

Beyond All Doubt

by dolefully desired

An unusual request by the Wizengamot leads Hermione to witness a side of her professor she never imagined could be real.

One

Chapter 1 of 18

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I sank slowly into the chair at the kitchen table. The Burrow's homey surroundings suddenly seemed cold and distant. Outside I could hear the faint sounds of Ginny and Ron's continued one-on-one Quidditch battle, but my professor's words had rendered me momentarily braindead.

"You want me to do *what?*" My own voice sounded weak and tremulous to me. I couldn't quite convince my mind to wrap around what Professor McGonagall had just requested that I do.

She sighed and repeated herself. "Despite Lord Voldemort's defeat and Professor Snape's full confession and willingness to undergo interrogation, they are unwilling to accept that he may not pose a threat to society," she said in careful, measured tones. "To that end, they have appointed a council of Wizengamot elders who are to judge, based on the information contained within his Pensieve, whether he is telling the truth about his reasons for defecting to the Order."

"But..." The thought of willingly walking into the memories of the most feared professor at Hogwarts...a man who was undeniably the least pleasant person I'd ever met...was currently beyond my ability to fathom. "Why can't they simply administer Veritaserum?" I demanded. She looked at me as though six years' premier magical education and the honor of becoming Head Girl had been utterly wasted on me.

"He is a Potions master, and a former servant of Voldemort. They cannot take the chance that he will contrive some way to administer the antidote as a preventive measure and thereby manage to lie to them."

I frowned in concentration. "Is that even possible? I once read in a potions journal that..."

"Miss Granger." Her lips pursed as she tried not to admit to me precisely how little she cared what I'd previously read in a potions journal which held no interest for anyone but myself. "The fact remains that due to the protections Professor Snape placed on the Pensieve, no adult witch or wizard can gain access to his memories. Only someone without the mark of a complete magical education will be able to bypass his protections without being detected...and thanks to your honorable performance in last month's confrontation, the council has deemed you the most appropriate candidate."

I sat back, stunned. Only a month ago Harry had finally located and destroyed the last of Voldemort's Horcruxes, thus summoning the monster himself to the scene of his final annihilation. It was a mystery to all of us involved how he had managed to kill his nemesis, but somehow, amidst the fray and the bloodshed, he had manifested the strength to cast a Killing Curse more powerful than the Dark Lord's, vanquishing him...and the last remnant of his soul...entirely.

Those of us still living had spent the last month trying desperately not to become overwhelmed by the force of survivors' guilt. I still woke every morning haunted by the sight of Neville's face as he lay on the ground, twisted and broken; by the sound of the Aurors' screams as they had formed the first wing of the attack and taken the brunt of the damage. Tonks was still languishing in St. Mungo's; the Healers were uncertain whether she would ever recover sufficiently from the nerve damage and manage to walk again. Kingsley Shacklebolt and dozens of other Aurors were dead. Bill Weasley and Fleur Delacour had married not two months before losing Charlie in the battle.

All in all, I had plenty to deal with as it was, and I longed to do nothing more than focus on my upcoming year at Hogwarts. I had had every intention of enforcing upon all three of us the comfort...and relative challenge, considering the excitement and tension of our past six years...of a strictly normal school year, filled with nothing but ardent studying and the occasional butterbeer in Hogsmeade.

Well, so much for that.

"Miss Granger." Professor McGonagall seemed to be restraining herself from waving an inquisitive and slightly mocking hand in front of my face. "Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes, ma'am." I was still incredibly floored by the Wizengamot's request, but they had no reason to doubt my loyalties: I'd come out of the final confrontation with a broken leg, two broken ribs, and plenty of my own scars to vouch for my dedication.

"They feel," she continued, "that you are the most mature and promising of the... younger people involved... and are therefore ideally suited to their need." She folded her arms primly in front of her and looked me squarely in the eyes, her gaze grave. "Miss Granger, you need to be aware of the totality of what they require of you. You will sort through Professor Snape's memories...each and every one of them, regardless how... unpleasant...and you will report back to them your objective opinion of what they contain. It is the council's hope that if Professor Snape *did* ultimately undermine the Headmaster's wishes and declare his loyalty to Voldemort, it will be contained within that vessel. They cannot justify convicting him on a bad reputation and public opinion alone, though I suspect they desperately want to do just that.

"You cannot simply pass the memories onto them via your own Pensieve. Professor Snape was... exceedingly thorough in his precautions. Though the wards placed on the object will not permanently harm you, as you have not yet finished your schooling and your magic does not have the signature of an adult witch, you will still be unable to remove any of them. Thus you cannot give up halfway through." She stared at me, awaiting a response. "And you have less than two weeks before the beginning of the school term."

I squared my shoulders and rose, trying to convince myself that I could handle seeing firsthand the unsavory side of a man whom I had lately preferred not to dwell upon. "All right," I said reluctantly, and I could see the relief flash in her eyes. "Where is the Pensieve? Would you like me to start right away?"

She nodded curtly. "I would. I shall Floo to the Ministry and inform the council of your decision; in the meantime, I would like you to warn Molly that you will be absent for several days and meet me at Hogwarts as soon as possible. Unfortunately, I will have to ask that you do not alert your parents of this... latest development. The Wizengamot will frown upon involving Muggles in any way, and I assure you that you are in no danger." She prepared to leave, adding, "We will set up quarters for you in Sev...Professor Snape's...rooms." Her face pinched unpleasantly in consternation at her inappropriate slip. "It isn't as though he'll be returning anytime soon."

As soon as she'd disappeared through the Floo, I tried to calm my queasy stomach and sought out Molly Weasley, dreading what she...not to mention Ron and Harry...would have to say about my newest assignment from the Order.

