

Hermione's Little Black Book

by zambonigirl

Hermione needs to discover herself sexually as well as intellectually. Ultimate HG/SS pairing, but there might be others in the way.

One

Chapter 1 of 8

Hermione needs to discover herself sexually as well as intellectually. Ultimate HG/SS pairing, but there might be others in the way.

I fully admit to violating copywrite laws by using characters that I did not create or name myself. I also admit to being a sick individual who actually likes Severus Snape, and would love for him to get shagged at the end of HP 7. I will also be infringing on the intellectual property of Playwitch Magazine, though I will abide by their copywrite laws, and not reproduce any of their articles, in whole or in part. Please don't sue me. I'm poor. All I have are two guinea pigs, and they're much more trouble than they're worth.

AN: First off, I have to say that this story will be very AU, particularly in regards to any morality that you might have noticed in Hermione over the past few years. Her priggishness will fly out the window and give way to a toned-down Ho!Mione, only she won't be so very interested in her looks still. I had to give her that much. Besides, I think she's probably really very pretty just the way she is, she doesn't need a makeover. Just a really good shag by about ten or twenty people who really know what they're doing. And Snape, of course.

Hermione held on for dear life as Fred and George continued to pound into her, their shouts of triumph mingling with hers. She could feel her climax, just out of reach, and in just a moment, YES! Oh Gods, YES, YES, YES!

All sense left for several seconds as George rode the waves of her clenching with great aplomb. Oh, they were both far too smug as they all collapsed in a sweaty heap onto the bed. Her knees were sore from all the kneeling she had been doing over the course of the evening, and she had definite bruises on her hips from their fingerprints, but it was a good sore.

It had been a few months since Ron had left to join a Quidditch team, and they had parted amicably. But at 21, Hermione realized that she wanted more notches on her belt than just one, and the twins were sort of like killing two birds with one stone.

"Did we tell you, Hermione, that we're going to be featured in Playwitch Magazine next month?" Fred asked.

"It's great for business," George yawned. "Be great for other things, too."

Hermione laughed. "So I'm lucky to have gotten this private audience before you hit the big time, eh?" she teased.

"Well, we could possibly find it in our hearts to get you a signed copy," Fred offered.

"As a gift, you see," George said as he stroked his hand up her side.

"Might be worth something very soon."

"The fastest selling edition yet."

"I'd appreciate it, I really would," Hermione said, still smiling. "I've never read Playwitch. I wonder what the articles are like?"

Both boys laughed and tightened their holds on her. She was soon very safely wrapped in a cocoon of their arms.

"No one reads the articles," one of them said. "You're supposed to look at the pictures and admire them."

"Only you get to say that you've actually been with us."

"Ah, to be you, you lucky girl."

"The envy of-"

"Of every girl in Britain who hasn't had you, and that leaves only the Muggles, who don't even have subscriptions to Playwitch!" Hermione laughed. "Oh, boys! You're incorrigible!"

Their laughter followed her to her sleep, and she woke up feeling rather randy, which was easily remedied by Fred settling himself between her thighs and taking her for a ride. George gave her a few minutes to recover before he claimed her, and she left their flat on wobbly knees.

"Someone's gotten shagged," her co-worker said rather loudly the following Monday when she settled down at her work area.

"Shut it," Hermione answered as she began to prepare her ingredients. She was a Junior Potion Maker for Saint Mungo's along with three other Juniors, Evan, John, and Katherine. Katherine, from the British West Indies, was the only one she really called a friend, though after her outburst, Hermione was beginning to reconsider that.

"Oh, don't fake a bad mood with me, Granger. Anyone within a ten-mile radius can see you've been shagged, and well."

"Yes, well, if you don't dry up, I'll owl copies of your ode to Legolas to the entire department."

Katherine lifted her hands in mock surrender, and was about to say something when their supervisor, an old and wizened Healer called Hazel, entered the room and began handing out their assignments. She treated them still as though they were apprentices, but there was no murmuring amongst the Junior Potion Makers. They simply took any stasis spells off of working potions, and gathered ingredients for any new potions, and got to work.

After lunch, Hazel made an announcement. She had worked for a very long time, and was ready to pension off. Hermione was shocked to see Hazel go, but the announcement came as no surprise. At eighty years of age, Hazel deserved a break.

"In the next two weeks, I hope to promote at least two of you to Senior Potion Maker, if not all of you. This lot has been amongst the best of my career, and I see great things coming from each of you in the future. I hope to see your names in The Daily Prophet some day soon."

Hermione and Katherine decided to go to the local pub after work, and managed to talk their other two co-workers into coming along.

"What a thing!" Evan, a twenty-something man with blond hair and freckles exclaimed. "Old McCreedy leaving St. Mungo's, never thought it'd happen."

"Oh, come now," Hermione said, sipping gilly water. "She can't work forever, I know I wouldn't want to."

"It's just that she really seems to love her work, you know?" Evan countered. "She loves making potions and bossing all of us around."

"Yes, well," Katherine said, "Now she can go on holidays and boss other people around. To McCreedy, the best Potion-Master in St. Mungo's!"

"To McCreedy!" they echoed.

"So, Kat, where're we going after this?" John, a reedy young man with a shock of black hair, asked.

"I don't know where you're off to, but I'm going home-alone-after this."

Hermione laughed at them and shook her head. One of these days, Katherine would give in to John, but she was going to make him work for the honor. Until that time, Hermione enjoyed watching them and laughing at them. John was almost pathetic, but no more so than Katherine. She was very interested in him, but her reluctance was as much about past disappointments as it was about not wanting to get too involved with someone that she worked so closely with, and Hermione could understand. She had the same fears when she started liking Ron. But that seemed like it was so long ago, now.

"Oi! Granger!"

Hermione turned her head, looking for the person who called her name.

"Hermione Granger!"

She felt shocked as she recognized the handsome, smiling face coming towards her from the semi-crowded pub. He was pushing his way through bar stools and tables, nearly knocking over several pints as he went.

"Oliver Wood!" she screeched, and jumped down from her seat and into his arms. She barely glanced Katherine's interested face before Oliver ushered her to a private booth, and bought her another gilly water.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "I haven't seen you since...since the funerals."

They had buried most of the members of The Order Of The Phoenix on the same day, at the same cemetery. Oliver had been there, along with several other people that Hermione had not known as members until the very end. The losses had been staggering, but there was another baby boom, and the population was slowly bouncing back.

Oliver placed his hand over hers briefly. "Well, yes, but, so...how have you been?" he asked, his usual exuberance taking over.

"Great! Really great. Why are you in town, Oliver?" she laughed and shook her head. "Oh, that sounded awfully blunt, didn't it? I didn't mean it like that."

"I know what you mean. My team wasn't scheduled to be in town for several weeks, but there was a large change. Bit of a situation, really," he said, leaning in conspiratorially. "The Seeker for The Watford Wildcards died yesterday after he took a tainted dose of Felix Felicis."

Hermione gasped. "But that's illegal!"

Oliver nodded. "Quidditch is in an uproar right now. Haven't you read the paper?" He looked genuinely shocked when Hermione shook her head. "I can't believe it myself," he said.

"Me either! Cheating at a game!"

He laughed from deep in his chest, and his eyes sparkled. "No, you; not reading the Prophet. Cheating at Quidditch I believe."

Hermione laughed at that and leaned over her drink. "Oh, it's been a crazy day, Oliver." She looked up and took his hand again. "I am glad to see you, though. But you still haven't answered my question-what are you doing in Town?"

"Well, the Watford Wildcards are out of the running, pending further investigation, and a lot of matches are being replayed because of the controversy. It's a big deal, and my team, The Bellamy Bludgers, is playing the Chudley Cannons tomorrow night. Do you think you can make it?"

Hermione smiled. "Who would I root for? Ron plays for the Cannons, and you know that Harry and I support them because of that."

Oliver shrugged. "Root for whomever you like. The Bludgers aren't a great team, but they're as much as I have right now. Better than playing on a reserve team!"

"Oh, very well," She said, taking another sip of her drink. "I'll go and watch all of you. Have you been to Fred and George's joke shop yet?"

"Went there earlier. They told me about Playwitch."

"Can you believe it?" Hermione asked, laughing. "They're going to send me a signed copy."

Oliver laughed, too. "Will it say, 'Thanks for everything, Fred and George' on it?"

"Oh, I hope so. That way I would have an excuse to never show it to anyone. Beat them at their own game." Hermione rolled her eyes just thinking about them. "It's noisy here, Oliver. Let's go somewhere else."

"My room's just upstairs," he grinned.

Hermione grinned back, and left with him, only looking over her shoulder once to wave at Katherine.

"You know, maybe if I get famous, I'll be featured in Playwitch," Oliver mused as he pulled Hermione into his room and pushed her against the closed door. "Then you could start a collection of those magazines."

He tasted like firewhisky and pepper, and when he lifted Hermione up to straddle him, she let her head fall back and moaned at the feel of his length pressing against her center. It was at that moment she decided to be a female Casanova. Surely, there could be nothing better than having a no-strings-attached romp in the sack. Especially after all the years she invested in Ron, only to have her dreams dashed. No more committed relationships for her, she would be the bee, and any man in her way would be her flower, fit for plucking. It was an insane thought, but she actually felt more sane than she ever had before.

She gasped when he entered her, quickly in a hard thrust, both of them with their robes hiked up around their waists. She knew that the people in the neighboring rooms could hear them, heck! Their moans could probably be heard in the common room below, but she didn't care. All she knew was that Oliver was making her feel sexy and wanted and damn good, and that was all she wanted or needed at the moment.

Hermione's flat was very small and square in shape. The front door opened to her living room, with a little kitchenette off to one side. There was a hallway facing the door with a spectacular view of the bathroom, and two small bedrooms branched off on either side. It was snug and cozy and just big enough for herself and her two pets and maybe a guest in a pinch. She liked it, and she liked changing the wall color every few days using spells that she found in Witch Weekly, which Molly Weasley had subscribed her to for a birthday gift.

When Hermione walked into her apartment, it was very near midnight. She gave a little laugh when she thought of herself as a real party animal. Crookshanks jumped onto the kitchen table immediately and began to scold her.

"Now, now, don't be such a prude, Crooks. I know I've been gone a long while, but that doesn't happen very often."

Crookshanks immediately began to inspect her hands and arms, sniffing for where she had been and what she had been doing. Hermione actually found herself blushing, particularly when it became apparent that her cat did not approve.

"I already have a dad, all right?" she yelled after him as he jumped down in a huff and stalked off. "Bloody cat."

There was a stack of packages on the table, as well as two editions of The Daily Prophet. Both had front-page articles about the Quidditch scandal, and one even had a picture of Harry Potter, with a caption of him saying, "Sports like Quidditch should bring people together, not tear them apart!" Hermione snorted. It sounded like something Rita Skeeter would make up. In actuality, he probably said something like, "I don't really know, but I s'pose it's pretty bad."

Hermione grinned and reached for the next paper, but something at the bottom of the current edition caught her eye. In the corner was a picture of a very surly-looking wizard with long, lanky hair and a very prominent nose. "Severus Snape, Death Eater, To Return To Britain," the title proclaimed, and Hermione found herself reading the article in its entirety before carefully clipping it for further study. Finally, she moved on to the next parcel on the table.

"Why can't they ever quote me correctly?" Harry moaned in a letter. Hermione smiled and jotted off a response and set it aside until her own little owl, Bubo, came home. The next package was a copy of Playwitch, with Fred and George on the cover, the headlines strategically placed over their naughty bits. The centerfold, which featured them back-to-back, gyrating and smiling, members jutting straight out so that the discerning witch could easily and accurately calculate their magnificence.

"To Hermione, always our greatest supporter," was scrawled over their torsos. "Love, Fred and George," across their hips. Their picture winked at her and waved, and Hermione laughed at them. The final parcel was a letter from Ron, also about the Quidditch scandal. He mentioned that Oliver was in town, and that he and Harry would be taking him out for a drink on Friday, and would she want to come?

She decided to decline the invitation, but promised to watch the game, and set her letter to Ron on top of the one to Harry just as Bubo came fluttering into her little kitchenette. He drank a little water, then took the letters and was off again, out the open window that overlooked the sink. Hermione sat back and stared at the article on Snape.

"Despite death threats, former Death Eater-turned-spy Severus Snape has decided to return to his roots, and will take a job under Ministry jurisdiction soon. Most well-known for the death of Albus Dumbledore, Snape is by no means a welcome war hero. His status as Order Of The Phoenix Member is still under dispute, even by members of said order. Only Minerva McGonagall would stand up for him when contacted, saying that though his position was dubious, he had always helped rather than hindered, and that the death of Dumbledore was on the strictest of orders from the deceased himself. Harry Potter, who lead The Order in Dumbledore's place has refused to comment on Snape, and became very angry when pressed. One wonders what such an infamous person would wish for in returning to such mass hostility.

"He can go hang himself for all I care," one Order member finally said after great persistence."

Hermione sighed. Well, that would be something that she would worry about later. For now, she just wanted to go to bed.

"Oh look, there's my friend that's dating the famous Quidditch player!" Katherine exclaimed as Hermione was crossing the street.

"I'm not dating him," Hermione said as Katherine caught up with her.

"Well, then there's my friend that's shagging a famous Quidditch player," she amended as they walked through the doorway to St. Mungo's.

"We went to school together, it's not as though I'm some sort of groupie."

"I'm just happy that you're finally letting that bushy hair of yours down for a change, all right? I mean, it's high time you started shagging boys. The more the better, then you'll know what you like and how you like it."

Hermione suddenly paused. What she liked and how she liked it?

"Well? Come on, slow coach!" Katherine said as she pulled Hermione into the dim, humidity-controlled environment that they brewed their potions in.

Hermione made her potions like an automaton that day. They were quite possibly some of the worst of her career, but even at her worst, she was usually better than most. All that she could think about was what she liked and how she liked it.

What did she like? And just how did she like it? And what exactly did she like about it?

Sure, sex was fun. Her body reacted very well to male stimuli, and the sight of a fully cocked penis was enough to make her wet. Her orgasms were always easy to achieve, whether on her own or with a partner, and she never left feeling dissatisfied. Not even with Ron, who was no where near as attentive as his brothers. But what exactly did she like about it?

She knew what she didn't like about it; it was always over with too quickly. And Fred was the first man to ever try giving her oral; she would have liked to have experienced that a little longer, maybe even with Oliver, too. But even so, only a few licks, and Fred had her screaming his name and thrusting against him as she rode the wave of her orgasm. She couldn't help but think that it could be better. But how?

"Earth to Hermione," Katherine said, nudging her. "It's time to go home. What's wrong with you? Dreaming of your Quidditch pal?"

Hermione lifted her head from her cauldron and looked around the room. Everyone else had packed up and were grabbing their cloaks. The Senior Potion Makers were eyeing her oddly, and Katherine was frowning, arms crossed over her chest.

"Come now, Hermione," Hazel chided, setting a stasis charm on Hermione's cauldron. "I know you're not looking forward to my last day, but staying over time will not keep me here longer."

Hermione laughed and gathered her leftover ingredients. "I'm sorry, Hazel. I thought I might be able to finish my work before the end of the day. I suppose I was wrong."

"Well, never mind that now, dear. Off you go. See you in the morning!"

"Forget acting shagged," Katherine hissed as she wrapped her cloak around her shoulders. "You seem bugged!"

Normally, Hermione would have made a retort, but she couldn't think of one when the idea of buggery had just been introduced. Did she want to try that? Maybe?

"C'mon, let's get a drink," Katherine said, taking Hermione's elbow with one hand as she flipped her black, braided hair over her shoulder with her other hand.

Hermione held her arm back and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Katherine. I know I've been a real pill today, but I really need to get home tonight. I have...I have to do a few things, okay?"

Katherine looked genuinely worried. "I've never seen you like this. You're actually starting to scare me just a bit."

"I'm fine, I promise," she smiled. "Really, I just have some things to work out."

She Apparated to her flat and went straight to the roll-top desk in the corner of the small living room. In one of the cubby holes were five brand-new Moleskine notebooks that her father had imported from Italy upon the completion of her apprenticeship. She had been saving them for her own research, or at least a special occasion.

Well, this was probably the most important research of her life. Settling down to her task, Hermione began to keep a diary, starting somewhere around what should have been her seventh year at school, all the way to the present. Just as with everything else, she would do more than merely research sexual positions and maneuvers. She was going to get to the point of why sex felt so great, and what she could do to make the feeling last for as long as possible. Her first avenue of exploration would, of course, begin with herself, and a quick glance at Playwitch told her that she might be able to glean a lot from its articles.

The cover promised that Lord Orion Shagswell could help her find her perfect position, and someone called The Petulant Poetess claimed to have published the first chapter of a scandalous novella that would "Make [Her] Toes Curl With Delight!"

Looking at the personal ads, Hermione felt like sending one in that said, "Look out, world! I'm coming!"

TBC

AN: Okay, I know I'm not citing the team that Oliver told the trio he had joined in GoF simply because I doubt he'd still be on a reserve team after all these years. I did, however, make up names of Quidditch teams, so don't yell at me. I did put Ron on the Chudley Cannons whether he deserves the distinction or not.

As for Playwitch, I love the webazine, and I think that anyone who works on it is brilliant and talented and brilliantly talented, and I might have a bit of a crush on Lord Orion Shagswell, but don't tell anyone, okay? Anyway, PW will be as AU as the rest of the story, as you will see.

Here are the instructions for the challenge:

Hermione has had numerous liaisons and like the bookish know-it-all she is, she keeps track in her Little Black Book. This can be an actual book, or it can be another form of records keeping.

