

Naked Journey

by PlaidPooka

A potion accident causes unusual results.

The First Step

Chapter 1 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

A/N: This is the first story I ever wrote in my life. It's a bit of a farce, and I willfully juggled a little bit of canon where Animagus' are concerned. However, canon juggling aside, it's quite a romp and though it has the odd serious bit, I hope it makes you laugh as well. There are naughty bits that occur later in the story, thus its NC-17 rating. So be warned!

As I said, this is the first creative writing I've done since high school, and my first ever attempt at dialog. I have to give huge thanks to my beta, Goblynn. I could have written this without her, but no one would have wanted to read it! She rocks! This fic is complete in 18 chapters, and I will post them a few at a time until I get the whole lot up.

Disclaimer: They are not mine, I just take them out to play.

Professor Severus Snape was beginning to suspect he had made a grave error. He found the thought profoundly disturbing. Glaring at the classroom full of seventh year Slytherins and Gryffindors, he weighed the situation carefully in his mind. Almost insufferably brilliant and unused to making simple mistakes, on the occasions when his intellect failed him he reacted badly: volatile, stubborn, and irrational. He hated being wrong. Perhaps if he had been more willing to face the possibility, the situation he was currently studying would never have gotten so terribly out of hand.

Conditions at Hogwarts were almost as volatile as Snape's temper.

Only three weeks had passed since the Order of the Phoenix, led by The Boy Who Lived To Be a Pain in His Arse had finally taken down the Dark Lord. Adding that to the fact that the seventh years before him had only a month until they graduated, it was no surprise that the students could barely concentrate to walk down the corridors without mishap, let alone brew anything complicated. Severus had not stopped to keep this in mind when he started them brewing the difficult potion that had been on the syllabus for this class since before the term started. It was the worst time in the world for a group of hyped-up, hormonal teenagers to try their clumsy hands at brewing the Draught of the Living Death. He closed his eyes for a moment, rubbing absently at the bridge of his nose. Perhaps he was being paranoid. He almost snorted at the thought. After two wars as a spy for Dumbledore he knew he was hopelessly paranoid. However, it did seem he was unnecessarily worried in this instance. Another quiet glare around the classroom showed nothing particularly amiss.

Well, almost nothing. Hermione Granger's persistent whispered instructions to Longbottom, The Boy Who Lived to Explode His Last School Cauldron, were a constant hissing annoyance that threatened to turn his slight headache into a full blown migraine. One would think that after seven years, the intelligent--if insufferable--young woman would have learned that (slimy git he may be), he was not stone deaf. He began walking through the classroom. In typical Slytherin fashion, he did not proceed immediately to Granger and Longbottom's table, but wound through the room silently until he eased up behind the perpetually hissing bane of his teaching career. He leaned down until his mouth was directly behind Hermione's ear.

"Miss Granger," he rumbled in his lowest register, "perhaps Mr. Longbottom would be better able to concentrate if his lab partner did not insist on doing a remarkable

impersonation of Medusa's best wig."

To say Hermione was startled was a gross understatement. Having been so focused on Neville and the horrifying mistake he was about to make, she missed not only the beginning of the Professor's random stalk about the classroom, but also Harry and Ron's quiet, albeit persistent, warnings of his approach. In her defense, high marks in advanced potions and private study of the subject made her painfully aware that Neville's current impending mistake was not only wrong, but very dangerous. Why wouldn't he listen? When Snape's voice suddenly rumbled into her ear, she flinched and spun around, only to find herself pressed head to toe against what felt like a hard, black, cloth-covered wall. Her traitorous heart began to beat like a rabbit's and she was quite aware it wasn't solely from fear.

For Severus' part, his eyes went wide in surprise for moment. His pupils dilated. He was patently unused to finding his arms suddenly full of curvy young woman. The moment lasted only an instant before his eyes narrowed and she was pushed by the shoulders to arm's length from his body.

"I think, Miss Granger, that no matter how much it distresses your silly little know-it-all persona, you should at the very least try to make it through University before you attempt to teach my classes," he snarled.

"But Professor, Neville..." Hermione began.

"Silence," he spat.

Severus opened his mouth to continue piling abuse on the trembling girl still locked in his grip, but instead glanced to the petrified boy beside her, immediately taking in the scope of the catastrophe Hermione had been trying in vain to avoid.

The students should have been adding asphodel to their potions by this time. Asphodel was an amber liquid, with bright specks of gold. It most definitely was not the hideous green liquid that Longbottom held in an uncapped phial over his simmering wormwood infusion. One sniff told him exactly what was in it. For the second time in as many minutes, Severus' eyes widened, this time in fear. Longbottom was about to add undiluted bundimun secretion, one of the most caustic substances known to wizard kind, into a cauldron of Draught of the Living Death.

"Longbottom!" he bellowed.

Professor Snape's bellow did not have quite the effect that he was aiming for. While he did want Longbottom to jump away from the cauldron, he did not intend for the stupid boy to drop the entire phial into the simmering potion. The surface of the liquid immediately began to roil like a storm-swept sea as it turned an inky black. Severus, his hands still grasping the girl, knew he could never get his wand up in time. He had never seen a potion react so violently so quickly. He didn't know if his spelled robes would be enough to protect him, but he knew his duty was to keep the students from harm at all costs. His voice barely trembled as he shouted "Hermione, get down!" Flinging her bodily to the floor, he threw himself over the seething cauldron just as it erupted.

Curled on cold stone, Hermione heard his scream. Turning her face upwards, she was horrified to see blinding green light bursting through the cauldron, through the Professor's robes, through Professor Snape himself. The light grew too bright to look at, and she collapsed back to the floor, mewling in fright. After what seemed an eternity of light and screaming, the green pulse, which reached even through her eyelids, finally vanished. The classroom was eerily silent, except for the scuffling and quiet moaning of her classmates. Forcing herself to open her battered eyes, she gazed uncomprehendingly for a moment at the now calm cauldron, noting that Professor Snape's clothes were draped over the table, his boots in a heap on the floor. As she watched in wretched fascination, his wand rolled slowly off the table and landed with the quietest of crashes on the floor. Severus Snape was gone. Hermione lowered her head into her arms and sobbed.

She slowly came back to herself when she realized someone was gently shaking her shoulder and quietly repeating her name. Looking up, her vision blurry and eyes awash with tears, she focused on a pair of round glasses.

"Harry?"

"Hermione," Harry said, his voice quiet and calm, "I need you to try to pull yourself together. We have to go to Dumbledore and tell him what's wrong. Neville's useless, he won't stop crying. You're the only one who was close enough to see what exactly happened."

"Professor Snape is dead," she said hollowly. "That's exactly what's happened." As the words left her mouth, her eyes filled with tears.

By this time Ron had managed to pick himself up off the floor and make his way over to his friends. Never the most tactful, he tended to be even worse than usual when overexcited.

"Do you mean to tell me, 'Mione, that you are lying there crying your eyes out over that greasy, hook-nosed git that made the last seven years of our lives a complete misery?" Ron said in breathless outrage.

Hermione sprang to her feet, glaring at Ron in an unknowingly amazing copy of her vanished Professor. "Ronald Weasley," she snarled, "how dare you! How dare you insult a man who just sacrificed his very life to save a bunch of ungrateful wretches like you! You're absolutely pathetic!"

Harry sighed. Sometimes he wished his red headed best friend would at least try to link his mouth up with his brain. All they needed right now was a classic Ron vs. Hermione row. On the bright side, if indeed there was one, Hermione was at least on her feet and coherent. "Hermione," he thrust out before Ron could get properly wound up, "think! We don't really know what's happened to Snape. We don't really even know that he's dead. All we know is that he's gone. The sooner we get to Dumbledore the sooner we can get this figured out. If anyone can fix this, he can."

Even Harry was taken aback by the sudden look of hope that lighted up Hermione's tear-stained face.

Lost

Chapter 2 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I just take them out to play.

Deep in a rarely explored branch of the forbidden forest, about 37 miles north of Hogwarts, a naked man lay sprawled on the grassy ground of a small clearing. Arms and legs akimbo, as if he'd been carelessly tossed there like a forgotten toy, he slept the deep, dreamless sleep of the unconscious. The forest here was almost primeval. At

the edge of the tiny clearing the trees were huge and dark; upper branches entwined together in a canopy more reminiscent of a rainforest than an English wood. From the edge of the trees, lurking in the perpetual twilight under the dense canopy, inhuman eyes regarded the still form with avid interest. Nostrils flared as the creature took long scenting breaths.

The man was not beautiful. He was tall and muscular, but a bit too thin. Pale skin was now kissed for the first time in years by an early spring sun filtering down through the small break in the trees in which he lay. His ebony hair rested in a tangled fan around a face that, though strangely compelling, seemed all angles. Long, black lashes rested on his cheeks, hiding midnight eyes. A cool breeze raised goose bumps over his exposed skin; the man shivered, but did not stir.

The unicorn took slow, cautious steps when it finally left the security of the trees. It crept slowly up to the man, until it could lower its head to a pale, bootless foot and take a long sniff. Nicker in a friendly fashion, it tossed its head, and then lowered it again to nudge the foot. Another shiver was the only result. The unicorn walked gently around the man until it could lower its violet eyes to the man's face. It inhaled the man's breath, sniffing deeply. Warm fuzzy lips nuzzled the man's nose and then nudged his cheek. With a sigh, the unicorn lay down, pressing as close as it could to the sleeping man. After a while, the man did move. He pulled his limbs into a more natural position, rolled to his side and nestled close to the soft, warm creature beside him.

But Severus did not wake.

Hermione was never as happy to be Head Girl as she was at this moment. Racing to the door of Dumbledore's office she didn't have to shout or recite the name of every sweet she had ever heard of. She paused long enough to shout the password she had already been given, this week it was Canary Cream, and flew, breathless up the stairs with Ron and Harry fast on her heels. It took Albus a good five minutes to hand them mugs of chocolate and get the frantic students to calm down enough to make sense. Completely frustrated by the loss of time, Hermione ungracefully blurted out that Neville's cauldron had exploded and that Professor Snape was missing and perhaps dead. She then further embarrassed herself by beginning to cry again. Albus' merry blue eyes grew more serious, but the twinkle did not entirely disappear. Asking them to wait for just a moment, he excused himself and walked through an arched doorway into his private quarters. When he returned, the twinkle was back in full force. Stepping up to where Hermione sat on the sofa, flanked on either side by her two best friends, he put a comforting hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. "Don't worry, my child," he said soothingly. "Severus is not dead, nor does he seem to be in any particular danger at the moment."

Hermione raised sorrowful eyes up to the man she thought could right any wrong. "But Headmaster, how could you possibly know?"

"Come with me, my dear," Albus said, taking her hand as she stood, then leading her through the archway. "You boys come along, too."

Just inside the archway, against the wall, stood a large grandfather clock. It was comfortably familiar to the three students that followed Albus into the room. Having many hands, each one bore the picture of a person Albus considered family. Around the edge of the face--instead of numbers--were designations ranging from "Teaching Class" to "Hung-over." As Hermione searched for the face she most wanted to see at the moment, she was startled to see her own face giving her a surprised look from a hand set firmly in the designation "In Love."

"I'm just not going to even think about that right now," she thought to herself. "I am not going to think about it. Nimue's panties! I hope the boys don't notice...but where in hell is Seve...Professor Snape?" Finally, she located the stern but cherished face. His picture appeared, at turns, either sneering or seeming mildly embarrassed to be shown on the clock at all. His hand was centered in the designation "Lost."

"You see, my dear," said Albus calmly, "we have not lost your Potions Professor, we've merely misplaced him."

"We've got to find him, Headmaster," she replied firmly. "We simply must find him immediately."

"That will be easier said than done, I'd wager. Dumbledore said smoothly. "But don't worry yourself another moment, Hermione. Severus is a very powerful wizard, and I assure you he won't come upon anything he won't be able to handle. He'll probably turn up in time for tea." Albus was shocked to find his calm words did not have the desired effect. Hermione resumed her quiet weeping and both boys stared at the floor dejectedly.

"Headmaster, you don't understand." Hermione spoke so softly that Albus had to lean in to hear her. "He vanished, but his clothes didn't. He doesn't have his wand."

"What?" Albus barked, much louder than he intended. "You're telling me Severus Snape is lost--Merlin-knows-where--naked AND wandless?"

In reply, Hermione slid her hand into the pocket of her robes, pulled out a wand longer and much darker than her own, and offered it to the Headmaster. Albus looked at it for a long moment before reaching out to gently remove it from the stricken young woman's hand. As he gazed at it, the ever present twinkle in his blue eyes dimmed and died. Placing the wand in his own pocket absently, as if he suddenly couldn't bear to look at it another second, he then gathered the three students and led them back to their seats in his office. Sitting back down at his desk, he took a long sip of his tea and looked at Hermione, his face serious and determined. "I think, Hermione, that you had best start at the beginning and tell me everything that happened."

His seriousness calmed Hermione where his previous kind words could not. She was at last able to put her tears on hold, and, in a low but steady voice, began.

Severus woke. Had anyone other than the unicorn been there, they probably wouldn't have noticed. The Dark Lord might finally be dead, but the habits of years as a spy do not die easily, if at all. Severus awoke, but didn't open his eyes; his breathing remained slow and steady. He knew immediately he wasn't in his chambers at Hogwarts, the smell was all wrong. Instead of the comforting smell of books, candle wax, and leather upholstery, he smelled mostly grass and something vaguely equine. Merlin's brass balls! Where the devil was he and how did he get here? Remaining on his back, eyes still closed and breath even, he continued the ruse of sleep while exploring his reluctant memory. It came back in pieces. A curvy woman pressed intimately against him. Frightened chocolate eyes staring into his own. Flashes of green light. Longbottom! With sudden clarity he remembered the horrifyingly mismanaged events that caused his blackout. That took care of the how, now on to the where. Before he could continue investigating his surrounding with ears and nose, he felt warm breath on his face--and something licked him right across the mouth. All pretense fled, his eyes snapped open to stare in disbelief at the face of the unicorn whose nose was almost touching his own. Its pink tongue appeared again, licking his nose.

"That's it," he snapped, "I must be dead. That infuriating twit of a Longbottom has finally succeeded in killing me and I'm obviously in hell."

The unicorn was not dismayed in the least by the man's bitter tone and preceded to nibble on Severus' chin.

"Oh for Merlin's sake stop it," he said in a much softer tone. "That hurts. Those teeth are made for nibbling grass, not chins." Showing an amazing ease, not to mention lack of respect for the sharply horned creature, he raised his hands and literally pushed the furry, inquisitive head away. "Let me up you damned silly beast, and mind the horn! If I have to be alive then I'd rather not be immediately impaled."

The unicorn stepped back with reluctance and nickered encouragingly. Severus sat up, his eyes taking in the pastoral surroundings before making his second unpleasant discovery, followed quickly by his third. He was naked as a newly hatched Hippogriff! At first he thought this only a minor annoyance--until he reached for his wand, thinking to easily rectify the situation. One half hour, one fruitless search, and an unending stream of profanities ranging from "Merlin's pink g-string!" to "JesusMaryMotherFUCK!" later he gave up the search, sat back down, and rested his head in his hands. The unicorn had aided his search by prancing about, nickering gleefully, and occasionally touching a cold, wet nose to assorted bits of his bare anatomy. "I absolutely detest unicorns," he said tiredly.

That statement was completely untrue. Only those with the blackest of hearts hated unicorns. In truth, Severus thought unicorns were graceful and almost painfully beautiful. However, though he never tired of looking at them, he avoided them like the Goblin plague. It wasn't because he detested them, it was because he was completely embarrassed by the way unicorns treated him. Apparently something about him was the unicorn equivalent of catnip. Here he was--a nasty, unpleasant, unattractive, ex-Death Eater--and apparently all unicornkind thought he was the most fascinating thing since the invention of Floo powder. Hagrid warned him ahead of time when unicorns were in the corrals so he could be certain to stay far away--for if Severus passed close enough for them to get a good whiff, they would escape the corrals to

gambol around him, nuzzling his robes, following him around until he managed to escape their attentions. Anyone who saw the unicorns following the dour Potions Master around like ducklings after their mother would collapse on the ground howling with glee. Not a sight to instill in others fear of his dark, Death Eater persona. (Not to mention the fact that it embarrassed the hell out of him.) He had tried in vain to determine what exactly it was about him that caused such an inexplicable reaction in the violet eyed creatures. He'd tried glamours, invisibility cloaks, masking his scent, but nothing worked. Dumbledore had patiently tried to explain to him that the unicorns didn't care about his lack of virginity, or the deeds in his past, but only in the true state of his heart; it was that alone which drew them. Severus found that as ridiculous as Arthur Weasley's electric plug collection.

He regarded the unicorn through narrowed eyes. "Why don't you stop sniggering at me and do something useful--like finding me something to eat?" To his utter astonishment, the unicorn trotted off into the forest with a whinny that rang out like a peal of bells.

Alone

Chapter 3 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I just take them out to play.

An hour before dinner started in the Great Hall, Hermione found herself lying on her bed alone with her thoughts. Once again, she was thankful for the privileges associated with being a Head Girl. After 6 years of sharing sleeping quarters with the other girls in her class, she finally had a room to herself. Not that she minded the other girls really, they were quite nice most of the time--they just had the bothersome effect of making her feel like she belonged to another species. Neither as intelligent, nor as studious as Hermione, they spent more time discussing things like which Slytherin's arse looked best in quidditch robes than they did completing their class work. Even during the war against Voldemort (she still had trouble saying the fearful name aloud, but now that he was at last dead she could voice it in her thoughts) the other girls spent an insufferable amount of time discussing make-up glamours and hair care potions. Tonight, the peace of her own room was exactly what she needed. She was going to rack her brain and find some way of locating Severus Snape if she had to read every book in the Restricted Section to do it.

She had regained some amount of hope after the meeting with Dumbledore when he took immediate action, rousing an entire team of Aurors to go over the potions class room with a fine tooth comb. Her fledgling hope was once again dashed when--hours later--they admitted to finding nothing to lead them forward in the search. Apparently, the mysterious green light had created such a strong and invasive aura that any magical traces of the professor's ultimate fate were instantly eradicated.

Her flagging hopes were later cut to the quick when Dumbledore quietly asked if she could decipher Neville's botched potion enough to give an idea of exactly what reaction occurred. Her potions work was unsurpassed, but it was still the work of a student--she knew just enough to realize it would require a full fledged Master to find the answers they needed. Of course, the only full Master of Potions in Britain was currently wandering naked and helpless gods-know-where.

She decided it would be better to not focus on the 'naked' part of that thought--it was doing horrid things to her concentration.

Blushing, she forced her mind back on track. There were only three other Potions Masters in the world. That thought finally got her mind off naked-Snape and she basked in the knowledge that the secret desire of her heart was so incredibly brilliant. Only forty years old, quite young when considering wizards, and already one of the four known Potion Masters in the whole of the wizarding world. That kind of achievement, at so young an age, by a man who spent the past seventeen years spying and fighting in two wars was absolutely unheard of. She simply could not understand why Harry and Ron had so little respect for him, even if they could not bring themselves to actually like him. She loved her best friends dearly, but there were times she despaired of finding one decent brain between them.

At the moment she wished her Potions Professor was not so bloody smart. She wished there were a thousand Potion Masters. Maybe then they could track just one of the reclusive bastards down. Wanton lack of social skills seemed to be a required attribute of the species. Dumbledore had heard rumor of a Master somewhere in China. Hermione spent an hour writing a description of the potion and its aftermath on a long scroll before the Headmaster had cast a translation spell and owled the missive away.

Despite an endless stream of words meant to comfort, he did not appear hopeful of the outcome. Ultimately, he looked squarely at the three Gryffindors and told them flatly that--despite the fact they were only four weeks from graduation--if they went haring off on some dangerous "mission" to find Professor Snape, he would expel them all.

For once in her life, Hermione didn't give a shriveled fig about being expelled. She believed her best friends (and partners in crime) would feel the same. She couldn't have been more wrong. As soon as Dumbledore released them, they hurried back to the deserted common room in Gryffindor tower. The rest of the students were continuing their classes after the potion mishap, excepting Neville, who was resting his overwrought nerves in the hospital wing.

As the Fat Lady's portrait clicked shut, Hermione spun to face her friends and demanded, "Alright then, so what are we going to do?"

To her absolute shock, her best friends--indeed her only close friends, other than Neville and Ginny--her brave fellow Gryffindors replied with various forms of "absolutely nothing."

"What do you mean we're going to do nothing?" she snapped. "We always do something!"

"You heard Dumbledore. We do anything and we get expelled!" Ron whined.

"Since when has the thought of getting in trouble ever stopped either one of you from dragging me into any adventure you fancied?" Hermione continued, her voice lowering in anger.

"Well, I suppose the main difference is you're asking us to get expelled 'cause of a greasy git that's been an absolute terror to us for the last seven years!" retorted Ron.

They were in full fledged row mode now. Harry watched from the sidelines, doing his best to stay out of it. Since Hermione and Ron's brief, doomed foray into dating at the start of sixth year, Harry learned it was best to let them have it out before he expressed an opinion. He was beginning to think he knew exactly why Hermione was so determined to help Snape, and he didn't like his conclusions at all.

"Are you trying to tell me--just because you don't like the man--you're willing to let him die out there, helpless and alone?" Hermione shouted.

"Don't like him?" Ron replied, in that annoying voice he used when badly impersonating Hermione, "How about hate him? He's nothing but a snake pretending to be a human being. And who says he's going to die? He's too fucking mean to die! We should be so lucky!"

Hermione finally had enough, striking Ron's cheek with a resounding blow that echoed in the suddenly quiet room. His face blazed redder than his hair as he opened his mouth to speak, but Harry restrained him with a touch to the arm.

Hermione glared hotly at both of them. "He may not be a nice man," she hissed, "but he is a strong, intelligent, and brave one. He has fought on the side of the light for as long as we've been alive. Professor Snape has saved all of our lives on multiple occasions. If there is one thing I know, it is that he deserves to have someone at least try to do the same for him."

Ron never did know when to leave well enough alone. "Come on, Hermione! I know you stopped hating him sometime sixth year, but if you keep talking like that I'm going to start thinking you actually fancy the great git."

"I could do worse," she replied coolly. "He's worth a dozen of you, Ronald Weasley." With that, she spun on her heel and disappeared into her private room, the slammed door's hinges rattling with the force. In the common room, two young men stood with mouths agape, staring after her.

Now sequestered in her room, her Gryffindor soul was fully prepared to leap into action--but she first had to determine a course of action. Thank gods it was Friday and she could forget classes and concentrate her formidable intelligence to the problem at hand. Her mind rustled with the beginnings of an idea. What she needed now was to spend the night in the Restricted Section doing research, filling in the gaps in her fledgling plan. As a seventh year, she now had free access to that section, but was still required to follow curfew. To stay long enough to get what she needed would require borrowing Harry's invisibility cloak. Immediately she realized a problem: she didn't even know if Harry was speaking to her. In an amazing display of the synchronicity in the universe, there came a quiet knock at the door. A pause, then the door opened far enough for a tousled head to poke in. Serious green eyes regarded her intently for a moment.

"May I come in, Hermione?"

"Just you, Harry?"

"Yes, just me. Ron's gone off to the quidditch pitch for some air."

"Come on then," she replied, sitting up and scooting over to give Harry some room beside her. Harry plopped down, but seemed to be looking anywhere but at her. "Harry, just say what you've come to say. I expect you think I was a bit hard on Ron."

"Actually no, though the palm print on his face looked like it might have been permanent until I spelled it off. Ron deserved what he got." Harry looked her straight in the eye for the first time since he entered. "I'll never like Snape; I think he's a right bastard. But I have come to respect him because of what he did in the war. He doesn't deserve this, and he does deserve help--I just don't think we're the best ones to give it. If you want to work on the problem here, fine. I'll help you all I can. Then you should give whatever you find to Dumbledore and let him handle it."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but closed it with a snap. It was useless to waste her breath. Harry's mind was obviously made up. She couldn't really disagree with what he said, even while knowing that she'd never stay quietly at Hogwarts while her snarky Professor was missing. It was disconcerting to know she was still alone in this, but at least Harry was meeting her half way. "I do have an idea, Harry. I don't need any help with it but I need to do some research tonight. Could I borrow your invisibility cloak?"

"Of course," Harry smiled in relief at her lack of temper, "but will you promise me that if you find anything helpful you'll let the adults handle it?"

"We're eighteen, we're hardly children," Hermione replied, in a futile attempt to ignore the promise.

"You didn't answer my question," he said, smile fading.

Hermione sighed. "I'll consider it, but--damn it, Harry--I can't promise that and I don't think you should ask me to."

"So it's true then, that you're in love with Snape?" On Harry's lips the name sounded like a curse. Hermione gasped, blushing like a Weasley. She tried to say something, anything, but could only stammer.

"Ron mightn't have noticed your hand on Dumbledore's clock, but I did," continued Harry. "It didn't take much to put that together with how you're acting now and come up with the right answer. What I don't understand is--why him?"

Hermione sighed again. How does anyone explain the heart? It's inconceivable. However, her friend of seven years--though obviously upset--refrained from berating her as Ron would have done, and seemed to genuinely try to understand. "I'll do my best to explain Harry. I don't know if I'll succeed, but I'll try. You deserve that much." She paused, gathering her thoughts and courage before plunging in. "The truth is, I don't think there are always reasons why we love who we do. I don't even think we choose who we love. You either love someone or you don't. I can easily tell you things I admire about him--he's the single most intelligent person I know. He's brave. He has an amazing sense of duty and honor. He does what he feels is right even when he knows he'll never get any recognition for it--in fact, I think he actively avoids recognition. I know he's often unfair to students and has a wicked temper, but I stopped being afraid of him second year; I found I respected him fourth year, last year I realized I was attracted to him, and I am not going to try explaining that!"

"I can almost understand simple attraction," Harry broke in, looking embarrassed. "At least, as much as a straight man...anyway, you wouldn't be the only girl rattling on about his 'sexy' voice, how he's mysterious and dark, and all that rubbish. But how can you actually love him? You deserve someone nice."

"Nice?" interrupted Hermione. "Maybe I should forget Severus and marry Neville! We could have a nice relationship, a nice home, nice children, and I could be oh-so-nicely bored out of my pleasant skull for the rest of my nice existence!" Hermione ran a hand through her unruly hair in exasperation. "Harry, has it ever occurred to you that I'm not exactly nice myself?"

"What! Hermione you're the ni..."

"Stop right there. I know you're my friend and I know you love me, but I'm not stupid. I might beat Severus in a popularity contest but we both know I have dreadful social skills and quite the temper. I have a horrible tendency to talk down to others and I can't seem to help it. I can count my friends on one hand and pretty much everyone else treats me like a space alien. I'm not saying I hate myself--I like myself just fine--but I do it with my eyes open. I love Severus with my eyes open as well, warts and all."

"I do wish you would stop calling him by his first name," Harry growled. "It's just so fucking weird."

"Sorry." Hermione laughed. "I've never had much occasion to say it out loud and I guess I'm taking advantage."

"When in the world did you fall in love with the nastiest Professor at Hogwarts?"

"I think it came along gradually. I can tell you the exact moment I realized it. It was during the final battle when you confronted Voldemort. I know you were focused on him, and couldn't see what was happening elsewhere. I'd already been injured and I was lying on the ground but still conscious. I looked up, and standing right behind you was Severus. You were fighting Voldemort, but about a dozen of his Death Eaters had broken away from the main battle and were trying to hex you. Severus stood there, exhausted, hurt, blocking every curse thrown at you until the rest of the Order could break through. I've never seen anyone move so fast. It was the most terrifying and beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life. I couldn't deny my feelings after that."

"I didn't know," Harry said softly.

"It's not like he would ever have told you."

"Too right. All right, Hermione, I may never like this, but I do think I understand it. I may even be persuaded to behave at the wedding," Harry joked.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that. You know the reasons I love him, but what in the world would he want with a 'silly little girl' like me?"

