

*Knock knock knock.*

"Bugger!" Severus snarled. Hermione's head dropped onto his shoulder for a moment in frustration. She untangled her legs from his waist as the sound of someone knocking on her bedroom door floated through the enchanted mirror in the corner of the bedroom. He slipped out of her, helping her to stand. "I'm going to take twenty points off your House, because whoever-it-is has horrific timing!"

"It's probably Ginny. And you're not taking House-points off," Hermione countered calmly, restoring the knotted state of her dressing gown. "Because her unfortunate sense of timing is going to put both of us into a suitably cranky mood. You'll get to be surly and snarly, and not have to act nearly so hard as you've had to try, of late. You *should* be grateful for this interruption."

He eyed her skeptically, then grunted. "Alright, you may have a point. Ten points from Gryffindor, for the untimely interruption."

"...Oh!" she gasped, mock-outraged. "Bastard!"

He slapped her lightly on the backside, turning her towards the mirror. "Go back to your quarters, wife, before your friend bashes down your door."

It wasn't until she had already stepped through the enchanted frame that he realized *which* bathrobe she was wearing. Not hers. His. Green velvet, with a silver snake-S stitched over the breast. "Shite! Mione!"

It was too late. He hurried to the mirror, activating its one-way scrying ability. He watched her open the door, letting the redheaded younger girl inside. Their voices drifted through the mirror as he listened tensely.

"What took you so long?" Ginny asked Hermione as the older witch closed her door again.

"I was in the bathroom. Just got out of the shower," Hermione added, gesturing at her damp hair.

Ginny's gaze swept over her hair...and paused at her shoulders. "Hermione...that's not your bathrobe. That's...that's a *Slytherin's* robe! Where did you get...oh, sweet Merlin! You've got a ruddy hickey on your neck!"

Her hand clamped over her neck as her face attempted to flood with an embarrassed blush and drain in bloodless shock. Skin patchy, Hermione hurried over to the mirror, peering at her reflection as Severus stared out at her, unseen from her side of the twinned mirrors. Peeling her hand away, she stared at the fading but still reddish spot low on the side of her neck. "*Oh.*"

"Don't 'oh' me! Just please tell me you're not snogging Malfoy!" Ginny begged her.

That restored Hermione's equilibrium with a snort. "...As if! The Platinum Prat's about as attractive to me as Fang on a bad drool day. No...um, well, you've found me out. I'm seeing someone. Behind Ron and Harry's backs, because they'd hit the roof, so you'd better on your honor not breathe a single word of this to them, or they'd fly off the handle and try to beat the poor fellow to a pulp."

"You've got that right...you're dating a Slytherin! I thought you had more pride and class than that, Hermione!" Ginny protested, making Severus bristle a little. Not that he could fault her attitude, given the rivalry between the two Houses.

"I am not dating a Slytherin," Hermione lied without flinching. Not that it was much of a lie; she was married to one, which wasn't the same thing as dating, at all. She turned away from the mirror, and smirked at Ginny. "I felt a bit rebellious last night, so I nicked the robe. It's...er, it's Professor Snape's, actually."

Ginny's mouth fell open, her hazel eyes widening almost to the point of bulging. "You...*stole*...and are wearing...?"

Hermione grinned. "Yep! Stole it right out of the laundry! I'm giving it all the girl-cooties I can, before returning it to the clean-laundry baskets. The next time he snarks at me in class, I'm just going to sit there with this beatific smile on my face, as I imagine him wearing the bathrobe I've contaminated with my girlishness...and I wish I'd paid more attention to Lavender's beauty-journals, because I wish I knew a few delayed-action charms to put on this thing. He was so mean and horrid to me last week, I'd love to see him enchanted into hair-curlers and mascara. Or maybe an involuntary leg-waxing."

Torn between gaping in shock, shuddering in horror, and laughing in mirth, Ginny choked behind a hastily raised hand. "Thank Merlin I'm not on your 'bad' list! Since when did you start rebelling, anyway?"

"Round about the Christmas hols, actually."

"Uh-huh." Ginny sank down in the chair at Hermione's desk. "And just how far have you rebelled? Aside from nicking Professor Snape's own dressing gown from the school's laundry room?"

"I lost my virginity before the end of the year. Quite thoroughly, I might add," Hermione confessed airily. Silently watching, Severus wanted to caution her to not overdo it, but he couldn't do a thing to warn her without alerting Ginny to his presence. The Head Girl shrugged and sat on the edge of her bed. "I'm just more discreet about it than everyone else. And more discriminating."