It is up to the author to decide her motives for these encounters, and why she's moving from one man to the next. It could be because she just hasn't found Mister Right, or it could be because she is researching. The options are limitless, be creative.

Has she recorded memories in the book? good bad ugly?

Does she have a little of their DNA stored?

Did she design a charm to detect magical and reproductive abilities, maybe a charm to see how the child would look and act genetically?

Severus must find her Little Black Book and figure out a way to read it. Severus and Hermione do not have to be in a relationship. They could be teachers, or she could be the equivalent of his parole officer, or anything else that you can think of that would cause them to interact.

Requirements:

-Hermione must be of legal age of consent.

-Hermione must have at ten people in her book.

-Some mention of contraceptive and prevention of wizarding STD's must be made if doing this challenge based on sex.

-The names: Oliver Wood, Viktor Krum, Blaise Zabini must appear in the book in some fashion.

The Little Black Book must contain at least 3 of the following information (these are broken down into categories, choose any or all or add whatever you'd like, up to you):

-Appearance and attributes of 'equipment': length, width, circumcised (yes or no), and uniqueness?

-Prior experience

-Specific will and won't perform: Oral, specific positions, voyeurism, bdsm, role-play/fantasy, massages, multiples, etc.

-Creativity: points for being creative and willingness to 'try new things'

-Special talents: notes on what she finds most notable

-Number of times she has met with, dated, or had encounters with this person and the reason she has stopped.

-Photo of the person

-Song, image, or scent that reminds her of the encounters

-Fetishes

-Mention of one person that she sees every year on a certain date. Your choice what she actually meets this person for, but the pattern must be evident.

-Pick-up lines used (by either or) and most effective method of seduction.

Ideas for pick-up lines:

-You've lost that lovin' feeling.

-Where's the nearest book store?

-Do you prefer sex on the beach or a slow southern screw?

-I understand you're interested in reading books.

The book must have some sort of rating scale... but keep in mind it all depends on what she's keeping records for and how the book is graded.

Optional:

-There is a charm on the book giving false information to any reader but Hermione.

-Hermione has mention of Obliviating a date.

Length: This story may be a one-shot or multi-chaptered.

Due: The first chapter of your entry is due August 20, 2006.

The story may be AU or HBP-compliant.

Rating: Though this sounds like it must be an R or NC-17 rated story, it does not have to be. There are many different ways to go about this, this does not have to be smut. Just please be sure that your rating matches your story.

Two

Chapter 2 of 8

In this chapter, Hermione runs into an old friend.

Big thanks to Robinson Rocket for her grammar help! I couldn't have done it without her.

The Quidditch game went like any that Hermione had ever seen. She did not like the game too well, but she loved her friend, and was very happy that he won. Harry and Ginny were both exuberant, and pulled Hermione into a group hug as Ron and his teammates flew a winning lap around the Quidditch stadium.

"Hermy-ownee!"

Hermione turned her head sharply and found herself nose-to-chest with Viktor Krum.

"I tought dat vas you!" he exclaimed, as he wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her up, spinning her around in a circle before setting her down and pulling her into a hug.

"Viktor! Oh goodness, I didn't think I'd see you here!" She looked up at him, and years melted away. She was once again a very young student at Hogwarts, never been kissed, and weak at the knees because of the way his eyes swept so admiringly over her. He saw her; he always saw her the way she was, because of her mind and who she would be and who she was now. Viktor appreciated her, and it felt good, especially since Harry and Ron tended to take her for granted so often. Oh, it was good to see Viktor again.

"Harry Potter, it is nice to see you again," he said, holding out his hand.

"Viktor Krum, always a pleasure," Harry answered, as several flash bulbs went off around them.

"Harry Potter, are you going to help with the Inquisitorial Unit assigned to the Quidditch Corruption Scandal?" a reporter called out.

Harry shook his head. "No, I'm simply watching my friend play tonight."

"Viktor, is this your date?"

"She is a fery old friend," Viktor answered, releasing Hermione from his grasp.

"I know her! Hermione Granger. Didn't you date Viktor several years ago?"

"Oh, for goodness sake, can't a woman simply be friends with a man? Must there always be something sexual going on?" Hermione answered.

"Harry, is there any chance of a marriage between yourself and long-time girlfriend Ginevra Weasley?"

Ginny tugged on Harry's hand. "We're just watching a game tonight, folks," she said. "Just fans of the Chudley Cannons, and my brother, naturally."

They pushed past the reporters and made their way down to the ground.

"Sorry, Hermione," Harry muttered. "I hate it when they follow us around. Got a picture of me and Luna last week, and posted it in Witch Weekly, claiming I was having an affair."

"Oh, it's all right, Harry. I'm used to it by now. Anyway, I'll see you lot later, I suspect. Have fun with Oliver tonight, I'm sure you have a lot to catch up on."

"I will valk you home, Hermym-ownee," Viktor said, putting a possessive arm around her waist.

She felt suddenly very randy, and couldn't wait until Viktor managed to get her home. "I'd appreciate that, thank you," she murmured.

"If you're sure you don't want to come with us," Harry said.

"She's sure," Ginny answered, a light smile playing about her lips. "Night, Hermione. I'll talk to you later."

They parted, and Hermione felt another wave of anticipation as Viktor tightened his hold on her.

"I am so happy to haf seen you tonight," he murmured, nuzzling her hair. "I wanted to owl you earlier, but I did not tink you vould see me."

"Oh, Viktor! Why wouldn't I?"

"I tought you vere dating Ron Veasley."

Hermione frowned. "What made you change your mind?" Had Oliver been talking?

Viktor smiled. "I saw you, and tought I vould take a chance. I am happy I did. You are so beautiful, Hermym-ownee."

She looked up into his deep, dark eyes and melted against him. "I'll Apparate us to my flat."

He was a meticulous man, Viktor Krum. He wasn't fast and furious like Oliver, or overwhelmingly stimulating like the twins, or even sweet and loving like Ron. He was like a rainstorm, at times hard and unrelenting, and then suddenly soft and gentle.

He started by kissing her tenderly. He didn't touch her much, he simply held her around the waist with one arm, and cradled her head with his other hand. His lips moved gently over hers, tender kisses, lots of lip, light sucking, and tongue every now and then. She responded in kind, and really learned to love kissing again, just as she had done at Hogwarts, when kissing was new and dangerous and part of the unknown.

When his tongue finally invaded her mouth, he seemed to really taste her, licking through her mouth and over her teeth, bringing his body into full contact with hers. It was incredible, as though he were possessing her rather than simply making love. He moaned and pressed her down into the bed, sucking her bottom lip into his mouth. He was still gentle, though, sucking it while he licked it. Then, suddenly, his teeth sank into the tender flesh, and Hermione gasped as she thrust her hips against his.

He pulled back and used both his hands to smooth her hair down. "I haf missed you so much, Hermym-own-ninny. I haf missed your letters. Why did you stop writing me?"

She blushed and bit her lip, which was still thrumming and blushed a little. "Ron didn't really like it when I wrote to you, so I just sort of stopped. I'm sorry, Viktor. By the time I didn't care what he thought, I figured it was too late."

He leaned down and kissed her again. "It is nefer too late to restore a friendship," he told her before leaning down and kissing her again. This time, he pulled her hips against him so that she could feel his length through his robes. "Do you vant me?" he asked.

"Yes, I do."

"I vant you, too. Sit up, Hermym-ownee."

He moved away and tugged on her arms until she was on her knees. He then began to slowly remove her clothing, hungrily drinking in her skin as he revealed it.

"You are fery beautiful," he said again as he tossed her robe onto the chair next to her bed. His own robe soon joined it.

He used to be horribly S-shaped, stooping his shoulders to hide his height and breadth. He was so insecure as a young man, but that persona had gone. He was a confident man, and his eyes were looking over her hungrily as he stroked her sides and lowered his wonderful mouth to her shoulders. His long fingers deftly did away with her bra, and he laid her back down to slip her panties off. He spread her thighs open and looked her over once more before sliding between them, stopping when his face was even with her breasts, which were still every bit as small as they had been when she was in school, but they stood out when she laid down, her nipples pointing to the ceiling. Viktor took one into his mouth as he pressed his hands against her back, forcing her to arch against his mouth. She moaned and sank her hands into his hair, her legs twining around his torso.

"So passionate," he growled against her skin.

"Viktor," she crooned as she squeezed her legs.

"Patience, darling," he said, pushing her shoulders against the bed. "Do you know what I like on a woman, Hermione?"

She shook her head.

"I love this on a woman," he answered, pressing his hands into her hips. "I love this softness. So lovely, so feminine. I could kiss here." He lowered his mouth and Hermione pressed her hipbone to his lips. "I bite, too," and he did. "I love this, too," he said as he pulled her thighs open. "I kiss here, too."

Her head fell back onto the pillows as he pulled her apart and moved his mouth over her most intimate area. When he sucked her clit into his mouth, she jumped upward and gaped at him.

Viktor smirked and opened his mouth, letting his tongue drop out in a very obscene display that made her arch her back, and then dropped his head back down to her.

"Gods, Viktor, don't stop!" She put one hand on his head and fisted his long locks as her other hand came to her breasts and kneaded them, rubbing over her nipples and squeezing them. Viktor looked up at her and moaned against her, causing all new sensations as he continued to suck.

When he pushed two fingers inside of her, it was her undoing. She shouted and arched against his face, tugging at his hair a little harder than she would normally have done, but he didn't seem to mind. He simply lifted his head, and continued to thrust his fingers as she rode out her orgasm.

"You like, yes?"

"You know I did."

He smiled. "Yes, I know. But you tell me, make me feel good, eh?"

Hermione tugged him up to her and smiled mischievously. "Oh, I can make you feel very good."

He ran his tongue over her lips before kissing her. "You can? You will now make me feel good? Yes, I think you should."

He seemed to be about ready to lift her knees and thrust home, so Hermione pushed him over and straddled his hips, thrusting her tongue into his mouth as she went.

"Oh, no, Viktor. I think that this situation calls for immediate reciprocation."

It was obvious that he did not understand what she meant by that, so Hermione decided to show him. She slowly made her way down his torso, letting her breasts skim over his skin, pausing when they cradled his erection, causing him to thrust upwards and moan.

"You're so very big," she said when she was at last looking at him. "Very thick, too." She ran her hand up and down his length, analyzing it.

"Does that please you?" he asked, his voice strained. "Do you like how fat I get?"

Hermione hummed her approval, and leaned in to lick up the underside as Viktor moaned and twined his fingers through her curls, being far gentler than she had been. When she took him into her throat, she could tell that he was forcing himself to not thrust upwards, so she rewarded him by taking him completely into her throat.

Viktor let out a strangled cry and pulled Hermione up to him, twisting so that he was on top and once again mounted and ready to strike.

"You will force me to lose control," he said gutturally. "I would not like this."

"It wouldn't be that bad," she answered breathlessly as he pressed himself to her opening. "Gods, Viktor!"

He sank his teeth into her shoulder as she arched her back against him, and sank fully into her heat.

"How fat do I feel now?" he asked against her ear, thrusting upwards forcefully. "Does it suit?"

"Y-yes," she managed to squeak. "I...ahhh...oh, I like it very much."

He chuckled and kissed along her shoulder as he continued to thrust slowly and forcefully, rocking her hips with each movement upwards, and yet still holding her in an embrace. She could not help but watch him, his magnificent muscles straining rigidly against his skin, his face taut, and his eyes like large black pools of ink, infinitely tender.

He lifted one hand and brushed her hair away from her face, staring at her lips as he did so. He kissed her, sucking gently on her bottom lip as he increased his pace, and she met him stroke for stroke.

They changed positions, only instead of a messy fumbling of limbs and sheets as she had often experienced, he simply held her to him as he turned over. Hermione smiled brightly at him, for this was her favorite position, and kissed him deeply, biting his lower lip before she pushed up and began to ride him. Viktor smiled at her and lifted his hands to her breasts, which she felt were being horribly neglected, and said so as he thumbed her nipples while cupping her fullness.

"My apologies, princess," he answered and contorted so that he could lick and suckle her nubs as they both continued to thrust.

The sensation of his mouth sucking now on her nipples was far more stimulating than she would have expected, and Hermione began to wonder if she could hold on longer. As if anticipating this reaction, Viktor heaved himself upwards, and in a maneuver that she did not even try to comprehend, they were both on their knees. He had one hand firmly on her buttocks, the other around the back of her neck. He kissed her again, and she instinctively held onto his shoulders to keep herself from falling backwards. He wasn't thrusting necessarily, but they were certainly humping each other, and her very sensitive clit was pressed quite intimately against him, and she found that she could take no more. Wrenching her mouth away from his, she could only moan her pleasure as he lowered her onto the bed, but stayed upright so that she was straddling his thighs, and he began to really thrust into her, taking full advantage of her spasming muscles, and finding his own release.

He collapsed on top of her for a few moments before moving off to the side and pulling her into a horizontal hug, nudging her neck with his nose and worshiping her tingling body with his hands. He moved her thigh so that it was resting on his hip, and her body gave an involuntary shudder.

"I was right," he murmured. "So passionate. Such a beauty in pleasure. A man could not ask for more in a partner."

Hermione smiled and snuggled against his chest, not caring that they were laying the wrong way on the bed. She didn't need a pillow when she had Viktor's strong arm underneath her head, or a blanket, when his arms were wrapped so casually around her. No, this must be what heaven was like. She felt his lips press against hers a few times as she drifted to sleep, but she was too sated to try to answer him.

They made love again sometime during the night, and then again as the dawn began to shed its first rays through her window. By the time the Saturday morning edition of The Daily Prophet was delivered by owl, Hermione and Viktor were poking around in her small kitchen, neither one particularly rested, but each so relaxed as to make rest unimportant.

"Harry and I make front page, eh?" he said throwing the paper to the side of the tea service. "They haf nothing better to say, so I am headline."

"Don't be such a Prima Donna, Viktor. I'm on here, too, you know."

Viktor knelt down next to her and looked at the picture she indicated. In the picture, Viktor lifted her up and twirled her around over and over again, every time with a bright smile on his face.

"You should smile more," she said, cupping his cheek. "You look so handsome when you smile."

He took her hand and kissed her wrist. "I will smile for my Hermy-ownee. That is how you will know that I think of you." He pulled her to her feet and wrapped her in his arms. "But I must leave now, my darling. I haf things to do today, and every day until the Quidditch scandal is concluded. I will not always be in England, but I hope I can say hello ven I am?"

Hermione smiled and leaned up to kiss him. "Of course you can! You're my friend."

"But you haf more friends than just me. I know, you are beautiful woman, and passionate for loving. Men cannot resist this, and I am a man."

"I promise, Viktor, if you let me know that you are in town, I will make time for you...more than enough time for you."

Her answer satisfied him, and he gave her a very thorough goodbye kiss that left her so weak in the knees, she had to sit down when he released her. She was also useless for the rest of the day. Crookshanks and Bubo barely managed to get her to feed them, and she rejected three invitations to dinner from various friends, content to mope around for the rest of the weekend, reliving her marvelous night of bliss whenever she managed to glance at the paper, or at her bed. No, it was a day for sighs and memories and lots of wine.

Eventually, she cut the picture out and spellotaped it into her notebook, along with a not-so-brief entry that catalogued Viktor's vitals, as well as her thoughts on the evening.

Real life did not invade on her consciousness until Monday morning, when she reported for work as always, and blatantly ignored all of Katherine's questions about the newspaper article and what might have followed.

"It's not fair, I would tell you!" Katherine hissed, as they began to ready their ingredients for the day.

"There's nothing to talk about! Viktor and I have been pen friends for a long time, and he happened to be at the match. I didn't ask the paper to make a scene of things."

"Well, I don't believe you, but I suppose there is little I can do about it if you clam up like that."

Hermione smiled at her cauldron and remembered Viktor's farewell kiss. She hoped fervently that he wouldn't be back in town any time soon. With kisses like those, he could make a girl forget her resolve to play the field!

TBC

AN: Yeah, Viktor has given up the canonical "Hermy-own-ninny" for "Hermy-ownee". That's my doing, so stop flaming me for it. I can't help but think that the position I've put him in here-no longer a Quidditch player, traveling around and unraveling the mysteries of cheating by way of enhancement in professional sports, would sort of soften his accent a bit. I have a friend from Bulgaria, and while her accent is pronounced, this is pretty much the way she says "Hermione", unless if she's sounding it out very slowly.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed, and I hope y'all are happier about the longer naughty bits (heh). If Viktor features in this story again, though, I reserve the right to cut the naughty bits shorter (god, I'm five!). Now I'm off to North Carolina, so I'll wave at my fellow Americans as I fly over your states.

For full instructions on this particular challenge, please see the first chapter notes.

Three

Chapter 3 of 8

Hermione needs to discover herself sexually as well as intellectually. Ultimate HG/SS pairing, but there might be others in the way.

Romance is all very well and good, and as much as a girl needs a fantastic rogering every now and then, she also has to eat and shower and dress and clean litter boxes. In short, Hermione could not remain in a sex-hazed bubble for more than just a day and a few hours. By Tuesday morning, she had returned to her usual routine with not much more than a few moments of every day to reflect on Viktor and his kisses. Her co-workers were also discussing the impending retirement of Mrs. McCreedy, and it seemed that they had volunteered Hermione to bring the drinks.

"Do you know what to do?" John asked, looking not at all sarcastic, during their lunch break.

"I think I've had a drink or two in my lifetime," Hermione answered, shaking her head. "Any word on who the replacement will be?"

"I heard them talking earlier," Katherine offered. "I can't remember the person's name. It was a strange name, too. Like Snake or something."