"Damn, Hermione, I hadn't though of that. You're bloody doomed!"

Wrong Turn

Chapter 4 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

Severus Snape spent the first fifteen minutes after the unicorn's departure convincing himself how relieving it was to have the bothersome beast gone. After the first ten minutes of his tirade, he conceded that he didn't sound sincere even to himself. He'd always been a loner, even before his career of espionage made it a necessity, and there were few people, indeed, that he called friend. Despite infinitely preferring his own company, years of teaching at Hogwarts had left him painfully used to the bustle of teachers and students. Even alone, with his private quarters under a silencing spell, he could feel the magical presence of wizards around him--seeping through the very stones of his dungeons. Suddenly, the man who prided himself on self-reliance felt uncharacteristically distressed at finding himself completely and utterly on his own. It was enough to make him wish for the unicorn's return in spite of his previous disparaging remarks.

He spent the next ten minutes sulking.

Finally, with a last glare at the trees through which the unicorn had departed, he decided to do something about his lack of clothing--or try, at least. Severus Snape was actually rather skilled at wandless magic--however, there's good reason why even those skilled in the art preferred the focusing power of a wand, unless desperate. Wandless magic was fairly good for basic defense and rudimentary attacks. While lacking the force of a spell channeled through a wand, it could be quite adequate in a pinch. For any other use, wandless magic was, at best, erratic--and, at worst, hopelessly unpredictable. One could attempt to conjure a sandwich and end up exploding every glass object within thirty paces. Transfiguration was never Severus' best subject, and that brand of magic was, in general, not a willing partner to wandless magic. Nonetheless, Severus was determined to try, rather than to go voluntarily parading through an unknown forest absolutely starkers.

Thirty minutes passage found Severus equally naked, exhausted, and furious. The utmost effort and concentration had rewarded him with nothing but a pounding headache and a clearing that had burst into bloom with orange, thimble-shaped flowers. Lying back on the grass, he vented his ire by methodically plucking and crushing any oddly shaped flora unlucky enough to be within easy reach. He had destroyed quite an impressive circle of them when the unicorn suddenly returned.

Severus was torn between his present state of frustration and a relief he did not want to acknowledge at having any companion in his misery. He settled for muttering, "Well, that took you long enough," in a tone vastly different from his usual mockery. Had anyone of his acquaintance heard him, they'd likely faint from shock.

The unicorn tried its best to whinny around the branch gripped in its teeth, smaller stems and leaves dragging in the animal's wake. The branch was laden with apples, and Severus found his unsuccessful garment-creating efforts had left him famished. Apples wouldn't have been his first choice, but he wasn't going to look a gift horned-horse in the mouth. He ate the first three cores and all. He then ate three more, tossing the cores to the unicorn, who crunched them delightedly as if Snape-spit-covered apple cores were his chosen form of ambrosia.

Sated for the time being, Severus stripped the remaining eight apples from the bedraggled branch, set them in a pile, and considered how to carry them. He sighed, stood, and regarded the apples intensely. Raising a hand, he intoned gravely, "Wingardium Leviosion Subsequorine." For once, the correct--if a bit ridiculous--effect he strove for was achieved. The apples obediently rose into the air and floated around to stop directly behind him. They would follow there until he released them. Severus strode once around the clearing to assure the spell had not gone amiss.

They made an interesting parade. Tall, naked wizard, a string of eight floating apples, and a prancing, nickering unicorn. "If Albus could see this he'd laugh himself into a hernia," Severus muttered morosely. Halting the parade, he turned his eyes to the unicorn. "As I seem to be stuck with you, I suppose I ought to call you something."

The unicorn gazed at him expectantly.

"What elegant appellation could possibly do justice to your graceful form, your evanescent eyes, your incessant snickering? I fear it's a Herculean task. Yet--wait! Perhaps it isn't hopeless. I shall name you...Bob," he finished with a smirk, arching his brow as if daring the unicorn to argue.

Other than a toss of the head and a gleeful snort, Bob did not deign to reply.

Albus had exhausted every avenue imaginable to find his errant Potions Master and friend--even so far as to venture into Trelawney's lair, hoping against hope that the bangled seer might make the third honest prediction of her life. He had given up in impatient disgust when, in a wispy and trembling voice, Sybil began her usual litany of doom and gloom. He had taken to making frequent trips from the desk in his office to the grandfather clock in his sitting room just to check on Severus' clock hand. Its firm position in the middle of "Lost" was oddly comforting. The next time his pacing found him before the clock, he was disconcerted to see the hand in slow movement. Watching intently until it stopped its journey at "In Danger," Albus' head dropped and a trembling hand passed over his eyes.

Dinner in the Great Hall proved to be a trying ordeal for Hermione. Ron was huffy and distant, which he demonstrated with complete lack of grace by talking loudly to everyone in the vicinity except her. At this point, she was rather relieved he wasn't speaking to her, but his constant shouting was very distracting. Harry was a calming presence at her side; he ate while chatting to her of inconsequential things. He didn't bring up their earlier discussion (for which she was grateful), but whenever he caught her gazing sadly at the empty seat at the Head table, Harry took a moment to pat her arm or give her hand a surreptitious squeeze under the table. Her eyes went again and again to where the professors sat, and not only to the empty chair. Watching the remainder of the staff told its own story. Headmaster Dumbledore was obviously trying to keep up cheerful small talk, but his eyes were lackluster; he looked far closer to his actual age than ever before. Madame Hooch, usually sitting at Snape's right, stared at her plate unseeingly as she picked at her food. Each time she glanced at the empty chair beside her, she sighed. Hagrid was putting on a brave front, but every so often his napkin would wander up to his eyes rather than his mouth. Suddenly, he turned to the others as if relating a story. Hermione couldn't make out much of it, but she caught the words "remember" and "unicorns." The other professors chuckled halfheartedly, until Professor McGonagall burst into tears and dashed from the room. Hermione couldn't bear another moment. With a quick goodbye to Harry, she fled the hall herself with the invisibility cloak tucked in her bag. Once she reached the restricted section, she found the tomes she required and settled into a secluded corner, preparing for a long night.

Severus had no idea where he was or which way home lay, but if he was ever to make progress, he had to start moving. A glance at the sky told him there was not much

daylight left. The night would be cold; if he kept moving he might stay warmer. It would be dark beneath the trees, but stubborn man he was, he decided to creep about in the dark rather than wait in this clearing another moment. It was obvious that his fellow wizards had not been able to locate him; otherwise, they would have arrived already. He chose his path by starting to walk in the direction he happened to be facing. His bad luck was still dogging his heels--he was facing due north: directly away from Hogwarts. Bob apparently thought, at first, they were going to parade around the clearing again and was all for it. As Severus approached the dark line of trees, Bob's puppy-like demeanor abruptly became fierce and determined as a basilisk. Leaping between Severus and the trees, he stood with lowered horn at his companion's chest--eyes white with rage, he stomped his hooves and hissed.

"What in the name of Hypolytus has gotten into you?" Snape sputtered in outrage. Never at his best and brightest when angry, Severus swiftly dodged the seemingly mad creature and continued into the wood, where (bad luck continuing to hold true) he ran straight into what Bob was trying to warn him about.

There were three of them. Looking like gnarled little men with bulging eyes, sharp teeth, and noses that put even Snape's to shame, they wore scruffy leather pants and tabards, had wicked-looking rusted daggers hung from their belts, and leaned on long handled, ax-headed pikes. Everything about them looked brown and dingy, except for their hats, which had the unpleasant color of dried blood--in fact, that was exactly what covered them. The ancient British wizards had named them, in their usual descriptive (if unimaginative) way, "Redcaps." Now, three Redcaps, though nasty enough, were considered no match for a seasoned and wand-wielding wizard. To Severus, they were a danger he would rather not have stumbled into. Reacting instinctively, power flowed from wizard and the Redcaps were tossed away, knocked off their feet. This did not especially injure them, but gave Severus time to plan his next attack, and Bob time to recover from his surprise and jump to his friend's defense. Leaping cleanly over Severus' head, almost brushing the tree branches above, Bob entered the fray with the blood-curdling scream of a wild stallion protecting his own. Facing two Redcaps that had landed close together, the unicorn impaled one as it scrambled to its feet. He chased after the second as it turned to flee, screaming in terror; which left only one for Severus to deal with. Gathering his force, he stilled his mind, raised his right arm, the palm of his hand facing his adversary.

"Appello Adustum!" His baritone voice rang out in the forest strong and clear. White hot fire shot from his palm, striking the remaining Redcap, setting it instantly aflame. It turned and fled, shrieking. Severus did not think it would get far. Spinning around as he heard a noise to his left, he saw only Bob returning, horn and hooves dripping in gore. Severus checked Bob for injuries, but it seemed two Redcaps were no match for one furious unicorn. Severus finished his examination and patted the sleek, white-furred flank affectionately.

"Sorry my friend," he said tiredly. "I suppose it was inevitable that you eventually find out what a cantankerous git I am." He walked back to the edge of the clearing, looking at the sky. Light was fading fast. He'd made not one iota of progress getting home, but he was now exhausted by his expenditures of magic energy. "I think, Bob, that I can manage a few more hours in this damned glade before I go mad. Let's get some sleep, and tomorrow I hope I have the good sense to let you lead." Bob followed him to the middle of the tiny clearing, nibbling affectionately at the ends of the Potion Master's unruly hair. Severus lowered himself wearily to the ground and curled up on his side, the apples, following like obedient dogs, plunked into the grass behind him. Bob took a moment to scent the evening breeze, turning his head to take in all directions. Satisfied, he lay down next to Severus. A long pale arm, dusted with downy black hair, flung itself over the unicorn's shoulders as Severus nestled gratefully into the beast's warmth. Bob bent his head to mouth gently at the long fingers wound in his fur.

"G'night, Bob." Severus slept.

Bob relaxed but did not sleep. All through the long chilly night he kept a quiet vigil over his sleeping friend.

In Dumbledore's chambers, a clock hand moved slowly from "In Danger," to "Asleep."

Cavalry of One

Chapter 5 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

Hermione poured through ancient tomes and made scrolls of notes far into the night. The library was deserted and completely silent. Finishing the preliminary research by two am, she took a short break to eat a napkin-wrapped muffin (filched from dinner) before getting down to the real work. While she ate, she stood before a nearby window, staring out into the peaceful night. Though it was spring, winter still laid a tentative hand on the landscape outside. The days were just starting to warm, and the nights were cold and windy.

"Gods," she murmured, "he must be freezing." Sending up a silent prayer for his comfort and safety, she got back to work, driven to find him at all costs.

It took her until four in the morning to adapt the charm she needed, and the Arithmancy spell wasn't completed until after six. The sun rose on a brisk, but clear morning, and Hermione was shocked at the light beginning to stream through the window. She'd not realized her work had been so time-consuming. It never occurred to her that a witch with less skill, intelligence, and determination would've required weeks to work out the problem, if succeeding at all. One thing she knew was--as impatient as she was to rush off to the rescue--she simply had to get some sleep before attempting the complicated spellwork ahead. Hermione also needed an item from home, and knew her father had just the thing. Writing a quick note to her parents, she sealed the scroll before wrapping it in a note to Harry, asking him to send the message with Hedwig as soon as he woke. On the way back to the tower, she stopped into the kitchens, and (after asking a house elf to deliver the note to Harry's room) began packing some supplies. The elves were happy to bring the food she requested; they'd finally forgiven her the ill advised S.P.E.W. campaign. Hermione was still active in various groups working toward better treatment of magical beings, but she no longer tried to free elves willy-nilly.

Working a quick preservation spell on the food, she shrank it enough to easily tuck away in a small drawstring pouch. After thanking her gracious helpers profusely, she departed through the fruited picture. Hermione's feet were headed tiredly to the stairs leading to Gryffindor tower when she remembered one more errand to take care of before succumbing to sleep's siren call. This early on a Saturday morning there were few people about. Though she threw the invisibility cloak back over herself, she was relieved not to have many people to dodge. Continuing to the stairs, she headed down instead of up.

Standing before Snape's office, Hermione raised her wand and examined the wards. The Aurors had lowered Snape's personal wards during their investigation--she was relieved to find they'd put only basic ones in their place. She was through the door and into his office within minutes. Once inside, she found the wards on the potions cabinet were still Snape's. Typically difficult and complex, Hermione spent over half an hour to cautiously break them, layer by layer. Some were simple alert wards, which she ignored--her Slytherin professor wasn't around to feel the silent alarms. She imagined she'd tripped rather enough of them to cause quite a headache when he returned, though. She stoutly refused to contemplate putting an "if" in that thought.

The potions in the cabinet were categorized and clearly labeled. Blessing her surly professor's organized mind, she quickly selected a variety of healing, pain, and restful sleep potions. These she couldn't miniaturize, as additional magic would ruin the effects of the potions. She withdrew a small potions box from her pack and fitted the bottles carefully into the cushioned, velvet lined compartments. Proceeding swiftly to Snape's desk, she searched the top. She didn't want to go pawing through his drawers (and she suspected they had wards she would never be able to break), but she needed something personal for the spellworking she had planned. Tucked between two

books she found a handkerchief. She quickly performed an adapted reveal spell on it. After the botched Polyjuice potion second year, she'd learned to be more careful of unknown spell ingredients. The simple, white linen handkerchief was indeed Severus', and enough of his aura clung to it to serve her purpose. She wanted very much to tuck it into her robes, next to her heart; with a sigh she placed it carefully on top of the phials she had stolen and closed the case. She couldn't afford to let her aura contaminate it. Hermione wished she could take Severus' wand to him, but it was locked carefully in Dumbledore's office, and even with the cloak and password she knew she'd never get anything out without the Headmaster's notice. She looked around the empty office sadly one last time, then made her way to her room, falling into an exhausted sleep.

Hermione dreamlessly slept for six hours. She woke to a package on her bed, together with a quick note from Harry. She appreciated him helping her, but she scowled at his telling her again to take any findings to Dumbledore. It just wasn't possible. The object she intended to fabricate would work well only for the maker, and she refused to waste more time trying to convince the Headmaster she needed to go along. Eagerly opening the package from her parents, she removed the old Muggle compass. Setting it aside reverently, she prepared for her journey. A packed knapsack and a quick cleansing charm later, she stood next to the bed dressed in sturdy Muggle clothes--jeans, jumper, and hiking boots. She hated Severus would see her looking so boyish, but this was about rescuing, not romance. She was ready to begin casting.

Hermione started with a simple transfiguration--the compass became larger, its face luminous. Then she began her adapted charm. Wrapping the compass tightly in Severus' handkerchief, she worked an intricate charm, tying his aura to the compass. She was beautiful when she cast, the graceful, focused, complex motions like a dance of hands and wand. The handkerchief vanished...the face of the compass changed. Instead of the cardinal directions and their counterparts, there was now only one prominent marking on the face: a silver, entwined double "S" gracing the point that formerly marked North, while the lesser directions were branded with tiny serpents facing in the direction they indicated.

Now the only thing left to do was the hardest. The Arithmancy spell was the most difficult she had ever attempted. She was fortunate it was her best subject. During the difficult casting, her voice never wavered and her wand never fell. When it was finally finished, the needle came alive with searching movement. After a few spins, the compass pointed the direction in which Hagrid's Hut lay. That told her that her elusive Potions Master was due north of Hogwarts.

With a quiet shout, mixed of triumph and relief, Hermione put on her cloak and pack, grabbed her broom, and covered all with the invisibility cloak. Leaving her room, she made her way silently to the gates of Hogwarts. Once past, she mounted her broom and balanced carefully. It was a standard school model she'd bought in a used broom shop during her brief period dating Ron. Flying on broomstick was not her favorite way to travel, but it was the only option she knew that would permit her to both make good time and continually check Severus' position on the newly created Snape compass.

With a final look at the secure familiarity of the castle Hogwarts, her home for the last seven years, Hermione gave a small sigh and flew off into the unknown. She did not look back again.

Severus woke up sudden panic. He'd been having an unfathomable dream in which Albus Dumbledore was kissing him. His eyes opened wide with shock, only to find Bob's furry face immediately above his own--undoubtedly the source of the whiskery kiss.

"You need a shave," he said with a glower. Bob refused comment but nickered in horsy laughter. They had a breakfast of apples in companionable silence, Severus eating four, while Bob polished off two whole ones and all of Severus' cores. Bob then finished off his meal with several mouthfuls of thimble-flowered grass. Making a brief foray to the scene of the prior night's battle (with Bob's gracious permission), Severus had hoped the Redcaps' weapons might still be there--but unseen hands had come in the night and picked the area clean. He could have kicked himself for not thinking of it after the fight; he had just been too worn out to think clearly. Returning to the dell, he regarded the last two apples. He was getting sick to death of apples, but they did slake his thirst, and heaven knew when he would find anything else to eat. Though two were easily carried, he decided to spell them. Wizards duelists, like American Muggle gunslingers, had an abhorrence of carrying things in their hands. He spoke and the apples bobbed a bit, settling in behind him. He could tell, even with a night of rest, that his magic had grown weaker. He was tired and beginning to feel weak and ill. Despite the unicorn's shared warmth, the night on the cold ground had chilled him to the bone. The constant struggle with wandless magic, followed too soon by the spells he used against the Redcaps, had left him terribly depleted. Feeling he'd never be warm again, he wanted only to curl up with Bob and go back to sleep. Sleeping would never get him home, however. With a strength of will honed by endless years of finding himself in all manner of distasteful situations, he drew himself up straight and gestured to Bob to lead the way. Responding with gleeful whinnies, Bob tried to snuffle at the thick black curls at Severus' crotch.

"That is NOT for you!" Severus snarled, but the hands he thrust out to bat the foolish creature's head away were surprisingly gentle. Bob continued to snicker as he gave up teasing his human and turned to lead them from the clearing. He headed due south.

At first the journey was easy enough. While the thick canopy above them made for a murky journey, it also meant that there was less undergrowth to avoid. The walk gave Severus time to think. He was resolved to getting back to Hogwarts one way or another, no matter how long and uncomfortable the journey. He had a mission: kill Neville Longbottom!

When Albus Dumbledore woke from a restless sleep, he found himself wandering to the grandfather clock, still clad in his nightshirt. He was very much afraid of what he would find there. As he searched out one particular hand, a tiny twinkle sparked in his blue eyes. Severus' hand had moved into "In Transit." A soft breath of relief echoed in the quiet room. Then he noticed a new designation on the clock face. Sometime in the night the phrase "Rescue Mission" had appeared; all alone in the midst of it was the clock hand belonging to Hermione.

"Damn. What in the world were you thinking, my dear?" He'd been hoping his threat of expulsion would keep the child safe. He never thought it would drive her to roam about on her own. He ought to have known better, of course. Albus knew exactly which wizard had inspired Miss Granger's recent emotional clock designation. What the hell were those boys thinking, letting her go haring off alone? He would have to speak to them as quickly as possible. Before changing into his robes, he called a house elf, asking it to find the boys and send them immediately.

When the boys arrived they met a stern-faced Headmaster. His face appeared, by turns, both angry and disappointed when he learned they knew absolutely nothing of Hermione's plans.

He ushered them from his office with a brisk, "I know I ought to be congratulating you for following my orders, but I simply cannot believe two brave Gryffindors let such a sweet young lady wander off into danger alone."

Harry and Ron were devastated. They walked in embarrassed silence back to their common room. Sitting in a quiet corner, conversing in low tones, Harry filled Ron in on Hermione's night in the restricted section.

"We're never going to figure out what she did are we?" said Harry.

"Never. If we transfigured both our brains into one we still wouldn't be as smart as 'Mione," Ron replied. Then he fell back into his habit of uttering complete nonsense when upset. "Why would she go to so much trouble for that greasy bat anyway? If I'd for one second thought she was serious I would have locked her in the Quidditch shed! When she gets back I'm really going to give her a piece of my mind!"

"Ron Weasley!" snapped Harry. "You're my best friend but sometimes I could wring your bloody neck! If we're lucky enough to get Hermione back in one piece--after the disgusting way we've treated her--we should get down, kiss her feet, and beg her forgiveness!" Harry's words fell on Ron as if he'd been doused in cold water.

"I just don't understand why she did it, Harry," he said quietly.

"Because she's in love with him you dunderhead! Before you get on a roll about that one, I'm going to tell you right now that if you don't want to lose her friendship forever, you bloody well better get used to the idea. You'd best use the time Hermione's gone and try to fucking grow up!" Harry's voice had been getting louder and louder as he talked, and he fairly screamed the last. Thundering off to their dormitory, he left Ron looking absolutely gobsmacked.

Walking Thoughts

Chapter 6 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

The first few miles of Hermione's flight went smoothly. Once out of sight of Hogwarts, she paused to remove the invisibility cloak and tuck it safely into her pack. She'd decided it was too blasted difficult to make sure it covered broom, body, and all, while flying. Saint Simeon himself would have been impressed by the tremendous foolishness of this single act. Later, Hermione would have ample time to reflect on this decision with regret. Flying close to the treetops, she momentarily remained blissfully ignorant of impending doom. Their nearness comforted her and she felt safer not flying too high. This decision would have made St. Simeon laugh right out loud, had he been there.

The average human being spends very little time looking at anything located more than a foot or so above their heads. Indeed, to best hide something, hide it in plain sight--so long as it is up. Slytherins are quite aware of this. Slytherins can have sex outside on a balcony, facing a crowded street, and 999 times out of a thousand--no one will notice. (This bit of knowledge causes Slytherins to feel a bit smug. Perhaps it's not only the knowledge, but also the exercise giving Slytherins that smug smile.) Gryffindors, on the other hand, will try to snog under a table and everyone in the room will know about it. (This will also make Slytherins smug, but then most things do.) Slytherins think Gryffindors have a lot in common with St. Simeon, except that while St. Simeon acted the fool, Slytherins think Gryffs have been typecast.

In typical, non-Slytherin, human fashion, Hermione was unused to paying attention to things in the sky when not actively studying astronomy. Humans tend to believe all things behave basically the same as they do, and when the universe proves them wrong time after time, they have the audacity to keep looking surprised. It would come as no surprise to Hagrid that creatures living and nesting in the treetops of the Forbidden Forest kept a sharp eye to the skies, watching for encroaching danger. For Hermione, unfortunately, the clever gamekeeper was no more present than St. Simeon.

The nesting pair of hippogriffs watched the intruder intently. Hippogriffs are temperamental during the best of occasions, as well as being sticklers where manners are concerned. Nesting hippogriffs can unexpectedly change from "merely temperamental," to "bordering on psychotic" rather quickly. Considering anything flying over their nest as be the epitome of rudeness, they feel the only punishment fit for such behavior is immediate death and dismemberment. Wizard children are warned of such things when they are given their first broomstick. Children of Muggle dentists have no such warnings.

As Hermione flew over the nest, the male hippogriff exploded from the treetops, screeching in fury. Hermione nearly fell off her broom in surprise. The hippogriff charged, and she--never the most skilled of fliers--panicked. She could only think how desperately she wished to be back on solid ground. Hermione dove straight down. The dive was far too steep for anyone other than Harry Potter himself to recover from, and poor Hermione never stood a chance. To complicate matters, an errant tree branch caught her across the forehead, making her race towards the ground more uncontrollably. Vainly trying to pull up, Hermione crashed unceremoniously to the ground, losing consciousness as she landed in a heap.

Fortunately for Hermione, hippogriffs have the most unfortunate habit of never looking down. Once she disappeared, to lie as if dead in a clump of bushes, the hippogriff decided she no longer existed and returned to his worried mate on the nest.

Finally regaining her senses, Hermione woke to find the threat gone and herself unhurt, except for assorted scrapes and a bitch of a headache. The broomstick, however, was mortally wounded. The sudden crack against the ground had split it into three pieces. It was beyond repair. Hermione put her head in her hands as she collected her thoughts. There was no way she was giving up; she would just have to resign herself to a slower journey on foot. She had only made it ten miles from Hogwarts. Though she didn't realize it, Severus was still over twenty miles away. She had learned one lesson, though: before setting out, she carefully put the invisibility cloak on over her warm woolen one.

Saint Simeon smiled.

The first hour of Bob and Severus' journey was relatively peaceful. Stumbling upon a trail leading south, Severus paused in indecision. Not a Slytherin for nothing, he was suspicious of the seemingly too-convenient path. In truth, Severus was wary with good reason. Innocent paths in the deep of enchanted forests usually led places the average wizard did not desire to go, and were made by creatures unpleasant to meet. When Bob snickered at him and tried to resume nuzzling at places Severus thought he had no business nuzzling, Severus gave in and followed his equine friend down the path.

"Well, Bob," he grumbled, "we both know following my lead is bound to end a cock-up. I suppose I'll have to trust you in this instance."

The trail was slightly more open than the surrounding wood. It meandered like a stream, winding through the trees as bits of light filtered through a nearly non-existent gap in the leafy ceiling above. Though still cool, the exercise warmed Severus enough to lighten his discomfort. Having little to do--beyond docilely following the horsy rump in front of him--Severus soon found himself lost in his thoughts.

His mind recalled a pair of soft brown eyes staring up at him from the potion classroom's floor. The expression they'd held had rather shocked him, for they'd seemed to express both the fright of a startled doe and the warm concern of a lover. He attempted repeatedly to ban the evocative image from his mind, only to have it reappear the moment he dropped his guard. This both befuddled and annoyed him. That lovely young face had absolutely no business haunting him. Wait--lovely? From what circle of hell had that thought sprung? Since when did anything about the most annoying witch to darken his classroom door seem attractive? Damn--he knew he'd been too hard on her. She'd surprised him in her second year with a flat refusal to be afraid of him. At some point, she'd begun showing him a grudging respect; that respect endured a gradual metamorphosis into open admiration. As a child, her eyes swam with tears each time he'd loosed a barb in her direction, yet--in the last couple of years--she'd given back as good as she got, and always with a delicate turn of phrase just this side of respectful. Most recently, when he'd directed his most terrifying scowl her way, she got a rather pinched look on her face, leading him to suspect she was biting her tongue to prevent her laughter. What kind of witch laughed at his patented 'I am evil incarnate' look?

He was forced to admit her remarkable brilliance. Not that he would ever be caught rhapsodizing on her many talents in the staff room, unlike the other professors--the insipid fools. She also had a gift for potion-making that her imbecilic classmates lacked. This last year, he'd taken to giving her detentions at random, for completely nonexistent reasons, whenever he required an assistant for his own work. She would, quite transparently, pretend to sulk, and he, in turn, would pretend to fail seeing through her pretense. At the beginning, they worked in companionable silence; eventually, however, they developed a pattern of falling into discussions of all manner of magical theory. Severus wasn't accustomed to conversing with people as intelligent and articulate as himself. He was also unused to the rare treasure of feeling free to act of his own accord, without the constant annoyance of giving offense. Like Albus, Hermione didn't seem to care if he wasn't nice; when at his most annoying, she was at her most amused. It was rather addicting, and the only method he'd found to cope with her impending graduation was to utterly refuse admitting himself capable of missing anyone. He'd grown accustomed to thinking of Miss Granger as an extraordinary student and an interesting person with whom to debate; a sort of colleague, a contemporary. He'd thought it was only her mind he admired. A little mishap, a little fatigue, and suddenly her eyes haunted him and the word "lovely" was bandied about

inside his head.

It was most disconcerting.

Hermione's invisible passage through the wood was blissfully uneventful, if a bit boring. She often found herself berating her stupidity at losing the broom. She had no idea how distant Severus might be, and knowing she might have already reached him drove her to distraction. For all she knew, the man bedeviling her every thought was suffering severely and in dire need of assistance. Her overactive imagination envisioned him in all sorts of catastrophic situations: tired, hungry, cold; maimed, despairing...dead. Her worst waking nightmare included walking a hundred miles, faithfully guided by her Snape compass, only to find his ravaged and lifeless body. She was beginning to wish she had listened to Harry and taken her findings to Dumbledore. Surely she could have found some way to make him understand it was imperative for her to go with the rescue party. The headmaster would have found a faster way to reach Severus than walking. She couldn't bring herself to turn back, however; with her luck, she would turn back when her love was just around the next bend--broken, bleeding, and desperately needing help.