"Discriminating?" Ginny countered. "With whom?"

"None of your business. You might as well set up your books and notes on my desk while I get dressed," Hermione directed her younger friend. "Because the subject is closed...and if you ever open it with either of the boys...or anyone else, for that matter...I'll never help you study for another test, ever again."

"Hmm. On the one hand, I'm dying of curiosity to know...but on the other hand...I really don't want to know that badly. So," Ginny changed the subject briskly, "What do you remember of the Conflagration Charm? 'Cause I'm having trouble with that one..."

Hermione allowed herself to relax only on the inside. Externally, she affected a thoughtful pose, casting her mind over the Charm in question. On the other side of the mirror, Severus dropped his head for a moment, sighing in relief at her quick-witted save. They'd been so careful over the last three months; this was the first time they'd nearly been caught. Not allowing himself any more time to relax, Severus re-encharmed himself and climbed back up the wall to resume his exercises. The aftereffects of unrequited lust and nearly being found-out would make him suitably surly, this morning, but his exercises could not wait. They were now into the danger-zone of spring. Sometime soon, the Dark Lord would attack, attempt to cast the Cuorum Curse, and two prophecies would be fulfilled, one way or another.

They needed to be ready.

...

She was wearing the earrings he'd given her for Christmas. Crescent man-in-the-moon earrings, but with one difference; each crescent-face was being straddled by the naked figure of a woman, rendered in tiny, exquisitely erotic detail, for the womanly figure straddled the moon-man's mouth. Riding it in permanently frozen, metallic ecstasy. *Minx.*

"Miss Granger."

She jumped a little, not expecting him to be right behind her, peering over her shoulder at her work. "Er...yes, Professor?"

"Your latest extra-credit project was sloppy. You will come back down here and write a better draft during the lunch hour. Ten points from Gryffindor for atrocious grammar, too."

"...Yes, sir." She bent her head over her cauldron, slicing and grating, while Severus circulated among the handful of other students in his Advanced class. Only when he returned to his desk to check over his notes while the various potions simmered did she make her move. Snapping her fingers softly, she summoned her stylus, wrote out his name, and tapped the two-way image. \* *What's up? You praised the last article I submitted for you approval. What's wrong with it?* \*

*"Nothing,"* he wrote back, using his own stylus. *"I just saw your choice in earrings, and felt the urge to show you how much I love you. But if anyone else notices them, someone might tattle on you as to their inappropriateness. That's why I took off the ten points."*

*"You're the one who gave them to me...and you're the one who keeps inspiring me with your expertise in that arena. Thank god you took down the portraits in here,"* she wrote back, adding a sketch of a smiley-face with its tongue sticking out wryly. *"Because as soon as lunch begins, I'm going to jump all over you."*

His reply was a sketch she wished she could save, yet was grateful no one else could see, for all it was barely above stick-figure quality. It wasn't pornographic; it was simply two stick figures holding each other. *"...I need something to cheer me up, my love. Hannah Beltingway is in my after-lunch class, Double Potions no less, and I swear she's trying to give Longbottom a run for the budget on Most Cauldrons Melted In A Month. We don't have to make love; I mainly want to hold you. A half-hour's peace, stolen from the rest of the world by simply burying myself in your arms...that would be heaven. Everything is so stressful these days. I keep fearing the next time I'm Summoned will be IT."*

She knew what he meant by the capitalization. *"Same here. To hold or to snog, I'll be here...whups, got to add the sliced liver!"*

...

This was it. Palms sweating, Hermione faced the Death Eaters, cloaked and masked in black and silver, bold enough to be in the streets of Hogsmeade itself. Granted, it wasn't in the bright light of day, but late evening was bad enough. Order members and Aurors, grim-faced and determined, versus masked ranks of Death Eaters...and the one maskless bastard in their midst. It would've been less intimidating if he'd been masked; that serpentine-influenced face was the ugliest thing Hermione had ever seen. She wished inanely she could wipe the sweat from her hand, but didn't dare let her wand waver. She wished Albus Dumbledore could be with them, to offset Lord Voldemort's powers, but he'd been lured out of the area by what appeared now to be merely a diversionary tactic, a spurious assault on the Minister of Magic's mansion.

One of the Death Eaters moved. Or rather, removed, prying the metallic mask from his face. A longish nose, shy of being a cassowary's beak, and strands of black hair a bit too soft, if oily, to be century-plant fibers came into view. Voldemort, drawing breath to speak, whipped his head to the side.

"...What are you doing, Snape?" he hissed instead. "You're here to attack, not to reveal yourself!"