Hermione turned pale. "Snape?"

"Not Severus Snape?" Evan said, his face even paler.

Hermione remembered The Daily Prophet from the previous week, and the article she had read about Snape returning to Britain. "It's got to be him!"

Katherine hadn't been in England at the time of Dumbledore's death-she had attended an academy for witches in America, but every witch and wizard in the world knew of Dumbledore, and they knew of his death. It took a few moments for her to remember where she had heard the name before, but when realization hit, her brown eyes grew huge, and she squeaked out, "The murderer? The traitor? He is to be our new boss?"

Hermione sighed. "He wasn't a murderer, you know, and he wasn't a true traitor..."

"He was a Slytherin, and he would have done anything to save his own skin," Evan said. "He just knew how to play the system."

"If he really wanted to play the system, then he would have done like the Malfoys after the first war, and worked hard to fool everyone. Instead he just left us all. I don't know why, but I'm not going to jump to conclusions," Hermione decided, which was really rather more than she felt. Inside, the thought of being under Snape's thumb again made her want to both cry and scream at the same time. It would be just like Hogwarts all over again.

Evan and John felt the same way, too, if their faces were anything to go by *Lucky Katherine*, Hermione thought. *She has no idea what to expect.*

"Mister Snape" was introduced to the group on the following day, and Hermione balked at the change in his appearance. He was every bit as ugly as ever, that was a given, but he had filled out and gained some color, though not much, in his cheeks. His teeth were even more yellow than the last time she had seen him, which hardly seemed possible. He stared them all down with his usual contempt, and actually seemed angry to see her there, though it was probably just her imagination. He kept his

arms folded over his chest as McCreedy introduced her crew to him while she smiled brightly and congratulated Hermione on being named a Senior Potion Maker.

"There will be one more to promote, of course. Mister Snape," she said kindly, her aging blue eyes smiling brightly at the sullen man standing next to her. "I'm just waiting for the Ministry to open the position. They're all excellent workers, as you'll discover."

"Indeed," Snape mused, his eyes boring angrily into Hermione's forehead. "And may I ask what it was that Miss Granger accomplished in order to distinguish herself above her peers?"

If McCreedy heard the malice in his voice, she chose to ignore it. "Miss Granger came to me very highly recommended, you know. Thirteen N.E.W.T.'s! And Outstandings in all of them. I assure you, the praise was not false, she has lived up to her reputation."

Under normal circumstances, Hermione would have been flattered and pleased. Under the laser-sharp gaze of Snape, however, she wanted to laugh at how ridiculous it all was.

"Yes, of course. But beyond *that*, what has she done? Has she improved her efficiency? Has she found a new way to bottle or brew? Does she have any true insights into potion making, or is it all merely book knowledge?"

Hermione flushed as their familiar arguments came back to her at full force. She felt that books were always the best resources, while Snape insisted she use her instincts more. She could still remember what he said to her before they went to face the Death Eaters and Voldemort. He had pulled her aside and reminded her in his most caustic way, that there would be no books or scrolls on the field of battle, and that he shuddered to think that she would be watching his back. Well, he was still alive, wasn't he? Unfortunately.

Poor McCreedy could no longer ignore his remarks, nor did she quite know what to say. At least, she did not know what to say in front of them. She whisked him off to her office, and from the Silencing Charm that was placed, Hermione guessed that she was giving him an earful, which would only make everything so much worse when she finally left them in his hands. If there was one thing that Professor Snape could not countenance, it was having his authority questioned.

"I don't think I like this," Katherine decided. "Not one bit."

Hermione could only mentally echo her friend's words, her capacity for speech seemed to have been removed. She could only silently pray for the day to be over quickly.

Harry greeted her in the foyer of St. Mungo's at quitting time, looking like a very messy-haired vigilante in a set of Gryffindor-red robes. "Hermione," he practically shouted, grabbing her arm and pulling her close. "I just heard."

Several people in the lobby looked at the pair with speculative glances, and then at each other knowingly. Very few people actually believed that Harry and Hermione did not sleep together. It was the subject of many howlers sent to herself and Harry, and in letters to the editor in various magazines and newspapers. Now they were in public, looking very intimate as Harry stood to his full height and breadth, which was rather impressive.

"About my promotion?" she feinted. "I'm very excited."

"You know what I'm talking about," he snapped, green eyes flashing like emeralds. "That arsehole, bloody Snape!"

Naturally, Snape chose that moment to walk up behind Hermione and give Harry a mock bow.

"My, my, I am graced with the presence of famous Harry Potter on my first day at work! So kind of you to remember me, dear boy."

"Your last day, you mean," Harry seethed as he pulled Hermione closer to him, his hands digging into her arms almost painfully. "You don't think I'll actually stand for this, will you?"

"I don't see what you can do about it, really," Snape answered in a bored voice. "But as you are assaulting one of my employees at the moment, I will have to ask you to leave. Put me down as one wizard who is not afraid of famous Harry Potter and his idle threats. Is he bothering you, Miss Granger?"

Had his tone been less mocking, Hermione might have wished for the ground to swallow her whole. Instead, in a fit of anger, she forced herself from Harry's grasp and glared at both of them. "While I appreciate this humorous little scene, I'm afraid that I must bid both of you good evening. I've never been a fan of cock fights."

It was the wrong thing to say, she knew. "Cock fight" implied that two of her lovers were quarreling over her, a fact that would again bring out speculation about her personal life as well as Snape's and Harry's, but she could not feel badly for them. They deserved everything that Rita Skeeter would write about them.

As she stalked off, Harry forgot about Snape and grabbed her again by the arm, but kept up with her as she walked. "Come over tonight at least and talk to me about it."

"Harry Potter, I want your promise that you won't start meddling in this!"

Harry stopped short, an angry scowl darkening his brow, but that gave way to a look of pure confusion. "What?"

"Don't meddle! I mean it! You'll only make things worse for me if you do."

"If you think for one moment that I'm going to leave my best friend in the clutches of that..."

Hermione grabbed his sleeve and pulled him along the pavement with her, garnering even more stares from patrons and employees alike. "Never mind him! Anything you do will only make it worse. I appreciate that you hate him, but I'll thank you to not draw me into your disputes!"

Harry looked angry again, and she held up her hands to his chest in order to help dispel his temper. "Look, I understand that you hold him responsible for the deaths of your parents, and for the death of Dumbledore. No one questions that. I don't question your right to be angry with him, but Harry, you can't interfere with my career!"

Harry was obviously undergoing a great internal debate over her words, but he finally softened his features and pulled her into a nice hug. "I'm sorry, and you're right: it isn't your fight. I shouldn't bring you into it."

Hermione rested her head against his shoulder and smiled. "You owe me a drink now, you know."

"Yeah, I know. Come to the Black House with me, I'll set you up."

She let him Apparate them to his home, but not before she looked past his shoulder and saw Snape regarding them with a very odd expression on his face.

She sighed. Now he would think that she and Harry were lovers as well. There was nothing that she could do about it, though. People would think what they wanted, regardless of the truth. Snape would be just one more uninformed idiot, and the thought made her feel smug. He would be so wrong for once in his life.

Ginny was happy to see Hermione, and pressed a tumbler of Ogden's Best into her hand almost immediately. "I'm so happy to see you!" she cried. "Tell me all about Viktor."

They went into the lounge and relaxed as Harry pattered around the kitchen, helping Dobby cook dinner. Hermione was sure that Dobby could get on just fine without his master, but it was obvious that hearing sex stories involving his best friend made him more uncomfortable than his presence made his servant, so they let him go.

"Viktor sounds amazing," Ginny decided after Hermione finished her recap. "And I love your journaling idea."

"Well, you know how I am."

Ginny laughed. "Yes, I know how you are. You probably have pie charts and flow charts and all sorts of charts set up, as well. How far do you plan to take it, though? I mean, I celebrate your newfound empowerment, but what are you working for? What would fulfill you?"

Hermione shrugged and thought on Ginny's words for a moment. "I hardly know, Ginny. Ron wasn't the first person that I kissed, but...he was my first, you know? I feel like I gave him so much for so long, and I'm just in a mood to take for a while."

"I understand. If Harry had been my first, I'd probably feel the same way that you do. Just be discreet. No more fucking Oliver against a door in a public house, yeah?"

Hermione balked. "You heard about that?"

"Um...pretty much everyone who was in said public house heard about it. You weren't very quiet, you know?"

Her head fell into her hands, and she moaned. "Oh, FUCK!"

Ginny laughed. "Maybe not those exact words..."

"Ginny, this is dreadful!"

"Oh, it's not so bad, Hermione. Come on, you've been a nun for the past-I don't know? Twenty-five years? It's okay that you let your hair down for once."

"Well, Harry made a huge scene at St. Mungo's today, and it's not helping. And now that Snape is my boss...you know how he feels when Harry's name is in the paper. He'll probably be livid if I'm in there, too!"

"You're not his student any more, you know. Neither is Harry. He can feel however he likes about it all, it has nothing to do with you or me."

Hermione took another sip of her firewhiskey and savored the burn as it went down her throat. "You've forgotten what a bastard he is."

"And you've forgotten how well he fought to keep us safe. Yes, he's a bastard, but underneath, he's just a normal man. Besides, I seriously doubt that he kept you from being killed by Parkinson just so that he could make the rest of your life miserable. I say be as nice as possible to him, it'll drive him mad at the very least. But forget Snape for now, there's something else I want to talk to you about before Harry calls us into the kitchen. Have you bought him a birthday present yet?"

"No, why? Do you want to go in on something together?"

Ginny got an odd look in her eye, and Hermione began to feel just a little apprehensive. "Yes, I have an idea," she said. "You see, he and I want to be a bit more adventurous in bed, too, but we're very committed to each other. We've been talking about a *ménage à trois* for quite a while lately, and you're pretty much the only person we've agreed on so far."

Hermione felt a bright red flush creep up from her chest, which was actually being displayed rather nicely thanks to the three buttons she had undone due to the effects of the alcohol, to her cheeks as she considered the implications of Ginny's proposal. Sleep with them? Both of them? And actually lend some credence to the rumors?

"Think about it," Ginny said quickly, as if she could read Hermione's thoughts. "Before you say no or yes, just think about it. It could be fun. At the very least, you'll have another entry for your journal."

Hermione smiled. Well, she had decided to try as many new things as she possibly could.

"I'll think about it. I promise. I'll let you know by Friday night."

"Just don't tell Harry if you decide to. I want it to be a surprise."

It would be. A big one, too, if she could do it, and if she still thought it sounded like a good idea in the morning.

Of course, the morning also brought a hangover and the realization that she would be facing Snape again, and probably every day for the next few years until she could feasibly be promoted again. It was a very odd position for her. On the one hand, she respected Snape's expertise in potion making, and she looked forward to learning more from him. On the other hand, he was a right bastard, and no amount of expertise could detract from the fact that he was a horrible teacher.

For most people, work was work. You show up, you do your job, you get paid, you go home to your family and friends and try and forget that in ten hours, you'll be right back where you started from. For Hermione, though, it was a bit more. She enjoyed recognition and honors. She was proud of her work, and often spoke of it extensively to her friends and family who didn't really listen, and she was sick and tired of the rumors circulating around that she had only been given the job because of Harry Potter. Call it overachieving, call it insanity, but Hermione was determined that eventually, not only would everyone admit that she got her job because of her skills and not because of Harry, but also that they would all be thankful that she was working for St. Mungo's. It was a selfish, narcissistic thought, and it didn't surface very often, but when it did, she did nothing to apologize or disguise it.

In a small way, she actually understood what Snape went through while he was teaching them. Harry was listened to and accepted simply because he was Harry Potter. He didn't do anything in the first place to make himself famous; in fact, it had been his mother all along. But because it looked as though Harry had killed Voldemort, he was a valid member of society and regarded as something special. Hermione herself had fallen for it during her first year at school. It wasn't until she had gotten to know Harry that she realized that he was a human being with a terrible family life, and not quite as much care as he should have had. It was still hard to remember who he really was underneath it all, what with him being idolized by every magazine and newspaper in the country. By all rights, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna, and yes, even Snape as well as many others, should also be treated the same way by the media. Instead, they were all given speculation on a near weekly-basis as to whether or not their gains were due to favors, or their own merit. It was demeaning and wrong, but she could not see how to end it. No, they would always be merely afterthoughts while Harry was the star of the show.

She didn't begrudge him his fame, or his influence, particularly since he saw it as a yoke rather than wings to fly. She did wish for fairness. Both Luna and Neville struggled daily to gain respect in their fields. Granted, Luna was a little...well, mad, in her columns and the way she ran *The Quibbler*, and she was incredibly outspoken about things that were simply not true, but she was a hero and a veteran, and heroes and veterans were allowed to be eccentric. Neville was always taken for granted, both before and after Voldemort's defeat, and not just by the outsiders who were content to stand on the sidelines and lob complaints right and left; Neville was overlooked by almost everyone in the Order Of The Phoenix, and was only honored after Harry made a particular point about it. Much to Neville's detriment, however, he was still looked upon as the person who was given borrowed feathers by benevolent Harry Potter because of their deep friendship.

Ginny perhaps was the worst of all. She was the kept woman of Harry Potter, too weak in her own needs to even demand that he make an honest woman out of her. Forget the fact that she was only twenty-four years-old and was barely starting out in her field, and that twenty-four was not even a quarter of the life expectancy of a witch. Ginny's job, according to the public, was to produce heirs for Harry Potter. That she wanted her own career and that Harry might be supportive of it was not even considered.

Hermione sighed as she made her way to her workstation. Snape had every right to be angry at the world. She did not think that it was fair that he channeled all of his hate into Harry, as it really wasn't Harry's fault that no one would listen to the truth of the matter, but she did understand his need to be bitter.

"Miss Granger," he greeted, looking very smug indeed.

"Mister Snape," she returned, nodding her head slightly before removing the stasis charm from her cauldron. She supposed that he might have been surprised at her lack

of blushing and blundering, but she was still a bit angry and him and Harry for dragging her into their ongoing dispute. Besides, acting like a cowed second-year was no way to begin a working relationship with The Bat Of Slytherin.

Her refusal to be flummoxed by him, though, seemed to invite him towards her at any moment of the day. He was constantly questioning her choices of ingredients and the ways that she prepared them as well as the way that she stirred, and with what. To make matters worse, at her lunch time when she usually caught up with The Daily Prophet and relaxed a bit, he decided to join her at her table.

"I see Potter is still under the impression that Voldemort simply did not get enough cuddles as a child," he grumbled as he poured himself some pumpkin juice and nodded towards the front page, where Harry was smiling for once as he helped open the brand new Wee Wizard Orphanage. He also, for once, outlined his expectations to the press, that the orphanage would help magical orphans such as himself find the sort of life that they needed amongst their peers. It was a daunting undertaking, but many Wizards felt it was a futile endeavor. Apparently Snape was one of those Wizards.

Hermione skimmed the article and shrugged. "At least he's using his money and power to help wizards, rather than hurt them like a few wealthy wizards have done before him. Malfoy comes to mind immediately, of course, but he's rather an easy target."

"Quite. Still, I doubt that Potter could have prevented Tom Riddle from becoming the fierce Lord Voldemort by simply having a cuddle with him."

Hermione set the paper down and straightened her posture, ready for yet another argument with "Mister" Snape. "Tom Riddle was a brilliant boy who was forced to grow up around average Muggles. Had he been governed by wizards and witches who knew his tricks, I do believe that there would have been a much different outcome for him. Even if he still ended up being a menace amongst the Purebloods who seek to protect their way of life, there is a very good chance that he would have been much less of a problem. He might have even been able to use his intelligence and talent in a productive manner for the good of all wizardkind."

Snape scoffed and stabbed at his peas and potatoes. "Nonsense. You are looking at this from a Muggle perspective, not as a Witch. When there is a will-a true will to do something magnificent and terrible-the will of the person in possession of it will always prevail. Trying to stop Tom Riddle from becoming who he was would have been an exercise in futility. His passion, his mission, his single-mindedness would have found its way out, and it would have consumed him every bit as much as it did."

"Oh, but sir, you forget that we are discussing bringing a child up from infancy and forming its mind from the beginning. His mind would never have been given a chance at such evil!"

Snape actually looked like he felt a little sorry for her as he leaned in and practically whispered, "You are the one forgetting, Miss Granger, that Tom Riddle was the heir of Slytherin." He paused a moment so that his words could sink in. "He had the power of the Chamber Of Secrets, he spoke Parseltongue, and he willingly accepted his legacy."

"You make it sound as though he never had a choice, though. We all have choices! Look at Harry-he was given the same powers that Riddle had, and yet he chose to be good, even despite everything else that he had going against him."

Snape shrugged. "Perhaps Potter had no choice in the matter, either. His mother protected him with very deep magic, it's quite possible that she also lent her essence to him. Despite my abiding hatred for both Lily and James, one must always remember that she was a good, decent person."

"And that's why you hated her so much," Hermione mumbled before she could stop herself. Snape looked at her sharply, and she sighed. "I didn't mean it like that."

Snape gathered up his lunch tray and inclined his head. "Think nothing of it, Miss Granger. I don't mind my employees being slightly impertinent, but please remember in the future that a little impertinence goes a long way. Good day."

As he walked away, Hermione replayed their conversation in her head, trying to reconcile his behaviour with what she knew of him. Five years ago, he would have taken her hide for some of the things she said. It was almost like he wanted to be friendly to her. Of course, she did have to ruin it by saying an ugly thing. And it might not even be true! But still, it was the only explanation that Hermione could ever find for the hatred Snape held against Lily Evans-Potter. Ginny's theory was that Snape was in love with Lily, but Hermione could not allow that the man ever held tender feelings for anyone, and she really hated being wrong.