To drive away the restless fears, she forced herself to focus on more pleasant thoughts. Ebony eyes flashing terror into a wayward first year one moment; sparking with interest and wonder during their heated Arithmancy debates the next. She could only imagine how they'd look alight with passion. Hermione was unsure why she continued to torture herself with such thoughts. True, they'd formed a sort of camaraderie of mind during his ridiculous fake detentions, but he had at all times acquitted himself with the utmost propriety. Not once had he given any indication of regarding her as anything more than a dedicated student and interesting conversationalist. He'd given her not one warm look or friendly touch; in fact, he avoided touching her in any fashion, other than the unavoidable brush of fingers when she passed on potion ingredients. Hermione was certain the Potions Master hadn't a clue that each such careless contact literally caused her heart to skip a beat. He likely would run screaming from the room if he knew.

Why would he not run, after all? He'd called her "silly little girl" so often, she ought to have the phrase emblazoned on a t-shirt, then he'd be able to point and save his breath. She had nothing particularly to recommend her. Certainly, he admired her mind, but a grown man does not coil naked with a woman's mind. She was relatively certain that Professor Snape wasn't a man drawn to dull women; he'd too soon grow bored. However, there are many intelligent women much more beautiful than she; Severus, though not classically handsome, held enough dark intrigue to garner his share of propositions. The thought of "her" professor with one of these phantom women made the young woman's eyes narrow with jealousy. Damn the man! Were she fortunate enough to find Severus before some contemptible fate caught up with him, she would surrender to Gryffindor recklessness for once and give those phantom women a run for their money! With grim determination, she increased her pace. Perhaps Harry had been right--maybe she was bloody doomed, but she'd not go quietly into doomed oblivion. She'd do her best to throw herself at the obstinate man, hoping he was intelligent enough to catch her.

Beware Severus Snape, your fate comes stalking...and it's wearing hiking boots.

Severus' journey following Bob down the path had become a trying ordeal. Any person that's spent time in a forest (be they wizard or Muggle), will advise in great length of the various proper states of attire for a prolonged hike in the woods. Not one will advise to tromp about naked--and with good reason. The most circumspect of nude traveler will inadvertently brush against all manner of things in passing. Sharp twigs, thorny bushes, stinging nettles, poison ivy--only a few of the non-magical flora that Severus encountered since he woke to discover his *au naturel* predicament. His tall, lean body was already marred with a plethora of scrapes and scratches. These things he simply ignored. Years as a Death Eater and spy had trained him to put any mere unpleasantness easily out of his mind. Even in his reverie, he'd kept raven-sharp eyes on watch for the more dangerous, magical plants. He simply hadn't been able to avoid everything, especially before finding the trail they currently traversed. In stoic fashion, he ignored what he could do nothing about; were he to fall to distraction with the memory of dusky eyes, it was surely a necessary diversion. Unfortunately, he now faced a problem he could no longer put aside. He'd have gladly given up the Snape family estate for his own well worn, but beloved, dragonhide boots.

The trail they followed was barely broken and seemed seldom used. The dirt was littered with stones, branches, and tree roots. Severus had tried to be careful of his feet, but after walking three hours, his beleaguered appendages were torn and bloody. Bob, for his part, would gladly have given his human friend a lift, were it in his power to do so. Unicorns are small and delicately made. While very strong, in their own way, they are nevertheless quite unsuited as beasts of burden. Severus was deciding what, if anything, he could do about this turn of events, when Bob stopped in front of him.

They'd come upon a small brook crossing the trail. Severus hoped it would be potable--the final two apples had been divided between them over an hour ago, and he was terribly thirsty.

"What do you think little one?" Severus asked. "Do you think we can chance it?" Bob lowered his head to sniff intently at the water's surface. Raising it, he blew air through his lips in an equine raspberry. He looked to his friend, tossing his head and appearing uncertain.

"Time I earned my keep is it?" Severus said with a smirk. "Not to worry, I do have a bit of experience judging the properties of liquids, after all." Kneeling down, Severus cupped water in his hand, lifted it to his prodigious nose, and inhaled deeply. His lips parted slightly, much as a cat's will when scenting rapily. He nodded absently, as if satisfied, then touched his tongue lightly to the surface of the water. He closed his eyes, and--in the manner of Muggle scientists and wizard potion masters--focused one hundred percent of his attention to the taste of the puzzle at hand. The wizard portion of his mind instinctively checked for any trace of magical effect or compulsion. His eyes eventually sprang open in calm surety.

"It's safe enough, although we can only hope to avoid a case of traveler's ague, as I don't think I'm up to a boiling spell." With that assurance, Bob happily dropped his head to the water and drank deeply. At first cupping the cold water in his palm, Severus then sighed, stretched out on the bank, and lowered his lips to the water in imitation of his companion. His head snapped up when he heard feminine laughter.

A woman, stunningly beautiful, stood on the other side of the narrow stream, gazing at him with wry amusement. She wore a long, elegant, ivy green brocade gown with a very full skirt, reminiscent of an earlier age. Her blonde hair blew about in the gentle breeze and her hands, playing with her skirt, swirled it in a seemingly unconscious imitation of her hair. She laughed again as her green eyes swept interestedly over Severus' nude length, still stretched out along the bank.

Severus' first reaction was to spring to his feet, but quickly quelled it in favor of keeping those parts of his anatomy, so compelling as far as Bob were concerned, covered. The unicorn gave the woman a token glance and resumed drinking. In Bob's defense, her type of being was no threat to a unicorn, so he had no way of knowing the danger she posed to normal men. Incidentally, none in Severus' acquaintance would ever refer to him as "normal." Noticing Bob's lack of concern, Severus forwent scrambling to his feet and settled on raising himself enough to prop an elbow in the dirt and rest chin in hand. Raising an eyebrow and giving the alluring blonde a look conveying extreme boredom, he addressed her.

"Good day, madam," he said in a world-weary voice. It paid to be polite when dealing with an unknown being, but it also paid to discourage further conversation. Her replying laughter bubbled like the stream.

"Good day, milord," she responded in a voice like warm butterbeer. "I must confess it is not everyday I find a bonny lad draped upon the ground, nor one so charmingly attired." Severus was not distracted by the syrupy voice--he rather detested butterbeer. Instead, he took the time in which she spoke to study her form as minutely as he would an unknown, and potentially dangerous, potion. There was something decidedly odd about how she kept her flowing skirts in a state of almost hypnotic movement. His suspicious nature would serve him well this day. A more trusting man, a man more susceptible to a pretty face and sweet voice, would have met a very different fate. His study was rewarded. There it was--difficult to glimpse amongst the swirling cloth, Severus saw an almost dainty cloven hoof.

He immediately relaxed. He knew exactly what this creature was; it was no danger to an intelligent wizard. The woman was a type of water fairy, a *Glaistig*. Similar in part to a centaur, the *Glaistig* was part woman, part goat. They lurked near water-crossed paths hoping to lure travelers to dance with them. Any man doing so found his demise, as *Glaistigs* fed on their dance partners like vampires. They were bound by their magic, however, and if he would not dance, she would not drink.

"You might well give it a miss, madam," Severus broke in coolly, "not even the fires of Hades itself could convince me to dance with you." With that, he calmly rejoined Bob in finishing his drink. The *Glaistig's* bewitching manner was gone, and with it fled her sweet voice. With tones akin more to firewhisky than butterbeer, she heaped abuse

upon the weary travelers before storming away in a flurry of cloth and hooves.

Finishing his drink, Severus sat up to examine his abused feet. They were indeed in a bad way, and if he didn't soon find some answer to his quandary, he wouldn't be going much farther. He spared no time trying healing charms. Attempting to heal without a wand is a bit like a Muggle surgeon trying to operate without a scalpel. Recalling his beautiful boots once more, he was struck with an idea. His boots, as his teaching robes, were charmed by a variety of protective spells. Teaching bumbling cretins how to combine volatile potion ingredients was dangerous work. Since most failed student attempts ended in melted cauldrons and caustic substances running over the classroom floor, he paid particular attention to the spells on his boots. One of those spells was an armoring charm. A very useful charm, not only would it keep the most caustic of substances out, Hagrid himself could step on Severus' booted foot and he would feel no pain. Severus wasn't certain he could do it without a wand, nor was he sure what effect said charm would have on bare skin, but he had to try something.

An hour passed. Bob, tired from his sleepless night, napped while Severus worked his magic. It took several tries and far more time and energy than Severus thought was prudent. He was, at last, met with success. His feet still stung from previous injury, but were safe from future harm. Rousing Bob from his nap and taking a final drink from the stream, Severus crossed the brook and continued his journey home, far wearier than before.

Hermione had stumbled on a path heading north. Knowing the dangers of woodland paths, she felt secure enough in her invisibility to exchange prudence for speed. It would have cheered her greatly to know that fate had led her stumbling steps to the very trail Bob and Severus now followed. She walked for hours, until an unforeseen circumstance halted her progress abruptly. A small herd of Catoblepas had encroached on the path to forage on the sparse vegetation growing at its edges. They looked rather like scaled cattle with over-large, heavy heads that hung earthward. They were not especially aggressive, but their chosen diet of poisonous plants made their breath deadly to humans. The safest way of dealing with them was to avoid their attention completely. Hermione was invisible and, luckily, upwind of the grazing animals, but they completely blocked her path. If she tried to leave the path and circle around them they would likely hear her. No matter how much care she took she'd never miss every dead leaf and snapping twig. The Catoblepas didn't have to see her to hurt her; they had only to breathe in her general direction. She quietly backtracked, putting a little more distance between herself and the noxious creatures. There was nothing to do about it; she would have to wait until they moved along. Using the unexpected break to have an early dinner of cheese and bread, she then checked her stores to make certain her potions were surviving the journey intact. Then she permitted herself to become lost for a bit in her daydreams. By the time the herd had moved along, it was nearing sunset. Hermione made sure she moved past the haunt of the Catoblepas, in case they returned in the night, then resigned herself to sleep. Placing wards around the nook between two tree trunks where she curled herself, she then slept. Her entire journey that day, both by broomstick and hiking boots, had only taken her fifteen miles north of Hogwarts.

Severus tried to push ahead. He was determined to return to Hogwarts and kill Neville Longbottom, yet no amount of will could completely negate the needs of a body made weary by exposure, hunger, injury, encroaching illness, and overuse of magic. Bob aided all he could, whinnying at the few things that were edible, but in early spring there is little in any wood to keep a man alive. Severus found himself puzzled by that branch of apples--they weren't in season, so where had they come from? He imagined the unicorn must have journeyed to some enchanted garden; he wished there was one nearer by. He'd never reach home if he couldn't keep his strength--he was too weary to manage another step. With that thought, he lay down to sleep the remainder of that day and through the night. Bob dozed lightly, keeping faithful guard over his pet. Severus had managed five miles that day. Seventeen miles separated him from Hermione.

Until Death do Part

Chapter 7 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

A hot wetness rained hungry kisses on her inner thigh. Breath, like fire, stirred the cinnamon curls covering her sex. Onyx eyes looked up from between her legs, burning into her own with searing heat.

Groaning in her sleep, Hermione woke with a start to find the sun high, blazing down through a chink in the trees above. There was enough warmth to make her uncomfortable, wrapped tight in her woolen cloak, and she tried to blame the heat she felt on the sun. She failed miserably.

Hermione was chagrined to find it almost noon; she should've resumed her journey hours ago, but couldn't be blamed, really. After a sleep too short the night before, heavy spellworking, fear, worry, and a five mile walk on legs unused to so much exercise, her body demanded much-needed rest. Making up for her late start, she preformed a quick cleansing spell, had an equally quick call of nature, then grabbed a cheese sandwich from her provisions, munching on it while continuing north. The day remained blessedly uneventful, Hermione's only complaint was that a couple of rocky hills further slowed her progress. By nightfall, she'd managed nine painstaking miles.

That same morning, while Hermione dreamed heatedly of her Potions Master, the lead player in those dreams woke much less pleasantly. Circumstances had caught up with Severus: waking feverish and weak, he began his now stumbling walk behind Bob only by the grace of his iron determination. Focusing on the white furry beast ahead of him, every ounce of concentration was required solely to continue putting one aching foot down in front of the other.

Bob himself was not at his best and brightest. Even for a unicorn, two nights with little sleep will take its toll. He worried over his pet. Bob knew, as much as he'd like to keep the man, such creatures did not fair well in the dark forest. He was trying his best to herd his human friend out of the wood as quickly as possible. It was a slow process with such a frail creature. Today, he had a new worry--his friend smelled of illness and was too tired to share in the cheerful games that made their previous mornings so enjoyable. Sleepy and preoccupied, it was little wonder that the unicorn led them forward without his usual care.

At Hogwarts, a gray-haired wizard watching a clock hand wept openly in frustration and despair as it swept unrelentingly from "In Transit" to "Deadly Peril."

In Muggle adventure movies, battles are lengthy affairs littered with give and take actions, almost like a perverse ballet. In fact, those skirmishes are carefully choreographed, often leaving time for witty discourse and snarling bravado. Only when the audience is on the edge of its seat do those efforts condense themselves into a final outcome. In life, deadly struggles are usually as quick as they are callous. There is no grace or wit in them, and they herald devastating results with little ceremony. Adversaries muddle through as best they can, hoping the Fates leave them standing, and their opponent dead.

Bob and Severus had managed a slow march of three miles by the time Hermione woke, still fourteen miles away. At noon they found a small spring, at which they took a

welcome drink while resting. Eventually, refusing to give into exhaustion, Severus pulled himself to his taxed feet and the two companions continued southward. After one more excruciating mile, disaster struck.

Hidden high in a tree leaning over the trail, a dark-robed figure watched the pair with covetous eyes. Swarthy, pocked skin covered a misshapen face like dried up bracken. Long fingered, skeletal hands hung from the sleeves of her tattered robes. The hands were armed with equally long, wickedly pointed nails. Her hair was a filthy black mess that nearly cocooned her, draping around and down her back, reaching almost to her heels like a tangled black shroud. Her eyes were empty red pits, showing no intelligence or emotion--save ferocity. Watching the pair approach, she drooled in anticipation. The creature was a Black Annis Hag. Loosely regarded as human, and rather dense, hags made up for their lack of brains by being unspeakably vicious. They were fast, inhumanly strong, and resistant to magic. The Black Annis variety was also cannibalistic, liking nothing better than the opportunity to dine on their human cousins. She continued to drool.

The fight, though it may have seemed a stretched eternity, was brief and brutal. The hag waited until they'd barely passed beneath her before flinging herself from her perch, landing on her feet directly behind Severus. He tried to spin, but before he came half 'round, she scored his shoulder and back with poisonous slashes from her claws, tossing him aside. The hag turned to face the furious unicorn as Bob drove his horn deep into her belly. It was not enough to kill her, and as they writhed together, she clawed at the unicorn with both hands.

Quiet rage filled Severus' mind as he clambered to his feet, raising a palm at the black frenzied form, intoning a dark and solemn "Avada Kedavra." The spell struck the hag squarely, ripping her from the unicorn's horn and away from him--but not before a desperate dying swipe of her clawed hand slashed across the unicorn's throat.

Staggering to Bob's prone form, Severus dropped to his knees beside his friend, only to find liquid silver flowing from the loyal creature's neck in a stream. He tried desperately to heal his fallen friend, but without his wand it was a pointless (if impassioned) endeavor. Severus did manage to stopper the animal's pain, though he could not halt his death.

Bob nickered at him softly, trying to raise his heavy head to look at Severus with a chagrined expression, as if to say "Looks like this cock-up is my fault."

"Hush, now, dear one," Severus murmured. "It's quite alright, I'm here with you. Nothing shall ever harm you again, my friend." Severus sat where he could draw the dying beast's head to his lap. Quieted, Bob sighed as Severus stroked his head and neck, his fingers leaving wet, quicksilver trails through the soft white hair. Tears ran silently down his face, falling to mix with the shimmering blood. Severus wept for the first time in his adult life--quietly, unashamedly. He continued to murmur soft words of affection, stroking the silken neck, long after the flesh beneath his hands turned still and cold.

Albus finally received a response to the owl sent off to China. It had managed to find the surly Asian Potions Master, but the scroll the owl returned with offered no hope. The wizard had studied Hermione's account minutely, and his answering letter explained exactly how the Draught of Dreamless Sleep had been turned into a teleportation potion. The science involved would have interested any student of potions, but that hardly made up for being unable to discover where such a potion teleported one. Giving up on deciphering the dissertation further, Dumbledore returned to the grandfather clock with heavy, slow steps. His own Potion Master's hand was again in motion. Albus' breath caught as the hand crept slowly through "Dead" and ended in "Despair." Albus drew a ragged breath. He was loath to imagine what horrendous circumstances could turn his stoic friend to despair, but at least the boy was alive.

"Live, my boy, live," he whispered. "All is never lost, not while life and love await you. Live and give Hermione a chance to reach you."

With a heavy heart, but unquenchable hope, Albus Dumbledore left his office to continue keeping up appearances in the Great Hall.

Eventually, the living, when facing the dead, must make a choice. They either carry on to face blind destiny, or they lie down beside the fallen--joining them in death. There was only one thought which finally convinced Severus to lay Bob's cold head upon the muddy ground gently (oh so gently), and take action. He abhorred the thought of the hideous body of the hag lying anywhere near his beautiful fallen comrade. Dragging the loathsome thing farther away, he wanted to tear her body apart with his bare hands--fling raw, bloody pieces of her to the four winds--tear her black heart from her chest and crush it in his trembling fist. He did none of these things. He knew of more important work to accomplish this day, and had only so much failing energy to manage it. Severus settled for repeating the same charm used on the Redcap, staring coldly at the burning hag until her body was reduced to dusty ash.

Returning to Bob's still form, he considered his options. He refused to leave his friend's body to be ravaged by passing beasts, but his magic was now completely drained. With gentle hands, he arranged the unicorn as if kneeling, horn touching the earth to which he would return. With slow, staggering steps, using the very last of his strength, and all his formidable will, he doggedly gathered stones and built a cairn for his friend's repose. The humble task, done with hands and sweat (rather than impersonal wand waving), claimed the remains of the day and left him spent and numb. Uncaring of his own safety, having no thought for whether he lived or died, Severus lay down next to the cairn, and placing a hand upon the cold stones, drifted into unconsciousness.

Only four miles now remained between where Hermione slept wearily and where Severus slept as if dead.

Hermione woke the next morning from a night filled with disquieting dreams--dreams in which Severus wandered broken and bloody and her Headmaster's voice kept telling her to "hurry, hurry!"

She rose quickly, and without further ado, continued down the trail--almost running in her fear.

Four miles away, Severus woke delirious. The untreated slashes of the hag's poisoned nails were quickly destroying the last of his defenses. He patted the stones he lay against absently, not quite recalling why they were dear to him. Uncertain where he was or what he was doing, the habit of walking south turned him automatically in that direction. Stumbling forward on shaking legs, he would fall, lie a moment, and then hoist himself back to his feet to shamble forward and eventually fall again. His eyes were glazed with fever, his hair a muddy tangle. Dried blood from his own wounds mixed with the dried silver of Bob's, covering much of his naked body. The skin of his knees became broken and bruised from his inability to stay upright.

A voice inside his head endlessly repeated a command to "Go on! Go on!" So he did, not even understanding why.

Less than an hour had passed when Hermione rounded a bend in the path, only to see the object of her worry walking towards her on unsteady legs. The relief of finding Severus, and the horror of his bedraggled appearance, left her standing in the middle of the trail, mouth agape in shock, still invisible in Harry's cloak.

Severus walked directly into her.

On any other day (and in any other condition), had Severus run into an invisible person (no matter how curvy), he'd have hexed first and asked questions later. Fate was smiling upon Hermione, for when Severus ran into her, he simply put his hands on her invisible shoulders and blinked at the empty air between them uncomprehendingly. He wasn't panicked, for the situation seemed oddly familiar. Why? He sniffed, and a feminine smell reached his nose, a scent reminiscent of oranges and ginger. It was sweet, yet hotly spicy. He knew that smell...he knew these curves.

With the final thread of his will, he drew himself up, flung the invisibility cloak from Hermione's still gaping form, and intoned in his best wicked professor voice, "Miss Granger, that will be twenty points from Gryffindor for behavior unbecoming a student." He then collapsed unconscious at her feet.

Giving up all pretense of normality, Albus Dumbledore sat in a comfy, overstuffed chair he'd conjured before the grandfather clock. While he watched in stony silence, Hermione's hand spun from "Asleep," returning to "Rescue Mission." Severus' hand had made slow procession from "Despair" to "Asleep," then on to "Deathly Ill." Mid-morning, Albus suffered a momentary panic when Severus' hand turned to "Collapsed," until noticing Hermione's "Rescue Mission" designation had disappeared, to be replaced with "Nursing."

"Well done, Miss Granger." He smiled for the first time in days and the blue sparkle bloomed in his eyes. "Well done, indeed."

Albus pried his eyes from the clock face (it was a bit like getting addicted to a Muggle soap opera), leaving for the staffroom to spread the hopeful news.

Patience and Patient

Chapter 8 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

When Severus collapsed, Hermione was finally able to close her gaping mouth and take action. Kneeling beside the motionless form at her feet, she put a hand to his forehead. He was burning up with fever--and so chilled his teeth chattered, though he remained unconscious. She'd have to get him warm, then she could assess the damage. Though she couldn't bundle him up until his wounds were examined, she could get him off the cold ground. Quickly transfiguring her woolen cloak, she levitated his prone form onto what was now a thick pad. She next charmed up one of her merry blue fires, setting it nearby. The air around the pair warmed rapidly, and though the sleeping man still shivered, his teeth had finally stopped chattering. She critically eyed his still form. He was smeared with mud, blood, and...unicorn blood? Good gods! What had happened? Surely he didn't... the thought broke off. He'd never stoop to such an act to stay alive. He was far too honorable. Putting her curiosity aside until he was well enough to tell her about his trials, she began determining the extent of his injuries. A simple cleansing spell and the assorted muck melted away, leaving the pale form battered, but clean. As the grime disappeared, Hermione couldn't help but be distracted by his nudity. She'd never been face to face with a naked man before, and this particular man was dear to her heart. Dragging her traitorous mind from such thoughts--and her eyes away from the black, curly, thatch of hair at his crotch (and all it framed)--she set down to business.

Hermione was no mediwitch, but had taken an independent study course in basic healing with Madame Pomfrey last year. She'd thought it prudent to know the basics while the war against Voldemort was still raging. Calming her wildly beating heart, Hermione studied the figure laid out before her with a skilled eye. Most of the injuries were superficial, thus easily dealt with. His knees were beat to hell, requiring more effort. The parallel slashes raking down his right shoulder and back were, by far, the ugliest of his injuries. She looked them over carefully--four ragged-edged lacerations...probably some type of claw mark. The flesh had gone an ugly red, with thick, orange-tinged pus seeping from the slashes. The wound stank of rotten fruit--definitely poisoned. She'd have to neutralize the poison and thoroughly clean the wound before she could risk closing it.

Rummaging in her pack, Hermione removed the precious box of potions. Thank Nimue she had brought so many in her typically 'better to be over prepared than not prepared at all' fashion. There were two different potions that might counteract the poison. The rotten fruit smell suggested a neurotoxin, so she chose the antidote suitable for poisonous snake bites and the like. Whispering a prayer that her choice wasn't wrong, she began pouring the solution into the wounds.

The potion worked immediately, the orange pus disappearing and the redness around the slashes returning to normal, if pale, skin. The wounds began to bleed freely, but the blood was red, and apparently normal. The disgusting smell also had abated. Pouring an antiseptic potion into the wound to sterilize it, Hermione grasped her wand tightly, murmuring the flesh-knitting charm repeatedly as she traced the wounds, wand nearly touching his skin. The wounds closed, leaving softly red lines of new skin in their wake. Hermione rocked back on her heels to rest for a moment. One wound dealt with...only fifty thousand or so to go. Sighing, she got back to work.

It was well into the afternoon before she'd gone over every inch of Severus and healed the multitude of injuries covering him. The knees and the palms of his delicate hands gave her the most trouble. Apparently he'd been crawling at some point, for both were torn and bruised. From time to time she rested, gathering her strength and her wits before continuing. At last, she finished.

Severus had not stirred during her ministrations. This worried her, but didn't surprise her--his outward injuries were only part of the problem. It shocked Hermione what havoc a few short days could cause in the man--normally lean, he was now pitifully thin...his hair was clean, but still a rat's nest of tangles. His ribs protruded baldly, and dark patches circled his eyes as if bruised. He was obviously exhausted and suffering from illness, hunger, and exposure. Selecting a basic restful sleep potion from her stores, as well as a Pepper-up, she lifted his head, pouring the liquid between his lips and into the back of his throat. Steam curled gently from his ears and his fever began falling in earnest.

Though Hermione was exhausted she could not rest quite yet. She carefully set defensive wards around them, made certain her magical fire wasn't in danger of setting the surrounding trees aflame, then transfigured her handkerchief into a warm blanket. Removing nothing but her hiking boots, she lay next to the sleeping man, covering them both with the blanket before gathering him into her arms, resting his head on her shoulder. When he woke he'd probably attempt to take every point possible from Gryffindor for "behavior unbecoming a student," but she didn't give a damn. She'd worried about him for days; now she felt compelled to hold him close, as if her arms could keep him safe. She thought briefly of transfiguring him a night shirt, but she was tired, and it did feel so lovely to wrap her arms 'round his naked chest. Sighing, Hermione fell into a light sleep.

In Albus' sitting room, Minerva joined him in clock watching. As Hermione's hand spun to "Sleep" and Severus' turned to "Recovering," Albus swung Minerva into an impromptu waltz, eyes twinkling madly.

Hermione woke in the dead of night to the soft, blue light of her magic fire--and an empty space beside her. She heard retching, and raising herself on her elbows, squinted in the semi-darkness. Severus had crawled from the pallet and, still on hands and knees, was heaving pitifully. Clambering up, Hermione grabbed her potion box. Choosing a serum for nausea, she hurried to his side.

Hermione fell to her knees and gathered his long, tangled hair away from his face. Unstopping the phial with her teeth, she spat out the cork and commanded him to drink. He complied, then rested, head hanging, until the nausea passed. With a quick spell she removed the traces of his illness and helped him back to bed.

"You shouldn't have gotten up, sir," she admonished softly.

"After all the trouble you've gone to on my behalf, it would have been unspeakably rude to vomit on you." Severus' voice was weak, but his snark intact. Hermione couldn't

restrain a smile. She eased him back under the blanket, crawling in beside him. He gave her only token resistance when she pulled his head back down to her shoulder. He was still too weak to offer much struggle. Besides, if he ignored the glaring impropriety of lying naked next to a student, he was forced to admit that having Hermione's shoulder for a pillow, and her warm arms wrapped securely around him, was decidedly pleasant. Inhaling her spicy citrus scent, he allowed himself a tired (but smugly Slytherin) smile.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor for behavior unbecoming a student," he mumbled softly into her shoulder, the smile not leaving his face.

Hermione snorted. If he was only taking off twenty points for the incredible cheek of her cuddling up to his naked body, he mustn't mind it as much as she'd have guessed.

"You are far too ill to know what you're saying, sir," she teased. "Besides, you can no longer deduct points on my account--Headmaster Dumbledore's expelled me."

"What?" he snarled, lifting his head for a moment to glare at her. He let it fall tiredly back to her shoulder and rumbled, "I'm going to kill Albus. But he'll have to wait his turn. My first priority is to insure Longbottom's demise." He drifted into sleep to the sound of her warm chuckle.