Cradling the mask in his dragonhide-gloved hands, Severus met Hermione's gaze. They both knew this was IT. The N.E.W.T.s were only two days away; the probability that both prophecies would come true tonight was too high to ignore. "You're right. I *am* here to attack. *Disspeculumbustio!*"

Every single mirror-polished mask in sight flared white-hot, literally. Screams erupted as the Death Eaters wearing them scrambled frantically to pry the burning metal from their searing flesh, as the mirror-mask in Severus' hands smouldered brightly against his heat-resistant gloves. Bodies dropped around him, decimating the Death Eaters' ranks with a single spell.

"Snape! How dare you turn traitor on me now!"

"I've always *been* a traitor," Severus sneered as he moved just enough to visibly align himself with the other side. "I fight for Light and Love, not for your Darkness and Hate!"

"...Love? *Love?*! You betray me for *LOVE?!?*" Ignoring the screams of his followers, Voldemort's face scrunched with betrayal and rage, until he snapped out his wand. *"Mortuavivvizi cuorum!"*

The spell, a wailing, wraith-like bolt of blackness not unlike a misty version of a Dementor's tattered robes, struck Severus in the chest, making him stagger back. It hooked and grabbed something brilliant and golden, dragging it out of his chest with a roaring sound, sucking it up like a vacuum-cleaner...but something else streamed in from the side. A matching golden fire, roaring out from Hermione's own chest. She stumbled to the ex-Death Eater's side, wrapping her arms around her husband of six months and increasing the golden fire tenfold as he clutched at her in return...but her gaze was on her best friend. She shouted through the cacophony of screaming Death Eaters and battling magics.

"...Get him, Harry! Break the bastard, and break his spell!"

Harry blinked, shook off his daze, and switched his attention to Voldemort, who was scowling and trying to increase the power of his emotion-eating spell. Harry scowled, too, letting his own anger show, and flung out his arm, shouting something. The words of his spell were lost in the noise, as was the colour of the light that flashed from his wand. It did not even touch Voldemort, however; instead, it struck the point where golden flame met blackened mist...and the mist wrenched itself free, doubling back as the fire abruptly died, no longer being drawn out of either of their chests. As quick as a necromantic cobra, the mist-thing struck its caster instead.

For a moment, a brief flash of golden light puffed out of his chest, then other hues streamed into that ravenous maw, flashes of pink and pale blue, mint green and peach. Voldemort screamed, a high-pitched agony, and dropped to the ground as the colours darkened out of the bright and pastel ranges, roaring and squealing and shrieking into darker reds and deeper greens, livid oranges and vivid blues as the black thing spread over his body, shrouding it from the feet upwards. More and more of the black mist started to envelope the Dark Lord's body. As it did so, it creepily silenced the screaming and the roaring, allowing the others to hear the whimpering of his badly-burned followers.

"We...we have to stop this," someone muttered from among the Aurors as the hues turned to indigo, eggplant, burnt umber and charcoal. The darker colours were taking far longer to come out, testament to the emotional mess that was the Dark Lord's soul. "He has to stand trial..."

Panting heavily, Severus flung out his hands, stopping the others before they could make up their minds on the matter. "...Do *not* interfere! This curse is irreversible, for him. If you try to stop the spell now, you will create a soulless monster far more dangerous than the Dark Lord ever was, a killing machine with no conscience and no remorse. Unlike myself, Riddle has no one to apply the countercharm to this particular foul curse.

"There is no other way to stop the process...other than death, one way or another. Trust me, I've seen the twisted, foul results when it was interrupted without a countercharm like the one that has saved me. This is the only way to save us all from his madness."

Even as he spoke, the mist shrieked and *popped*, vanishing. Leaving behind a twisted corpse frozen mid-writhe, agony etched in every line of what used to be Tom Riddle's face. It was over. Lord Voldemort was dead, and his followers were in too much pain to resist as the Aurors and Order members broke ranks, swarming forward to bind their helpless, whimpering, blistered captives.

"...This was *that* curse, wasn't it?" Harry demanded, glancing at Hermione, who still stood at the Potions Master's side, arms still wrapped around his waist, supporting him. "The one prophesied in my godfather's diary that was supposed to kill you...but it was supposed to strike *you*, not *him*!"

Hermione eased her grip, abruptly aware of how tightly she was holding her husband on his left, purple-scarred side. She gave Harry an impatient look. "Regardless of who it struck, Harry, *you* turned it back against him. Voldemort killed himself, because of it; if he hadn't cast it on someone, we'd all still be fighting him, and some of us would be dead. The important thing is that *Voldemort* is dead, irrevocably, irreversibly *dead*, and most of his followers are captured. The war is over!"