For the rest of the day, Hermione belied McCreedy's faith in her by making merely passable potions, for her thoughts were intent on her conversation with Snape. All of his words held undertones of sarcasm, and she got the distinct impression that he was simply using her arguments to reaffirm his disapproval of her, but he had said some very thought-provoking things, particularly in regards to Tom Riddle and Harry Potter. Did neither of them really have a choice in the matter? Had fate really sealed their destinies? Could Harry have become a dark wizard, bereft of all feeling and conscious? Could poor Tom Riddle have ever been led by an understanding and strong hand? She would never know.

Harry...Ginny had made an interesting proposal the previous night. A threesome, for Harry's birthday. Hermione had been shocked. Harry didn't seem the sort who would want two women at once, but then, she probably didn't seem the sort who would want two men at once, and she had gone to bed with the Weasley twins. More than that, she had really, really enjoyed it-so much to the point that she would really enjoy doing it again at their earliest convenience. They had both been inside of her at the same time, Fred behind, George in front, and she had felt so completely full and satisfied, even though Fred had hurt her a bit. She would like to do that again as well, come to think of it.

She wondered what she and Ginny could do for Harry that would make him feel as wonderful. What did men like? Ron had been easy, just roll over and let him go, and he was a happy man. Viktor had been her most complex encounter, but she assumed it was because he probably had the most experience out of the lot. Would she be able to entertain Harry enough to have him consider it an actual birthday present? Well, win, lose or draw, she wasn't about to back down from her own resolution quite yet, and a threesome with a man and a woman would be an interesting and hopefully not completely embarrassing entry in her little journal.

TBC

AN: Wow, what a short and unsatisfying chapter. I was going to have smut, but I just want to get this out so that I can start with the next chapter, and give you peeps something to read, if I still have an audience after all this time, that is. Enjoy, and look for lots of sexorz in the next edition! Also, much more Playwitch, and possibly fangirling of Orion Shagswell.

IV

Chapter 4 of 8

Hermione and Ginny give Harry a very happy birthday.

Chapter IV

"Miss Granger? A word, please."

Hermione looked up from her bubbling cauldron to find Severus Snape eyeing her speculatively.

"Just a moment, sir."

He inclined his head to her and disappeared into his office. Quickly, she finished off her potion and killed the flame beneath it. A little nervously, she ran her hand over her hair and tucked a few strands into the elastic that held it in a plait. Why she was tidying herself for Severus was not something she wanted to think about just yet.

Hermione had not been in the supervisor's office since Mrs. Macready had retired, and she was unsurprised at the changes Severus had made to it. Gone were the pictures of children and grandchildren that had graced the wall and credenza. Gone was the spell that had changed the walls from dismal gray to light blue. Gone was the friendly lighting and bright, warm fire in the fireplace. Now it smoldered, hardly eking out any heat at all.

Severus sat behind an impossibly large mahogany desk, his hair pulled back with a ribbon. He actually looked rather handsome, an idea that Hermione quickly squelched. Her activities of late had caused her to look at men quite differently, but she was determined to see Severus just as she always had: a disagreeable man with a foul temper.

"Miss Granger, finally." He stood up impatiently and picked up a file. "The hospital would like your help for a few moments as soon as you can possibly spare them."

Hermione got the distinct impression that he would not allow her to refuse whether she wanted to or not. Of course she wouldn't, but that wasn't exactly the point. "Of course, sir. Anything."

He nodded and passed her the file, then walked to the door, looking back as though he wanted her to follow. She did, of course, opening the file as she went.

"There is a Muggle-born student on the fifth floor, and we are having a hard time convincing his parents to allow us to remove a rather nasty hex."

Hermione opened the file and read through it rather quickly as she followed Severus's swishing black robes through the maze of St. Mungo's.

"Why won't they let us take care of the boy?"

Severus paused beside a doorway, hand on the knob. "Because they are convinced that he should go to a Muggle hospital."

Hermione nearly dropped the file. Her parents had taken her to a Muggle hospital once. It had been disastrous. Of course, that was before they knew she was a Witch. And then there was the time that Mr. Weasley had agreed to putting stitches in his arm. Muggle methods should never be used on a Wizard or Witch. It was nearly unthinkable. Thankfully, the staff at St. Mungo's was adept at handling such emergencies, but to have one's child safely there already, and still insist upon moving him out? What could the parents be thinking?

They were frightened, no doubt. The boy had probably only just received his letter from Hogwarts, judging by his age.

"You want me to talk them into letting their child stay." Hermione said. "Why me? Why not someone from the Liaison office?"

Severus sighed. "They're all busy with helping Muggle-born's prepare for their first year, and you're the only Muggle-born Witch on duty today. The people that I answer to would like to see this resolved without involving the Ministry."

His implication hit her very hard. The Ministry might have the power to remove the child from his parent's care. "I will do what I can. Sheath your wand out of sight."

Severus shoved his ebony wand into his boot and opened the door. Inside, a young rather fashionably dressed couple was worrying over a young Wizard who looked rather like his skin was made out of tire rubber.

"Oh my," Hermione murmured, pushing the boy's blonde hair out of his face. "Were you playing with your wand?"

He nodded and the dark black color of his skin paled slightly. "I thought I was transfiguring my teapot."

Behind her, Severus chuckled. She herself was suppressing a laugh. "Nathan, didn't you read your textbook? You should really start with toothpicks and needles."

Nathan nodded, his eyes downcast.

"Miss? Are you his doctor?" the father asked impatiently.

Hermione turned to him and smiled. "I'm a potion brewer, sir, and my name is Miss Granger. I am not a Mediwitch, but I can honestly tell you that your son is not quite as bad off as he looks."

The mother turned scarlet and looked as though she was about to give Hermione an earful. Preemptively, Hermione raised her hand to stay her.

"I'm not saying that he doesn't look shocking, but a simple reversal by a trained Mediwitch or Wizard will return your boy back to you in no time, as good as new. I know that this must be very difficult for you. It was for my parents when I received my letter. I was supposed to attend one of the finest schools in London myself. I'm sure your son was down for an equally prestigious school."

The father nodded. "Eton."

Hermione smiled. "My friend Justin was down for Eton as well. He did wonderful at Hogwarts, and is even a hero in our world. Order of Merlin, First Class. I'm sure that your son will do equally as well."

"You're assuming that we're going to carry on with this!" The mother exclaimed. "Look at him! Look at my son!"

Hermione pulled up a chair and opened the file across her lap. "Mrs. Grambford, I am very sorry that your son got a little caught up with his studies and decided to try a few spells out. One of those spells backfired. It's been known to happen. But please, believe me when I tell you that this is incredibly rare! If Nathan had been in a classroom with a professor watching his movements and explaining the spell, this would not have happened. Now, I am perfectly willing to discuss your son's future with you, and I am more than happy to regale you with tales of my own experiences as a Muggle-born at Hogwarts-" cleverly omitting the parts about Voldemort, of course-"but first, can't we get a Mediwitch in here to see about Nathan? Let's set him to rights first, and then we'll all be in a much better mood to discuss this."

The Grambfords relented, and Hermione had Severus summon the Mediwitch who righted the boy with very little effort. The Grambfords were actually surprised to see how easy it was to reverse the spell, and spent the next two hours quizzing both Hermione and Severus about Hogwarts and the Magical world.

"I do believe that it is lunchtime," Severus remarked as they made their way back down to the brewing room.

"Yes. Sir? Do you mind if I use your office during my lunch hour?"

Severus turned to her with a shocked expression on his face. "I do mind, but I will allow it, if you have a good reason."

"I need to write to Harry."

"Sorry, I won't allow it."

"Snape, please! I need to discuss this matter with him!"

"Which matter?"

She found herself practically chasing after him. "This matter! The things that you and I just witnessed. Harry is drafting a bill that will help Muggle-born witches and wizards survive better in our world, and it's situations such as this that we are trying to avoid."

Severus was apparently determined to act obtuse. "Situations such as what, Miss Granger?"

Hermione sighed and grabbed his arm, thankful that he actually stopped his stalking and looked down at her. "You said yourself that the hospital was trying to avoid getting the Ministry authorities involved. They might have taken that boy away from his family, and you know it! And then what? Obliviation for all of them?"

"Perhaps it would be for the best in some cases."

Hermione frowned. "Who makes that decision? And how? What are the guidelines? Sir, you must see! There has to be some sort of accountability. Please, may I use your office to write Harry a note?" The last sentence was spoken rather shrilly and a little hysterically, but she held her ground.

Severus studied her face for long moments, his cold black eyes boring holes into her skin. She flushed under such scrutiny, but she did not look away.

"Very well," he finally conceded. "You may use my office for one hour, but you will not make a habit of drafting missives to Harry Potter in there, is this understood?"

She nodded. "I would not ask it of you were it not important."

"I know. And this is the main reason why I am allowing it." He turned and began his retreat once more, Hermione following at a much more sedate pace.

The brewing room was deserted. Her coworkers had no doubt left for the cafeteria, as the lunch hour had begun a quarter of an hour earlier. Hermione reached into her portfolio and took out a piece of parchment and her writing utensils. Severus was in his office, sitting once more behind his large desk, two plates of food sitting in front of him. She looked at him quizzically, but his nose was already buried in *The Daily Prophet*, and he did not look up when she sat across from him.

"You don't have to stay with me."

"I'm not comfortable with someone working in my office without me. Nothing personal, mind you."

Hermione actually understood perfectly. "No offense taken."

"Speaking of taking, here, take this plate. I ordered it for you."

She suppressed a smile. "Thank you, sir."

Uncharacteristically, Severus grunted in response and snapped his paper back open as though he were hiding from her good will.

"And thank you for trusting me with the task this morning. It really means a lot to me."

He didn't answer her, but she knew that he heard.

When the hour was up, Hermione had managed to pen her letter and eat her meal with relative composure. She had even managed to have a short debate with Severus regarding an article about Harry's charitable endeavors. It was actually very pleasant.

"Be careful," Ginny cautioned over dinner at Hermione's house.

"Oh, Ginny! Of course I will be. You don't think that I'd actually want Severus Snape in my little black book, do you?"

Ginny shrugged. "Why not? He's damned sexy. And so tall. I bet he's hung like a Hippogriff."

Hermione choked on her tea. "I don't need these images in my mind!"

Ginny waved her off and took a sip of her own tea. "When do you want to surprise Harry? And do you want to practice kissing or canoodling first? I'd really like to surprise him in bed."

Hermione jumped up and went to her desk. "I almost forgot! I ordered a book and some props from that Lord Orion Shagswell. You know? The wizard who writes the advice column for *Playwitch*?"

Ginny joined Hermione at the desk. "Ooh, him? He's dreamy! And what do you mean by 'props'?"

Hermione smiled and held up a box. "Come to the bedroom. We'll practice our canoodling and kissing, and we can play with my new toys."

Harry's birthday dawned bright and crisp just as it should have. Hermione smiled all through the day, remembering Ginny's heated touch along her body. It was interesting, experimenting with another girl. It was something they had never engaged in, though they had laughed about it every now and then when the other girls at Hogwarts had been caught in compromising positions, emphatically insisting that they were just practicing their techniques. Now it seemed that there was some merit in such trysts. Ginny was warm and soft all over, and her kisses were sweet and tender. No stubble marred her chin or scratched at Hermione's skin when she nuzzled, and breasts, despite what most women thought, really were a lot of fun to play with.

By the time evening fell and it was time to leave work, Hermione was desperately horny and ready for a long, slow night of passion. She had already given a request to Severus to be excused from work the following day, and he had actually approved it without question. She was positive, though, that if he knew why she wanted off, that he would have rather died a thousand deaths before allowing it. He would also have probably given her the lecture of a lifetime. It might be warranted, too. Sure, the entire Magical World was convinced that Hermione was one of Harry's lovers, but that didn't make it true. What she was going to be doing this night would make it true. Very true. The thought was not at all distasteful.

At Grimmauld Place, Hermione hastened to the master bedroom on Ginny's heels. Ginny was a woman on a mission, and just as with everything else, she meant to carry through with an intensity that would make even Severus Snape pale in comparison.

"I bought us some lingerie."

"Oh? I thought we were going to do this naked," Hermione said as she entered the room and kicked off her shoes.

"We were until I was reading that book you leant me by Lord Orion Shagswell. He mentioned lingerie quite emphatically in chapter five, and you know *Playwitch* has quite a few adverts for naughty costumes; I couldn't help myself."

Hermione pulled her robes up over her head and unclasped her bra. "Let's see."

Ginny went to her bureau and opened a small corner drawer. "I hid them in here so that Harry wouldn't find them. He thinks this is my junk drawer. It really just has an excellent Confundus Charm placed on it."

The filmy scraps of material that Ginny pulled forth from the drawer could hardly be called clothing, or even lingerie. The panties were crotchless, and the corsets only laced over the ribcage, leaving the breasts bare and framed by lace. The gloves and stockings were shimmery bits of silk that felt like heaven to the touch. Once they were kitted out, it looked as though their extremities were covered with the finest glitter.

"You're beautiful," Hermione couldn't help saying as Ginny flopped onto the bed, her pert breasts bouncing with her movement.

"So are you." Her look turned predatory. "Now come here, love, and let me show you just how much."

They both giggled at her joke, and Hermione wasted no time in slinking her way up to Ginny, starting at the foot of the bed and crawling on her hands and knees.

"I hope these are for me," Ginny murmured, taking Hermione's breasts into her silk-covered hands.

"You have to show me that you know what to do with them first," was the coy reply.

When Harry found them, they were furiously riding each other's thighs, wet and sticky from sweat and arousal. Hermione opened her eyes briefly to catch a glimpse of him, his face hard with lust, his hands keeping a white-knuckled grasp on the canopy bar.

"Harry," Ginny keened, "oh Harry! I think...oh, god...I think we need you!"

Hermione whimpered and pinched Ginny's nipple as she began to come.

"Fuck," Harry grunted.

Hermione didn't have the luxury of watching what happened next, as she was too busy thrusting against Ginny's thigh and shoving her tongue down Ginny's throat as she came rather forcefully. Not to be outdone, Ginny pushed Hermione onto her back and insinuated her hand between Hermione's thigh and her clitoris before she threw back her head so that her red hair flew this way and that as she succumbed to *le petit mort*. Harry swore again, but Hermione was too distracted by the soft curves now filling her arms to pay him much mind.

Ginny, however, was practically married to the man who was watching them, and apparently didn't have the luxury of forgetting him and his needs. Hermione watched as she took Hermione's nipple into her mouth, and then tongued it, all while looking at Harry through smoldering brown eyes.

Harry, who seemed to have finally gained his wits back, doffed his outer robes and joined Ginny in lavishing Hermione's nipples, stealing kisses from her whenever he could. When Ginny decided to move on to Hermione's other nipple, Harry stopped and sat back, straightening his glasses as he did so.

"What are the rules?" he asked.

"Anything goes," Ginny answered. "And as this will probably be your only chance with her, you might want to pay Hermione as much attention as possible."

Hermione laughed and escaped from their cozy little knot. "Ginny dearest, you do forget that we are here for Harry's birthday gift. He should be calling the shots."

Harry's green eyes took on a look of mischief, and he reclined against the pillows. "That's right, isn't it, my lovies? I'm in charge. Why then, as it is my birthday, and I am king for a day, not to mention your savior, I order you both to undress me. Whoever does the best job gets to ride the firebolt first."

Hermione leaned in and ran her hand down his shirt. "I'd rather ride you," she whispered in her best husky voice before she licked her way into his mouth and gave him a toe-curling kiss.

When she brought her head up to finish removing Harry's shirt, Hermione found that Ginny had been very industrious by removing his shoes and pants entirely, and was now kissing her way around his lower extremities, careful to not touch his penis, which was now large and hard, dark from arousal and pointing straight upward. Deciding that she was behind in the game, Hermione gave up any hope of teasing him more and simply ripped his shirt open, exposing his rather nicely shaped chest.

She had seen him nearly naked before, when they were hunting Horcruxes all those years ago, but she had been with Ron at that time. Not only had Harry been off-limits, he had been uninteresting as well. Now she found him to be quite the opposite.

"What do you think?" Harry asked, running his palm along his shaft, his large hands not diminishing his size at all.

"I think it a very good thing that you are not covered in chocolate, or Ginny and I would be fighting to devour you."

Ginny laughed and threw her arms around Hermione's shoulders. Harry smirked at both of them, then held out one hand towards his dresser and shouted, "Accio chocolate!"

A drawer opened, and a jar of chocolate fudge flew into his hands. Still smirking, he heated it slightly with his wand, and then drizzled the contents down his chest, over his stomach, and across his thighs and cock.

"Ginny, if you'll just come over on this side of me, the two of you can start up here and work your way down."

"You're a cheeky devil," Ginny accused as she slid herself across his body, allowing the chocolate to smear over some of her more delectable parts.

"I have plenty of sweets hidden around here," he said as he licked a drop of chocolate off of her nipple. "Just in case."

"Now I know what you do without me," Ginny murmured as she lowered her head to his chest, just a short distance from Hermione's. They worked his chest together, sucking the chocolate off of his flesh, and off of each other's faces. By the time they reached his cock, they were both sticky and aroused, and the sight of his large shaft was positively electrifying.

"You have it all the time," Hermione murmured as she delicately sucked at the base.

"And I'm not inclined to share," Ginny returned, meeting Hermione's tongue with hers.