Waking late the next morning, Severus knew where he was after only a moment's reflection. He could smell a faint, sweet, gingeriness about him and he was warm, so blessedly warm! Sweet merciful Merlin, what uncalculated pleasure mere warmth was after the days of his ordeal. His earlier delirium had vanished, and though he still felt terribly weak, he knew the worst of his troubles were over. At least the worst of his physical troubles; what in Hades was he going to do about the owner of the soft arms which had held him so gently all night? Several highly inappropriate suggestions came to mind immediately. He wasn't a bloody Gryffindor, however--the situation required serious thought. Now, where had those arms gone to? Severus finally opened his eyes to mid-morning sun...and the sight of Hermione preparing to walk off down the trail.

"Miss Granger," he rumbled darkly, "exactly where is it that you think you are going?"

Startled, Hermione turned, a slow smile coming over her face as she noted how much better he looked this morning. "I have to get us some water, Professor," she explained, "I should be back shortly." Hermione's smile was easy and her words so warm that Severus dropped his eyes from her animated face, lest he give too much of himself away. As he did so, he noticed Hermione's wand lay next to him.

"Miss Granger," he said, his voice venturing briefly into his former disdain, "have you gone barking mad during the night? Kindly come collect your wand before you go traipsing off into the unknown."

Raising an eyebrow, Hermione blushed, but said coolly, "I didn't want to leave you alone and defenseless, sir." Severus was abashed at the sentiment. A wizard never voluntarily gave up his wand to another. The fact she'd done so warmed him in a way utterly different than her magical blue fire. Of course, he couldn't allow her to act so foolishly (no matter how charming the gesture).

"You will collect your wand immediately. You are far more likely to need it while blundering about in the forest than I will."

Hermione sighed, looking as if she wanted to argue the point for a moment, then obediently walked back to snatch her wand from the blanket. As she did so, black eyes never left her face. A giggling thought entered Severus' mind.

"Perhaps, Miss Granger," he said calmly, "when you return you might be kind enough to transfigure me some pajamas?" His eyes drank in the appealing flush spreading from her cheeks down her long neck.

"Oh, I'm sorry Professor," she replied, "I'm afraid--what with healing all your injuries--the need just slipped my mind. I'd be happy to do so when I return."

She gave him a clearly false look of innocence. Gryffindors were notoriously bad liars. What exactly was she lying about? Had she considered clothing him last night and decided not to? Why? He knew he was not a handsome man. Severus couldn't imagine what, if anything, a young witch could possibly find pleasing about his gangly form. In true Slytherin spirit, he decided to fish for clues.

"I am sorry to have caused you such trouble, Miss Granger," he purred.

"I'm surprised my sudden appearance yesterday did not give you nightmares. I must have looked quite hideous."

"Actually," Hermione replied with soft seriousness, "I do not think I have ever seen anything more beautiful in my life." She flushed again and turned, fleeing down the path.

A predatory smile crept over Severus' face.

"Interesting," he murmured.

Hermione fairly bolted down the path until out of sight of the infinitely distracting Potions Master. Where in heaven had she found the will to say that? Godric Gryffindor would be proud of her today; she reeked of bravery and recklessness. At least her frank confession hadn't launched him into a tirade. The only visible reaction he'd given to her remark was a slight widening of his eyes. Insufferable man! How could she judge how to proceed if the man wouldn't give her one clue of what he was thinking? Well, that wasn't exactly true. Severus did give clues--they were just so small as to be almost inscrutable. This last year she'd perfected the art of Snape-watching while serving those fake detentions. Especially during those times when they'd remained in the lab beyond the time necessary for potion-making, simply to finish whatever discussion in which they were embroiled. He wasn't always nice during these debates; in fact, the discussion often turned very heated as two intelligent minds expressed differing opinions. Even when disparaging her conclusions, he seemed more open, more honest, and more accessible than she'd ever seen him. He neither treated her as a friend, nor treated her as a student. He spoke to her as a colleague, and she treasured it.

Always the epitome of propriety, he never referred to her as anything other than "Miss Granger," or simply "Granger," until the potion accident. She distinctly remembered him calling her "Hermione" as he flung her out of danger. Now, if Severus truly thought of her as nothing more than a student (or even colleague), she could very well imagine him attending on her deathbed and flatly refusing to call her anything but a very proper "Miss Granger." All professors insisted on proper forms of address--Professor Snape would most likely prefer death than do otherwise. Yet she'd heard him say, with her own ears, her given name.

"Interesting," she murmured.

As pressing as the need was to puzzle out his "curvy young woman" problem, Severus had one need more urgent. If he didn't take a piss immediately he was going to be resting on a very wet pallet. He was glad she'd left; aside from the obvious, he didn't want her seeing how ridiculously weak he was. Nor did he want Miss Granger having to clean up after him like an errant puppy. He despised being sick; it was utterly humiliating (especially if one's only nurse was a curvy young woman about whom one was having deliciously inappropriate thoughts). Severus sighed--best get on with it. He refused to resort to crawling, and with great difficulty and disconcerting amount of effort, managed to find his legs and take a few trembling steps away from the pallet. Leaning heavily against the tree he chose to water, he managed the task without further injury to his pride. It took the rest of his waning strength to return to his rustic bed.

Damn! He'd hoped they could start back to Hogwarts today, but his insufferable weakness was not going to allow it. He knew Miss Granger had not applied for her Apparation license yet, she'd decided to wait until her schoolwork was completed. He'd never be able to manage it in his weakened state--and with an unfamiliar wand--without them both ending up splinched.

Unless she had brought his wand? She was an amazingly competent witch after all. He wouldn't mind a few days in the wilderness with Hermione, sorting out just exactly

what he was feeling about her, but it was inadvisable. The longer he kept her out here the longer she was in danger. He had his own freshly tragic experience to remind him that while pain and torture last decades, joy is a fleeting, incredibly fragile thing.

He wished Bob could have met Hermione. Bob would have loved her, and it would have been most amusing to see what bit of Hermione's anatomy Bob would have tried to snuffle. He distracted himself from a sorrow too fresh to be borne by imagining the bits of anatomy in exquisite detail.

It took Hermione longer than expected to reach water fit to drink. Finding a spring at last, she transfigured a rock into a large jug, filled it, and cast a sterilizing charm. The jug was heavy, and her progress slow, as she returned to where Severus waited.

While walking, she considered her professor's reaction to her forced company last night. No matter how ill, for an intensely private man to condone such behavior on her part, with only token resistance, was unfathomable. The stubborn man she knew would've taken himself from the bed to lie on the cold ground and die rather than permit an embrace he considered insufferable. Instead, the Slytherin had only teased before submitting gracefully to her embrace throughout the night.

"Miss Granger, my arse!" she said mockingly. "Such behavior from Professor Snape is practically a letter of intent. I believe I have a chance after all."

What was he going to do about the cuddlesome girl? No, not a girl any longer. While it seemed a disconcertingly short time ago that Miss Granger had been a knobby-kneed child waving her hand in his classroom, he could no longer ignore her seemingly sudden burst into womanhood. Even in those dreadful Muggle clothes, her transformed figure was achingly apparent...and there was nothing girlish about it. Last night, with his head pillowed on her shoulder, he had fallen asleep with a charming view of round, full breasts that no mere jumper could conceal.

Severus may have been having a bit of trouble coming to grips with the fact that Hermione was no longer a child, but he had no problem at all with her age. Muggles would have been scandalized by a twenty year age difference. To Severus, it wasn't even a consideration. Barring accident, a wizard had an expected lifetime of 150 years, sometimes more. A twenty year age difference in wizards was very much similar to a five year difference amongst Muggles. What concerned Severus were his own intentions. There were few people of his acquaintance that he truly respected. Miss Granger was one of them. He was unwilling to risk ruin of that by trifling with her, no matter how seductive the idea. He resolved to allow himself ample time to decide exactly what he wanted before proceeding further.

Did he want a relationship with Hermione? The few relationships in his past had been as unfulfilling as they had been brief. Yet, he didn't feel it would be that way this time. It was certain that he was attracted to her, judging by his reaction last night. It was imperative she transfigure him some pants before that reaction became as obvious to Hermione as it had already become (rather painfully obvious) to him. Feeling himself begin to harden again from the memory of being curled against her, he thrust the thoughts aside.

He certainly would never become bored with a witch like Hermione. Her mind was a constant and welcome diversion. She was a loyal little thing, as well. If she indeed had any feelings for him, he realized he needn't worry that she would go traipsing off after some more handsome wizard. The true question needing an answer was: what exactly did Hermione feel about him? While he was beginning to sort out the reasons why he might decide to pursue her, he found it difficult indeed to understand what she might see in him. Had he been mistaken in regards to her actions? No matter. Slytherins were obnoxiously patient. He would wait, and watch, and then...perhaps...strike.

When Hermione returned to their make-shift camp, Professor Snape had fallen asleep. For a long time she gazed at his face, relaxed in sleep, telling herself she was only looking for improvement. In truth, she simply enjoyed looking at him; she felt she could spend several eternities doing so. With a sigh, she left his bedside. After he was more rested, he should eat something. Thank the gods she'd thought to ask the house elves for some soup; she didn't believe he could manage more than that. Pulling one of the tiny crocks from the drawstring bag in her pack, she cast the reversal of the reduction charm, then placed the crock near the water jug. When her enigmatic professor woke, she would need only a quick warming charm and the meal would be ready.

Not wanting to wake the tired man, Hermione sat at a small distance from the pallet and pulled a book from her bag. She pretended to read...mostly she watched him sleep.

A Day of Peaceful Plotting

Chapter 9 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

Hermione was weighing the importance of resting versus eating when Professor Snape finally woke. He seemed very weak, and she could've kicked herself for not feeding him before leaving to look for water that morning. That, however, would soon be amended. Gathering up the crock and a recently transfigured spoon, she headed for the pallet.

Sitting down, she asked, "How are you feeling, Professor?"

"I imagine I'll survive," he replied wryly, sitting up with difficulty. Hermione rushed to help him, transfiguring some cushions so he could lean back comfortably. He snorted in amusement. "It seems decidedly odd to suddenly find such comfort in the wilderness."

As he sat up, the blanket fell slowly to puddle at his waist, baring his chest. It was a long moment before Hermione could tear her eyes away from the dark triangle of hair revealed, forcibly stopping herself from following the trail leading down to disappear beneath the blanket. While she was thus distracted, Severus regarded her face intently. By the time she looked up, he'd masked his face in an oblivious expression and was idly fussing with the blanket. Observing her frank appraisal had left him feeling flushed, but he thought it tactical to fake a shiver.

Hermione couldn't believe she'd been gaping like a wanton at her professor. Thank heaven he hadn't noticed! When she finally gathered her wits about her, she was mortified to see him shiver with cold. "You must be freezing, sir!" she exclaimed. Transfiguring him a nightshirt, she helped slip it over his head.

Face covered in nightshirt, Severus allowed himself a small smirk.

Hermione fed him the soup by hand, while he pretended to protest irritably. It amused him that no matter how churlish he behaved, she would merely roll her eyes and pop another spoonful of soup into his complaining mouth. Twice he'd stopped himself from chuckling aloud at her expression. When the soup was finished, he decided to stop his teasing, at least for the moment.

"Miss Granger, I shall be forever grateful for your coming to my rescue; however, I admit that I am baffled by how you managed to find me."

He covertly watched her hips sway as she crossed to her pack, fetching an object for his inspection.

"I made a compass attuned to you, sir," she explained, handing him a round, palm sized object. He examined it avidly, noting, as he held it, how the needle spun in lazy circles.

"I take it that when I am not in possession of the compass the needle points out my direction?"

"Exactly," Hermione replied with a proud smile.

Unable to hold his curiosity in check a moment longer, Severus asked her to explain how she came to create it. Hermione obliged, and when she reached the point of explaining how she'd used his handkerchief, she was forced to admit her burglary of his office.

Outwardly Severus scowled. In truth, he was deeply impressed she'd broken the wards on his potions cabinet. It was almost...Slytherin...of her.

"Please keep in mind, sir, that you'll have to get Headmaster Dumbledore to reinstate me if you wish to get me expelled," she responded, with a charming roll of her eyes. He couldn't help it; he chuckled. She seemed momentarily taken aback by the sound, but after a brief grin, she threw herself back into her explanation. When she began to explain the Arithmancy portion of the spellwork, Severus expressed interest in seeing the equations.

The scroll containing her notes was still in her pack. As she retrieved it, she said, "I would enjoy hearing your reaction to it, sir. I considered asking Professor Vector to check it over but...er..." Trailing off mid sentence, Hermione blushed, her head dropping in embarrassment. Reaching out a single finger, Severus placed it firmly under her chin and brought her face up until she met his eyes.

"Miss Granger," he said seriously, "I am well aware of your brilliance. It is hardly difficult to imagine there are times when the work of the student surpasses the ability of the teacher. I am unsurprised that you have done work that is beyond Professor Vector's comprehension. I rather doubt that I will understand all of it myself. That being said, I will thank you not to be embarrassed by your intelligence again in my presence." The finger dropped, but Hermione eyes did not. She gazed at him a moment, eyes wide. Professor Snape had offered her backhanded compliments before, but never had he spoken so plainly.

Without further ado, she gave him the scroll and they spent the next few hours discussing it with vigor. Reaching one particularly complex equation, Severus quieted, slipping deep into thought. Bowing his head, eyes closed, hands steepled, and extended index fingers lightly touching his lips, he concentrated. It was almost as if he'd fallen into a trance. Waiting patiently, Hermione found herself staring where fingertips met lips. Knowing it was but a habit of thought, she still found the pose strangely provocative. For once, Severus' action was not the carefully calculated action of a Slytherin; nor was his next word premeditated.

"Hermione..." The girl in question flinched, both from the sudden sound and from the joy of her name from those recently contemplated lips. "I begin to grasp the theory," Severus continued, opening his eyes, "though I am not up to understanding the math involved. You should consider sending the work to an Arithmancy Master for further input."

"I have considered it," she replied, "though Arithmancy Masters are even more difficult to find than Potion Masters. Since Einstein and Heinlein have died, I believe the only one is Stephen Hawking. Master Hawking is so involved with his American Muggle projects I doubt he would make the time to read a student's work."

"I am acquainted with Master Hawking, and would be pleased to send him a letter of introduction. I am certain he would be interested in your work."

Hermione was gobsmacked. First, her normally surly Professor had complimented her, now he was offering to write letters for her? Severus Snape never wrote letters on behalf of a student! Today there must be pork in the trees and popsicles in hell. Finally she managed, "That would be most kind of you, Professor."

With a characteristically disdainful snort, Severus replied, "Kindness has nothing to do with it, Miss Granger. This work deserves to be read. You will undoubtedly end up with a journal article published about it." He regarded her intently. "What do you intend to do after graduation?"

"Before I was expelled, I intended to go to University."

"You will graduate, Miss Granger. Rest assured. On what subject do you intend to focus?"

Hermione blushed, but answered honestly, "I intend to do a double concentration in Arithmancy and Potions." Severus was secretly pleased by her interest in potions, but he wasn't sure it was wise.

"Miss Granger, I do not think it advisable for you to include potions in your concentration." Watching her face fall, he continued, "Do not mistake me. Your potions work is exemplary, and if you wish to continue it-- in a curtailed capacity--you will have my every support. However, I believe you should focus on Arithmancy. You have the makings of a Master; it would be a great pity to waste such skill." He noted the transparent look of disbelief on her part. "Miss Granger, I believe we've already discussed my displeasure in your ridiculous Gryffindor modesty. Do try to pull yourself together."

"I...I'm sorry, sir," she stammered, "It's only that I've never imagined doing such a thing."

Severus sighed in exasperation. "The work you've done on this 'Snape compass,' as you horridly call it, is the work of a Master. That is why you will have trouble finding anyone else to comprehend it. There is more to being a Master than education, memorization, and simple intellect. One has to have an almost intuitive knack for the subject. It is quite possible that Masters are not made, but born. In potions, for example, one could memorize every potion known to wizards, have a basic knowledge of the process of experimentation, and have moderate success, without ever achieving Master. What has made me a Master of Potions is that I have an innate ability to know what reactions will occur when I combine new ingredients. It is this quality that I see in your recent work."

Even in their "fake detention" discussions, Hermione had never heard him speak at such length. Noticing he was growing tired, she said, "I will consider what you have said--very seriously. Some nurse I am, I'm wearing you out! It's more soup for you and then you need to get some rest."

Amused, Severus allowed Hermione to fuss over him. He was grateful when she eventually removed the cushions and helped him to recline. A murmured "thank you" and he was asleep.

Severus woke to find the late afternoon sun barely filtering through the trees. Casting a soft warm glow down to the bit of path they camped on, it revealed an engaging picture. Hermione sat propped against a tree, head tilted back to expose a long delicate neck, an abandoned book in her lap. She was fast asleep. Severus turned onto his side, and propping his head up with one arm, watched her. His eyes turned soft and warm with rarely revealed affection, and he was quickly lost in thought.

Whatever was he going to do with the charming minx? His calculated gambits earlier had proven, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she was attracted to him. That seemed inexplicable, but he couldn't deny what she, in her naiveté, had made so obvious. Equally obvious, sometimes uncomfortably so (he shifted restlessly beneath the blanket), he found her attractive as well. His eyes wandered freely over the sleeping woman. Her hair was a capricious tangle of cinnamon curls. Free of Hermione's usual attempts to tame it, the long, wild, locks framed her slender neck, falling over her shoulders, ends resting just above her generous breasts...it would be easy to walk over and thrust his hands into that lush mass. He shifted under the blanket again. Without his awareness, one of his hands crept down the blanket to rub idly against the source of his discomfort. Hermione stirred--Severus' hand sprang away from its recent employment, and a quick redistribution of the blanket covered his discomposure. Trying to calm himself, he mentally recited the ingredients of the Draught of Peace. Opening her eyes, Hermione raised her arms to stretch her cramped back. Potion ingredients forgotten, eyes straying to her breasts, Severus felt himself grow harder. Damn! He needed a subtle stratagem to distract her long enough to deal with this...untimely situation.

"Hermione," he began, thinking hurriedly, "I wonder if you could do me a small favor?" Mind straying to exactly what 'favor' he most wanted at that moment, it took every effort of his will to keep his features calm.

"How may I assist you, sir?" she replied with a cheerful smile.

'How indeed?' he thought. Aloud, he continued, "I wonder if I may impose on you to take a short walk down the path? I need to...er...use the facilities, and I don't think I'm quite up for a walk yet." Blast! It was neither elegant nor subtle, but he was a bit distracted.

Turning a becoming shade of pink, Hermione readily agreed. When she asked him to call her when finished, the mental image of him calling her name as he came almost caused the event right then and there. Managing to wait until she was well out of sight, he rose and walked a short way into the wood.

One hand propped against an oak, one hand plunging beneath the nightshirt, he was in such a state that a few strokes left him biting his lip to keep from crying out as he came, suddenly splashing the smooth bark. Resting his head against the tree, he waited for his panting to diminish. Eventually, the tree was used again, this time for the less enticing reason he'd given Hermione, and he then called to her as he returned to the pallet.

The remainder of the evening passed readily enough with food and discourse. When Severus lay back to sleep, he assumed Hermione would make another place for herself. He was both pleased and disconcerted when she took her odd Muggle boots off and climbed in with him. The little temptress! Severus knew she was a Gryffindor, but he hadn't expected this type of bravery. Resigned, he allowed her to cuddle next to him as he tried to relax. It was a long time before sleep came.

It was a long time before Hermione, too, found sleep. She'd been waging a mental battle all evening about where she would sleep that night. It would be more proper, more logical, and infinitely more cowardly to make another bed for herself. When the time came, she decided that, for once, she was going to be both brash and selfish, doing as she pleased. After all, without his wand, Severus was in no position to hex her. The worst he could do was order her out. Though he looked startled when she crawled in next to him without ceremony or warning, he'd not protested. At first, the body next to hers had gone stiff; after she curled close to him and closed her eyes, he'd eventually relaxed. Imagining a plethora of acts even more brave, Hermione finally fell asleep.

He rose slowly out of ginger-scented dreams to find Hermione's body tangled about his own. His arms were around her, her head on his shoulder and her hair tickling his cheek. Her hand was wrapped about his neck; one leg enclosed between his own. Damn and blast! She would make a speedy end of his resolve if he wasn't careful. Having been so utterly distracted by her constant presence, he hadn't a moment's peace to make any sort of logical decisions about the situation. They should be able to start back to Hogwarts today...perhaps the journey would give him time to think. Severus slowly and gently began to extricate himself, trying not to wake her.

Hermione was already awake. It was a testament to Severus' utter distraction that he remained unaware of the fact. Knowing the moment he woke by the sudden tensing of the body so deliciously entwined with her own, she feigned sleep, hoping to see his reaction. After a moment, the tension had drained away with a quiet sigh. Surprisingly enough, he'd not leapt from the bed in alarm, but continued the embrace for a long moment. Raising her eyelids only slightly, she peered from under her lashes. Her left leg was thrown over one of his; her calf nestled between his knees, her bent knee resting on his thigh. Above her knee, she saw the blanket was tented in a way that left no doubt of his reaction to her. Hermione might not have much in the way of sexual experience, but she was not naïve. Between a little secretive reading and chats with the other seventh year girls, she at least knew what to expect. She took a long look at the proof of his arousal before closing her eyes.

'Why Professor Snape,' she thought, 'I'd no notion you cared!' He chose that moment to start carefully drawing away. Knowing she wasn't quite ready to throw herself at him, Hermione decided to at least push the envelope a smidgeon. Murmuring as if still asleep, she slid her hand slowly down his chest to his waist, turned her face up to snuggle into his neck, and raised her knee until it barely brushed his hard length. He went completely still. Hermione took that as a sign to push a bit more. Leaving her knee where it was, she snuggled a little closer, murmured again, and kissed his neck. He continued to lie as if unconscious but a soft groan escaped his lips. Knowing she could proceed no further (unless she was ready to leap off the metaphorical cliff); she at last took pity on the poor man. Pretending to stumble awake, she withdrew from him and opened her eyes with what she thought to be an innocent expression. Severus couldn't be faulted for, this time, not noting the transparency of the look.

"Good morning, Professor," she said cheerily. "Oh...I hope you will excuse me, I believe I shall take a walk and, how did you put it? Oh yes, use the facilities." With that she left the stunned professor and took herself off down the path.

Severus' 'facility' break came about much as his last, only this time Hermione's name escaped his lips in a breathless sigh.

Hermione's walk ended much the same way, only it wasn't her own name she whispered as she found her release.

Meeting again at camp, if either of them noted how long the other was gone, they made no mention of it.

She Stumbles, He Falls

Chapter 10 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

Following a breakfast including neither apples nor soup (to Severus' pleasure) the two reluctant adventurers discussed plans for the day. Though 'discuss' may be too mild a word.

"I beg your pardon, Professor," Hermione continued hotly, "but you are not yet strong enough to make such a journey. I estimate it to be close to 30 miles."

"I think, Miss Granger, that I am by far the better judge of my abilities at this point. I do not mean to belittle your efforts on my behalf, but you are clearly no Mediwitch," Severus snarled in response.

"I believe that it takes more to make a 30 mile hike than centaur-headed stubbornness!" she hissed, adding a belated and insincere "sir!"

"Had you managed the foresight to bring along my wand, we would both be at home sipping a cup of tea by now." Severus' voice was dropping, low and dangerous.

"Well, the next time I feel like getting hexed by Albus Dumbledore, I'll just waltz right into his office and attempt to steal something!" Hermione's voice, on the other hand, was getting a bit high and squeaky with frustration.

"Perhaps you would care to explain how Hermione Granger, adventuress extraordinaire, managed to lose her broom?" he sneered with a disgusted snort.

"I was attacked by a hippogriff," she said flatly, "and I believe the next time I feel fool enough to try to help an ungrateful wretch like you, I shall lock myself in the Quidditch shed until the urge passes."

Though Severus was momentarily appalled by the danger she'd faced to reach him, he'd worked his anger to such a fever pitch that he was unable to check it. The knowledge that she'd been in danger, and on his account, only added fuel to the flame. "Serves you right, you stupid little girl. I am astonished that you managed to make it so far from Hogwarts without a keeper. Now, if you would stop this foolishness and transfigure me some clothes, this is one ungrateful wretch that would prefer to get home as soon as humanly possible."

"As you wish, Professor," she said in a low, tight voice. Had Ron and Harry been there, they may have warned Severus that when Hermione was arguing, you were safe enough as long as she was shouting. It was when her voice went suddenly calm that you had to watch out. They may have warned him, but probably not.

Raising her wand, it took Hermione but a moment to create a set of clothes identical to what Professor Snape habitually wore--down to the last cuff button. Identical, at least, in all ways--but one: the entire set was a shocking lavender. It was nearly the color of a unicorn's eyes. For a moment, Severus simply stood there, a vein pulsing at his temple. Facing Hermione with a glare that had caused seasoned Death Eaters to flee in terror, he slowly raised one eyebrow. Inwardly, he was startled to see his most dangerous glower had instilled no terror in the young woman. In fact, she had that pinched expression that he suspected meant she was biting back a fit of giggling.

Her eyes open wide with that patently false Gryffindor look of innocence, Hermione blinked twice at him and said in a cloying voice, "I'm so sorry, Professor! I'm afraid I'm just so young and inexperienced...I'm always getting my transfiguration of colors wrong."

Unexpectedly, Severus found his rage fled and had to stifle a chuckle himself. Refusing to alter the scowl on his face (he wasn't about to let her win that much) he nevertheless realized he was fighting a losing battle. They may indeed start back to Hogwarts today, but he was going to have to make the trip looking as Albus did in the 1970's.

They packed up the camp; Hermione reversed the charm on the pallet and re-claimed her cloak. With a wistful look around the now familiar bit of path, they began the long walk back to Hogwarts. The recent argument had made them both thoughtful and they walked together in silence.

Severus had much to consider. Without an iron will forged by the long years of war, the temptations brought on by waking up with a soft young woman wrapped securely in his arms would have been too much to ignore. He truly cared for the girl; he could never give in to his passions without being very certain where he wanted those passions to lead. Would it be such a terrible fate if he married the minx? Damn and blast! Married? When had that errant thought reared its ugly head? Trying to decide if he wanted a simple relationship with the chit; suddenly he was throwing about the word 'married.' Saint Gianna's green garter! Severus had never in his life considered marriage for the blunt reason that he never thought he'd live long enough. There were precious few elderly spies in the world. Now, at nearly 40 years of age, he was free for the first time in his life. Free of bitter and cruel parents, free of Voldemort, free of a life of subterfuge and atonement. His hand strayed to rub a place on his forearm. Yes, even free of that hated brand. Why shouldn't he now do whatever he liked? Why shouldn't he marry if he so chose?

What would it be like to be married to Hermione? He certainly would never be bored. She possessed both unmatched intellect and subtle wit; he'd become quite addicted to both during their discussions in the potions lab this last year. She was not a classic beauty, but he loved looking at her. Those expressive eyes and that riot of hair would be a constant pleasure to contemplate. Never would he forget the feeling of her warm form molded to his. Gods, but she was a tiny little thing. (Not that it mattered--all are the same height lying down.) He liked that he was so much taller than she, it made him feel strong...protective. It also made him feel like picking her up, wrapping her legs about his waist and propping her against the nearest tree. There was no doubt in his mind that there could be passion between them. But was she too...nice? As much as he admired her sweet kindness and undeniable loyalty, he wasn't a nice man. She might find this amusing now, but a young lover put up with behavior a wife would not tolerate. He was too old to play at being nice all the time, nor did he wish to. If he could find no assurance that she wouldn't expect such a thing, then this impending relationship should go no further. Until he could make absolutely certain of that fact, he would use his every ounce of willpower to prevent things between them from escalating. While he didn't think he could bear to keep her from snuggling up to him at night, if she so chose, he could damn well keep the situation from getting heated.