"The war is over..." Severus echoed. Strangely enough, despite the fact that this moment had been his greatest goal for a very long time, only now was it sinking in that they'd actually won. More than that, that he was still alive, as was the witch at his side. Turning, he clutched her to him. "The war is over...the war is *over*!" The words escaped him in a shout that quickly became a laugh as he lifted her up and twirled both of them around, grinning madly. Stopping, he set her down, cupped her face, and grinned at his beaming, laughing, crying wife, heedless of his own tears of relief. "The war is *over*..."

Pulling her face to his, Severus met her parted lips in a heated kiss, uncaring of where they were or who was watching. All he could think was that the war was over, and so was his spying days. His surly days. His bastardish days. He was finally free to be the real Severus Snape...which his beautiful, beloved young wife had helped him to rediscover.

"Oy! What're you doing?" Ron demanded, grabbing his arm and prying it from her face. "You can't kiss her!"

Annoyed that he'd lost his head and given this last deception away, Severus wrapped his other arm around Hermione, keeping her firmly at his side. As much of a headache as it would be to reveal the truth, there really was no more point to keeping it hidden. "On the contrary, you overgrown, freckled troglodyte, I can kiss her all I bloody want!"

"She's your student!" Ron protested.

"I'm also his *wife*," Hermione retorted, "And I'll kiss him back, if I like! You celebrate in your own way, Ron, and we'll celebrate in ours."

The youngest male Weasley wasn't the only one around them who gaped and staggered back a step. "You're...you're..."

"...You're *married*?" Harry managed to ask through his shock.

"Since before Christmastide. And before you ask, the Headmaster has been grading her work...*and* he personally approved of the marriage," Severus added, grateful for Hermione's support as she stayed snuggled firmly against his side. "It was all a part of the counter-spell to the Cuorum Curse. But even though it hit me instead of her as prophesied, the curse was still thwarted, thanks to the nature of the countercharm." He paused, then added snarkily, "Sorry to disappoint you for still living, Potter, but...ow!"

Hermione released the scarred flesh she'd pinched through his robes. "Be nice, Severus. The boys have just had a bad shock. There will be plenty of time for explanations later."

"First thing I'm doing is taking that ruddy scar-healing potion," Severus muttered under his breath. A thought crossed his mind. "And the second thing I'll have to do is see Albus about a certain pendant, and a change of wardrobe and voice."

"For what?" Hermione asked him as the others left them alone for a moment, needing to deal with the aftermath of the brief but decisive conflict.

"For going back, and giving Black the prophecy he wrote down, the one that started all of this." An unhappy frown pinched his brow. "Unfortunately, this means I'll have to be parted from you for nearly two years, waiting to catch up with the correct course of time."

"Excuse me? We're *both* going back," Hermione countered firmly, poking him in the side, "as soon as my N.E.W.T.s are through and I've left the school. You and I going to have a two-year honeymoon somewhere warm and tropical, far from England. Once you've delivered the warning, that is."

"I don't have enough in my vaults at Gringotts to pay for a two-year sabbatical, Mione," he pointed out.

"So we'll become apothecarists!" she retorted. "Besides, I heard it was lovely down in Pago Pago these last two years, with no storms to worry about, and a nice crop of plantains last year."

"I am not going anywhere that I have to wear a lavilavi over my robes," Severus protested. "I'd rather go to the Bahamas."

"Who said you'd be wearing robes?" she teased him. "It's the tropics, after all."

"...Urgh! Would the two of you just shut up?!" Ron exclaimed. "Bad enough I have to smell all this burnt flesh, but to listen to the two of you carrying on like a pair of...of *lovebirds*...!"

"What, jealous, Weas!...ow!! Dammit, stop doing that, woman!" he ordered as she again pinched his side. "I can still take House-points from you, at least for a few more days!"

"Make me!" she retorted fearlessly.

Ron and Harry weren't the only pale, unsettled faces turning away as he silenced her with a kiss. Neither of the Granger-Snapes cared. The war was over. Voldemort was dead, and the side of Light had triumphed. The one weapon the Dark Lord did not have in his arsenal, the one defense that could have saved him, the one thing he had disdained and discarded for all of his life...love...had instead defeated all of his schemes.

It was a very good day to be alive, Severus decided as he continued to kiss his wife.