They alternated kissing each other and suckling his cock until he couldn't take any more, and he dragged them both back up to him, and then it was his turn to torture them. He kissed them separately, and then they managed a three-way kiss. At one point, he pushed them together so that he could take a breast each into his mouth at the same time. Then he knelt between them and used his hands between their legs, watching as they began to thrust against him and arch at his ministrations. When he commanded that they kiss each other, they complied, but they did not stop themselves there. With Harry gazing at them approvingly, they caressed and kissed each other's breasts and bellies, always watching him so that he would know that it was all for his benefit.

Well, theirs, too, but mostly his.

Finally, he sat back on his heels and pulled Hermione, who was very nearly at her second orgasm of the night, onto his shaft and began to thrust into her in earnest. Someone—she was never sure if it was Harry or Ginny—forced her onto her back, and then Ginny mounted her face. Understanding what was to be done, Hermione gladly pulled apart Ginny's folds and began to lap and suckle at her, using the same techniques that she usually enjoyed. The only sounds that she could hear were the moans and pants of Harry and Ginny. She was concentrating so hard on what she was doing to Ginny that her orgasm took her completely by surprise, and she had to turn her

head and sink her teeth into Ginny's thigh to help counterbalance the exquisite perfection of the moment.

Ginny moaned and said something that didn't register in Hermione's brain, and then her arms were once again filled with the beautiful redhead's curves as Harry began to thrust into her while she lay cradled against Hermione's chest. Ginny whimpered and cursed as Harry grasped her hips and sped up his thrusts. She alternated kissing him and Hermione, and then she grasped a handful of Hermione's hair and arched her back as she let out a deep, keening moan of pleasure. Harry closed his eyes and threw back his head so forcefully that his glasses went flying off, and they both came together. His weight was added to Ginny's, and Hermione found herself in the not unpleasant position of playing mattress to the Magical World's most famous couple.

As their passion simmered down, they arranged themselves more comfortably against the pillows. Ginny was sandwiched between Harry and Hermione, and Harry had managed to wrap his long arms around both of them.

"You really need to grow a pair of breasts, Harry," Ginny muttered against his chest as she pulled Hermione's leg over her waist and ran her hand along it. "I love playing with them."

"I rather like yours, too," Hermione said, running her hands over them. "I couldn't imagine more perfect breasts."

"You're welcome to come over and play with them any time you like," Harry offered. "But I'm spent now, ladies. If you wish to carry on, however, I certainly won't stop you just yet."

They laughed and snuggled even closer against him.

"Tired," Ginny said.

"Me too," Hermione agreed.

"Sleep," Harry whispered, leaning over to kiss them both on the forehead.

The next morning, Hermione and Ginny woke Harry with a full English breakfast and another satisfying ride. By the time she made it back to her flat, Hermione was sore and achy in all the right places, so she treated herself to a hot chocolate as she relaxed in her pretty claw-footed tub and recapped the previous night's events in her little black book, complete with both Harry's and Ginny's proportions. An added extra that she had begun to tack on after her first few quickies, was something personal, such as a way that they liked to be touched or kissed in a certain spot.

Smiling in satisfaction, she closed the moleskine and leaned back against the lip of the tub. Life was certainly getting more interesting by the day.

TBC

AN: Sorry this is so long in coming! It was a difficult chapter to write (I started it about ten times, and then had to scrap it), but I'm very happy with how this turned out.

Thanks to everyone that's taken the time to read and review. I try to answer each one, but if I forgot you somehow, I'm sorry. I do really enjoy reading what you think about this tale, though.

Five

Chapter 5 of 8

NOT DH COMPLIANT! NO SPOILERS FOR DH! Hermione needs to discover herself sexually as well as intellectually.
Ultimate HG/SS pairing, but there might be others in the way.

Going to any party in the Wizarding World was difficult enough for Hermione. She was still Harry Potter's friend and nothing more, but she used to at least have a boyfriend. It was almost enough to make her rethink her current status as a free agent, showing up to parties alone. And it wasn't as though she could just not go, either. Harry had asked her to attend on his behalf, and she said yes out of duty to him. He had promised to make it up to her somehow, and she hoped that it included a deep-tissue massage at the new salon in Diagon Alley.

Harry had assured her that Remus would be in attendance, but she was having a time trying to locate him in the crush. Bodies seemed to be everywhere, but then they were in a restaurant rather than at the Ministry or some other Ministry-sanctioned meeting hall. There was a silent auction, but Hermione didn't really care about what she bought or how much it was. Harry had given her unlimited access to his accounts at Gringott's to bid with, so she assumed that whatever she purchased, it would need to be expensive. And small. Harry did not want to go through the hassle of bringing anything large to his home, and Hermione did not like the idea of shrinking something expensive and possibly antique down in size.

Hermione decided to give up trying to locate Remus and instead concentrated on finding a suitable item to bid on, as well as a glass of something alcoholic.

"...practically running a crusade of her own," she heard a familiar-sounding voice say. She hoped it was Remus.

"All the better, dear chap," another familiar voice answered. "A woman on a crusade is infinitely preferable to one on a mission."

"I fail to see the difference, Lucius."

Hermione stopped short. Severus Snape. Lucius Malfoy. Oh no! She turned towards the sound of their voices and saw them, tall and imposing against the rather mundane decorations of the restaurant. One was silvery white while the other was impeccably black.

So much for Snape attempting to keep his reputation clean by not hanging around with shady characters.

"Hullo, Mister Snape," Hermione said. "Mister Malfoy."

Lucius looked Hermione up and down just as he usually did, an expression on his face as though he found her to be the most distasteful being on the face of the earth.

"Miss Granger, how...unexpected," Severus said, also looking her over. She felt suddenly like a painting that they were both critiquing.

This wasn't going well. Time to cut and run. "Yes, well, that's how things are from time to time. Sorry to have intruded, I'm just trying to find Remus Lupin. Nice to see you

both."

"Won't you have a glass of champagne with us, Miss Granger?" Lucius asked, snagging a glass from a waiter. As always, he was dressed as though he belonged in Regency-era London, from his highly polished black Hessians to his costly white silk gloves. He was perhaps one of the most handsome men to ever live.

"I'm sure that Miss Granger has other things..." Severus began.

"If it's alcoholic, I'm drinking it," she mumbled, reaching for the glass.

Lucius smiled and delicately placed the champagne flute into her ungloved hand. As it was after five o'clock in the evening, she really should have been wearing them. The laws of decorum amongst the Magical were very clear on bare hands after a certain hour for formal occasions. However, Hermione did not consider a cocktail-and-silent auction-party to be a formal occasion, so she had left hers off. She was relieved to see that Severus had as well. His bare hands were clutching a tumbler of firewhiskey, and Hermione wondered how he had managed to get so lucky. As in Hogwarts, his dress clothes consisted of Victorian-era regalia. Black trousers, black cut-away, and a surprising crimson waistcoat. He actually looked nice.

"How charming you look this evening, Miss Granger," Lucius said after he gave her a moment to sip her champagne.

"Thank you, Mister Malfoy," she murmured. Hermione had decided long ago that if she was going to embrace the Wizarding World and dress like an eccentric witch, she would choose the Medieval period as her model. For the silent auction, she had chosen a silver underdress with a blue velvet surcoat over it. Her sleeves were belled and the open sides of the dress were embroidered with knotwork.

"Hermione! There you are!"

Hermione turned to find a smiling Remus Lupin approaching her. He was also wearing a crimson waistcoat, but his Edwardian suit was khaki. She didn't even have to look at Lucius to know what he felt about khaki at an evening event. "Hello, Remus. I thought you'd forgotten all about me."

He wrapped his arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. "Of course not, love. Have you had a chance to look at any of the items up for auction yet?"

"I was just going in that direction when Mister Malfoy offered me a glass of champagne."

Remus looked up at her companions in shock. "Malfoy! Snape! How...what a chance."

"Lupin," they both sneered simultaneously.

Remus ignored their tone and indicated Severus's firewhiskey. "Where did you pick that up?"

"At the bar," Severus bit out. "I suggest you go and find it."

"Oh, all right, all right. Bloody arsewipes. You ready, Hermione?"

Hermione nodded and he grabbed her hand, ready to lead her off.

"Miss Granger is with us, Lupin. I suggest you find your own date."

Hermione gave a little laugh and squeezed Remus's hand. "Sorry, Mister Malfoy, but I am Remus's date for the evening. Thank you so much for the champagne. Mister Snape, I'll see you on Monday."

Lucius looked very angry for some unexplained reason, but Severus simply nodded his head to her and took another sip of his firewhiskey. Hermione was sure that the last thing he'd want to do would be to spend the evening entertaining her, especially since they usually spent every day together.

"I'm sorry I'm late, but I was unavoidably detained."

"I forgive you."

"You look beautiful."

Hermione looked up at Remus and smiled. "Thank you. How were you detained?"

"I ran into Bill Weasley. He told me something about a few of the items up for auction tonight. Were Snape and Malfoy beastly to you?"

"They were quite pleasant. What did you learn? And I thought that Bill was in Kazakhstan."

"He was in Russia, actually. Do you know the story of Swan Lake?" He pulled her to the bar and ordered them both a firewhiskey. Hermione pushed her champagne glass away, anxious for something a little harder.

"Of course I do. My parents take me to see either The Nutcracker or Swan Lake every year."

Remus smiled. "I thought as much. Royal Ballet?"

"Of course. So, yes, I know all about Swan Lake. I even used to watch this stupid VHS when I was little of the story in cartoon form. It left out some of the major plot points, but it was fun for me. Very precious. What do you know about Swan Lake that you aren't telling me?"

Remus smiled and leaned in close. "It all happened."

Hermione widened her eyes and forgot about her drink. "So the Evil Wizard Von Rothbart..."

"Was an actual evil wizard who would steal young maidens away from their families. He would steal other things as well, apparently. You really should talk to Bill about it. He said that there were these rooms hanging from the castle turrets like birdcages. He said that there were no doors to go inside, so they theorized that Von Rothbart probably Apparated within."

"How many?"

"I didn't ask. He was in a rush, and so was I. Apparently, a Muggle who was visiting family just outside of Minsk went missing for three weeks. It got to the point that some of our people became involved looking for the man-I'm not sure how, but the Russian version of Aurors found the man dead around what looked like a ruined castle. Being Aurors, however, they sensed magic and began to detect the wards that were protecting the castle. Rothbart's power was so strong that the wards and protection spells were just now, hundreds of years later, are beginning to wane."

Hermione felt giddy. "How was Bill called in?"

"Well, he wasn't the only Cursebreaker called into the job, but the fact that he works for the Goblins landed him in charge. Some of the artifacts that were recovered are here tonight, available by auction."

Hermione frowned. "Who decided ownership of the artifacts?"

"The International Federation of Wizards. Your friend Malfoy was on the board."

"Naturally. Whose artifacts are up for auction?"

"That's the odd part. The Goblins are selling theirs and will donate fifty percent of the proceeds to the Wee Wizard Orphanage."

Hermione nearly choked. "Donating? The Goblins?"

"I didn't get any of that out of Bill, but yes. The Goblins are donating their artifacts. It's highly unusual."

Hermione took Remus's hand and led him away from the bar. "Come on, let's have a look!"

In the end, Hermione ended up purchasing a bowl of seven Pisanka eggs, all of them lovingly detailed with various symbols that would be fun to research. She decided that she would ask if she could keep them as a birthday present. Harry would not likely say no, and she rarely asked for anything from him.

"I think I have a few books on Russian Folklore at my apartment," Remus said. "Would you like to come by?"

Hermione looked up at him. Was he asking what she thought he was asking? His wolfish grin told her yes. What would it be like, making love with a Werewolf?

"Sounds lovely."

Remus pulled her close and was just about to Apparate them when Lucius approached.

"You're not going, are you?"

Hermione had to fight to keep from rolling her eyes "Yes, we are. I'm sorry, I thought you had left already."

Lucius smiled back. "I would not have left without at least trying to say goodbye. Do you require an escort?"

"What do you think I am?" Remus asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Oh, I've waited years for you to ask that question. For starters..."

Hermione stepped between them. "That's enough, Mister Malfoy. Thank you for your kind attention this evening. I am sure that I will see you again soon."

Lucius reached into his coat and removed a silver-leafed card. "Here is my card, Miss Granger. You may call on me whenever you like. Please enjoy your eggs. Their beauty alone makes them worthwhile."

Hermione took the card. "Thank you, sir. Now if you'll excuse us, we must be off. Please give my best wishes to your friend."

Lucius gave a quick nod, and Hermione leaned against Remus as he put his arm around her. With a "crack", they were off, and a moment later, they were standing in front of Remus's flat. He opened the door and ushered her inside, only to push her against the door and immediately pull her into an open-mouthed kiss so hot that it nearly scorched her. He was rough and demanding, and she found herself out of breath even attempting to keep up with him.

Remus took her hand and led her to the bedroom. It was decorated with dark reds and gold. A large tapestry hung on one wall, and sheer white curtains hung from the bed cornice. The room looked like something created in ancient times, but the bed itself was a wonder. It was high-so high that she would need a stepstool to climb onto it. Before she could wonder why Remus would want a bed like that, he grabbed her again and began to undo the laces on the back of her gown while kissing her in his same rough style. When he was finished, both her underdress and her surcoat slithered to the floor in an elegant heap. Instead of pouncing on her corset, however, he simply took a step back and began to peel off his layers, a satisfied smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Hermione wasn't entirely sure what she should do, as Remus continued his maddeningly slow progress. His hands were now at his collar, and she decided to help him. He did not push her away, he simply allowed her to undress him while he unbuttoned his cuffs with his arms behind her back. When his shirt dropped to the floor, she dropped with it and set to work on his trousers. Remus, however, seemed to have a different idea and instead backed her up to the bed, which turned out to be just the perfect height for him to bend her over.

He did not bend her over it, however, simply pushed her against it and lifted her rear so that she was straddling his hips. Again, it wasn't so much that he was rough, but he certainly was not gentle. Hermione had never been treated with anything other than kidgloves.

Remus began to kiss her again, only this time it was nips and sucks and then a bit of tongue, and then his teeth sank into the softness of her neck as he untied her corset strings and thrust against her. The pressure of her breathing separated the strings a little, and he reached his hand in to free one of her breasts. With his free hand, Remus used his wand to spell away the rest of their clothing, and without even preparing her, thrust home.

Hermione gasped. He felt so large-larger than any of the others she had been with. Looking down in wonder, she saw that he was very well endowed indeed, and he chuckled.

"Hold on, Hermione. This is going to be a bumpy ride."

With no other preamble, Remus grabbed her buttocks with both hands and began to thrust with wild abandon. The feelings were so odd-he hurt her, and yet it felt so good at the same time. There were only two items that she could hold onto, the bedpost, and his shoulder. Both shuddered with each thrust, and one groaned with every dig of her nails on his flesh.

Her first orgasm was quick and violent, and Remus allowed her no time to ride it out. Instead, he did what the bed was made for and flipped her over, pinning her torso onto the mattress as he once again thrust into her. He held one hand against her belly while his other hand held her thigh aloft. Each thrust hit against her G-spot and she fisted the bedcovers with each hot stab of pleasure. Soon, she was muttering incoherently, and only barely noticed when his hand abandoned her thigh and sank into the hair at the back of her head. He roughly pulled her head back and began to thrust so hard that he was practically spanking her with his body. He tugged on her hair again and pulled her hips sharply against his, shattering any control that she had left. She began to scream with pleasure. Loudly. This time when her orgasm broke, it was monumental. She had heard of this phenomenon, female ejaculation, but she had never experienced it before now.

With a howl of pleasure, Remus climaxed and continued to thrust until his legs gave out and he collapsed onto the hardwood floor. Without his support, Hermione fell on top of him, and they stayed there all wet and sticky and sweaty for quite some time.

~*~*~*~

"A word, please, Miss Granger," Severus said.

Hermione cast a stasis charm on her cauldron and ducked into his office. "Sir?" She couldn't help but notice that he looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"Miss Gra...Hermione. I wish to speak with you. Not as a superior or a colleague, but as more of a friend, if that is possible."

Hermione sat down in the chair across from his desk, her interest thoroughly peaked. "Regarding what, sir?"

Severus sat in his chair and twirled a quill in his fingers. "Regarding...Miss Gr...Hermione, I understand fully that this is none of my business, and indeed, I could be released from my position for even bringing this up to you, but I feel I must *meddle*, with all good intentions."

"Meddle?" Hermione exclaimed. "Mister Snape, what could possibly be the matter?"

Severus slammed the quill onto his desk and drew his shoulders up squarely. "Hermione, I know that Lucius propositioned you at the party Friday night. He told me that he intended to, and then boasted that he had."

Hermione blushed at his words. "I see."

"You are a bright woman, and I know that this probably does not need to be said, however, Lucius has a way about him. Women can't seem to resist him for whatever reason. I must caution you, Hermione, do not waste even a moment of your life with him. He is my friend, and always will be, but I would hate to see your life destroyed by him."

Hermione processed his words, her mind unable to comprehend any of it. "Why are you telling me this, sir? I...yes, Lucius did give me his card and ask me to call on him. I do not intend to. I will tell him this myself. I do not wish for his attentions."

Severus snorted. "All women say that at first. It signifies nothing to him."

"If he persists, he'll only annoy me. That is not conducive to romance."

"Lucius is very persuasive. It's a gift that he has. When you're away from him, all you can think about is how much you hate him. When you're with him, however, it's a completely different story. I am not attempting to tell you what to do by any means. I sincerely do not wish to see you become another of his conquests; particularly considering who you are, and the friends you keep."

"Oh, I see. You think that Lucius would use me to garner respect? I daresay his galleons would work better. I'm Harry Potter's whore, remember? Not only that, but I'm keeping the respected Weasley daughter from having her Happily Ever After. I don't see how his befriending-or even seducing-me could do much for him. You'd better remind him of those things."