However, the Fates know all too well what becomes of the best laid plans of mice and men. Severus would one day bless them for it

Hermione's mind was in an equal whirl. Distressed by the recent argument, she found herself grinding her teeth, a habit her parent's had broken her of long ago. It wasn't the argument itself that bothered her (she thought the Potions Master was wicked sexy when he was furious), but only Severus Snape, the embodiment of all things Slytherin, could have a hard on for her one moment and call her a "stupid little girl" the next! Damn and blast! Now, of course, he strode along beside her in stony silence. He was lost in thought and not giving her one clue what those thoughts might be. Glancing at him again, Hermione stifled yet another giggle. The effect of stony silence, purposeful stalk, and serious mien was altogether spoiled by the swirl of bright lavender robes. She felt that transfiguration had been rather naughty of her; but he had called her "stupid little girl" one time too many.

Hermione was feeling, for the first time in her life, a sense of power that had nothing to do with magic. Knowing that her Potions Master was obviously affected by her, she felt if she continued as she began, she would soon get what she wanted. What did she want exactly? While Hermione didn't know what that 'exactly' entailed, she knew her heart's desire. She simply wanted to be at his side. It mattered not to her whether they were discussing the world, arguing bitterly, or wrapped in each other's arms. She wanted to be with him, share his life; his dreams. She wanted to cause that fleeting warm chuckle he had let slip the previous day; Hermione felt she could dedicate the rest of her life just to making the normally dour man laugh.

Hermione knew that a life with Severus would never be easy. He would be sneaky, difficult, and volatile. He would never tell her anything was amiss unless she dragged it forcibly from him. Love with him wouldn't be poetry and roses, to say the least; it would be hard work. If there was one thing Hermione was least afraid of it was working hard. And think of the rewards! Untold hours of talk that had nothing to do with Quidditch or hair care potions. Doing research and experiments together that might change the wizarding world. Quiet evenings snuggled before a fire while reading. Not to mention she steadfastly suspected that behind the calm façade beat the heart of a deeply passionate man. What would it be like when the dam of that calm finally burst? Gods! Her nipples made an obvious appearance through her jumper just imagining that. Hoping Severus was too lost in his own thoughts to notice, she nonchalantly put her woolen cloak back on.

Merlin's hairy arse! Is that a nipple I see before me? Bloodyfuckinghell! What could the vixen be thinking of? For heaven's sake man, she's in the middle of a blasted wood with no one around but yourself, who do you think she's thinking of?

Though he made no outward sign, said nipples were having quite the effect on Severus' thoughts as well as other assorted bits of his anatomy. Finally having acquired pants, they were uncomfortably tight at the moment; making both walking and thinking difficult.

Merlin in a sidecar! She's covering up. Why in Hades did she go and do that for? Wait a minute...covering impressive nipples is an excellent idea. We are attempting to think before pouncing. Why exactly was that? Oh yes...respect...decisions...logic...whatever. Why exactly are you, the Head of Slytherin House, being so damn logical while there are deliciously hard nipples so enticingly within reach? Blast! Damn, I can smell her. She smells delectable...ripe...oh-so-ready to be plucked. Must keep control of ridiculous hormones. I'm not a bloody teenager for fuck's sake! Must stop thinking the word fuck. Must. Stop. Fuck!

The befuddled thoughts of both distracted travelers were interrupted when they came to the closest of the rocky hills Hermione had climbed on her way in. Hermione solicitously asked Severus if he would like to stop and camp before attempting the hill, as they'd walked through the afternoon and into the early evening. Severus declined, saying he'd rather transverse this obstacle and camp on the other side. He was more interested in working out his present frustrations with a little exercise before facing an evening with Hermione, though he wasn't about to tell her that. They climbed the hill slowly; Severus was amazingly recovered by the day of rest and Hermione's efforts, but he didn't want to tempt fate.

Fate was already tempted, but for a completely different reason.

At the crest of the hill there was a small chasm between two large rocks. It hadn't troubled Hermione on the way in as it was only about two feet across and easily stepped over. Of course, Hermione had been wearing the invisibility cloak when she traversed it the first time. The pair climbing the hill was unaware they were drawing near the favorite haunt of a Gwylion.

Gwylions were a type of fairy, but bore no resemblance to the cheerful little beings often lighting special events at Hogwarts. Looking vaguely like small old women, they were as mischievous as they were hideously ugly. Their preferred occupation was to lead travelers astray, however they equally liked hiding, unmoving, in rocky places and staring with a condemning glower on their frightful faces at passers by. The person who came upon this unappetizing sight unawares was usually terribly startled, which caused the Gwylions no end of wicked amusement. The chasm Gwylion was a little more nasty than most, thus her perch amongst dangerous footing.

In the lead, Hermione was still distracted by 'the nipple incident' when she began to step over the break at the crest of the hill. Looking down, she was indeed startled to see the sudden horrifying face, looking daggers at her. One misstep and she began to topple into the chasm.

Strong hands grasped her by the waist and pulled her roughly out of harm's way. Landing hard against Severus' chest, she caught her breath a moment before she turned in his arms to thank him. The words died in her throat. Severus was looking down at her like a starving man--as if he could happily consume her.

'Oh...oh my!' was all Hermione managed to think, her mouth opening in surprise. Taking one glance at her parted lips, Severus' dam of control broke apart, his mouth descending on hers as a hawk to a dove. In all her imaginings it was never like this. Fumbled experimentation with inexperienced schoolboys had ill prepared her for the pure heat of the Potion Master's kiss. Hot. Demanding. Invading. As his hungry tongue plunged into her open mouth, the blood rushed to Hermione's ears--she could hear naught else. Eyes having drifted closed of their own accord, she couldn't see. She couldn't think. She couldn't even breathe. The world disappeared. It was as if her entire universe collapsed and was reduced to this one kiss. It was sweetly devastating.

Severus was not thinking at all. He was tasting, and with the same intense concentration he gave to his potions. Here it was... that same tangy spiciness which clung to her always. Delectable. At last thrusting his hands deep into her glorious riot of hair, with a growl, he deepened the kiss.

Not knowing heaven could get more intense, Hermione was awestruck. Both the lips joined so energetically to hers and the low predatory growl that poured into her mouth sent searing tingles down her spine and straight betwixt her legs with a sharp twitch. 'Good Gods,' she thought vaguely, 'he's only kissing me and I nearly came.' Another growl from her professor, answered by a pleading whimper of her own, and there was no more thinking on the hill crest for some time.

Temporarily sated on her mouth, Severus regretfully withdrew from it in order to explore other, long hungered-for bits of Hermione. Fastening lips and gentle teeth on her neck, he forwent the pleasure of her hair to plunge his hands beneath her cloak. Sliding his hands down her trembling back to cup her bum, he pulled her even harder against his aching arousal. Leaving one hand there, keeping Hermione tightly caged, he reached with the other to search out one of the delightful nipples he had glimpsed earlier. Hermione moaned huskily, and, with a sweet lack of experienced grace, ground her hips against him. Something about that innocent action brought Severus slightly to his senses.

Must get her naked. Must get me naked. Why did I ever want clothes... bothersome things. Hilltop. Rocks. Probable virgin. Blast! Cannot take tender virgin while propped against rocks. Besides, we want a comfortable time to explore, don't we?

Reluctantly but firmly, he drew himself away from Hermione. She whimpered in protest and tried to press back against him.

"No!" she said breathlessly.

Damn but she was a passionate little thing! It took every ounce of his strength not to prop her up on the rocks after all. However, he had things in mind that could not be accomplished on this rocky peak.

"Sweet one," he purred enticingly, "I only want to get us off these blasted rocks."

"Promise?" she asked him with all the heat of her body reflected in her eyes.

"Promise," he replied, with a rakish grin that left her no doubt of his intentions, and sent loose another hard twinge between her legs.

Later, Hermione would have no clear idea how she came to find herself on the level path below the craggy hill. Nor would she recall exactly how Severus managed to possess her wand. Her next clear recollection was of Severus removing her cloak, then transfiguring it back into the pallet before he gently laid her down. Not quite able to control his impatience, he divested himself of all but his trousers with another wave of Hermione's wand, before throwing himself down to crush her body beneath his own. Hermione's eyes widened in desire as she again saw the coveted naked chest, then they fell closed in the delight of her hands being able to explore his bare skin. At first, she kept her hands firmly confined to his bare back--as she grew braver; she lowered them to his arse, giving a tentative squeeze. Encouraged by the growl of pleasure from the mouth currently assailing her earlobe, she continued her explorations more firmly.

Mmmmm...How was he ever going to keep himself in check long enough to make this good for her? He didn't need to ask--he knew by her untutored, if devastating, explorations, that she was indeed a virgin. The mere idea of thrusting into her innocent heat, of claiming what no man had ever before been offered, nearly made him come in his pants like a schoolboy. Gods! If she had such an effect on him now, he couldn't imagine what she might do to him with more...practice. He had to slow down lest the event end before it was started. He drew away to lie at her side, ignoring her sweet, inarticulate protests. Rubbing a hand firmly up and down her side to calm her, he gave her a gentle kiss before sliding up her jumper. Rather than showing nervousness at his intent, she gladly raised herself up so he could remove the garment. Another moment and her bra was gone, as well, before he laid her back and dropped his head to her bared breast.

Severus analyzed that breast with lips and teeth and tongue until, at last satisfied, he moved on to its twin.

Under the power of that hot, wet, talented mouth, Hermione melted into a being of inarticulate cries and growing impatience. She hadn't one scholarly thought left in her head. All she realized was that she needed more of this amazing flood of sensation. She demanded more. In an unexpected moment of bravery, she almost frantically pushed Severus to his back, and, lying atop him, she paid the same attention to his chest and small, flat nipples that he had lavished on her own. Severus was enchanted by her sudden streak of dominance, and allowed her to continue her ministrations until he thought he might go mad. Not able to take more of the sweet torture, he rolled them over again and returned to her mouth to plant a hungry kiss. A hand went to the button of her jeans.

"May I..." he rumbled against her mouth, "may I remove these?" With Hermione's equally husky affirmative, he rose to his knees and, too impatient to go more slowly, retrieved her wand. With a soft charm, she was revealed in all her naked glory. Still kneeling, he drank in the lovely vision before him for long moments.

"Hermione, you are perfection," he sighed, returning to her eager embrace. Feeling her moist heat through only the front of his trousers, his self-imposed torture reached new heights. He once again removed himself to rest closely pressed to her side and, as his lips returned to her mouth, he dropped a hand to gently squeeze her curl-covered sex. Hermione whimpered encouragingly and he dipped a long, pale finger into her soft folds. At first, he only traced a finger up and down the hot cleft, giving her time to accustom herself to his touch. Sweet heavens! She was already so wet with arousal that he could barely contain himself. To have the proof that this charming angel truly wanted him was almost more than he could bear. When she began to grind her hips against his hand, he slipped a single finger into her passage.

So hot. So tight...so deliciously tight. Knowing he could not wait long to taste her, he managed a brief dance of fingers and thumb before his mouth left hers, leaving a hungry trail of kisses down her body, meeting his hand's endeavors. Finally reaching his goal, he replaced hand with hungry mouth. He was overcome with taste and scent as he plunged his tongue into her tight channel. Delicious.

Hermione shrieked. Hours of self-exploration had never led to this intense excess of sensation. Without embarrassment, she shrieked again, instinctively raising her hips to press against that talented mouth. Tension growing, her mouth uttered an unending stream of inarticulate encouragement.

When Hermione shrieked, Severus almost came again. Damn, but he was fast running out of self-control. He needed to press into that hot, wet, heat--and soon. Patience... Patience--he must make this first taste of pleasure good for her. She was nearly there...he could feel her tension mounting. He withdrew his tongue and plunged two fingers

into her. Pumping the fingers steadily, he pressed the tip of his tongue to her sensitive bud, fluttering against it.

Hermione came, screaming his name.

Returning to her side, he held her close as she dazedly recovered. When she began to press herself against him again, he spoke. "Hermione," he began in a low trembling voice, "are you quite sure this is what you want...that I am what you want? I am fast approaching a point where I will not be able to stop myself."

She looked into his eyes with all seriousness. "I am absolutely certain I want this. I want you. Please."

That 'please,' spoken in such a pleading, soft tone, was Severus' final undoing. Kneeling again, and with another murmured charm, his cumbersome trousers melted away, leaving his fierce erection revealed to Hermione's startled eyes. He remained so, allowing Hermione to look at him. He chuckled at the mixture of nervousness and undeniable hunger that graced her eyes.

"What are you thinking, dear one?" he said, with soft amusement.

Hermione was thinking that, in spite of her research in the Restricted Section, she'd possessed no idea that a man's cock could reach such proportions. Egad! She couldn't say that! But how was it ever going to fit?

"I don't want you to think me naïve, but I just don't see how we shall ever...fit? You are too...magnificent," she finished lamely.

With another chuckle, he lay himself down on her, nestling himself between her thighs. "Hermione, I assure you that we will fit quite well together. Do not worry, little one, I will show you how perfectly we will meld."

Severus kissed her deeply, returning a hand to her soft folds to prepare the way. When Hermione was again pushing against him, he positioned himself at her entrance. When he tried, straining, to push himself slowly into her tight passage, he found his way tightly barred. Trying to gently stretch her only made her whimper with discomfort against his mouth. Sometimes fast was best.

He paused, his eyes darkening a moment. "It will hurt for a moment, little one, but I promise you I shall make you forget the pain."

"Yes," she breathed.

"Yes," he echoed.

Patently stroking her with his fingers until she again grew close to the edge of pleasure, he at last thrust in. She flinched beneath him, but he held himself still while her channel became accustomed to his hard, invading length. Continuing to stoke her button with practiced fingers, when she again began to lift against him, he allowed himself cautious thrusts into her heat.

"So tight...gods...you are so incredibly tight my love," he murmured into her ear. "You see? You fit me like a silken glove. So hot...oh gods, Hermione, I have never felt anything as perfect as your embrace."

Hermione forgot her brief, unlamented pain. Overcome by his sure, experienced movements, as well as by the low, husky voice growling his pleasure in her ear, it was but a few moments until she again screamed his name as she found release.

The tight channel convulsing around his pulsing shaft brought an end to Severus' torment, as well as his patience. With a few hard thrusts, he growled out her name as he at last emptied himself into her.

He barely had the presence of mind to transfigure them a blanket before they collapsed exhausted into each other's arms, swiftly falling asleep.

Panic and Pain

Chapter 11 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

Severus woke in a panic. What had he done? What had he been thinking? Of course, he hadn't been thinking at all, at least not with his intellectual head. Now, here he was, a glorious naked woman in his arms, cock already hardening with arousal, and all the normally calm man could do was get lost in undeniable panic. He'd sworn he would give himself time to reason out the situation before toppling them over a cliff from which they could not return. Hermione was not as world-wise as he--she deserved more time to make certain of her desires, and he deserved more time to ascertain her intentions. He'd no wish of giving in to this new-found joy, only to have it yanked away when she discovered him too much a snarky git to be borne. But what was he to do now?

Severus was never at the height of sanity when emotionally bowled over. When Hermione began to stir, he reacted (in an instinctive and completely Slytherin manner) with hardly a moment's thought. It was a brash action that he would come almost immediately to regret.

Grabbing Hermione's wand, Severus clothed both of them with a whispered charm. Hermione woke and turned to him with a startled expression, which then turned to complete shock as Severus lowered the wand, pointing it between her widening eyes.

"Oblivate," he intoned.

The surprise in Hermione's eyes lived a moment longer, then gradually slid into a look of incredible blankness. Taking the moment in which she was stunned to surreptitiously change his attire to its customary morose black, he then returned her wand. A devil as black-hearted as he should never wear such a joyous color, he thought.

When Hermione's expression seemed to return to her inquisitive, normal appearance, Severus brusquely asked her to re-claim her cloak and, without waiting, began walking down the trail.

"As you wish, Professor," Hermione said quietly. He was unaware of the look she threw his retreating back. It was a glare of confusion mixed with undeniable fury.

Trailing behind her reluctant lover, Hermione was seething with anger. Her thoughts circled in a raging tangle. What the hell was the sneaky, Slytherin bastard thinking? Even had his ridiculous 'obliviate' worked, did he think for one moment a freshly de-flowered virgin wouldn't notice something amiss? Indeed, her tight Muggle jeans were uncomfortably rubbing against tender flesh. Not having quite caught up to her insufferable professor, she managed a muttered healing spell and her discomfort abated. Still trying to hide her seething fury, she at last caught up with Severus.

Glancing at his face, she at first saw only his outward calm. Hermione had studied the secretive man far too closely to be fooled for long. His head was slightly bowed; his muscles unusually tense. His eyes tried in vain to shield a look of undeniable pain; he refused to look at her. Hermione's rage abruptly fled. Sweet Nimune, this sneaky Slytherin--this strong, unflappable man--was completely gobsmacked. She should've known. Having little experience with men in general, she still knew this man as few others did. Severus was far more comfortable with intellect than emotion. It was little wonder he'd panicked.

Trying to calm herself, Hermione gave a small sigh and continued to study the problem. Her first impulse was to confront the stubborn man immediately, but that would never work. If he felt threatened, he'd only dig in his heels and close himself off even more. Besides, she couldn't confront him until she'd some idea of what spooked him in the first place. Was it an instinctive pushing away of emotions that confused him? Or did he truly regret the amazing night of passion they had shared? Good gods--what if it wasn't amazing to him? Sure, it was the single most inspiring night of her life; that didn't mean he felt the same. What if she'd been horrid at it? Perhaps Severus had obliviated her in order to spare her feelings because she was terrible at sex! Confused, bereft, and worried, Hermione continued in sorrowful silence.

Walking along zombie-like, Severus was too numb at first to think much of anything. He neither noticed Hermione's quiet sigh, nor did he note her close scrutiny. For a long time indeed, he hid away, lost in his own mind, afraid to face the consequences of his recent actions. Coming slowly back to himself; he was utterly appalled by what he'd done. It was one moment of pure cowardice that he'd pay for all his life. With one foolish choice he'd ruined all hope of a continuing relationship with Hermione. Even an obliviated woman must eventually realize she was no longer a virgin. He'd thoughtlessly stolen that sweet memory from her mind. Oh...and how sweet it had been. His precious Hermione! Now that the situation was irreparably ruined, he could see with sudden clarity how important she was to him. It was hopeless--if he confessed what he had done, she would never forgive him. If he continued to woo her, while pretending that their night of heated passion had never occurred, she was bound to find him out. She was far too intelligent to be fooled for long. Even in his distress he already ached for her. Assuming it was a fit punishment for a man as horrendously stupid as he, he unknowingly sighed and walked on.

Severus' quiet sigh jolted Hermione from the place in her mind where she chased her fears of sexual inadequacy. Sneaking a look at his face, she noticed he didn't look so much disappointed as desolate. The clues were small, but they were present. His body language indicated a man whose sorrow was inconsolable--definitely not the attitude of a smug Slytherin, pleased by cleverly casting an unwanted (and possibly horrid) lover aside. For the first time all morning, Hermione allowed herself to hope there was nothing lost that could not be regained. Warmed by her hope, she freed her memory to play over the extraordinary events of the night before; permitting herself a secret smile. She'd been right about the tremendous passion the reserved man kept hidden. For a long while she lost herself in provocative thoughts.

Damn! Why was it that now all hope was gone all he could think of was pulling her to the ground and ravishing her? He couldn't tear his mind away from remembered kisses, her hot mouth exploring his chest, the joyful triumph of finally sheathing himself in her tight heat. Her whimpering cries echoed in his mind. He could still taste her on his tongue. He was going mad.

She was going mad. There had been sexual tension between them before, especially that morning she had so unashamedly snuggled up to him; it had never been so bad as this. Knowing now exactly what she was missing, all she could think about was throwing him to the ground and having her wicked way with him. She ached...oh, how she ached for him. Her every distracted thought was focused on a wild array of schemes to break down his defenses and get him deep inside her, where he belonged. She didn't know how to deal with her fledgling needs. Convinced she had to confront him soon, she searched her mind for a plan.

As Hermione searched and Severus fretted, they came upon a small pond near the path they traveled. Giving the body of water one appraising glance, Hermione decided if she could not yet conceive of a plan, she could at least cool off her heated and aching body. Besides, a convenient excuse to get naked might help the distraught man stalking at her side to recover his sense, not to mention his passion.

"We camp here," she said in a voice that brooked no argument. "I am going to take a plunge." Her tone did not keep her stubborn Slytherin from arguing.

"Are you mad?" he asked incredulously. Her bizarre statement had knocked his silence from him. "It is far too cold for a plunge. Have a cleansing charm and be done with it."

Not to be denied, Hermione simply began removing her clothes. An odd mixture of shock, shame, and excitement stole Severus' protests. Reconciling himself to his fate, he sat on the grassy bank and refused to look at her. Not even when experiencing the Dark Lord's displeasure had he known such agony. Knowing that she was so close, so naked, and yet so untouchable, was destroying the last vestiges of his sanity.

Hermione looked up from the frigid, but necessary, water to see a look of unspeakable sorrow on his dear face. She splashed to the edge of the pond, and, remaining mostly in the water, propped her head on crossed arms at the edge of the bank.

"Professor," she called softly, "what is wrong?"

Severus risked a glance at her and, seeing she was covered, stared at her sweet face with a look of unbearable loss.

"There is nothing you can do to help me, Miss Granger," he replied in a voice so low she could barely hear him. "I have made a grave mistake and there is no way to repair it." Hermione remained unsure of his motivations until he continued. "The gods grant man a brief taste of joy and he, foolish creature that he is, throws away happiness with both hands. I do not expect you to understand, Miss Granger, and I cannot even berate you for that, as it's my own bloody fault you cannot comprehend me." He finished in such a bereft tone that Hermione's heart went out to him.

She climbed from the water to stand unashamedly nude before him. Gaping at her for a moment in surprise, Severus turned his head away in tormented confusion. "Miss Granger...please..." his voice broke. "Please cover yourself...I beg of you."

Hermione stood in a feminine pose as old as Eve, one knee bent, one hand resting on a thrust out hip, head cocked slightly to the side as she studied him. "Why?" she replied. "It's nothing you haven't seen before--and quite recently."

Completely confounded, Severus' eyes dragged themselves to hers. What on earth could she mean?

"Honestly, Severus! Do you think me a fool? I've known for some time that I was in love with the most Slytherin man of them all. Is it any surprise I thought it might be prudent to learn blocking of an Obliviate hex?"

Severus had a sudden epiphany. Hermione had realized that dealing with him might lead to a situation in which he attempted to Obliviate her. So what had this amazing creature done? Had she given up in disgust? Had she fled in terror? No, she had calmly learned to block said hex and continued to pursue him. He had long known Hermione to be as brave as a Gryffindor, and as loyal as a Hufflepuff. Her recent Arithmancy work had proved she was brighter than any Ravenclaw. Now he was enchanted to see she was as sly as a Slytherin as well. Apparently his Hermione was a goddess. All doubts fled in an instant--there was only one more piece of the puzzle he wished to know.

"Hermione, if you blocked that spell this morning, why did you wait so long to confront me?"

"Because I didn't know why you did," she said with exasperation. Her confident pose changed. She crossed her arms in a protective gesture over her bare breasts, leaving her sex still charmingly displayed. Severus made every effort to focus on her words. "I mean," she continued, "for all I knew you thought...well...I wasn't that bad last night, was I?"

It took a moment for Severus to understand her meaning. Then he both shocked and infuriated Hermione by throwing his head back and howling with uncontrollable laughter. His rich, baritone laugh echoed through the surrounding trees.

Hermione, patience finally at an end, launched herself at his chest, pushing him flat on the ground and landing atop him. Being suddenly covered in delightfully naked and wet Hermione, Severus at last stopped laughing and regarded her with blazing eyes.

"You didn't answer my question," she growled.

"I find," he purred, "that my Hermione is brilliant in ALL things."

"Oh...oh my," was all Hermione managed before he pulled her head down, crushing her lips with his own. Leaning into the kiss for what seemed like an age, Hermione eventually withdrew to attack the long line of buttons barring her from her goal.

"You insufferable, stubborn, Slytherin man!" she fussed. "We could've been doing this hours ago! You give me the most spectacular night of my entire life and then, when I wake up hoping to do it all over again, you make me wait ages! It was excruciating!"

Beginning to chuckle again, Severus was amused by both his angel's impatience and the sudden understanding of exactly why she'd decided to take a cold bath in the middle of the wood.

"Am I so amusing then?" she demanded, glaring at him.

"You, Hermione, are a goddess." His eyes seared into her own. Haste soon replaced momentary anger and, growling, Hermione returned to attacking his buttons.

"I must say that I am thoroughly enjoying your intriguing battle with my apparel, Hermione, but I find myself as impatient as you. May I remind you that you possess a wand?"

"Oh!" Giving him a look as if he hung the moon, she scrambled to her cloak. Withdrawing her wand, she disrobed the man in an instant, then stood for a long time examining him with hungry eyes. Opening her mouth to speak...she blushed and closed it again with a snap.

"Dear one, it's all right. Tell me what you want," Severus said in a calm, low voice.

"I want to touch you," she said in a halting quaver. "I want to touch you as you touched me."

"Come then," he spread his arms in welcome. "I willingly deliver myself to your explorations."

Sitting on the grass at his side, Hermione was both intrigued and trepidacious. Ever curious, she was enchanted by the easy way Severus entreated her to do as she wished. However, more than anything she wished to please him, and she was uncertain she knew how. Ah...well...this was, after all, Severus Snape; she supposed if she did something wrong he'd be sure to tell her about it. Deciding to start with more familiar ground, she began by running her hands over his black haired chest. It was delightful; an intriguing juxtaposition of hard muscle and soft skin. She could run her fingers through that fascinating hair for all eternity. Remembering his response from the night before, she leaned her head down to take a tiny nipple in her mouth. Taking a lesson from his previous treatment of her own, she kissed, licked, and (getting braver) nipped the tiny point lightly with her teeth.

Severus had watched her early explorations of his chest with burning eyes. When she began to suckle, his eyes closed in pleasure, her gentle nip brought forth a pleased growl. Sweet Arcadia! What she did to him with her tentative, yet eager attentions! Resigning himself to his fate, he vowed to recite all the potions ingredients in his supply cabinet to keep control while she learned his every inch.

Keeping her hands busy on his chest (and not yet brave enough to go to where she most wished to) Hermione raised her mouth to gently assault his neck. Beginning with the hollow of his throat, she worked her way up, around his jaw, to nibble at his earlobe. Another growl rewarded her efforts. Growing bolder, she gingerly slid the tip of her tongue into his ear. Severus groaned, and Hermione felt his hand reach up to knead at her hip. She must be doing something right! Perhaps she could...she moved to kneel between his spread legs.

Severus was hard and erect as a castle turret. When Hermione left his neck, beginning to suck and nibble a trail down his torso, his thoughts were constant stream of hope and fear. Please touch me...touch me...touch my cock...gods no...if she touches me now, this experiment is going to be embarrassingly short...sweet Merlin I shall run mad... A hand wrapped itself questioningly around his hard length. At his heartfelt groan, she began to softly, gently stroke it with excruciating slowness. His inner litany abruptly changed. Bezoar...nettle...porcupine quill...scurvygrass...lovage...asphodel...hellebore...shrivelfig...aconite...

At last brave enough to give in to her curiosity wholeheartedly, Hermione found herself captivated by the amazing object in her hand. Hard as a tree branch and soft as a rose petal, she was astounded at the way the skin moved with her hand over the hard length as she stroked. As her grip tightened, Severus cried out huskily. Eyes flying to his face, her hand halted...had she hurt him?

"Don't stop," he begged. "Please...gods...you torturous seraph...don't stop."

Hermione readily returned to her task, thrilled she pleased him. His panting breath and gravelly voice were having a startling effect on her insides. So wet that the cool air tortured, she wasn't certain how much longer she could wait to have him inside her.