## Epilogue

### *Chapter 10 of 10*

The conclusion of the tale, coming full circle. Kind of like a cat curling up in a sunny spot...

### EPILOGUE

"...He's not going to listen, is he?" Hermione asked her husband sadly as he joined her in the bushes at the side of 12 Grimmauld Place, out of view of the building that was even now visually squeezing itself back into nothingness between houses 11 and 13. "He's going to go charging into the Ministry to help rescue Harry and the rest of us, and he'll be thrown into the Afterrealm. Unlike what we did to stop the Dark Lord, there's nothing that can stop him from being a fool."

"I know." Cradling her close, enjoying the pain-free press of her body against his left side, Severus dropped a kiss to her temple. "I tried though. Let it be recorded for all of time that I tried. For your sake, since I know you liked the bastard."

Hugging him, glad she didn't have to be careful anymore of the scar that had since been removed from his side, Hermione rested her head on his chest. "So...now where to?"

His forearm spasmed. “—Damn. Even though my body has witnessed his death, my Dark Mark is still active in this timeline. We'll have to go somewhere far away, so that I won't be tempted into answering his call just to stop the pain. Kharkov sent me a letter about that in the summer before your sixth year, you know. It was before the other Death Eaters caught up with him and killed him. He said eight thousand miles was far enough to reduce the Summoning to a mere itch, ignorable for the few minutes that it normally burns.”

“Then Pago Pago it is. That's ten thousand miles away.”

“Hermione, I am *not* wearing a lavilavi! It is *not* in your Granger-Snape's instruction manual!” he protested.

“Neither is riding a broom in mine, but you still keep trying to convince me of that,” she retorted.

He had to concede her point. *Wearing a lavilavi versus joining the Nimbus Nirvana Club...* Not an easy decision to make, if he tried to barter the one for the other. Sighing, Severus admitted, “True enough. But I checked, and Hawaii has had the most calm weather for the next two years. Not to mention a decent-sized wizarding population for my comfort, plus plenty of Muggle amenities for yours. And Albus—the future one—has given me a discreet letter of introduction with a potions research company based in the wizarding village of Alohapele. It seems one of their primary researchers, and his young and beautiful wife-cum-assistant—Rus and Mione Wulfric—will be steadily employed for the next two years,” he informed her, smirking. “Until they decide to move back to England, that is, to start a family in more familiar territory.”

“You realize, of course, that Ron and Harry and all the rest won't have had enough time to forgive us when we return, from their perspective?” Hermione offered wistfully.

“They'll come around. Now, come, Mrs. Wulfric—Merlin, I'm going to short-sheet his bed for giving us false identities with *that* for a last name,” Severus muttered darkly, before his expression softened as he looked down at her again. “You and I have a series of transcontinental Portkeys to catch in Diagon Alley.”

“And a lavilavi to wear.”

“They don't wear lavilavis in Hawaii.”

“No, but they do ride brooms.”

“Are you trying to blackmail me, Mione?”

“If the lavilavi, fits, my love.”

“...Alright, but it'll be a black one.”

“Gryffindor red.”

“*Black.* ”

“...Slytherin green?”

“Stop trying to tempt me.” He tried to scowl, but wasn't sure how effective it was, now that he no longer had to pretend.

“Well, we *are* on our way to paradise...” she grinned cheekily.

Yes, it was definitely a good day to be alive. Again. And this time around, at least for the next two years, Severus Granger-Snape would be a lot happier than his timeline counterpart, Severus plain old Snape. Severus let his lips curve into a smile. “Remind me to celebrate today for the self-fulfillment of that prophecy. And the day we drunk visions of each other...and the days we first exchanged letters, and the day we got married, and the day—”

Hermione covered his lips with her fingertips. “Rus, my love, a romantic Severus Snape is a very scary thing to see. Save it for when you're wearing the lavilavi.”

“I'll wear it to go riding and lovemaking with you on a broom.”

She chewed on her lower lip for a moment, then sighed. “*Fine.* But it'll be eight inches above the waves, so if I fall, I won't hurt myself. And it'll only be the lavilavi. Um...but I'll wear a sarong. There aren't any topless beaches in Hawaii that I know.”

“Pity.”

...

## The End

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*Author's Note: ...Like I said, a bit AU and OOC, but meh...I had fun writing it! (Before HBP crashed down on all of our heads.) If you want a canon story with a Canon!Snape...go read In Annulo, conveniently posted here at PetulantPoetess. If you just wanted to read a fun little relationship romp...feel free to start all over again with the Prologue!*

*Hope you enjoyed it,*

*~Lotm*