Severus once again looked decidedly uncomfortable. "I'm not saying that he definitely has an ulterior motive; sometimes a seduction is a means to an end in itself. I find it highly unlikely, however, that he would attempt a seduction without also gaining something more."

Hermione stood. "Well, consider me dully warned, though I honestly have no intention of ever paying a call on Lucius Malfoy. My friends are indulgent, but any sort of relationship with him would gain me a one-way trip to Saint Simon's Center for Magical Mental Maladies." She gave Severus her best smile and went to the door, noting that he was frowning at her. "Really, sir. Lucius won't continue to sniff around me after I've rebuffed him enough times. There are many witches out there who are beautiful and talented in ways that I never will be. Thank you for your concern, though. It's appreciated." She stopped at the door and turned back to him. "If I may ask, since we are being informal, why are you still friends with him if you dislike him so?"

Severus pushed a parchment around his desk for a moment. "Sometimes, it really is better to be with the devil you know than the devil you don't," he answered. "Good day, Miss Granger."

"Come out with me tonight."

Severus looked up, surprised. "Beg pardon?"

"Tonight. Come out with me. I'm meeting Harry and Ron at The Wand and Pestil. Come with us. Ginny will be there, and I think Ron will have a date. You can...you can be my friend. Just friends. You can leave whenever you like, but at least have one drink."

He actually looked as though he were considering it for a minute, but it didn't surprise her when he declined. "Some other time."

Hermione nodded. "I might not be a devil, sir, but at least you know me," she said just before she walked out the door.

TBC

AN: If you want to see what I think Hermione's party dress looked like, go here: <http://www.mwart.com/xq/ASP.product/pid.1087/qx/ladys-overdress-surcoat.htm>

And would you look at that! Hermione and Snape have actually made some progress! I'm so happy, I could hug them both.

Big thanks to all the reviewers. It's like getting a nekkit picture of "Luscious" Malfoy everytime I see a review notice in my inbox.

Six

Chapter 6 of 8

Hermione deals with Lucius and finds out what it is that he wants. We see another side of Severus. Slight hint at canonical pairings, but don't worry; not too much

AN: Here's the next chapter. Sorry it took so long to upload. Please enjoy! Thanks to everyone that's been e-mailing and commenting on this story during my little hiatus. And for the record, Hawaii was incredible. Yes. That's one of the places that I was. I drank from a coconut. It was awful. I had to mix it with sugar and rum to make it bearable.

~*~*~

Lucius Malfoy proved to be a persistent shadow to Hermione. He deftly maneuvered her at every social function, making sure that his card was next to hers at a dinner for the new Mugwumps, volunteering to serve on her focus group for the Wee Wizard Orphanage, showing up at The Wand and Pistil for dinners though he always looked hopelessly out of place in the dingy pub.

She admired his tenacity, but when he sent her a set of silver combs for her birthday, she began to feel that she was in over her head. The gift was so costly and so blatantly a bribe to get into her good graces that she almost seethed at him. Instead, she sent them back (reluctantly) with a perfunctory note about how she could not

possibly accept such an expensive gift from a man not related to her.

Perversely, at the party that Harry threw for her at Grimmauld Place, Hermione accepted a gift of earrings from Severus. They were simple Celtic knots, but they were made with excellent craftsmanship. Though they were nothing as exquisite as the combs, they were no trifle, either. When Lucius heard about them, he confronted Hermione at a soiree for disabled wizards and witches. He was polite, always perfectly gentlemanly, but very angry underneath it all.

Two days after the confrontation, he had sent her a letter begging for forgiveness and asking if they couldn't simply be friends. Of course, Severus had made it clear that there was nothing simple about being Lucius's "friend" even if she wanted to be, but how to communicate it to him without making him her enemy?

"I told you he'd be persistent," Severus murmured as he set his lunch tray next to hers. She was working on her third letter to Lucius, this one just as abysmal as the last one and just as likely to remain unsent.

"Yes, you did warn me. Why can't he just take no for an answer?"

Severus snapped open his newspaper and snorted. "If he took no for an answer, he would not be where he is today."

Hermione could not argue with this assessment, and lost all interest in the subject as her friends brought their trays to the table and sat down with them. The boys had finally gotten over their fear of Severus, though they still did not like him very much. They did like Hermione and Katherine, though, so they continued to sit together at lunch time.

"Anything new about the Quidditch scandal?" Katherine asked as she doused her shepherd's pie with brown gravy, making Evan look a little ill at the combination.

Severus turned to the sports page and almost spit out his peas. "You'd better look," he said, thrusting the page at Hermione.

Katherine, impatient, peered over Hermione's shoulder. "Impossible."

"Don't read it aloud or anything," John grouched.

Hermione shook her head. "I can hardly say anything, John." She skimmed over the article for a second time, hoping that she had read it wrong before. "As Katherine said, it's impossible. They seem to think that Ron is taking Felix Felicis."

Evan gave a laugh. "Anyone that's ever seen him play knows that it isn't true. He's an excellent Keeper, but he often makes mistakes. The other teams are probably just jealous that the Cannons are finally winning, so they're spreading gossip."

"Read it aloud, Miss Granger," Severus said quietly. "Let them decide for themselves."

Hermione obliged, and in her clear voice she read the article in its entirety. "Trouble may be brewing for the long-standing Quidditch team, The Chudley Cannons. The team is just now coming out of a two hundred and fifty year losing streak thanks to its new Keeper, Ronald Weasley, youngest son of Arthur and Molly Weasley and recipient of the Order of Merlin, First Class for heroism during the war against Voldemort. Witnesses have seen young Weasley consulting with a Potions Master on several occasions-" Severus snorted at this..."and accepting a vial of gold-tinged potion from him. Weasley has denied all charges, as has Coach Marcus Fairbanks. Weasley is expected to report for testing at St. Mungo's Hospital before September thirtieth. Oh dear. What potion, sir?"

He smiled. "Wolfsbane. I was giving him Lupin's monthly dose. I had no idea that the foul potion looked gold. How absurd."

"When was this?" Katherine asked.

Hermione turned questioning eyes to Severus. "Your birthday," he said. "Lupin could not make it, remember?"

Hermione nodded. "That makes me feel sick! Whoever is spreading these lies was invited to my party-could be one of my friends!"

"Or an uninvited guest," Severus amended.

"A party at Potter's house was enough to get me a really hot date," Evan said. "The lure of seeing The Boy Who Lived up close and personal was probably a huge draw for some people."

Katherine gave Evan a sharp look, but Hermione ignored them.

"There were so many wards in place, if it was an uninvited guest, they would have to be very powerful and incredibly skilled. I'll ask Harry for a guest list. I want to know who this person is. No one messes with my friends."

Severus cleared his throat and snatched back his paper. "Clearly not."

Hermione looked at him quizzically, wondering why he suddenly sounded so cold.

"And you shan't use my office to send him a letter," Severus practically snapped.

"I wasn't even thinking of it."

"Good."

He softened a bit, and Hermione wondered what it was that had suddenly changed his demeanor. And why would he care if she sent Ron a note, anyway? She had a break coming in the afternoon, it would be more than enough time to jot down a few lines of encouragement if she wanted. Ron would probably appreciate it, too, but he liked to deal with crises in his own way on his own terms. He would contact her.

And contact her he did. When she got home that night, little Pigwidgeon was flitting about her kitchen, attempting to cozy up to Bubo whenever he alighted on a perch. The tiny owl held a note from Ron, asking her to meet him the following evening at The Wand and Pistil, their favorite haunt for good pub food and draught beer. The best part was that it was usually so noisy with the sounds of live music and even livelier conversation, they could have incredibly personal conversations without running the risk of being overheard at quieter places like The Leaky Cauldron or a proper restaurant. Plus, the patrons tended to not give any of them a second glance-not even Harry.

She arrived early, still in her work robes, hoping that one of the intimate corner booths would be available at such an early hour.

Naturally, Lucius Malfoy had to choose this night to try and catch her out. He was standing with a companion at one of the high bar tables, his clothes too rich and his manners too impeccable for even this fashionable, posh pub. Lucius belonged in velvet-draped salons, perched on an antique chair with an elegant glass of good wine in his hand, not at a bar table with a tankard of ale and a plate of sausage, egg and chips.

Hermione sighed and decided that the reason her letters weren't working was because she really should speak to the man in person. Impulsively, she crossed to his table with determined strides.

"Mister Malfoy," she said by way of beginning.

"Miss Granger!" he exclaimed, halting her words. "Did you indeed cross a room to speak to me?"

Hermione sighed. "Yes, I did. We have much to discuss."

Lucius smiled and took her hand, brushing a kiss to the back of it. "I am more than happy to accommodate you, my dear. But first, allow me to introduce you to my friend Piedmont. Peter, this is Hermione Granger. I'm sure you've heard of her."

Piedmont nodded and held out his large, rough hand to Hermione, barking out a salutation with a voice that was just a little too coarse. He did not look the sort that Lucius normally associated with. His skin was dark and leathery from sun exposure, and his hair an unruly mass of short, black curls. He could easily lose three stone without any dire consequences, and his waistcoat was bright purple with silver stars embroidered onto it. He was too loud, too large, and just a bit too vulgar. What was he to Lucius? Was he involved politically or socially?

"You work for St. Mungo's, do you not, Miss Granger?" Piedmont asked her.

"I do, sir."

"Excellent. I am on the Board of Supervisors."

Hermione almost slapped her forehead. "Peter Peidmont! Of course, you were only newly elected to the post, were you not?"

"Yes. My father was on the Board for many years before he died, and I am excessively happy to follow in his footsteps."

Hermione nodded. So he was another pocket companion for Lucius, a way for him to keep his pulse on all parts of the Wizarding World. Was anyone useless at anything but friendship with him?

"Forgive us, Peter, but I wish to have a few private words with Miss Granger, as she is willing."

Peter waved them off, more intent on his ale and the Quidditch game being broadcast over the Wireless than he was in them at the moment.

Lucius led Hermione to the quiet corner booth that she had been watching ever since she came in.

"I am so happy that you've finally stopped avoiding me," he said as he helped her into her side.

"I'm not avoiding you, I simply have no interest in your proposal."

"Ah, but how do you know until you've heard what it is?"

Hermione sat back and waved her hand. "Very well, tell me what you want."

Lucius laughed and relaxed against his side of the booth. He was too handsome, too charming. He looked sinful and exciting, and though Hermione couldn't imagine him fucking her against a door, she could imagine him doing other thrilling things to her behind closed doors. Worse still, his laughter was bright and cheery. How could someone so duplicitous laugh so honestly? This was how he fooled people. This easy façade.

"Don't play coy with me, Lucius."

"I would never play coy with you, my dear. Not when you are always so straight forward. I would not insult you in that way."

"Then tell me what it is you want."

"So that you can get around to refusing me?"

"Precisely."

Lucius took her hand and began to run his fingers over it. "I want you to be my lover for a night."

"Only a night?"

"Yes."

"And in return?"

He shrugged. "A night of pleasure is payment enough for both parties, don't you think?"

Hermione snatched her hand back. "You have ulterior motives. You always do."

"Not always."

She glared at him.

"If you wish for more, I would be more than happy to oblige you. For instance, I could teach you the ways of politics."

"I understand the political structure of both the Wizarding world and the Muggle one."

Lucius shook his head. "No, darling, not political houses and positions, I'm talking about how to play the system. How to be a Death Eater and still manage to have a strong toe hold in every prominent organization. How to fight against Aurors and kill them, and still manage to hold the title of Chief Mugwump."

"I fail to see how any of this would help me."

"That's your problem. You don't want to circumvent, to play games and enter through the back door. You and your school chums insist on announcing yourselves loudly through the front door every time. Never mind that everyone else is already behind the scenes, scheming for something else. Never mind that you're setting yourself up to be a pawn."

"You're the chess master."

Lucius shrugged and held his hands out. "I cannot change who I am, and this is part of it."

"Scheming and conniving, willing to sell anyone and everything to get what you want."

Lucius's face took on a dangerous look. "I am a murderer, Hermione. Cold blooded, too, the worst kind. I am not remorseful in the least. I hate Muggles, and there was a time that I hated Muggle-borns even more. I was twice accused and convicted-rightfully so, as well-of being a Death Eater. I am, to use your terms, a despicable person. I am untrustworthy at best, and you don't want to see me at my worst."

"Why are you telling me all of this?" Hermione asked, about ready to pull her wand and hex him into the next century.

"Because I am still in good standing with the Wizengamot, the International Federation of Wizards, the Ministry of Magic, the school Governors, and even your friend Harry

Potter was willing to allow me a chair on the board for his Wee Wizard Orphanage. Think about it, Hermione. I know how to wield power and listen to the call of opportunity. Without me to guide you along, you will be forgotten as a war hero, and you will eventually go back to being the poor little Mudblood who can't find a job to save her life."

Hermione felt as though she had been slapped. "Thank you, Mister Malfoy, for your c..."

"It's no good being indignant. If you can't face the truth, then there's no point in my trying. But consider: you are the brightest witch of your age. Do you really want to waste your potential making potions for St. Mungo's for the rest of your life?"

"Of course not!"

"Then put your ego aside for a moment and admit that what I'm saying makes sense."

Hermione mulled over his words. She was hurt and angry at everything he implied, but there was no denying that he was making sense. The Wizarding World was changing, but slowly. Certainly not fast enough for a "Mudblood" to take over as Potions Mistress of St. Mungo's in less than ten years.

"And your reward?" She finally asked, after thinking over what he was offering.

Lucius smiled smugly, apparently sure that he had convinced her to go along with his scheme. "I want to head the Wee Wizard Orphanage. Having a chair is all well and good, but Potter doesn't understand the first thing about running an organization. And before you ask, I will confess that there are still circles where I am considered a pariah and heading the orphanage will help get me back into the good graces of those circles. It may mean nothing to you, but you are not a professional politician."

"I would never hand the orphanage over to a Death Eater, even if I could. I can barely stomach the current governors who threaten to remove Muggle-born children from homes practically on a daily basis. With you at the head, these children wouldn't have a chance at keeping their parents."

Lucius scowled. "Give me at least a little credit. Your objection is exactly one of the main reasons that I want to oversee everything; Potter has not the patience nor the finesse to convince the other members that family is every bit as important as strong, capable wizards. Instead of arguing his point eloquently, he merely becomes exasperated and lashes out at anyone close by. With me at the helm, things would be very different. I promise you, on my honor, that I would not pull children from Muggle homes without express cause. A case like Potter's, for instance, would be good enough for me, but there would be no wil-nil about it. We will make policy and procedure for the right way to remove a Magical child from a Muggle family. You could even help us write the policy, if you like."

He was actually beginning to tempt her. "How would I guarantee you a seat? How would I persuade Harry to give up this project? It's something that he's been working on for ages."

"With what I will teach you, you will be able to persuade even me to give you something that I am unwilling to give up."

She doubted that very much. Still, it was an intriguing idea. "I have to think it over, Lucius. I don't make decisions like this quickly."

Lucius nodded. "I understand. And now that we've put all our cards on the table, so to speak, I do hope that you'll accept this." He pulled from his robes the box that contained the lovely silver combs. "I have no use for them. They were bought with you specifically in mind. I promise that there are no strings attached."

Hermione smiled. "No, not this time."

"You can't blame a Wizard for trying."

Hermione gave a little laugh and deposited the box in her pocket just before a Severus Snape-shaped shadow fell on the table. Hermione looked up to smile at him, but stopped short when she saw a look of such disappointment and hurt on his face that she had a hard time quantifying it.

"I'm sorry, Severus," Lucius said amicably. "I didn't realize that Hermione had come here to meet you."

"She didn't," a voice from behind said. "She came here to meet me. Now if both of you will shove off, I think we would both appreciate it." Ron, a knight in dark blue robes stalked forward and pushed his way past Severus to glare down at Lucius balefully. "That's my seat, Malfoy," he growled.

Lucius raised his hands in mock surrender. "No need to get your dander up. Hermione and I have concluded our business here, and I was just about to leave."

Ron towered over Lucius, still scowling darkly. He was younger and slightly leaner, but he had proved more dangerous in battle. He also had a penchant for applying Muggle methods that dyed-in-the-wool Wizards such as Lucius had a hard time looking out for, which made him deadly in a duel. Lucius had enough aplomb to not look ruffled by the furious Wizard, but he was clearly not foolish enough to start anything.

Severus for his part was still staring at Hermione with that look of disbelief still firmly in place.

"It's not what you think," she said quietly while looking into his fathomless black eyes.

"It doesn't matter what I think," Ron groused, missing her exchange with Severus completely. "You don't want me for your enemy, Malfoy. Stay away from my friends."

"You should allow her to make up her own mind," he returned in clipped tones. "She is a grown woman."

"I believe that Miss Granger has made it abundantly clear that she will choose her friends herself," Severus said in his usual silky voice, betraying nothing by his steady tone, "no matter how unsuitable some people may find them."

Hermione frowned. Did he think that she had forgotten their little chat? That she didn't know firsthand how dangerous Lucius was? "I appreciate the concern. Really, I do. But it still stands that Mister Malfoy is just now leaving, and that I had agreed to meet Ron and no one else here tonight. I'm sorry, Mister Malfoy, but as you said, our business has concluded. Thank you for your company. Ron, please sit down. Mister Snape, it has been very nice to see you tonight. I'm sorry that I cannot offer you a seat at present, but Ron wanted to speak to me about something particular tonight."