He wasn't sure how much more he could endure before his control broke and he plunged inside her. What possessed him to let the minx torture him so unmercifully? She was wet...he knew she was...he could smell that extraordinary scent. Patience...control...gilly weed...armadillo bile...knotgrass...

When her hot mouth closed around the head of his cock he knew his control was at an end. He sat straight up, with a fierce "Hermione!"

Rising in alarm, Hermione's first thought was that she'd hurt him somehow. When he simply grabbed her and, lying back, dragged her up along his length to attack her mouth in a ravenous kiss, she realized he was ready for more than idle caresses. The thought prompted a moan.

Desperate to touch her, and completely beyond the power of speech, Severus' mouth ravished her lips and throat while his hands flew from her hair, down her back, to clasp her arse and grind her against him. Must get inside her...but first...

Suddenly rolling them until he was on top, Severus ground his hips against her, once, twice. Abruptly, he shimmied down her length to spread her nether lips apart with his hands and plunge his tongue into her. Hermione shrieked. In but a moment she screamed his name, coming against his mouth in a flood met by an eagerly lapping tongue. Suddenly, he loomed over her. Eyes flashing, he said one word, "goddess," as he plunged into her. Such a fever pitch of passion cannot last long. Buried in her tight heat at last, he tried to go slowly. When she bucked against him, he lost all vestiges of control, pounding into her. When she came again, trembling around him, he quickly followed her over the edge.

When he regained his senses, he was still inside her; Hermione was fast asleep, a charming smile playing about her lips. Withdrawing from her was like leaving home. Sighing, he took her wand to raise the wards that would protect them. Re-transfiguring the pallet, he gently picked her up. She woke, murmuring words too low to be

understood. He laid her softly on their makeshift bed, snuggled up behind, spooning her close to his warmth.

Hermione was in heaven. Severus rested her head on one arm while he put the other around her waist, its wandering hand coming to rest tightly cupping her sex. He slid one long finger just within her folds. Hermione wondered if he meant to do more, but he just left his hand there. She realized it was an erotically possessive gesture.

"Mine," he growled softly into her hair, as if reading her thoughts.

"Yours," she agreed.

They slept.

Interlude

Chapter 12 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

Waking, Severus kept his eyes closed for a long time. It was no Slytherin artifice; he knew exactly where he was. He was lying naked in the middle of the Forbidden Forest--and he'd never been happier in his life. The delightful vixen twined around him snuggled closer, making soft sounds in her sleep. Severus lay still, eyes firmly closed, lips curling into a ridiculous grin.

They'd been roused from sleep once during the night at the beginning of a sudden storm. Severus had used Hermione's wand to cast a shielding charm; they'd then made love again with frantic abandon as the storm raged around them. Remembering each exquisite detail, Severus' smile widened.

Sighing, he opened his eyes at last and contemplated the morning. He wanted nothing more than to wake his sleeping seraph and spend the entire day teaching her the thousand ways two people can pleasure one another. It was not to be--now the fates had granted him such joy, his only fear was it would be abruptly ripped away. The forest was a dangerous place, and they had but one wand between them. He could use Hermione's wand, but only with difficulty. Besides, he wanted her to be able to protect herself. Better she retain it and he manage as best he could. If he could but guide her safely back to Hogwarts, they could spend the rest of their lives in rapturous pursuits.

The goddess at his side stirred and woke.

Hermione took one look at the ridiculous grin on Severus' face and matched it with one of her own. He leaned over her and twin grins met briefly in a hard kiss. Severus smoothed the hair from her face. Gods, he could stay in this moment for all eternity. Giving the tip of her upturned nose a quick peck, he breathed a regretful sigh and resolutely began disengaging himself from Hermione's embrace.

"And just where do you think you are going, professor of mine? I have many plans for you!" Hermione demanded imperiously.

Chuckling at her tone firstly, Severus then waxed more serious, though he couldn't banish that damn fool's grin entirely. Lying on his side, facing her, his tousled head propped upon a hand, he regarded her as seriously as he was able. "From what you have told me, and my best guesswork, I imagine we are only about ten miles from Hogwarts. I would like nothing..." he reached a hand to gently cup her cheek, "nothing better than to remain here in exalted dishabille until the end of time, Goddess. However, if we forgo that pleasure, for now, I think we could reach home today."

"Why is it so important to get back today? We've had an easy time of it so far. Would it be so terrible continue to have me all to yourself?"

Hermione's tone was teasing, but the observant ex-spy noticed the thread of uncertainty in her expression. "Believe me, Hermione, I am not in haste to share you with anyone...you are mine," he growled, leaning forward for another quick, possessive kiss. "I will bow to the inevitability of having to share your attention with others if it means we are home safe. I know we've had an easy time, but this is a dark, very old forest. It hides secrets and dangers I would rather not face with only one wand between us. If my own wand wasn't heavily warded against such an attempt, I'd have you try to fetch it."

"Are we in danger then? We could use the invisibility cloak, though you are a bit tall for it."

"I'd rather exchange invisibility for speed. Honestly, little one, it's a miracle you reached me without mishap. I know you are both fierce and clever, but there are fell creatures in this wood and no invisibility cloak will fool all of them."

Noticing how serious his expression and the sudden sadness in his eyes, Hermione wondered anew what had happened to him before they came together. She had not forgotten the unicorn blood; she just hadn't felt brave enough to question him about it. Vowing to ask him about it after they got underway, she reluctantly began to climb off the pallet.

"All right then, if we are going to get moving, then I need to use the bushes!" she said cheekily. Severus chuckled again and went to "use the bushes" himself. A brief snack, quick packing, and they were walking down the trail.

Their walk was different today. Though Severus was not a man for overwhelming displays of affection, he constantly found reasons to touch the smiling woman at his side. Offering Hermione his hand to help her over a fallen tree, he would find himself holding it a bit longer than necessary. Occasionally, he'd rest a guiding hand on the small of her back or take a moment to wave a stray curl away from her face. She didn't mention the change in his attitude, but with every gesture she would turn to him with a beaming smile. He found his own foolish expression returning again and again. Who would've ever thought the "greasy git" would behave in this insanelly insipid manner, he thought to himself. The students at Hogwarts would faint dead away. Hmmm...actually a rather intriguing notion.

They walked for several hours--cherished hours full of inconsequential talk and stolen caresses. Eventually, Hermione gathered courage enough to ask the question that had puzzled her for days. "Severus, may I ask you something?"

"You may ask me anything, Hermione. I will answer if I can."

"When I reached you...well...you were covered in unicorn blood. Would you tell me what happened?"

Severus abruptly halted in the middle of the path, his face a transparent mixture of fear and mortification. He stared at her with haunted eyes. "Hermione," his normally sure, steady tones coming out jerkily, "I would never..." He broke off, dropping his head and closing his eyes tightly.

Hermione immediately knew what the trouble was. Appalled that she had waded into the obviously painful subject with so little tact, she rushed over to grab his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her.

"Severus, I know. I know you would never do such a thing. Forgive me my carelessness. When I finally found you, you were a mess. I adore you, Severus, and seeing you like that scared the very life out of me. It was a miracle I was able to stay calm enough to help you. I only asked because I wanted to know what horrible things you'd endured to bring you to such a state. I know damn well my wonderful, honorable man would never harm such a creature."

Severus' anguished look quieted and he buried his face in the crook of her neck. Holding him tightly, Hermione continued murmuring reassurances into his hair. They stood there, locked in a tight embrace in the midst of the woodland path, for a long time. Eventually, Severus calmed himself. Rather dismayed by his distasteful display of emotion, he gave a soft, self-deprecating snort and drew back far enough from Hermione to look at her.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he whispered, a bit sheepishly. "I'm just not good at all this..." He gave a graceful sweep of his arm, as if he were referring to the whole forest, but Hermione knew he referred to their fledgling relationship.

"I'm obviously not very good at 'all this' either, or I would've managed that more gently. I didn't mean to upset you. I expect it's going to take us some time to get used to one another."

"You are being too kind to me," Severus said with a roll of his eyes. "You posed a simple question and I responded like a babbling idiot...I should have known better...I should have known you better."

"Hush," she said, giving him another hug. "Can you tell me what happened?" she asked quietly. "It must've been bad."

"It was horrible, Hermione," he said in a frighteningly flat tone. "Despite years of the dreadful things I was forced to endure while spying amongst the Death Eaters, I think it was the most awful moment in my life. I know that I have never in my life felt so absolutely helpless."

"Tell me. Perhaps sharing this burden with me shall lighten it."

"All right, but let's keep walking. It seems easier somehow..."

Walking through the wood, Hermione at his side, her hand clutched tightly in his, he told her about Bob. He told her the whole tale: of Bob's gentleness, his humor, his unwavering loyalty. He told her of his sacrifice and of his death. When he finished, tears streamed down Hermione's face. She stopped them on the path again to hold her beloved tight in her arms.

"I'm so sorry, love. So very sorry. Gods bless him for keeping you safe."

"He would have loved you, my angel," whispered Severus.

They continued their walk in silence for some time. Severus never let go her hand.

Mid afternoon found the pair sitting close together on the ground, having what was supposed to be a short rest and a bite to eat. Hermione, however, was taking every opportunity to snog her beloved professor senseless.

"Sweet Liilth!" grumbled Severus. "I've created a monster! I see that I was quite correct, Madame, when I thought it best not to instruct you in the pleasures of passion until we were safely back at Hogwarts. If you do not stop your repeated attacks on my person, I fear we shall never arrive home." While the voice he used was pure Potions Master, the heated look belied his words. He dipped his head to hers and kissed her breathless. "Damn siren!" he growled, "We must get started. I think Hogwarts is only a matter of miles."

"Yes, Professor," Hermione said, rolling her eyes as she regretfully disengaged herself.

Before they started off, Severus realized he had to piss like a unicorn. With a complete lack of modesty, he simply whipped it out and got down to business. When he noticed Hermione studying the process with avid interest, he bit back a chuckle. "Woman, must you ogle me?" he asked her, smirking.

"I'm sorry," she said with a blush. "I've just never seen a man do...that... before--it's rather oddly fascinating. I can't seem to drag my eyes away."

Severus did chuckle then. "What am I going to do with you, siren?" Damn. One ogle and he was getting hard...makes it blasted difficult to take a piss. Finally finishing, he turned towards her as he began to tuck himself back into his trousers. Before he could complete the task, Hermione threw herself against him. Finding his bare cock suddenly thrusting against her jumper covered stomach was the last straw. Giving up to fate, he plundered her mouth with a searching tongue as he ground against her. Perhaps if they could be quite quick...he thought. Still ravishing her mouth, he divested Hermione of her wand. It was time to act on a particularly tantalizing fantasy.

Hermione was completely befuddled when Severus broke the kiss to strike a tree with a cushioning charm. What on earth was he doing? When he then used her wand to divest her of only her jeans and panties, while leaving her hiking boots, she was equally astonished.

"Perfect," he rumbled, eyes slithering up and down her half naked form. His erection still protruding proudly from his unbuttoned trousers, he did not waste time removing any of his own attire. Pressing once more against Hermione, he placed his strong hands on her waist and effortlessly lifted her up. "Put your legs about my waist, little one," he instructed, before returning his hungry tongue to her mouth. Hermione readily complied. She let out a pleased (if startled) squeak when Severus, with one swift, sure movement, lowered her to be instantly impaled on his shaft. She clutched him tightly with both arms and legs as he began to thrust into her eager heat.

For long moments they remained standing, unsupported, in the middle of the path while they writhed together. Eventually Severus' passion demanded more leverage and he stepped to the cushioned tree to press Hermione firmly against it.

Hermione had never imagined sex could be so wild and abandoned. While she loved the sweet attention Severus had previously paid her, she found herself enthralled by his present loss of control. The thought that she could reduce the normally reserved man to such a state, combined with the amazing things he was doing to her body, made her excitement rise quickly to a fever pitch. When Severus worked a thumb between their heaving bodies to find her button, she came immediately, shouting into the mouth that still devoured her own. Severus thrust one last time deeply into her tight heat as she spasmed around him, and his shout mingled with her own.

They rested against the tree for long moments, staring into each other's eyes and sharing gentle kisses while waiting for their panting breath to quiet.

"All right, little one?" Severus asked. "I was not...too rough with you?"

Hermione replied with a smug smile any Slytherin would have been proud of. "All right? Perhaps you didn't notice me screaming your name into your mouth? I'm a bit better than all right...I'm bloody brilliant!"

"I've always thought so," Severus replied with a satisfied smirk of his own.

A short time later found the new lovers once again walking down the path, hand in hand. A veteran of two wars as well as an accomplished duelist, Severus always remembered to take Hermione's left hand, leaving her wand hand free. Yet even the most brilliant of minds can fail one when suitably distracted. Severus had completely forgotten that, in the heat of passion, he had slipped her wand into his own pocket. It was a mistake he would live to regret bitterly.

The merry blue twinkle of Albus Dumbledore's eyes had gotten devilishly intense in the past two days. Students and Professors passing him in the halls fell to wondering what the old boy was up to. Albus wasn't up to anything (for once), he was just incredibly happy.

The morning after Severus' clock hand had landed in "Collapsed," giving Albus such a fright, both the hand of his reserved Potions Master and that of his rescuer had swung firmly into a new designation of the diverse grandfather clock..."Courting." Albus liked to stop by and check out the expressions on his young friends' faces. On the first day, Severus' expression ran the gamut between sly, thoughtful, and a bit taken aback. Hermione's had ranged between puzzled and a rather wistful hopefulness. This had amused Albus no end. He had swept Minerva into the room just to watch her face as she saw where her favorite student's hand had landed.

Minerva had snorted and said, "They are either perfect for one another or they're going to kill each other."

The second day of voyeuristic clock-watching had left Albus wondering if Minerva's second opinion had been the correct one after all. He was certain, however, that Minerva hadn't imagined it would be the sweet student who killed the often infuriating Professor. Yet there it was. Severus' picture looked absolutely devastated while Hermione's usually kind young face had a look of unspeakable fury. Albus couldn't imagine what Severus had done to cause that look. He knew Severus was brilliant, but there were obviously some things that the confident Potions Master had not yet learned to fear. Hell hath no fury...

By the next morning, both of his missing friends had sprouted absolutely ridiculous grins. Albus had a pretty good notion what had caused them. He found himself snickering at odd points during the day which made Minerva curious indeed. He tried to keep his observant Head of Gryffindor out of his sitting room that day. He wasn't sure how the woman would react if she figured out Severus was "molesting" her student. He sniggered again. Perhaps he should be more concerned for the girl, but judging by the expression on her clock hand, she wouldn't thank him for interfering. Ah, well...she was of age and almost graduated. He was certain the level-headed girl could make up her own mind on the matter.

He felt, at turns, a bit sorry for each of them. Hermione was going to have her hands full with his sly friend; that was a fact. Severus on the other hand, was patently unused to love of any sort. He was reserved even with those professors he called friend. Having an exuberant young witch like Hermione in love with him was going to throw him right off his head. Albus allowed himself another chuckle.

Suddenly, both off-watched clock hands began a slow and unstoppable movement. Albus' expression grew wary. Perhaps they were only arriving home at last? His face fell as both hands stopped firmly in "Deadly Peril."

"Oh my children...what have you done?"

Severus saw the beast first. He halted immediately on the path, stopping Hermione as well with their still clasped hands.

"Hermione," he said with quiet urgency, "my love, do not move."

Only three miles from home and safety, fate stopped them in their tracks. On the path before them stood a minotaur.

Fate and Irony

Chapter 13 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

The first minotaur, according to Greek myth, was born from a curse Poseidon wrought on King Minos. Poseidon had gifted Minos with a beautiful white bull--an animal destined to be offered as a sacrifice. Minos, enchanted by the perfect creature, valued it too much to offer it up to Poseidon as intended. The sea god, in his fury, caused Minos' wife to fall in love with the beast. The result of this inexplicable union was a monster. Minotaur had the body of a strong man with the head and hooves of his bull father. Violent and dangerous, he was hidden away in a labyrinth, where--every year--seven maids and seven young men were forced into the maze to appease the minotaur's appetites. Eventually, Theseus was one of the young men brought to the minotaur, and with the help of the princess Ariadne, the minotaur was slain.

In modern wizard times, minotaurs are rarely seen and avidly avoided. Wizard historians argue about from what these beasts sprang. It seems unlikely that Minos' bull-headed stepson produced any progeny. Some say the current minotaurs were created by Grindelwald, to be used as war fodder. However, there are recorded sightings of an occasional minotaur predating Grindelwald, so this is unlikely. The most common theory is that the beasts were accidentally created by Uric the Oddball in the fourteenth century.

Severus cared nothing of the beast's mythology or history; he was more concerned with its temperament. Minotaurs possessed the body of a man, true enough, but their intelligence and attitude was all bull. Stupid, aggressive, and territorial in the extreme, a wise wizard avoided them at all costs. The beasts were resistant to most hexes and inhumanly strong. This strength, combined with the wickedly sharp, long horns on their heads, made them almost impossible to overpower. After his whispered instruction to Hermione, Severus stood absolutely still, barely breathing, as he kept a wary eye on the creature. Hermione was an equally still statue at his side. Severus knew their best chance was hoping the stupid creature decided they were no threat and moved itself off.

In moments he could see it wasn't working. The minotaur was beginning to sway its head from side to side, stomping the ground with its over-sized hooves. Damn...the blasted beast was going to charge them!

"Hermione," he whispered, "can you slowly...very slowly...draw your wand."

Her hand moved sluggishly toward her wand pocket. Feeling its emptiness, she controlled her reaction, only letting out a barely voiced gasp. "Severus," she whispered in a voice as low as his own, "have you my wand?"

Severus let out a slight gasp of his own. By the many levels of Hell, how could he have been so foolish? He knew with a sinking certainty exactly where Hermione's wand was. It was in his right robe pocket; impossible to get stealthily while his right hand was tightly clenching Hermione's. That's it then. He would do his best to protect Hermione at all costs. He wasn't about to let her be ripped from his side as Bob had been...better to die himself than live with that eternal torment.

"Listen to me very carefully, love. In a moment, he will lower his head to charge. When he does, you must release my hand. Run back the way we came."

"I will not leave you!"

"You will!" he hissed. "Hermione, you have no wand. I will use your wand, and I will do my best, but I cannot fight while worrying about you. You must get out of the way."

"I will do as you say," Hermione said, though she hated the very thought of leaving his side. He was right of course; he was always so infuriatingly right. Damn, it was one of the things she most adored about him...this irritating brilliance. She found that there was one more thing that must be whispered. "I love you, Severus," she said simply.

"And I, you...my goddess." The minotaur began to lower its head with slow deliberation. "Here he comes, little one...run!"

With a gasp, Hermione released his hand and fled down the path. As the creature charged, Severus moved with the same amazing speed and grace that Hermione had witnessed at the final battle against Voldemort. He was the most accomplished duelist of his generation, a feat that would have guaranteed his success this day--had he possessed his own wand. Knowing that the lesser curses would have no effect on the rampaging beast, he went automatically to the strongest curse in his arsenal.

"Avada Kedavra," the strong baritone rang out with practiced conviction. Hermione's innocent wand (never having touched an unforgivable in all the time since it was created), bucked in his hand, balking completely at the dark enchantment. Suddenly the minotaur was upon him. Trying to play for time, Severus dove sideways to avoid the rampaging brute. With surprising agility in a creature so large, the minotaur grabbed Severus up in its powerful arms, raised him over its head, and threw him ferociously against the nearest tree. A sickening snap echoed through the forest.

Hermione had paused when she heard the unforgivable. She now stood in shock, terrified that Severus lay dead at the foot of the tree. Still gaping, her eyes lifted to meet the furious eyes of the minotaur. It charged again, Hermione fleeing before it.

Severus was dazed by pain for but a moment. Then, with all the determination of his formidable will, he locked the agony of his badly broken leg deep in his mind, to be examined later...if there was a later. Using the tree that he had impacted against so roughly, he levered himself up to stand unsteadily on his remaining limb. Raising his eyes to search out the minotaur, he was just in time to see the fell beast gore Hermione in the back, catching her up on its horns to toss her over its back; she landed on her head with a terrible crack. She lay still, like a broken doll. With a hurried prayer, he could only hope she still lived. Then he forced her from his thoughts as he turned his attention to the minotaur.

"To me, you foul fiend!" he shouted. "She lays helpless...I am the threat now! Indeed, by all the powers of hell, I shall be your death!"

Severus' face showed a look of such ferocity and determination that had the minotaur any brain at all it would have fled in panic. With the incredible stubbornness of its kind, it turned from the lifeless form at its feet and, lowering its head again, the minotaur charged.

Dropping Hermione's useless wand at his feet, Severus, showing a steady ruthlessness born of decades of war, lifted both palms to the galloping beast before him. Again he intoned the unforgivable, fed with all the blind hatred he had for the creature.

"Avada Kedavra." Green light flashed from both his palms. Streaming to the minotaur, it struck him squarely in the chest. The creature's face broke in spasms of agony as it fell back, screaming. At last, it lay still in the middle of the path--face twisted in torment--lifeless eyes staring at the sky.

Albus could not drag his eyes from the clock's face. Holding his breath for a tiny eternity, he watched the hands as they began their unstoppable journey away from "Deadly Peril." Severus' hand ended in "Gravely Injured," but the young witch's hand swung into "Mortally Wounded."

"Ah...no," Albus whispered. "Not that sweet girl. Poor Severus...my dear boy, fortune has never given you a chance of happiness has she...the vicious Jezebel." Albus collapsed back into the chair before the clock and, placing his head in his hands, he wept for his two young friends from whom the Fates had turned away.

Unbeknownst to Albus, the Fates had not quite given up on his friends, though they were still feeling a bit capricious.

Severus took no pleasure in the death of his adversary. Thinking only of Hermione, he tried to run to her aid. His leg, broken clean through, would not support him. As he crashed to the ground the broken ends of the bone shifted; one end breaking through the skin, causing a bloody wound.

Cursing himself for his stupidity, Severus retrieved Hermione's fallen wand, then used every stubborn atom in his aching body to drag himself to her side. He thought her dead at first, she lay so still. Finding a pulse, he realized she wasn't dead...yet. Having expected her back to have the most serious wounds, he was surprised that it was hardly gored. The minotaur's horns had landed firmly in Hermione's knapsack and barely penetrated into her flesh. Severus was relieved by this...until he found that Hermione's potion box had taken the brunt of the attack. The few healing potions she had left were smashed and useless.

"Gods!" he keened. "Is there no mercy in this hell of a world? Will the Fates never cease their inhuman joy of tormenting me?"

Struggling to quiet his mind, Severus examined Hermione's head. Here he found the sickening reason for her apparent lifelessness. Having fallen hard, she had cracked her skull. Severus, distracted by her back and the ruined potions box, had not noticed the pool of blood spreading beneath the beloved cinnamon curls. As he watched, Hermione's life flowed out--a red tide. Grabbing her wand firmly in his trembling hand, Severus did his best to close the wound. Fortune gave a small smile--Hermione's wand was quite used to the healing magic, and it was comforted by the love and worry it felt flooding from the man who'd previously used it so grievously. With untold effort on Severus' part, the wound closed. Hermione remained seriously injured, but she would not bleed to death.

Severus knew if she stood any chance at all of recovering, he must get her to Hogwarts. It couldn't be far. How would he accomplish it? He had almost completely exhausted his reserve of magic. He would never manage another healing charm with an unfamiliar wand. With his insufferable leg he could only effect a dragging crawl. By the time he crawled to help she would surely die. He knew immediately what he must do. Three legs would travel much faster than one.

Severus was an unregistered Animagus. It wasn't a secret because of his days as a spy; he'd simply never bothered to register. He found the form he turned into patently useless. It was particularly useless for spying. The beast he became was conspicuous in the extreme, not only because of its form but because of its impossible color. The only time he ever used it was on occasion when traveling in the forbidden forest looking for potion ingredients. The only person he had ever let see the ridiculous creature was Albus. Albus had chuckled at him for weeks after, and Severus had never let him glimpse the animal again, no matter how often Albus begged--his blue eyes alight with barely concealed humor.

There was one problem with the course of action Severus now took. An Animagus used a wand to transform. It becomes a part of the animal form, just as clothing does. It was possible for an Animagus to transform without a wand, but to do so, one risked being stuck in the animal form forever. St. Mungo's had an entire wing dedicated to taking care of wizards who'd been foolish enough to transform wandless. It was a veritable zoo.

Severus knew what must be done, and he was well aware of the danger he faced in doing it. He considered trying to use Hermione's wand; in the end, he couldn't bring himself to do so. It would take time for him to hobble on three legs to Hogwarts. If she awakened while he was gone, she would be completely defenseless without her wand. Better that he be damned to a life as a beast than for his sweet goddess to die. The mere thought was unbearable.

With a fierce determination, Severus placed Hermione's wand in her right hand. Eyes wet with unshed tears, he kissed her unresponsive lips one last time with unspeakable reverence. Dragging the invisibility cloak from the knapsack and covering her; he prayed that the simple protection of invisibility would keep her safe.

"I will return, beloved," he whispered.

Severus dragged himself to a tree and used it to lurch unsteadily to his good leg. It required all his concentration, and what was left of his magical energy, to transform. Beside the hidden form of his love stood a midnight black unicorn. Standing on three legs, he raised the quicksilver-seeping, broken fourth high off the ground. With one last glance in the direction of his hidden goddess, he began a ragged trot south--towards home and help.

Hagrid was working in the vegetable garden near his hut. Feeding his small plot of Barbary Lambs, he chuckled at their antics. Barbary Lambs, are not animals, but animated plants. A lamb grows from what resembles a small tree, remaining attached to the tree through a cord at its belly button. This cord acts as a natural tether, and when the lamb has eaten all the foliage around it, it dies. One does not usually feed Barbary Lambs, but Hagrid was so fond of the amusing plant-animals he could not bear to see them starve, thus his humble (if a bit silly) task this afternoon.

His chuckle abruptly fled when he heard a crashing in the underbrush of the forest near him. Putting down the large basket of hay he'd been dividing among the lambs, he left the garden to gather up his crossbow before standing to face the suddenly noisy forest. He was completely gobsmacked when an injured unicorn came blundering out on three legs.

"Look at the poor beggar, hurt by sommat weren't yer? Odd little thing 'e is, black as soot. Don't be worryin' none now. We'll get yer fixed up."

With that said, Hagrid began patiently trying to corner the hurt beast. Severus was horrified--were he a simple beast in need of assistance, he'd welcome the kind man's attentions. At the moment, however, there was no time to lose. Hermione needed help and the sole man who would recognize Severus was Albus. He simply must get away from Hagrid and to Albus' office. Hagrid made a sudden feint, almost grabbing him.

Severus screamed in anger and frustration. How could he possibly get to the castle? "Oh my Hermione," he thought, "don't you dare leave me, I will find a way...I swear it."

Little did Severus know that the answer to his predicament was about to walk itself around the corner of Hagrid's hut.

Insight

Chapter 14 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

Ron was grumbling to himself as he walked briskly back to the castle from the Quidditch pitch. He and Harry had been in the midst of a half-hearted game of catch-the-snitch when the inevitable argument had broken out. Honestly! You'd think, after seven years, Harry and 'Mione would've figured out when things grew heated he said the most stupid arse things imaginable!

Until this year, it hadn't seemed to bother his friends much that he had permanent foot-in-mouth disease. He'd tried to rein in his stupid tongue, but growing up with five older brothers made rude and ridiculous comments a hard habit to break. Before now, Hermione always seemed to understand that. Sure, they argued like grims and kneazels, but it was never serious. At least, it hadn't been until that last day. If he could take that fight back, he'd do it in an instant. At the time, it never occurred to him that she was actually serious--the way she'd been venting reminded him of her S.P.E.W. campaign. Ron wondered idly what silly name Hermione would've come up with for the Snape campaign. Save Nasty Old Teacher, perhaps?