Severus shrugged. "I was actually meeting someone here myself and thought I'd say hello. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Hermione inclined her head to him and watched as he stalked across the room and seated himself at a table with a beautiful middle-aged witch. She smiled as he approached, and seemed to know him well. He touched her arm when he sat down, and looked at her intently the way that he usually looked at Hermione. He went to the bar and brought them each a drink, setting it in front of her by sliding it around from behind so that he would be close to her, and Hermione felt more than just a twinge of jealousy. That was how he usually brought her lunch to her! Was he on a date with this witch? Was he intimate with her? Why did she have to be so beautiful?

"Hermione!"

She snapped her head away from the couple that looked just a little too cozy and brought her attention to Ron. He had asked her here, after all.

"Sorry, love. I just..."

"Don't apologize. I should be sorry. I should have sent you word that my testing was going to run into overtime. I didn't know that ~~the~~ you would be here, forcing himself on you."

"It was all right, Ron. Really. He just wanted to petition me to help him with a political project."

Ron flagged down a waitperson. "I hope you told him no!"

Hermione looked over at Severus, who seemed very happy to sit next to his witch, who in turn was looking less and less attractive on closer inspection. "I told him I'd think about it. Really, it wasn't a horrible thing. He really wants to help Harry out with the orphanage, and I think we can all agree that Harry needs a little help over there."

Ron shrugged noncommittally. "He needs help, but not from the likes of that one. He'd probably petition to have all the Muggle-borns killed at birth."

It was Hermione's turn to shrug. She really didn't know Lucius well enough to refute that thought. "How did the testing go?"

"Bloody waste of my time and everyone else's. I'm clean. Of course, no reporters wanted to hear that. You should have seen their faces when the doctors proclaimed me innocent. Guess I won't be gracing the cover of *The Daily Prophet* tomorrow."

"I'm sure that you disappointed everyone except your fans."

Ron gave a smile. "There were lots of fans there, cheering me. It was nice. That's most of the reason why I'm so late. Everyone wanted autographs! It was amazing."

Ron still lived in Harry's shadow to an extent, but he could hold his own now. "Maybe you'll make the cover of *Playwitch* instead of the *Prophet*."

He scoffed at the thought, but it cheered him. "You should have seen that place, Hermione. It was crazy. Five of us were accused of abusing, and none of us was guilty."

"But how did you know? They could have been lying about their test results."

He waved off the question. "We were all in the same room together. We could see the wands glowing."

"You mean to say that they didn't put you in separate rooms?"

Ron shrugged. "Why should they?"

"Because, you need your privacy!"

"We just wanted to get it over with. Maybe if one of us had been guilty, he would have asked for a private room. It's one of the ways you can tell, you know. When people are evasive, it's a sign of guilt."

Hermione colored. "It's not a sign of guilt at all! It just means that someone doesn't want to be inspected in front of a dozen people! Everyone is entitled to privacy. All those years I wasted on House Elves...I should have been working to open the eyes of Wizards. Did the persecution in the sixteenth century teach us nothing? You are innocent until proven guilty by a court of law, or in this case, by testing. Not before."

Ron shrugged. "I'm just glad it's over and that I can play again."

Hermione gave up the argument. She was not a politician, and arguing her point would only serve if she was before the Wizengamot. Instead, she directed her attention back to the seemingly happy couple at the table across the pub, smiling and laughing with each other, looking completely at ease.

Well, if that was the sort of woman that Severus Snape was into, so be it! Why did she even care? And what was she hoping for? That he would like her? That he would ever invite her out to a pub? That maybe his admonishments against Lucius had been out of jealousy?

"I can't believe old Snape has a date."

"Why shouldn't he?"

Ron sighed and took a large gulp from his pint. "I wonder how much he's paying her."

"Oh for heaven's sakes, Ron..."

Ron laughed. "You are so predictable, Herms." He stretched his hand across the table and grasped hers. "Let Snape have the witch. Not a bad piece of goods, that one, but a bit old for me."

"I bet she could teach you a few things."

Ron got a gleam in his eyes. "I bet you could teach me more."

Oh hell, why not? She knew Ron. She had slept with him countless times. And if he wanted lessons in love... "Eat up. You'll need your strength if you're going to keep up with me."

When they left, arm in arm, Hermione barely spared a glance at the dark man and his companion who practically transcended beauty. She only looked long enough to see that they were still conversing companionably about something or other. She was smiling, he was his usual stoical self, and their hands were entwined. Hardly a glance.

Well, hardly a look.

"You better know some new tricks," she growled darkly at Ron. "You're going to need them all."

TBC

Seven

Chapter 7 of 8

Hermione needs to discover herself sexually as well as intellectually. Ultimate HG/SS pairing, but there might be others in the way.

Warning: Hermione/Ron is in this chapter. If this is not your thing, blah blah. The plot progresses. Not that I think I still have a readership for this story. I know I've been MIA for an entire year (yikes!), but I do know how this story will end.

To say that Severus Snape was angry at Hermione was like saying that Niagara Falls was large or that Machu Picchu was high.

At first, Hermione felt a little guilty because he really had seemed concerned that Lucius would try and take advantage of her, and truth be told, she wasn't entirely sure that Lucius wasn't trying to take advantage of her. He had also seemed so protective of her, even when Harry had interfered his first day on the job, and he had told Harry to leave her alone. It seemed as though he valued her.

It was obvious now that he didn't value her, and that he didn't think very much of her at all, really. She would greet him, and he would grunt. She would sit down across from him at lunch, and he would get up and leave, taking the best pages of The Prophet with him as he went, and leaving her only the Sport's Page. She would ask him a question, and he would give her the shortest, most concise answer and then leave her alone.

Well, at least he hadn't started picking on her potions for no good reason. Yet.

"Miss Granger, what is this?"

Check that.

"A calming draught, sir."

"I find it unacceptable."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Do you?"

He raised an eyebrow back in answer. "Most assuredly."

She felt herself grow angry and pulled out her wand. "Very well. It is as you say, *sir*." With that, she Evanescoed the contents of her cauldron and watched in satisfaction as Severus turned red with indignation and almost began to splutter. "I'm sorry, sir, did you not wish for me to start over?"

"My office. Now!" he practically shouted.

Feeling triumphant, Hermione practically bounced into his office, and then turned, hands on hips, ready to give him a piece of her mind, and just a little glad that he was actually about to talk to her for the first time in days.

"Do you have any idea how expensive your little childish display of temper was just now?" he began.

"My display of temper? I prefer to think of it as your display of petulance!"

"*Petulance?*" he exclaimed, but then grew calm again. "Ah yes, I have nearly forgotten that you choose to see things your own way, despite evidence to the contrary."

"I knew you were upset about my talking with Malfoy. At a public house. In front of everyone. Where he could do nothing to harm me."

"So you think," he snarled back. "But I am done, Granger. I am done meddling and attempting to help you keep whatever dregs of reputation you still possess."

He turned to go to his desk, but Hermione stepped in front of him. "And now we have what is really bothering you: you think that I did not heed your advice!"

He put his hands on her arms and forcefully steered her out of his way, pushing her against the wall as he did so. "I think that I rather have proof that you did not follow my advice!"

His face was very close to hers, and Hermione noted for the first time that while his lips were rather thin, his bottom lip was positively suckable. "I was at the pub to meet my friend. He happened to be there. I haven't been getting on with writing a letter, and really, what I had to say needed to be said in person." Was it her imagination, or was he staring at her lips, too?

"In person, in a letter. It doesn't matter how you say it to him, he won't listen! And neither do you, apparently!"

"Lucius Malfoy does not want to have sex with me!" Hermione shouted back, hoping to God and the Fates that he had silencing charms on his door.

"Doesn't he?" Severus growled.

Hermione smoothed her hand over her hair. "Well, yes, he does, I suppose. But that wasn't what our conversation was about! He wants to head up Harry's orphanage. *That's* what he wanted to talk with me about, *that's* why he's been dogging my steps."

Now that she said it out loud, Hermione realized how silly it sounded. Lucius had been buttonholing and cornering her for weeks, and only so that he could head the orphanage, something that he could probably eventually get himself into on his own?

But she was angry at the man standing before her, and she wasn't about to think about Lucius now.

"Potter wouldn't allow it."

"Harry could be persuaded, if I felt that Lucius were the correct person for the job."

He was definitely staring at her lips. She licked them experimentally, and noted that his pupils actually seemed to dilate just an unth. Abruptly, he turned away from her and sat down in his large leather chair.

"Do you really have so little faith in me?" she asked after several long moments of silence. "Do you really think that I would let myself be taken in by Lucius? You really don't know me well enough, Severus."

He looked up sharply, but she was already turning the doorknob and leaving.

The rest of the day was a blur for Hermione, and the only thing she really noticed was that Severus handed her the paper at lunch time, and that Katherine kept staring at her. That evening, she stood in the line to use the Floo, and sent herself to Grimmauld Place, thankful that Harry was the first thing she saw when she stepped out of the dusty fireplace.

"Harry!" she practically whined as she threw herself against him, resting her forehead against the long hard bone of his shoulder. "God, you wouldn't believe my day!"

She hardly ever did anything so crazy or out-of-character, so she wasn't really surprised that he seemed surprised. Still, would it kill him to hold her a little tighter?

"What's the matter?" he asked lightly, tugging a little at her plait. He pushed her away from him slightly and lifted her chin with his fingers.

Suddenly, she realized that she was surrounded by Weasleys, and that she and Harry were two dark-haired islands in a sea of ginger.

"Oh dear," she said, putting her hands on her quickly blushing cheeks. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize that you had your family over. I'll..."

"Don't you think of leaving, Hermione," Mrs. Weasley said with a smile on her face. "You are a part of this family."

Ginny stepped forward quickly and grabbed Hermione's hand. "Why don't I take Hermione to get freshened up while Harry gets everyone a drink?"

As Ginny dragged Hermione off, she looked over her shoulder at Harry, who was ushering everyone into the conservatory, a recent addition to the house, and one of Ginny's favorite rooms. With a sinking feeling, she realized that she had slept with half the people currently in the house.

Hermione sat on the chair at Ginny's vanity while Ginny ruffled through her closet. "I know it isn't your usual bodice-and-peasant-blouse fare, but you do look rather nice in blue," she said as she laid a light blue robe across Hermione's lap.

"I'm so sorry I intruded, Gin. I should leave now while no one notices."

"Nonsense," Ginny said firmly. "We both wanted to invite you anyway, but then..."

Ginny put her head down and held up her left hand, which was currently home to a beautifully wrought gold band set with a large oval-shaped blood-red ruby.

Her day forgot (as well as the robe on her lap), Hermione rose to her feet and rushed to her friend, pulling her close and laughing.

"Ginny!"

"My Gran left the band to me, and Harry found the stone in Sirius's vault...I'm not really a diamond sort of girl, and he thought they looked well together. It's a bit big, don't you think?"

Hermione grabbed Ginny's hand and noted that the stone indeed felt huge under her palm, but it only made her want to laugh. "I think it's perfect!"

Ginny smiled brightly and blushed. "You'll be my maid of honor, won't you?"

Tears sprang into Hermione's eyes. "Just you try and stop me!"

They threw their arms around each other, laughing and crying at the same time, and that was how Harry found them when he came to check on them.

"Is she freshening up, or taking a bloody spa?" Harry stopped short and stared at them. "Or are you two just standing around and crying?"

Hermione launched herself at him and laughed. "Harry! You finally did it! You're finally turning her into an honest woman!"

Harry gave her a proper hug this time, and tightening his arms around her waist, he lifted her up and spun her around.

"Now get dressed!" he ordered with a laugh. "I'm tired of entertaining my future in-laws on my own. Especially since most of my future in-laws are the older, menacing brothers of my future wife."

At the word "wife", he turned to Ginny and gave her a beautiful, intense smile that made Hermione feel as though she had actually blinked out of existence for a few moments.

Quietly, she picked up the robe from the floor and went into the dressing room that had also been equipped recently as a water closet where she changed and washed a little, and re-did her hair from her usual plait into a nice cascade of curls down her back.

Ginny was taller than Hermione, but she was rail-thin like her brother Ron, and as a result, the robe she gave to Hermione was a little too long (but it only grazed the floor, so it wasn't too bad, but it was also a bit tight, especially across the hips, and Hermione felt very uncomfortably visible in it. To punctuate her thoughts, the looks of lust on three particular faces did little to dispel her discomfort. Fred, George and Ron all offered her a seat, but so did Arthur, and Hermione decided it was best to retreat to his side.

"I'm assuming that Ginny told you," he said warmly, silver glinting in what little red hair he had left as the moonlight and candlelight softly diffused through the glass room.

"She did, Arthur, and I'm so happy for all of you! I knew that Harry was just giving her time to establish herself."

Arthur laughed. "We live in a modern age, Hermione, but we Wizards are still quite old-fashioned about living together without marriage. That will probably never change."

Hermione gave him an indulgent smile and then turned her attention to Molly, who would finally-FINALLY-get to plan the wedding of her dreams, and who at least wasn't even attempting to hide that fact.

"The colors will have to be red and silver, of course," Molly said. "With a bit of black."

Hermione remembered how the Weasley wedding had been full of silver and purple, just like the coat of arms that they had adorning one of their walls.

"Oh, red!" Ginny protested. "And not just any red: blood red."

Harry came up behind her and wrapped his arm around her. "Better than green and silver."

"I wouldn't look like a giant candle with a flesh wound in green and silver!" Ginny protested.

"You can wear all white if you like," Molly said. "You don't have to wear a sash."

"I do want to be just a little traditional," Ginny murmured. "Hermione will be maid of honor, and Ron will be best man...Luna can be a bridesmaid. I suppose that Victoire can be my flower girl."

"Teddy can be the ring bearer," Harry said with a nod.

"Don't you think they're a bit young?" Bill asked, cradling his daughter's strawberry blonde head against his shoulder. She had just turned three.

"We won't be getting married for at least a year," Ginny said. "She'll be old enough by then."

Whatever Ginny felt about her sister-in-law, she loved little Tori to pieces and passed a fond hand over the sweet curls of the sleeping child.

"You know, Harry, I don't mean to sound pretentious, but your wedding will be a very big deal in our society," Arthur said. "Our family has been established for centuries, and yours has as well. This coming together will unite us all in a very significant way."

"This can't be the first time that a Potter has married a Weasley," Harry said with a laugh.

"No, but there will be a lot of talk about it. Especially since you are...well, who you are."

Harry's face grew dark for a moment, but then he shook it off. "Arthur, if you're trying to talk me out of marrying your daughter..."

They all laughed, and Hermione did too.

The evening passed quickly, and everyone eventually came to talk to Hermione. Fleur was ecstatic about the wedding and the part that her daughter would play in it. She

was also pregnant again, but she didn't want Hermione to tell anyone about it. Percy was optimistic and repeated to her many of the same things that Arthur had said about the two noble lines coming together, and even hinted at how he thought it might help his standing in the Ministry. Charlie was all goodwill and good humor and a little down that his good friend Oberon hadn't been able to attend, because he was sure that he and Hermione would have hit it off rather well. Fred and George were flirtatious and made many comments about how happy they were to not be tying the knot any time soon, but they thought it was about bloody time that Harry asked Ginny to do it. They also extended an invitation to dinner that Hermione understood to mean something completely else.

Ron seemed to be the only calm in the storm. He loved both Harry and Ginny, and while he had always looked forward to this day with great expectations, he wasn't entirely sure that Ginny wasn't making the wrong decision. The family left, and Ron stayed behind with Hermione. They ended the evening in the study, Ron with his arm around Hermione's shoulders as they sat together on the small but comfortable settee, and Hermione realized somewhat belatedly and pathetically that she and Ron could have been in the same situation, if only they hadn't decided to break up.

Why did they break up? She looked up at him, his deep blue eyes reflecting the color of his robe, his smile sweet. Severus never looked at her like that, and Ron's lips were definitely more kissable. Why had she been so conflicted about him earlier, anyway?

When he lowered his head and kissed her cheek, she didn't stop him, and when he took her hand and told Harry that they were going to stay the night since they had drank too much-were five glasses of champagne too much?-and that they were going to give the lovebirds some time alone, she let him, knowing full well that Ginny and Harry wouldn't think they were staying in separate rooms. Knowing full well that she and Harry and Ginny had made love under this very same roof well over two months ago. But she didn't feel awkward about it.

No, it felt quite right, come to think of it.

Ron took them to "their" room-the room they used to use a few years ago, when all four of them were living in the house.

He removed their clothes and unspelled her hair so that it hung around her shoulders. He was tall and solid and strong as he lifted her and laid her gently against the sheets. He had also obviously had as much practice over the last several months as she had. It wasn't the first time they had made love since their breakup, but to Hermione, it felt very significant. The last time, she had been working out her frustrations about Severus and Lucius. This time, she let him take control, which he did with the greatest tenderness.

She shivered when he made love to her breasts, kissing and caressing them, stroking, kneading, licking and occasionally biting. He ground his hip against her and sank his fingers into the flesh of her hips, claiming her lips in a deep kiss and then driving into her, his length familiar and sweet within her, hot and fiery as he moved slowly, drawing out to the tip and then thrusting back in. She arched and moved beneath him, welcoming him as she locked her ankles behind him.

Yes, this was right. This was beautiful.

TBC

AN: Yes, I updated! To the one or two of you that still care! (I hope one or two still cares...). I did have Bill be married, because I don't want Hermione to sleep with another Weasley.

OMG, What is Hermione thinking? Ron? Beautiful? Right?

Well, he is kinda cute, and very malleable. And what's up with Snape? Is he jealous, and if he is, is it of Malfoy or Granger?