Bugger all! Hermione would never realize why he hated the bat-robed prat. Ron understood better than Harry why Hermione fancied the great git. Snape was as intelligent and bookish as she was, and that was saying a lot. A strategist himself, Ron was well aware that Snape was brave and resourceful during the war. Ron even allowed that Snape, regardless of his personal feelings, had no choice but to treat the Gryffindor trio with the utmost contempt. A Death Eater spy couldn't be seen treating Gryffindors with anything resembling fairness. In truth, Ron understood much more than his riotous mouth ever let on. Despite this hidden understanding, Ron hated Snape with a passion. He hated the nasty bugger for one unchanging reason: Snape made Hermione cry.

Ron would never forgive himself that fateful time first year, when his thoughtless commentary had left Hermione crying in the girl's toilet. Not only had he been mortified by hurting her feelings, he'd almost gotten her killed by a mountain troll. Since that day, he had become rampantly protective of her. No matter how they argued, or how seemingly careless his remarks, he'd never again made such a bitingly nasty comment as that one.

Snape did. During their first five years at Hogwarts, Snape made some of the most devastatingly personal verbal attacks Ron had ever heard--and he made them to Hermione. Ron realized this had changed somewhat during the past two years. Though Snape still threw barbed remarks Hermione's way, the comments themselves were more witty and less harmful. It was probably the closest to playful teasing the dreary man got.

Even so, Ron would never forget that the man had made Hermione cry, nor would he forgive him for it; just as he would never forgive himself.

Ron's reverie came to an abrupt end as he rounded the corner of Hagrid's hut, coming upon a strange sight. The chess-playing, strategic part of his brain began analyzing the odd data laid out before it.

A coal-black unicorn was staggering about on three legs, screaming, as the upset gamekeeper vainly tried to corner it. Ron's brain revealed several things to him. The unicorn's leg was broken...unicorns usually loved Hagrid, yet this one was creating an amazing fuss...but it wasn't trying to escape back to the forest (in spite of the fact that it kept glancing back at the trees)...there was no such thing as a black unicorn.

The random pieces floating in Ron's mind put themselves into order. Bloody hell!

"Hagrid, stop!" Ron shouted. "That's not a unicorn!"

The unicorn stared at him, with an easily readable expression of amazement.

"Hagrid," Ron looked to the half-giant earnestly, "trust me on this one, please. Get the Headmaster and Madame Pomfrey right away."

"I'll trust ye, Ron. But I'll be wantin' an explanation after."

Hagrid headed for the hearth in his hut to floo the Headmaster. In a moment, Albus' head stared at him from the flames.

"Sorry t'bother yer, Headmaster, sir, but there's summat young Ronald Weasley thought yer should know. There's a unicorn down here wi' a broken leg. 'E won't let me touch 'im." Hagrid explained.

Albus' eyes widened. "A unicorn, Rubeus? What color unicorn?"

Hagrid was amazed by the seemingly unnecessary question; all unicorns were white unless they were young. How had the Headmaster known? "Tha's the odd thing, sir. The strange beastie's black."

"Merlin's teeth!" barked Albus. "Hagrid, don't let him leave. I'll fetch Poppy and we'll be right down. Don't try to catch him, my boy. That's not a unicorn."

"Everyone keeps sayin' tha'...but does anyone explain..." Hagrid complained as Albus' head disappeared with a pop.

While Hagrid spoke with his boss' disembodied head, Ron regarded the upset unicorn gravely. "Professor Snape, sir?"

The unicorn stared, then inclined his head in an elegant nod that was remarkably familiar.

"Sir, where is Hermione?"

The equine Snape spun on three legs and began trotting awkwardly towards the forest.

Ron quickly outpaced him to block his path. "I know you want to return to her, Professor. I'd like to go, as well. But we'll all go faster if you wait to get your leg healed. Madame Pomfrey is on her way," Ron said, with admirable calm.

Professor Snape hesitated a long moment as he gazed into the wood. Then, with a sigh, looked back to Ron and nodded his head.

"Professor, if you're an Animagus, why don't you change back?"

Severus gave a disgusted snort, then hung his head, nose almost touching the ground.

"You're stuck then...right. Is Hermione ok?"

Severus raised his head to look into Ron's eyes. Ron had never realized how sorrowful the eyes of an animal could appear.

"Right then...I'll take that as a no. Is she..." Ron couldn't say the word he thought. He felt as if saying the word 'dead' out loud would turn the nightmarish idea into reality. "Is she...alive?" he finished softly.

Severus whinnied and tossed his head in an emphatic "yes."

"She must be hurt bad then...if you left her." The phrase was only half questioning. With a small, tight nod of the head, Professor Snape confirmed his fears.

"Don't worry, Professor, we'll get to her," Ron said in a kind tone, which Severus had certainly never heard him use in his presence. Severus took a few shaky steps up to Ron, gazing into his eyes intently, then put his head over Ron's shoulder, resting it there.

Ron remembered from Hagrid's classes that this was a unicorn's sign of trust. Pushing aside his hatred, Ron raised a wary hand to pat his Potions Professor's furry neck. "We'll get to her," he repeated. Idly, he thought, "Well...I can always go back to hating him later. It's just hard to do when he's obviously so upset about 'Mione."

The Fates were working overtime that day. Heading back from the Quidditch pitch, Harry rounded the corner of Hagrid's hut just as Albus and Poppy arrived. Hagrid led them all back near the garden where Ron and Severus waited impatiently. Without hesitation, Ron became Severus' voice. Having always believed the youngest Weasley male to be a bit of a dunderhead, the equine Potions Master was stunned by how clearly and concisely the usually excitable red-head explained the situation.

Harry was unsurprised. While Ron was hopelessly dramatic in trivial matters, during a crisis he turned clear-headed and exacting. When Ron had directed the chess game hurdle on the way to the sorcerer's stone first year, he'd been absurdly calm, his speech had become almost elegant. Harry often thought it was a pity he didn't behave that way always.

In no time at all, the group disappeared into the forest, chasing after the healed unicorn as he rushed back to his Hermione.

Arriving where Severus had left Hermione, the rescuers met an odd sight. There was nothing there but an abandoned knapsack and a pile of black clothes. The humans in the party were surprised anew when Albus said, "Ah...there she is," and kneeling where Severus snuffled at the ground, removed the invisibility cloak to reveal Hermione. She remained as she was when Severus had left her. Pale and unconscious, had Madame Pomfrey not assured them Hermione still lived, they would never have known it.

"Headmaster, we must get her to the hospital wing right away. She's alive, but that's a severe trauma to the head. She requires immediate care," the mediwitch explained.

"I'll set up a portkey, Poppy. We can all get back to the gates quickly," Albus replied. Picking up a stone, he waved his wand over it, eyes closed in concentration as he cast. Finishing, he gave a concerned look at Severus. "I'm afraid you will have to walk back my boy. Unicorns cannot use portkeys, even be they Potion Masters." Severus hung his head and sighed, sides heaving. He was loath to be separated from his Hermione again, but there was nothing to be done.

Gathering up the knapsack and Severus' clothes, Albus shrunk them, tucking them into a robe pocket. "Hagrid, if you will pick up Miss Granger...Poppy, boys...if you would gather 'round, we'll be off."

Ron was torn. As much as he wanted to stay near his unconscious friend, the sight of the grieving unicorn was painful to see. Remembering how the proud man had rested his head over his shoulder, Ron made a decision that left Harry stunned. "If you don't mind, Headmaster, I think I'll stay and walk back with Professor Snape." Noticing Harry's confusion, he added, "It's alright, Harry. You go along with Hermione...we'll be fine."

Standing with his mouth agape, Harry stared at Ron a moment. Then something occurred to him--Snape might be a unicorn, but he was still basically naked and wandless. Other than that wicked-looking horn, he was practically helpless. Harry's Gryffindor spirit rose to the occasion. "That's ok, Ron...er...I think I'll go with you and the Professor. I imagine it will be a while before they'll let us see Hermione, at any rate."

With a pleased smile at the boys, Albus hesitated no longer. He invoked the portkey; Hermione and the professors vanished.

Severus stood glaring at the boys. What were they thinking? Was this some nefarious plot to get back at him, now he seemed helpless? He may be a unicorn, but he was not defenseless. If either of them made one move towards a wand they would find themselves gored before they could say "Wronski Feint." Contemplating them carefully, Severus grew confused. They didn't appear to be scheming; mostly they looked embarrassed. Hell's teeth! They were being all noble. Bloody Gryffindors. That was all he needed, a brace of insipid teenagers fussing over him. Severus gave a disdainful snort that was eerily alike to his human version, and began the walk back to Hogwarts, his unasked-for protectors trailing in his wake. Severus refused to admit, even to himself, how much their gesture meant to him.

Eventually the unlikely trio found themselves safely back at Hogwarts. Headmaster Dumbledore met them at the door to the hospital wing. His eyes were serious as he told them the prognosis was not good. Hermione's wounds had been healed and Madam Pomfrey had done all she could. Hermione lived, but the head trauma was quite serious; she'd slipped into a coma.

"Do not give up hope; Hermione's a strong young woman. I have every expectation that she will wake...in time," Albus concluded. With that, he shooved the boys off to their common room, promising to alert them of any change. After they left, he turned to Severus. "My boy, I am well aware you wish to stay at her side. As you are unable, at the moment, to take over your teaching duties, I see no reason to deny you."

Severus snorted. "At the moment." Albus knew damn well it would take a miracle for him to ever teach again. Well...at the moment he could care less. He just wanted to see Hermione. When Albus opened the door, he trotted to her bed.

While Hermione lay unconscious, Severus never left her side. At first, he'd neither eat nor sleep. By the second day of this behavior, Albus threatened him with a dreamless sleep potion, as well as force feeding by Hagrid, if he didn't make an effort.

"You'll not do the child any good when she wakes if you worry yourself sick, my boy," Albus said sternly.

Severus blew air threw his lips in an equine raspberry Bob would have been proud of. Had he been able to speak, he'd have reminded Albus that he wasn't likely to be of any use to her regardless while stuck in this blasted form.

When Albus made as if to floo for Hagrid, Severus appeared to relent. Picking at the clover the house elves had set out for him, he then lay down on a pallet on the floor made to accommodate his horsy form. He closed his eyes and dozed, but did not sleep. When Albus left the hospital wing an hour later, Severus rose on weary legs, returning to Hermione's bedside. He stared into her face for a small eternity, as if the force of his will alone could wake her. At last, with a long sigh, he stretched his neck (ever mindful of his sharp horn) and laid his head gently in her lap. He remained in that pose the rest of the day, dozing on his feet--remembering, for one fleeting moment, that joy had been his.

Demise

Chapter 15 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

Neville was as glad of Hermione's return as he was heartsick over her injuries. If he'd not been such a constant idiot in Potions this would never have happened! Because of him, the one person who'd always patiently tried to help him was lying in a hospital bed and no one knew when (or if) she would wake. Having heard that Professor Snape was returned as well, Neville had yet to see him. Headmaster Dumbledore was still teaching all the Potion Master's classes, and while Neville felt calmer under the Headmaster's guidance, he found he still didn't do well in potions. Without Hermione's patient help and Professor Snape's constant vigilance, Neville exploded more cauldrons than ever. He was fast approaching a new school record.

Neville was mortified by what had happened to Hermione on his account; he was terrified by what vengeance Professor Snape would take against him. Neville spent long hours envisioning, with gruesome clarity, any number of dismal fates brought about by an outraged Severus Snape. In his wildest dreams he couldn't possibly imagine the horrifying situation in which he later found himself.

Desperately wanting to see Hermione, Neville considered making a trip to the hospital wing. He wanted to go, even if she was unconscious, but he worried about running into the much-feared Professor. Snape wasn't teaching--was he in his quarters or lurking in the hospital wing? Eventually, his concern overriding his fright, he made his way cautiously to the wing's door with hesitating steps.

The wing seemed deserted. There was a lone occupied bed at the end of the long room. At this time of night, the hall was dimly lit, leaving little wonder that Neville didn't see the dozing midnight creature at Hermione's bedside. Neville crept forward; half-way to the bed he called softly, "Hermione?"

At that quiet sound, Severus' head snapped up from Hermione's lap. His eyes flashed in rage, equine nostrils flaring. "Longbottom!" he thought. "Here is the very reason my joy lies slaughtered!" Trumpeting his fury in a stallion's scream, he charged.

To Neville, it seemed as though a demon from the depths of Hell itself had risen from Hermione's bed. Shrieking in terror, he grabbed his wand and did the first spell that popped into his mind.

Alarmed by the racket, Madame Pomfrey ran from her office to find Neville clinging to the chandelier and the enraged unicorn still lunging up, desperately trying to reach the boy with a wickedly sharp horn. Shouting at Severus to no effect, she returned to her office to floo the Headmaster. In a thrice, Albus, Minerva, and Hagrid burst into the room.

"Severus Snape!" Albus bellowed. "What is the meaning of this outrageous behavior?"

Normally, the rare times that Albus Dumbledore bellowed, anyone within a league would stop what they were doing and pay immediate attention. Severus didn't even hear him. Tired, worried, and quite literally overcome by his animal passions; his mind so focused on reaching the apparent cause of his pain, the rest of the world ceased to exist. Albus was forced to stupefy his rampaging Potions Master, and was not pleased about it.

"Hagrid," Albus said grimly, "throw that mad thing in Poppy's office until we get Mr. Longbottom straightened out."

Hagrid dutifully, but gently, picked up the limp body of the unicorn and shut it in the office. While Albus tried to get his sudden temper in check, Minerva removed Neville from the chandelier. Fussing over the frightened young man a bit, Poppy tousled his hair and sent him off to Gryffindor tower with a dreamless sleep potion to help him get through the night. After Neville was cared for, and Hermione checked on, Albus finally opened Poppy's office door to deal with his unconscious professor.

"Ennervate," Albus intoned in an emotionless voice.

Severus woke confused. He couldn't quite recall what had happened. He remembered seeing Longbottom enter the hospital wing, and being angry, but what happened afterwards was a blur.

"Severus Snape," hissed Albus, "never in my long employment at this fine school have I ever...ever had to stop a teacher from trying to kill a student."

Severus was aghast...he had tried to kill Longbottom?

"Severus, you are both my employee and my friend, but I must say I have never been so furious in my life. Threatening the life of a student! What could possibly have caused you to behave in such a harebrained manner? If you hadn't been through so much already I'd ship you off to Azkaban myself!" By the last line of the speech, Albus was bellowing again.

Severus hung his head in shame. He honestly didn't know what had come over him. Had Albus not been so stunned by his Potions Master's inexplicable behavior, he may have realized Severus' trouble, and avoided a terrible mistake.

"Hagrid," Albus said in a soft voice that was infinitely cold. "If this creature is going to act like a beast, then let him be treated as such. Take him out to the corrals and lock him in."

"Yes, sir," Hagrid said softly. "Will yer please come with me, Professor?"

With a nod of his head, Severus docilely followed Hagrid out to the corral.

Being able to become an Animagus is a rare and wondrous gift. There is good reason why the power is not common. It is both a difficult ability to learn and a dangerous one. Even for an accomplished Animagus there are pitfalls of which to be wary. Severus already found himself mired in one by changing without his wand. He now found himself slipping into the most dangerous threat of all. The power to transform into an animal was never meant to be used long term--while a wizard in his animal form still possesses his human mind, the animal nature of the beast he becomes is an insistent call. This nature is a powerful necessity, for without the instincts that attend the form, no wizard could ever learn to act and move as the animal itself. The danger in staying too long in animal form is, eventually, the strong instincts of the beast supercede the human mind trapped within. This is the reason St. Mungo's has its Animagus wing--the wizards locked away in that ward lost all human sense. They are loved and cared for in respect for the wizards they once were, but they're no more aware than the poor beasts locked in any zoo.

Severus had been trapped in his unicorn form for two days when Neville made his ill-fated trip into the ward. When Severus' unicorn eyes had locked on the perceived threat to his Hermione, the unicorn's protective, wild-stallion blood had taken over his reason. Now he found himself locked in a corral, treated as the beast he looked, ripped callously away from all that was cherished, familiar, and human. The man in his mind was slipping away, and he was too confused and sorrowful to fight it.

I can't believe I attacked a student! What possessed me? I know I amused myself by plotting his demise, but the worst I would've done was hex the foolish boy. I've never hurt a student in my entire teaching career, surely Albus knows that! I've been through hell trying to protect even the most dunderheaded of students. What in Merlin's name came over me? Good gods, maybe Albus is right. Maybe now I am just an animal. I'm bound to be stuck this way, perhaps I should try to get used to it. It's certainly true that I'm no bloody good to Hermione like this...my sweet little one...Gods grant that she recover. The fates cannot be so cruel as to do otherwise. When she recovers, what then? Are you going to let her attach her soul to a bloody useless unicorn? No, of course not. Better to break away now. Better to be the animal I've become than to let her loyal heart be trapped with such an abomination as myself. She is young...she will find another love--in time. I have long known that joy was a changeling emotion and not to be trusted. Oh, my sweet Goddess...

Severus hung his head so low in his distress that his soft nose almost touched the earth. His unicorn's tears, so precious in potion making, ran down his equine cheeks to fall and be wasted, seeping into the unfeeling ground. His sorrow and shame were too great to be born. The simple, calm, nature of the animal was an enticing escape from his pain. Severus' mind began to slip away.

Hagrid was worried. He'd spent all morning in the corral with Severus, talking to him and trying to keep him company. Severus had acted gentle and amusing--like any unicorn--but not at all like the abrasive Potions Professor. Hagrid had tried again and again to get the usually stubborn man to answer him in some way--a nod of the head...anything at all; but while the unicorn was friendly and attentive...

Severus felt he could listen to the kind man's voice all day long. It was so gentle and musical. He couldn't seem to be bothered to understand what the man was saying, but he liked the sound all the same. The man seemed sad, though. Severus nickered to him and affectionately nibbled at the ends of the man's unruly hair. That seemed a familiar gesture somehow. He snorted and did it again.

With a heavy heart, Hagrid left to talk to the Headmaster; the unicorn placidly watching him from the calm safety of the corral.

"He what?" Albus was bellowing again.

"He just don' seem ta know who 'e is, Headmaster, sir. It's right pitiful 'e is."

Albus sat down heavily in the chair behind his desk--his legs didn't seem to want to support him. Hagrid was unnerved by the despairing way his Headmaster rested his face in his hands. "Merciful Zeus, Hagrid. What have I done?"

The kind man with the voice of song was coming back! Severus whinnied a welcome. He hadn't been bored in the man's absence; the sun was warm on his furry flanks, the breeze was a delight as it combed through his mane. He'd been watching the lamb plants caper about, they were quite entertaining. He hoped Song Voice would let him out to play with them, it looked like fun.

But who was this? Song Voice had brought another man with him, a greybeard. At first, the greybeard seemed quite pleasant: he spoke with a warm kindness that echoed the kiss of the sun on his flank. Eventually, the greybeard grew angry, and shouted things at him. Severus didn't like that at all; it seemed to remind him vaguely of a pain better left forgotten. He turned his back on the angry greybeard and went back to watching the green lambs wistfully until the greybeard went away.

Here were two more men to visit him! Why...they were scarcely older than colts! He didn't like the look of that round eyed fellow...something about him was unpleasantly familiar. That flame-haired boy seemed familiar as well, and in a much nicer way. He seemed to remember Flame Hair being kind to him. When the boys entered the corral, he ignored the round eyes and went eagerly up to Flame Hair to rest his head over the surprised boy's shoulder. The boy stroked his neck in a familiar way...mmmm...he liked that. All too soon the boys seemed to get distressed...and with a last pat on his neck, Flame Hair followed the round eyes back up to the castle.

Hermione slid into consciousness, hearing soft voices at her bedside. Where was she? What had happened?

"Albus, it does look like she's coming 'round, but I'm telling you--even if she wakes we can't possibly move her! Do you want her slipping away from us again?"

"Of course not, Poppy, but...blast it all...she may be his only chance. We've tried to drag him up here...the stubborn man refuses to leave the thrice-damned corral. I'd use magic...but in his present state...hell, Poppy, it would probably make the situation worse. If we can possibly get the girl out to him..."

Are they talking about me? Who was 'him'? Suddenly Hermione's memories came flooding back in a rush. The minotaur--Severus! Why didn't she hear his beloved dusky voice? Where was Severus? Eyes opening suddenly, Hermione fairly shouted, "Severus!"

"My dear, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you back with us," Albus said with a warm smile.

Noticing that the smile didn't touch his serious eyes, Hermione spoke again. "Where is Severus? What's happened to him? Why isn't he here?"

"Ah...my dear...I'm afraid I'm to blame for that," Albus replied.

Albus related the whole tale, how Severus transformed wandless to save her, how for the first two days he never left her side. Finally, he told her the confusing events of the night before, and his disastrous decision.

"Headmaster, how could you? How could you leave him out there alone after the hell he's been through? He would never hurt a student--you of all people should have known there was something amiss!" Hermione was filled with righteous wrath; she would not be denied.

Poppy tried to calm the agitated girl. "Now, sweeting, you really must settle down...you aren't at all recovered enough for so much excitement. Let me get you something to calm you..."

"Recovery be damned," Hermione said shortly. Looking to Albus with grim determination in her eyes, she continued, "You take me to him, Headmaster. You take me to him this instant!"

The greybeard was coming back...he didn't like that. He wondered if the man would shout again. But what was this coming with the greybeard? It sat in a chair gliding above the ground next to the man. Why, it's a girl! My...she's a pretty little thing, too. Is she coming to see me? Severus nickered in friendly fashion. The greybeard brought the floating chair right through the gate of his corral and set it on the ground. Look at that mane...it's as wild and free as any mare's. She's such a lovely girl. Lovely...that word seems appropriate somehow. She's talking to me...doesn't she sound sweet as a dove. Why, the little one is crying! Why does she weep? Severus stepped closer to sniff her breath in equine greeting. Wait a minute...what's that smell? What is that divine smell? Like oranges and ginger...I know that smell! Hermione!

The man's mind dragged itself from the depths of the animal nature that had drowned it. Startled, he tried to say Hermione's name and was frightened when it came out a strangled grunt. His eyes rolled, the whites showing. Completely confounded, he started to back away.

"Severus!" Hermione cried, getting out of her chair to try to reach him. She didn't have the strength and began to topple forward. In an instant, Severus was there, planting himself right in front of Hermione, who threw her arms around his neck to steady herself. She held him tightly. "Severus...oh, my Severus..." she whispered into his neck. He nickered softly, rubbing his cheek against her hair. "You can understand me now...can you not?" Hermione leaned back just far enough to regard him steadily.

Severus gave a slow nod.

"Thank the gods," she said, holding him tightly again. "Now you listen to me, you stubborn, insufferable man!" She placed her hands on each side of his furry head, forcing him to look her in the eye. "While they were figuring out how to get me out here, I had a nice talk with Professor Vector. Apparently, I'm a bloody genius. So, don't you think it would be prudent to give me a chance to find an answer to this blasted situation before you go all 'Seabiscuit' on me?"

What in Hades was his sweet angel talking about? What was a Seabiscuit? Maybe he wasn't quite himself yet. At any rate, here was his Hermione, weak still, but amazingly recovered. If she wanted a chance to do something about this, how could he possibly deny her? Making decisions for her when all alone in the dark night was one thing...turning his back on the owner of the warm arms wrapped securely around his neck was beyond his power. Leaning back slightly, he put his nose to her mouth, and with the gentlest of caresses, mouthed lightly at her lips.

"You need a shave," Hermione said, giggling. "That tickles! I believe that I'll take that rather bizarre kiss as a yes, shall I?"

Severus nodded his head, and nuzzled her lips again.

"Then come along, Severus. Let's get you back to your rooms. Potion Masters do not live in corrals!"

Sniggering, Severus gladly followed the floating chair back to the castle.

Romancing the Cure

Chapter 16 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

When the odd trio reached the front steps of the castle, they were met by a formidable obstacle. Madame Pomfrey, always protective as a mother bear in regards to her charges, was adamant about returning Hermione to the hospital wing. Hermione, a formidable witch in her own right, was having none of it.

"Madame Pomfrey," Hermione argued, "there is absolutely no reason that you cannot continue my treatment in Severus' rooms. I will promise to rest and do anything you ask, but that is where we are going and that is where I will remain. I will not have Severus left alone for one minute."

"Child," Poppy began in an exasperated tone, "I understand that you don't wish to leave him alone, I even understand why. Why can't he join you in the hospital wing as he did before?"

"That's just not good enough," Hermione replied calmly. "He needs his rooms. He needs the familiarity of his own rooms and all his things around him. It's going to be hard enough to keep Severus with us while we figure out a solution to this mess. I refuse to take any more chances with him."

Seeing the stubborn young witch refused to be swayed, Poppy at last consented and settled for a renewed promise that Hermione would rest. Hermione readily complied. She fully intended to begin researching Severus' problem immediately, but surely reading was restful enough.

Reaching the Potion Master's dungeon home at last, Albus scarcely had time to set Hermione's chair gently to the floor when Severus began making a huge ruckus. The moment they had entered his rooms, Severus had shaken his head wildly and dashed through the open door that led to his office. Following, Albus feared the man had lost his sense again. Severus was snorting loudly and attacking his potions cabinet with his front hooves.

"The wards!" Hermione shouted, suddenly remembering her last visit to that office.

"What?" Albus shouted over the racket of hooves pounding wood.

"I broke into his potions cabinet! I ignored all the alarm wards...they must still be going off and he can't speak to lower them!"

"Severus!" Albus bellowed, turning back to his irritated friend. "Out in the hall, if you please. Get away from the blasted thing until I can pull the wards down."

Sides trembling, and with a bitch of a headache, Severus gratefully retreated to the hall while Albus dealt with the problem. After a few minutes, Albus ushered him back in and held an opened phial of headache potion out to him.

"I don't know how well this will work on a unicorn," Albus said wryly, "but I expect you need it and I doubt it will hurt."

Severus gratefully took the neck of the phial between his teeth and, lifting his head, drank the potion down. He noted it didn't taste any better to his unicorn form than it did normally. Dropping the phial, he sputtered an equine raspberry and shook his head. At least the foul stuff appeared to be working--his headache disappeared.

"Now then," Albus said, sitting down in a chair next to Hermione's, "I understand that you intend to study Severus' problem, my dear. An excellent idea--what can I do to help you?"

"Well...I'll need some books..." Hermione began, then rolled her eyes at Severus as he broke into unicorn sniggering. "I'll make you a list, Headmaster. We'll need to make a few changes here, so that Severus will be comfortable...perhaps Professor Flitwick..."

"I'll send him down immediately, Hermione. Anything else?"

"Severus must not be left alone for any reason. Headmaster...er...have I been expelled?"

Chuckling for a moment, Albus answered the suddenly nervous young witch. "No, my dear, I never had any intention of expelling you."

"But you said..."

"I lied," Albus interrupted with another warm chuckle, his eyes twinkling madly.

"But if I haven't been expelled...why...I've missed over a week of classes!" Hermione looked every bit as upset as a patient who's been told they have only a month to live.

"My dear girl, worry not. While you were in hospital, I spoke to all of your teachers, including that sniggering one at your side, and all agree that you were so far ahead in your class work that you may consider your studies completed. As far as your exams go, I have spoken to the board about this situation...they have agreed to hold your exams later in the summer; after you have recovered and had time to deal with our present problem."

"Thank Nimue!" Hermione said with a relieved sigh. "I don't know how I'd have found time to prepare for exams and research Severus' trouble. I was thinking about asking you for the time turner..."

"That is not an option, Hermione," Albus said, eyes twinkling. "Poppy would have my head if I let you do anything of the sort! What else can I do for you?"

"I'd like to talk to Harry and Ron, Headmaster." Hermione gave Severus a wary look. "That is, Severus, if you will allow them in your rooms..." she trailed off with an uncertain expression.