Eight

Chapter 8 of 8

Hermione needs to discover herself sexually as well as intellectually. Ultimate HG/SS pairing, but there might be others in the way.

Something happened.

Something bad.

Hermione groaned and opened an eye, trying to remember why this feeling of dread had settled over her. It was Saturday, so she hadn't overslept...

"Oh my god!" she sat up in bed, dislodging the long freckled arm draped across her torso. "Ron, wake up!"

How could this have happened? She fell victim to one of the classic plunders! The two most well-known being "Never get involved in a land war in Asia" followed by "Never go in against a Sicilian when death is on the line." Only women knew the third: "Never have sex with your ex right after your friends tells you they're getting married and you aren't."

"What have we done?" she moaned into her hands.

Ron sat up next to her. "Oh, god, Hermione...I'm so, so *sorry*.. I was-"

"Drunk and feeling vulnerable because your friend, who is younger than you, is getting married and you're not?" Hermione supplied hopefully.

"Drunk," Ron finished.

Hermione decided that they both looked equal parts of relieved and offended.

Ron turned away and rested his arms on his knees. "Why wasn't it this awkward before?"

Hermione mimicked his posture and shook her head. "I think because we were both...thinking about getting back together this time."

Ron could only agree.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"So'm I." She threw her head forward and grasped the back of her neck with both hands. "What will Ginny and Harry think of me?" she moaned.

"What will they think of me?" he countered.

They sat in silence for what seemed like ages.

Hermione looked up. "It's really over now, isn't it?"

Sadness flitted across his face. "Yeah."

They both smiled bravely at each other, but there was nothing more to say. It was really, really done. She was ready to move on.

"We had a good go," she offered.

Ron put his arm around her and pulled her into his chest. "I'll always love you, Hermione. I mean it, I'm not just saying it because we're breaking up and I want to stay friends or at the very least not have you hate me. I will always, always love you."

A few tears escaped her tightly clenched eyes. "Me too," she whispered. "Me too."

The week went by quicker than she thought it would. Severus was a little cool towards her, but he began to sit with her and share his paper again. The Quidditch scandal continued, though fewer names were being printed. Games were being replayed, and The Cup was once again in a good way to come to Britain. There was a picture in the Sport's Page one day of Ron and Gabrielle De La Cour (as well as Bill and Fleur) after he had won a rather important game, and Hermione tried her best to not be jealous, though she did feel a rather sharp twinge in her chest at how happy Ron looked with his arm around Gabrielle. In truth, it probably meant absolutely nothing. At least, she'd keep telling herself that.

"You all right?" Katherine asked her Friday evening as they were clasping their cloaks around their necks.

"Fine," Hermione lied, brave smile still firmly in place.

"Yeah, right."

"Good night, Miss Christiansen. Miss Granger, would you mind staying behind a moment?" Severus asked as they were about to leave.

"G'night, sir," Katherine said, giving Hermione a squeeze on the shoulder.

Hermione felt a chill in her stomach at his words. She had been completely absorbed with work all week, and she knew that her potions had been some of the best of her life. He couldn't possibly be able to chide her for that, could he?

"Yes, sir?"

Severus put his hand on her elbow. "In my office, Hermione."

So he was using her first name again. Had he heard about her and Ron? Had he heard about Ginny and Harry? The Weasley's were going to have a huge party to celebrate the beginning of winter and announce the engagement then, but Mrs. Weasley was so excited about her only daughter getting married that she seemed to be telling everyone she came across about the "big secret."

"Is everything all right, Severus?"

He smiled down at her and steered her towards a chair by the fire, which was built up and crackling merrily. There was another chair next to hers, and he sat in it.

"Everything is fine. I just wanted to see how you are."

Hermione put her head down. "So you've heard about Harry and Ginny?"

"Potter and the Weasley girl? What about them?" He held up his hand. "Never mind, I don't care, and I can't keep up this façade forever."

Hermione laughed. "Then don't. I prefer you mean and nasty."

"Very well. Then I'll tell you that your potions this week were book-perfect, but absolutely dismal, and if you don't snap out of this funk, I may be forced to write a report about you."

Summoning up her best Gryffindor smile, Hermione stared straight into Severus's black eyes and lied. "I'm fine, Severus. I just have had a lot on my mind lately, and a lot to do. I am sorry that my potions were dismal. I will endeavor to do better next week."

Severus sighed. "You won't endeavor to do better, you simply will or I will find that I don't require your services any longer."

They both sat silently for a moment, she attempting not to laugh, and he looking as though he were absorbing something about her that she didn't understand.

"There is one other thing I wished to speak with you about. A position will be opening here at the hospital in the Charms department. I know that you were always good at Charms, but that is not why I bring it up. Your name was mentioned at the staff meeting, and the chairman, Peter Piedmont, wants you to apply for the position. I feel that you should as well, particularly considering your goals."

Hermione remembered the coarse, rather brash man from The Wand and Pistil.

"I...I don't think I should."

"Why ever not?"

Hermione considered all of the delicate implications in her reasons why not, but then decided to tell Severus anyway.

"Lucius Malfoy introduced Mister Piedmont to me. That night at the pub. Remember?"

"I remember you talking to Malfoy despite my rather strong warning."

"I remember you looking rather cozy with a very pretty Witch."

"Jealous?"

Hermione made the slightest shake of her head. "You?"

"Of course not. And I still don't understand why you wouldn't apply for a position simply because Piedmont suggested you."

Hermione stared at the dancing flames of the fire, trying to shake off the urge to throw herself at Severus. "Lucius introduced us. If I took the position, it'd seem as though

he gave me a favor. I don't want to accept favors from Lucius Malfoy, despite what you think about him and me."

She looked up from the fire to see Severus staring at her with a completely inscrutable look on his face.

"I want to meet with him," she said.

"Why?" he was still giving her that look.

"I want to know what his ideas are regarding the orphanage. Right now might be a really fine time for him to start making his moves, and I did promise to consider his proposition."

"Then why tell me?"

Why indeed? "You seemed...upset that I had ignored your warnings, even though I hadn't." She gave him a hard look. "I want you to go with me. He probably won't say anything inappropriate in front of you, and if he tries to deviate from the subject at hand, you could keep us on track."

"You don't think you could do that on your own?"

"Gryffindors. We get distracted by shiny objects."

"Hermione, please don't lie to me when you are asking me a favor."

"I just want you there, all right? Do I have to have an excuse?"

"And all I want you to do is apply for a Charms position, and you behave as though it's the most repugnant thing in the world, despite your aptitude for the work."

"It does feel rather as though you're trying to get rid of me."

The corner of Severus's mouth turned up ever so slightly in a smile, and Hermione smiled back.

"If I simply wanted to 'get rid' of you, I can assure you that there are far simpler ways."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Oh really?"

"Indeed."

"Simpler, but perhaps traceable?"

"Not a stain would mar my lily-white hands." Expressively, he held out his hands first palm-side-down, and then with a slight flourish, moved them upwards. Contrasted against his black robes, they looked incredibly pale. "Really, Hermione, don't underestimate me."

She gave a laugh. "Well, I'll apply for the position on the condition that you arrange a meeting between Lucius and me, and promise that you will come too."

"As you wish."

She left the room before she did something rash, like kiss him.

Hermione ended up at her usual haunt that night, mostly because she didn't have any food at her flat, and she did need to eat. When she walked in, she very nearly turned around and walked back out again, because Harry and Ginny were sitting at "their" table, and they both looked up when she walked in.

Well, there was no hope for it, she was just going to have to confront them and explain to Ginny how she had used her brother the other night, and how heartily ashamed of herself she was.

"Hermione!" Ginny said, running to her and throwing her arms around her. Harry did likewise, and then with his arm around her shoulders, he steered her to the table.

"I am so sorry," Ginny started when they were all seated. "Harry and I did not mean to keep you out of the celebration the other night, but I wanted to tell my family first. Tradition and all that."

"Well, that," Harry said, "and there was something else..."

"Oh, you're going to think we're beasts," Ginny said.

"And it's no reflection on you," Harry added. "I just want you to know that we love you, and I loved...that night was incredible. You were incredible."

"But that was when we realized..."

"We knew that you would wonder what caused us to finally make a decision and set a date."

"And you'd never ask in front of my parents and brothers."

"I mean, it's between us, right? No one else's business, the nosy bastards."

"Five reporters have cornered me at The Ministry, and they all want to know. Why did I tell my mum? She's telling everyone!"

Hermione held up her hand to stop their flow of words. "All right. I'm clever, I'll grant you that, but I have no clue what you two are going on about. However, before you begin explaining—clearly this time, okay?—I just want to get this off my chest. I am really sorry about the other night. I know it seemed that Ron and I were getting back together and everything, but we weren't. We aren't. Ever. And...and I think I'm going to stop my experimentation. I think...I think I was using people, not that they weren't using me back, but I think I was using all of you to work out my feelings with Ron, and that wasn't right. Anyway, I'm really sorry, Ginny. I do love your brother, but there will never be anything more. He and I have discussed it, so don't think that I just left him hanging. I am better than that."

Ginny and Harry stared at her in bewilderment.

"Oh," Ginny said.

"Right," Harry said.

"Don't you two have a clue what I'm talking about?"

"You and Ron shagged that night," Ginny said. "But Hermione, we knew that you two were just sort of comforting each other."

"You're adults, you can do whatever you like. If we were to get down on you about that, we'd be hypocrites."

"So you're not angry? With us? But you don't understand...you must think I'm the sluttiest slag this side of the Nile. I have been shagging just about anything that will stand

still long enough for the past several months, including the both of you. What must you think of me?"

Ginny and Harry exchanged a look. "You know," Harry said, "Ginny and I broke up and dated other people, and then made up only to break up again for the first few years of our relationship. You and Ron never did that. I just consider whatever it is that you're up to now as making up for lost time."

Ginny held her hand over the table. "You're a wonderful, beautiful woman, Hermione. You're smart and talented, and you have a good head on your shoulders. Whatever you've been doing with whomever you want to do it with is probably safer and more meaningful than most people's one-night stands. Don't feel ashamed. You should never feel ashamed of yourself."

"You can only go forward," Harry added.

"But this world, Ginny...it's so old-fashioned! Even if I did meet a wonderful Wizard, what are the chances that he wouldn't care that I've slept with most everyone I've ever known?"

Ginny shrugged. "Who cares what you did before? The new year is coming, Hermione, and with it, a new life for all of us. That's all that matters. Moving forward, like Harry said. Finding who you really are."

"And whoever that Wizard is, he'd be an idiot to not thank every single one of your partners for making you into the self-assured sexually aware Witch that you are today. Well, maybe not so self-assured this minute, but the second you get him into your bed, he'd better look out."

"Do you want anything to eat?" Ginny asked, changing the subject abruptly.

"Oh...yes. My usual."

Ginny left to thread her way to the counter, and Harry turned back to Hermione.

"We were hoping we'd see you tonight. We kept wondering why you were avoiding us."

"I wasn't *avoiding* you."

"Ginny thought it was because we hadn't invited you that night."

"Oh, you didn't have to worry about that, it was obviously a family event."

Harry took a drink of his beer and wiped his mouth. "Well, like we were trying to say earlier, we had been planning on telling you personally away from everyone else. You see, you played a very important role in the two of us finally making a decision."

"Because of your birthday?" Hermione blushed a little at that thought.

"Yes." Harry took her hand. "You see, we realized the next day that as completely wonderful as that was, we prefer each other, and we only want to be with each other for the rest of our lives. You probably think we're horrible."

Ginny sat back down and put a drink in front of Hermione.

"I don't think you two are horrible. After all...we were just experimenting, right? I mean, I knew it was a once-only fling. You don't have to explain to me."

"Yes, but we felt it had to be obvious to you," Ginny said.

Hermione laughed. "It wasn't obvious at all. I assumed that you both had gotten on with your careers and were ready to finally settle down. You do know that no one will be easy until the two of you have a baby, right?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Especially my mum."

"Arthur is convinced that Ginny is already pregnant, and that's the real reason why we're waiting a year."

"That way, no one can say that we moved forward too quickly."

A waiter brought their meals, and they were about to dig in when Hermione saw a dark figure looming in the doorway. He gave Hermione a slight nod and approached their table. Harry frowned, but Ginny stared at Hermione, obviously wondering what her reaction would be.

"Hello, Severus," she said. "Would you care to join us?"

"We'll wait for you," Ginny added.

Severus sat down next to Hermione and gave Harry a polite nod. "Potter. Miss Weasley. What on earth are you eating, Hermione?"

"Curried potatoes."

"Indian curry, English bread."

"They taste fantastic together," she assured him.

"What do you have against Naan?"

"What do you have against my own personal tastes? I'm in an English pub, and they never make Naan crispy enough for me, and I like it crispy."

"I doubt there's a clay oven in the kitchen."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "We have powers beyond what any Muggle could ever imagine, and yet we can't manage to make crispy enough flat bread."

"I'm sure they'd deep fry it for you," Ginny added with deceptive helpfulness.

Hermione made a face and Severus dipped a piece of baguette into her curry.

"Go get your own," she muttered, nudging him with her elbow.

"And miss the way your nose wrinkles so unattractively when you get annoyed? Surely not."

Hermione looked over at her friends to make a comment about Severus but stopped when she noticed the look of horror on Harry's face, and frank curiosity on Ginny's. Ginny even had the audacity to give them both a bright smile.

"When did you two get so close?" Harry demanded.

"We work together, Harry," Hermione said. In answer, he made a face, but it was probably more due to the fact that Ginny had very obviously kicked him.

"Have you received an invitation from my mother for our Winter Solstice celebration?" Ginny asked Severus, blatantly changing the subject.

"I have, thank you for inquiring."

"I hope you can make it. Hermione does, too."

Hermione felt like kicking Ginny, especially when Severus grew a little cold and stood up.

"I would not want to disappoint either of you, so I have already sent my RSVP to your mother. I will see you at the party. Hermione, I will see you tomorrow night. I have arranged the meeting that you asked me about."

"Oh, thank you, sir. I will see you later, then."

He nodded and left, and Hermione felt very despondent but tried to hide it.

"I'm sorry," Ginny said.

"No, it's okay. I guess..." she didn't finish the sentence. She guessed what? That she had misread her relationship with Severus? Apparently so. She had actually been feeling quite...friendly towards him. More than friendly.

"I can't believe this," Harry muttered.

"I think I need to go. I'll talk to you both tomorrow."

"Don't splinch yourself," Ginny cautioned. "Walk if you have to."

Hermione nodded numbly and decided to walk the few blocks to her flat. Along the way, she thought about Severus and why she had feelings towards him. How could she, anyway? She had finally just ended things with Ron!

Well, no...she hadn't just ended things with Ron, but she had finally given up on the idea of Ron. She had also finally given up on her idea of being a female Casanova. Men like Lucius Malfoy thought that she was a ripe fruit for plucking, and while her friends didn't really care much about what she did, other women would think she was a tramp. She was twenty-six years old, and single with her entire life ahead of her. Really, that was a good place to be.

She rounded the corner and walked up the steps to her building, removing her key from her pocket as she did so.

"Miss Granger."

She turned, flushing as Severus Snape came out of the shadows and moved towards her, his face set grimly. They didn't speak, he simply took the key from her hand and opened the outer door, then motioned for her to precede him inside. She led him to her flat where he once again opened her door for her and followed her within.

Bubo was on his perch, resting up for midnight when he would go out to scrounge and fly and meet with the other owls. Crookshanks lay on the table, a ginger cushion of fur. Neither of them looked up when Severus came up behind her and pulled her against him. When he turned her and pressed his lips to hers, they continued sleeping in silence. When he pushed her up against the wall, though, they both discretely left the flat to allow their mistress her privacy.

Severus maneuvered her so that she was straddling him, and he moved between aggressively, his intent marked by his actions. She wore next to nothing underneath her skirt, and she could feel the buttons from his placket against her, smooth and hard, and behind them, more smooth hardness. She ground against him slightly and gasped. The buttons were cool against her hot skin. They felt exquisite. He opened his mouth over hers and she willingly thrust her tongue inside, enjoying the taste of him and the way he slid against her, exploring within as they continued to pleasure themselves against each other.

Then, as abruptly as it had all begun, it stopped and he set her down.

"I can't do this," he rasped out, his voice hoarse. They were both shaking with need and she was about to slide down onto the floor; her legs were like jelly.

"W-what do you mean?"

He moved to the door. "I mean that I will not do this. I won't... I will not enter into this sort of a relationship with you unless we are very clear about a few things."

She hesitated, studying him as blood began pumping to her brain once again. "All right." It seemed a safe thing to say.

"I do not like to share, Hermione. I will not share. Not you. If you want me, if you want to try and make this work, I want you to know that up front so there is no question later."

Hermione tried her hardest to wrap her sex-addled brain around what he was saying. "I see."

"Please, do not think of this as an ultimatum. In fact, I feel that we should not make any sort of decision regarding a pending future relationship until after you have been promoted to a different department. I wouldn't want the gossip wags to say that we had something on the side, and infer that you were promoted purely because of that. Plus, you will have plenty of time that way to decide whether you wish to give up your freedom for something a little more permanent."

Something more permanent. Gossip. Promotion. Ultimatums. His words were finally sinking in, and she realized that he was offering to be her lover-her exclusive lover. But not while she was his underling. He was also giving her a chance to think about it and decide if she wanted it.

"All right, I will think about it."

He nodded. "All I came here to tell you was that I forgot to tell you that we are meeting Lucius at Chantelle's Bistro tomorrow night at seven."

It would be several weeks before Hermione fully realized how carefully he had orchestrated the entire charade in her flat, but by that time, she wouldn't care.

TBC