Severus was about to shake his head in an emphatic 'no' when he stopped, considering. Damn and blast! As much as he couldn't stand the young men, they were Hermione's friends. She was already making huge sacrifices in order to help him. How could he possibly deny her anything she asked of him? Remembering, rather uncomfortably, how the young men had walked with him out of the wood instead of taking Albus' portkey, Severus resigned himself to his fate. After one disdainful snort, he gave Hermione a brief, affirmative nod.

Hermione broke into a smile like the sun breaking through clouds. "Severus, come here," she demanded.

Drawing cautiously up to her, Severus didn't quite know what to expect. Hermione threw her arms around his neck to hug him tightly.

"Thank you, beloved," she whispered into his neck. "I know that wasn't easy for you."

Warmed by the sweet endearment, Severus nuzzled at her earlobe. He supposed he could endure any number of imbecilic students if it caused such reaction in his Hermione.

"Now then," Hermione said, drawing back to look at him, "may I make myself at home?"

Severus tossed his head in agreement, wishing he could tell her "You are at home, Goddess."

An hour later, Professor Flitwick and Hermione were arguing about the bed. Filius had made Severus a pallet on the floor of the bedroom, much like the one he had put near Hermione's hospital bed.

"Professor, I'm sure that would be perfectly reasonable if Severus was a unicorn. Despite appearances to the contrary, Severus is a man and as such he is going to sleep in his bed!"

"Miss Granger, I understand what you are saying, but it just isn't practical. He'd have a horrible time even getting into that bed."

The bed in question had been a bit of a surprise to Hermione. She wasn't sure what she had been expecting, but she hadn't expected Severus to be a closet hedonist. It was a huge four poster; velvet black curtains at the sides were drawn back and held open with silver chains. The same velvet draped over the top in an inky canopy. Looking up at it, Hermione was enchanted to see that the underside of this canopy had been charmed to show a night sky full of stars. Silver satin sheets, a plethora of down pillows, and a quilt of an intricate geometrical pattern in black and grey completed the overpoweringly sensuous bed. Feeling herself blush, Hermione tried to ignore the fact that it looked less like a place to sleep and more like a delightful playground--all the more reason for her to get Severus back to himself as soon as possible.

"Professor Flitwick, perhaps you could simply take the legs off the bed, so it rests on the floor?"

"Very well, Miss Granger." With a few swishes and flicks, the pallet disappeared and the bed became a much lower version of itself.

Having been rather flustered by the hungry manner in which Hermione kept eyeing his bed, Severus had withdrawn to the master bath to see what Filius had been up to in that room. He was not pleased by what he found there. The room had been expanded and next to his sinfully huge bathtub there was now an object that looked distressingly like a ridiculously large litter box. No. Absolutely not. There was no way in hell he was ever going to use that disgusting contraption. Not being able to speak his refusal, he took the edge of the box firmly in his teeth and pulled ferociously at it until he had dumped the thing over. He then proceeded to kick it in disgust.

Hearing the uproar in the bath, Filius and Hermione appeared at the door. Hermione took one look at the dumped box and got that pinched look on her face.

She had better not laugh, the vixen, or I shall not be responsible for my actions! Ignoring Hermione, Severus lowered his horn until it pointed at the diminutive charms Professor's chest and growled. An odd argument ensued.

"Now Severus...it wasn't that bad..."

"Snort."

"It was completely self cleaning..."

A growl, accompanied by stomping of hooves.

"I'm not sure what you expect me to do about it."

An equine raspberry.

"Miss Granger is supposed to rest, she simply cannot be walking you out to the woods at all hours like a dog..." Filius trailed off in sudden thought. "Out...get out! I have work to do!" A swish of wand and the dreadful box was gone. Filius drove Severus out of the bath and slammed the door.

"It wasn't that bad, Severus," Hermione said.

He glared at her. She giggled.

Half an hour later, Filius at last opened the door and ushered Severus in. Severus found that his bathroom was back to its original proportions. The only difference in the room was a new archway in one wall that was hung with a beaded curtain.

"Well, go on then," Filius demanded with obvious pride in his accomplishment.

Severus pushed through the curtain and stopped dead in amazement. He was standing in the forest! Looking behind him, he saw the archway he had passed through standing between two trees. Hmmm...if he must be a unicorn, at least this was more dignified than some overgrown sandbox. It would do.

Over the next few days, while Hermione rested and researched, Severus found himself constantly amazed by the young witch. Despite his form, she resolutely treated him as a man and demanded others do the same. Touching him often, she never petted him like an animal. She would hug him, kiss him lightly on the nose, or simply rest a hand on his shoulder. At night, she would curl up to him snugly and throw an arm over his back, her pale fingers clutched in his midnight fur. When the house elves had brought his first meal to him in a trough, she had patiently explained to them that Severus would be taking his meals at table. So he ate at table with Hermione, standing while she sat next to him, eating whatever the house elves brought him off Hogwarts's china. She allowed him his dignity--for that he would be forever grateful.

Harry and Ron visited every day. At first, they'd been obviously uncomfortable, but they soon took Hermione's lead in how to act around him. They treated him with the same respect as they would any teacher, patiently including him in their conversations by asking his opinion of things in a way that permitted his use of limited yes and no responses. Severus found himself both begrudgingly grateful for this and utterly fatigued by the whole contemptible situation. He was trying to keep his hopes up, but after several days and no apparent progress in Hermione's research, he was slipping into depression.

Hermione noted the change in him. She was deeply troubled by his growing apathy. If they couldn't keep his brilliant human mind engaged, they might lose him forever. She would simply have to take some time from her research to do more with him. Hmm...perhaps the boys could help more.

Ron and Harry were currently engaged in a wizard's chess game, while Severus stood reading a potions book held at head level by a reading stand. A clever charm by Filius allowed Severus to turn the pages by tapping them with his horn. While Severus was thus distracted, Hermione approached her two friends to engage them in a quiet discussion.

"Ron," she asked, "do the chess pieces only respond to verbal commands?"

"Yes, and they get rather grumpy if you mumble. Why do you ask, Hermione?"

"I suppose I was hoping you could play a game with Severus. You've both been great, mind you, but he needs something more interesting to do to keep him occupied," Hermione replied with a sigh.

Ron's eyes got a calculating gleam. "Hmmm...I always heard he was a wicked chess player. I never thought he'd consent to play a 'dunderheaded Gryffindor' so I never asked him. It would be an interesting match to say the least."

"That is the biggest understatement I've ever heard," Harry said with a grin. "Are you sure you want to risk your perfect win record playing Snape?"

"Who says I'd be risking it?" Ron replied with an exaggerated look of confidence. "I bet I could beat that git with my eyes blindfolded!"

"Ron, watch your mouth!" Hermione hissed. "It's a moot point anyway, since he can't play."

"Hermione, wasn't it Professor McGonagall who transfigured the chess set guarding the sorcerer's stone?" asked Harry. "Maybe she could figure out a way."

Excited, the two young men raced off, current game forgotten, to talk to Professor McGonagall.

They were up to something. Severus eyed the trio warily. All three of them stood around the chess table, looking at him with ludicrous grins on their faces. What horrible scheme had they cooked up to bother him now?

"Professor Snape," Ron asked with a gleam of challenge in his eye, "would you care for a game of chess?"

Severus snorted and raised an eyebrow. Hermione hadn't realized a unicorn had eyebrows, but the look was unmistakably familiar.

"Come here Severus," Hermione called. "Professor McGonagall has charmed your pieces so that they will respond to this." She held out Severus' wand. "If you hold it in your mouth, all you have to do is tap the piece you wish to move and the square it is to move to."

Intrigued in spite of himself, Severus stepped up to the board, took his wand gently from Hermione and--with a wicked glance at Ron...made his first move. After watching for a moment, Harry and Hermione retreated to sit at the dining table, where Harry studied while Hermione went back to her research. The game across the room progressed slowly with occasional muttered curses from Ron and various snorts and snickers from his unicorn opponent.

A fruitless half hour of reading later, Hermione slammed her book shut in exasperation.

"Haven't you any leads yet, Hermione?" Harry asked quietly.

"None. Not one single idea. The Professors all pat me on the head and tell me I'm a bloody genius but what blasted good does it do me if I can't..." with a glance at the chess game in the corner, Hermione trailed off, tears forming in her eyes.

Grasping his distraught friend's hand tightly, Harry said softly, "Don't give up, Hermione. If anyone can figure this out, it's you. Give it some more time."

"We may not have much more time, Harry," she replied with a sigh. "He's been stuck in that form for a week now. Even with all we are doing to keep his mind with us, he's bound to slip away eventually."

"Hermione...he obviously can use his wand," Harry said with a glance at the chess playing unicorn, "why can't he just hold it to change?"

"It doesn't work that way Harry. When an Animagus changes, his wand becomes an intrinsic part of the animal's physical make up. Believe me, I've thought of every crazy idea imaginable. I'd shove it up his arse if I thought it would do any good," Hermione replied in exasperation.

Deciding to try to lighten the mood, Harry said the first preposterous thing that entered his head. "Intrinsic part of his make-up, eh? Perhaps he should just eat it then."

Instead of laughing, Hermione fixed him with a look that was both incredulous and calculating. "Remind me to kiss your whole face later, Harry. Right now I've got to go to the library," Hermione said, dashing from the room.

"No way," muttered Harry to her retreating back. "No bloody way it's that easy. I was only joking!"

Ron's shout suddenly echoed around the room. "A draw! A fucking draw! Unbelievable! I demand a rematch!"

Severus sniggered.

Innovation

Chapter 17 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

For the next two days, Hermione barely spoke to anyone. Barricading herself at Severus' desk in his office, she was surrounded by several towers of books which she flipped through as she scribbled madly on a number of scrolls. Hedwig remained at her side, and several times a day she would tie a scroll to Hedwig's leg and send her off with a pat.

In the remainder of the Potion Master's rooms, Severus was never left alone. Harry and Ron spent all their free time there now, even going so far as to take their meals with the disgruntled Professor. When the boys couldn't be there, several of the other professors took turns visiting Severus. Albus reminisced about old times. Hagrid told him tales of his most recently acquired 'pet.' Minerva reassured him about the children in his House and told him of all their recent trials and tribulations. Madame Hooch spoke fondly of earlier years when Severus had been on Slytherin's Quidditch team while berating him severely for not being willing to assist her more often. Luckily for Severus, when Trelawney made an unexpected appearance at his door, Albus was at hand to firmly shoo her away. Severus' firm hold on his sanity was a testament to his strong will, but Albus didn't want to push the boy past all endurance by forcing the company of the doom-spouting seer on him.

Many chess games were played. Harry tried playing Severus only one time. When the Professor tricked him with a fool's mate after a game of only ten minutes, Harry left the chess playing to Ron. Ron and Severus' first seven games ended in a draw. This distressed Ron no end. Severus was having a grand time; it'd been years since he'd an opponent who could even manage a draw against him. The eighth game, Severus achieved a squeaky victory. Ron's wails of anguish could be heard in the Great Hall. It was the first time Ron had ever been defeated. Ron then sat before the fire, pouting and refusing a re-match, while Severus sniggered uncontrollably and spent the rest of the evening looking very smug, indeed.

On the third evening since Harry's insane idea had popped out of his mouth, the chess games had resumed and another set of draws was proceeding apace. Walking briskly in from the office, Hermione interrupted the chess players.

"Ron, Harry, would you mind calling it a night? I need to speak with Severus."

"You've done it, haven't you?" asked Harry. "You've got that insane idea to work."

Idea? What idea? Severus knew she'd been following some lead, now he was surprised to find that she'd never told him exactly what it was.

"Yes," Hermione said with a tired smile, "I believe so."

With that said, Harry firmly pulled a protesting Ron out the door. Severus and Hermione were alone. Severus regarded her avidly. Her hair was a beguiling tangle of curls, her tired eyes had circles under them, ink stained her Muggle t-shirt, and her lips curved in a wary yet mischievous smile. Severus thought he had never seen anything more beautiful in his life. If only...

"Severus...I have something to explain to you. It's going to sound a bit odd, I know, but I assure you that I have researched this most carefully and I truly believe it will work."

Severus' ears twitched forward in anticipation. Had his brilliant goddess found an answer at last? His growing hopes came crashing down at her next words.

"You see, Severus, you have to eat your wand."

At first, Severus simply stood gaping at her. Was she insane? Eventually the absurdity of the plan caught up with him and he let out a startled whinny that echoed through the room. Rolling his eyes wildly, he turned his back on her. Hermione could almost hear his voice in her head asking her if she'd gone barking mad. Sighing in exasperation, she continued with grim determination.

"Look, I know it sounds as if I've gone barking mad, but please listen to me while I explain."

"Snort."

"I've owed Mr. Ollivander, to insure that no harm can come to you, and his response was quite reassuring. It seems there are several documented cases of accidental wand ingestion, and while some of them had some rather interesting side effects, no harm came to any of the wizards in question."

"Snort." Stomp.

"I've been over the equations ten times. I even owed Mr. Hawking my findings and he was most hopeful of the outcome. While the equations are not completely satisfactory, they make sense enough that I truly believe this will work."

An incredulous whinny.

"Severus, please look at me."

Stubbornly refusing to turn around for a moment, Severus eventually gave in and faced her, resolutely staring at the floor. Kneeling before him, Hermione lifted his head with gentle hands as she forced him to look her in the eyes.

"Severus, remember what you told me about what it takes to be a Master?" she said earnestly. "About how it takes a certain...intuition? I can't explain how I know this will work, but I do know it! Every fiber of my being is telling me that this is the answer we have been searching for. I know it...do you understand? I know it will work!"

Damn. How could he deny her impassioned plea? Blast! He liked that wand; he'd had it since he was a boy. Even if Ollivander said no harm would come to him, he didn't want his wand destroyed. Fuck! On the other hand, he knew damn well he was running out of time. Despite all efforts on the part of his friends, he had felt his consciousness slipping with increasing frequency. If there was even a snowball's chance in hell that this bizarre plan might work, did he not owe it to himself to at least try? Did he not owe it to the goddess staring with such sweet concern and determination into his eyes? Once decided, he was immediately ready to take action. Gazing into Hermione's eyes for a moment longer, he reached his nose forward and kissed her...hard.

"Severus!" she squeaked. "Ugh! Normally I'd do just about anything to be kissed by you...but that was just...well, that was gross!"

Severus snickered.

"May I assume that means you'll try it?" Hermione asked hopefully.

A tight nod of the head.

Hermione threw her arms around his neck in a warm embrace. "Thank you, beloved," she whispered into his neck. "Thank you for trying...and for believing in me."

Severus sighed, sides heaving. Gods know he's do anything for this bewitching siren. It was rather disconcerting. He nibbled affectionately at her hair. Rising reluctantly, Hermione crossed to the chess board and retrieved Severus' wand. Returning to the rug before the hearth, she knelt again before him. Taking both her own wand and a small magic timer out of her robe pocket, she began to explain.

"I'll shrink your wand to a more manageable size, you don't have to chew it...in fact you probably shouldn't...just swallow it. It will take at least twenty minutes for it to ingest completely...I'll set the timer. You must not try to change until twenty minutes have passed. If it has no effect the first try, we wait another ten minutes and try again. I cannot be certain of the exact time it will take, so every ten minutes you'll try to change until it works."

Severus closed his eyes a moment. If he had possessed hands, he would have rested his face in them. Feeling a gentle touch on his cheek, he opened his eyes. Tawny orbs regarded his own, shining at him with an expression of unspeakable love.

"It will work, my love, I swear it will."

He kissed her again, this time a soft caress of gentle lips that barely brushed her own.

"Right then..." she said with conviction. "Let's do it."

Hermione shrunk his wand, and held it on a flattened palm. He lipped it gently from her hand and swallowed it down. After setting the timer, Hermione remained kneeling, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck and resting her head on his furry shoulder. They remained silently in that pose as the timer counted down a small eternity. After twenty minutes, the timer gave out a soft bong. Hermione could feel the unicorn's muscles tense in concentration. There was no change.

Ten minutes later, the timer rang out again. Hermione held on tight to her love, wishing that the efforts of her will alone could bring about the longed for change. Suddenly, she felt the flesh under her hands ripple. Soft, cool fur disappeared to reveal warm, bare flesh. Severus knelt naked before her, clasping her tightly...oh, so tightly in his wonderfully human arms.

"Beloved," he whispered into her hair.

Hermione had spent over a week being strong, being brave, and forcing a resolute cheerfulness even when she felt the most bereft. Now, at last having her love restored to her, she completely broke down. "Severus!" she keened. "Oh Severus!" She collapsed, sobbing, into his arms, clutching at him as if she feared he would disappear.

Moving them so that he sat on the rug with Hermione cradled tightly in his arms, Severus rocked her like a child as she wept. He murmured over and over, "I'm here, little one, I'm here."

Calming somewhat, Hermione lifted a tear-drenched face from the crook of Severus' neck to seek out his lips with her own. Severus kissed her with all the pent up passion of the torturous week he had spent constantly in her company but unable to truly touch her. He broke the kiss for fleeting moments to continue whispering reassurances and sweet affections in her ear. When her tears stopped at last and Hermione began to wriggle against him in a passionate and utterly distracting manner, Severus broke the kiss to look down at her with a smirk.

"It strikes me, Madame, that you are shamefully overdressed for this...reunion. I fear I must trouble you again for the use of your wand, for I seem to have misplaced my own."

Hermione giggled.

In a moment, she lay naked in his arms. When she tried to push him forcibly down on the rug, he stopped her. "Oh no, my siren. I have made love to you on a pallet, on the bare grass, against a blasted tree. For the last week I have endured the agony of sleeping next to you in my bed while not able to ravish you as I longed to. I demand a bed, my love. Let's leave the hearth rug for another time."

Standing, Severus lifted her easily in his strong arms and carried her into the bedroom, dumping her unceremoniously onto the low bed before diving atop her, crushing her body beneath his own. Spreading her soft thighs willingly beneath him, Hermione tried to get him inside her with sweet desperation. Severus had other plans. Finally able to touch his sweet goddess, he planned to worship her every inch before allowing himself to sheath his already aching cock within her tight heat. Breaking away from her protesting mouth, he lowered himself to begin his adulations with her glorious breasts. Kneading them with both hands, his mouth wandered from one nipple to the next in constant indecision. Severus solved the delightful dilemma by squeezing them tightly together so that he could take both enticing nipples into his hot mouth at once.

Hermione shrieked in abandon. She didn't know you could do that! Good gods, what other glories did she remain unaware of? She promised herself that she would spend all the time necessary to find out. She shrieked again.

Sweet Merlin! He loved the delightful sounds she made! Who would have ever guessed the normally reserved, bookish young woman had such depths of unplumbed passion? Feeling truly blessed for the first time in his life, he left her breasts to slide a hot tongue into her belly button. Hermione whimpered and tried to raise her hips against him.

Severus left a wet trail of kisses from her belly button down to her soft curls; Hermione thought he would finally grant her some relief from her torment. When he bypassed her aching mound to nuzzle behind her knees she began to plead with him.

"Severus...oh my god...Severus! Please...I need...I need..."

Smirking, Severus began assaulting her inner thigh with branding kisses and gentle teeth.

"Severus!" she squealed. "You...you stop this wicked...torture...this instant!" she commanded haltingly.

"My, my, my," Severus rumbled, his heated breath stirring the soft curls of her sex. Hermione lifted her head to find onyx eyes burning into her own. "You are quite a demanding little thing are you not? Whatever do you want?" he teased.

"You," she replied with husky simplicity. "I want you, Severus."

Hearing his name spoken with such passion was more than the Slytherin man could bear. With a quiet groan he drove his tongue into her delicious, wet heat. Already

aroused almost beyond endurance, a short assault by fingers and mouth brought Hermione right to the edge of release.

"Severus...please!" His hawk's eyes again impaled her own as he broke from his endeavors. "Severus...I want you inside me...please...oh god, love...I ache for you."

With a possessive growl he slid back up her body, claiming her mouth again in a demanding kiss as he cradled himself between welcoming thighs. Keeping a short rein on his impatience, he thrust into her with deliberate slowness.

"Ah...my little love..." he breathed into her ear. "Each time I enter your sweet embrace is as wondrous as the first. Beautiful...so beautiful." He began to move within her in earnest.

Twining her ankles around his calves, feet flat on the bed, Hermione bucked beneath him, raising her hips to match each forceful thrust. Her hands clamped on his arse, squeezing and pulling him to her. Finding that he could not bear to pry his mouth from Hermione's, Severus rested his weight on one elbow, freeing a hand to pinch and caress the hard nipples he took such delight in. Hermione groaned into his mouth.

Severus broke off from the kiss to growl in her ear, "Sing for me, my little one...come for me...let me hear you call my name...my goddess...my siren."

Hermione's world fell apart. She came...hard...moaning his name as he pounded into her. Severus had never seen anything more rapturous than her beloved face as she found her release in his arms. In but a moment he was shouting wildly as he at last emptied himself deep inside her.

Entwined in each other's arms, the lovers came down slowly from the heights of their passion, gazing up at the enchanted stars of the bed's canopy in silent content. The worries and long hours of the past week caught up with them and they snuggled together to go to sleep. Severus spooned up tightly against Hermione's back, one arm under her neck, one around her waist, a hand tightly cupping her moist heat, one finger slipped between her folds.

"Mine," he growled softly.

"Always," she replied.

Severus woke once during the night, still wrapped around the soft, curvy young woman in his bed. Dumbledore's owl was hooting softly from the night stand.

"What does that meddlesome old man want now?" he growled softly. Reluctantly disengaging himself from the sleeping siren, he padded over to the waiting owl to remove the small scroll from its leg.

Dear Children,

I trust all is well? I admit to being a trifle anxious about not hearing the results of Hermione's little experiment. Perhaps you are both...busy?

Albus

Snorting quietly to himself, Severus moved to his desk, penning a short reply. Tying it to the waiting owl's leg, he sent it off before returning to bed. Hermione stirred as he wrapped himself around her.

"Severus?" she asked sleepily, turning into his embrace.

"I'm here, little one. I'm here."

It was a long time before they let sleep reclaim them.

Albus chuckled to himself as he read the note, written unmistakably in his Potion Professor's elegant scrawl.

You Bothersome Old Man,

I am indeed quite...busy. I trust I can rely on you to keep teaching my classes at present. I intend to be busy for some time and do not wish to be disturbed.

Severus

Remembrance

Chapter 18 of 18

A potion accident causes unusual results.

Smiling to herself as she left the castle to visit Hagrid's hut, Hermione reflected on the two weeks which had passed since Severus' triumphant return to his natural form. She could scarcely think about that first week at all without blushing like a Weasley and grinning like a Slytherin...or a Potions Master. That entire week, they'd not left Severus' chambers once. They'd taken all their meals there, and had taken each other everywhere imaginable, eventually working around to the hearth rug. On the third day, Severus received a package from Mr. Ollivander containing his new wand. When Hermione had impatiently demanded he try it out, she had found herself suddenly weightless with his first softly intoned charm. Being Muggle born, Hermione had never imagined the amazing ways one could combine magic with sex. Luckily for her, she had a professor who seemed content to spend the rest of his life instructing her. Flushing again at the thought, she at last reached the corral, meeting a charming sight.

Hagrid had a small herd of unicorns in the corral. A tall, black-robed figure stood out darkly against the sea of nickering white. There he was, her inscrutable man, standing amongst a capering, adoring throng with an uncharacteristic smile lighting up his chiseled features. The smile widened further as he looked up to catch her eye. Then his eyes dropped to the new t-shirt she wore. It was silver, with large, Slytherin green letters proudly proclaiming "Silly Little Girl."

Rich, baritone laughter echoed over the grounds of Hogwarts.

Two passing first years (startled by the unbelievable sight of their evil Potions Master laughing uncontrollably while standing amid sniggering unicorns) fainted dead away.

Severus laughed harder. Rolling her eyes with mock despair, Hermione couldn't help chuckling a bit herself as she revived the frightened first years and sent them on their way. Turning back to the corral, she found Severus gently pushing the enthusiastic unicorns back as he slipped out of the gate.

"No, no, little ones. You should stay here with Hagrid. He needs you for exams, you know," Severus said, in a soft tone few had heard. He turned away from the secured gate to pull Hermione into his arms for a kiss.

"I heard from Master Hawking today," Hermione said, drawing back enough to look into Severus' eyes. His expression became one of shielded wariness.

"What did he say?" Severus asked simply.

"He agrees with you. He said that I'd learn faster in an apprenticeship than I would at University, and he agreed to take me on."

Severus was unusually tongue-tied. "I see," he began quietly, "so...er...I expect...that means you will have to move to America?"

Hermione could barely stand the hint of wistfulness she found in his eyes. "The only place I intend to move is into your rooms--that is, if you will have me?"

Even Severus was unable to conceal the sudden mixture of shock and hope that lit his face. "But...Hermione...your apprenticeship..."

"My apprenticeship will be fine. Master Hawking will only be supervising my work a couple hours a day--it's all he has time for. He said he doesn't care where I live as long as he can hook up to the floo network. So, Severus," Hermione said softly, "where shall I tell Master Hawking I will be living?"

"Your home is with me, Goddess. If you wish it."

"Yes, Severus," she answered with a beaming smile. "That is exactly what I want...you are exactly what I want."

There were no more words for some time, as both speakers' mouths became quite busily engaged while a herd of cheerfully whinnying unicorns watched from the corral. Eventually they broke the kiss and Hermione saw Severus' eyes glance to the Hogwarts gate.

"Are you going then?" she asked gently.

"Yes, it's time, I think."

"May I come with you?"

"Not this time, siren. I promise I will take you there someday, but I feel this is something I must do alone. Can you understand?" He gazed into her eyes with a worried expression.

"Of course I do, you silly man! Come, I'll walk you to the gate."

Hand in hand, they crossed the lawn. Halfway to the gate, they found themselves surrounded by a gleefully sniggering white throng. The unicorns had escaped the corral. They pranced around the pair, tugging gently at their clothes and nuzzling at places they probably shouldn't have. The human part of the impromptu parade giggled, and batted furry heads away with gentle hands. Students who were lucky enough to witness the impossible event gaped in shock and ran off shrieking to tell their friends in the castle. They were not believed. Albus and Minerva, taking a stroll on the fine spring day, both found themselves sitting in the grass, laughing uncontrollably.

At the gate, the parade paused. Hermione gave Severus one more kiss.

"You promise to be careful?" she said, gazing worriedly up into his black eyes.

"I have my wand, Hermione. Nothing will harm me." Leaning down, he whispered in her ear, "I will never leave you again, my Goddess." Squeezing her hand before he released it, Severus disappeared with a soft pop of Apparation. The unicorns surrounding Hermione were instantly distressed at the sudden disappearance of their favorite pet. Hermione gave them a chance to calm down, murmuring to them gentle assurances before leading them back to the corral.

On a rarely traveled path, many miles north of Hogwarts, near a rocky cairn, a wizard appeared. Silent, the man gazed at the cairn, a soft sadness darkening further the black of his eyes. With untold grace he made a sweeping gesture with arm and wand, clear baritone voice echoing in the stillness of the forest. The rocks of the cairn shifted, changed. Melting together, they formed a rectangular crypt, a simple form with rounded edges and unadorned elegance. Another sweep of arm accompanied by murmuring voice and the humble granite took on the sheen of marble. One last charm and a single word carved itself into the top of the monument.

The man sighed, sitting upon the bare earth to rest his back against the new-formed crypt. At first, he sat in silence, lost in thought. Occasionally a small smile would grace his lips. At other times his features would fall into an expression of quiet sorrow. Eventually, he spoke. He spoke of friendship, of loyalty, of love. He spoke of the changes in his life, a life he was only now starting to truly live. He spoke of sacrifice and of remembrance. At last, noting the passage of time by the near setting of the sun, the man stood. Tracing the single word carved into the stone, Severus said goodbye. The man disappeared; the forest was quiet once more. All alone in the middle of an unused path, the monument stood, the word shining silver in the fading sunlight.

"Bob."