After dodging Ron's unceasing rant of questions, shrinking my belongings, and pocketing them nervously, I bid The Burrow goodbye and Flooed into Professor McGonagall's study at Hogwarts. I pulled my coat around me more tightly and looked around. Despite my scant absence, the room seemed entirely different without Dumbledore's cheery presence.

His portrait had been hung proudly above the impressive desk, undeniably the centerpiece of the room. He was snoozing contentedly, and I banished the thought of waking him. I only wanted someone to soothe my nerves, a selfish desire, and it was unfair. Having been painted so soon before his death, the portrait had no doubt been inundated with questions and tears after that fateful day at the end of our sixth year. The last thing he needed was a tearful seventh year pouring out her heart and her reservations about her former Potions master.

Now, after the tumult of the summer's events and the myriad contradictory reports in the *Prophet* about Professor Snape's heinous act and questionable loyalties, I preferred not to think about it. Years spent lying in my bed dreaming about his hands and lips across my skin had left me with an irrefutable bias, and I knew that I was certainly not the ideal candidate for this job. It ate at me, in fact, the guilt burning through my stomach as I sat in the chair before the fireplace, staring frantically at the grate from which Professor McGonagall would soon emerge.

However, I knew that were I to decline the assignment, it would logically pass to one of the other school-age witches and wizards in the Order, and that left only Harry, Ron, and Ginny. Neville might have provided a more objective opinion out of honor, despite his intense dislike for the professor in question, but he was gone. Ginny blamed Professor Snape for Headmaster Dumbledore's death and, thus, their inability to protect and save Charlie, and I knew that Ron's irrationality would land Professor Snape a lifelong commitment in Azkaban before I could even blink. Harry had been verging on comatose since things had calmed down, but spent his days and nights in constant vigil over Tonks' bedside, kept company only by Lupin's emaciated, hollow specter. He wouldn't even have given me the time of day if I'd attempted to engage him in constructive conversation, let alone agreed to leave her for the sake of ensuring Sev...Professor Snape...received a duly just trial before the Wizengamot elders.

Now /was doing it. This was becoming ridiculous.

I wanted to believe what he'd claimed to the papers...that Dumbledore had extracted from him an Unbreakable Vow specifying that should circumstances arise where he was forced to prove his loyalty to Voldemort in order to secure his position, he should do so at any cost. Now that Narcissa and Draco Malfoy were dead, there had been nothing stopping him from admitting the truth of their involvement with the Death Eaters and Narcissa's equally unrelenting demands for an Unbreakable Vow, but it didn't soften the public opinion. The man had spent the better part of twenty years engaged predominantly in risking his own safety, and indeed his life, to provide for their betterment in the long run, but they wanted nothing to do with him.

I knew how the average wizard and witch felt. They had tortured, sunken eyes like Harry. They wanted to be freed of any thoughts of this miserable existence. They wanted to move on and force any reminders of the past behind them. They clung to Severus' brief involvement with the Death Eaters as undeniable proof that he was at heart a criminal and a horrible person, and they wanted him punished and isolated accordingly.

I'd called him by his first name again, I realized idly, sighing. I suppose that was what came of spending my illicit daydreams imagining myself gasping his name.

The fireplace roared to life at that precise moment, exhaling green flames. Professor McGonagall stepped through and did little to acknowledge me other than a brief nod in the direction of the staircase. Obediently and silently I followed her through the cold, empty halls of Hogwarts down to the dungeons, where she paused before a particularly unsavory picture of medieval knights engaged in torturing a prisoner of war. I briefly wondered at the extent of Professor Snape's masochism if he'd agreed to have that hung upon the entrance of his rooms as a constant reminder of his probable future.

She murmured something under her breath, and the portrait seemed to fade from existence, leaving us facing a very large black door. She nodded, and I reached forward to grasp the handle, feeling the door tingle against my palm as though it were attempting to memorize me.

"It is identifying you," she explained. "After we have entered, you need simply grasp the handle from the inside and speak the words you want for your password. It will recognize you as its new master and obey that password." She motioned for me to open it, and so I did, allowing her to sweep past me before I followed and closed the door behind me. She turned her back toward me and stood stiffly, and I understood that she wanted me to set the password.

I spent a harried moment trying to determine what would be most useful and, simultaneously, obscurely difficult to guess, and finally settled on the name of an old Muggle fairytale I sincerely doubted anyone else would recognize. The door glowed a brief, incandescent blue, and Professor McGonagall turned to verify that I had followed her

instructions. Seeing that I had done so satisfactorily, she began moving toward another room.

I spared myself a few moments of inattention to take in the sight of the room around me, shocked beyond all description that Professor Snape's rooms would be so... sumptuous. I'd always taken him for the simple, spartan type, given the almost obsessive cleanliness of his desk area in the Potions classroom, and I had assumed him to be a bachelor in the extreme...very little furniture, no comforts such as additional pillows, maybe a few books.... This was nothing like I had expected. The room was darkly masculine, admittedly, but books were piled absolutely everywhere, and if I was not mistaken, there was a record player, perhaps Charmed to work within Hogwarts' walls, sitting on a side table alongside a rather rich assortment of liquors. The couch looked positively heavenly, as did the tapestries...beautiful old-fashioned oil paintings, every one of them...and I could feel my excitement rising as I registered exactly how many books he owned. They covered every surface, stretched across every expanse of wall...

"This is the bedroom." Professor McGonagall's voice broke my concentration with a dispassionate tone. I looked up hastily to find her opening a nearby door to reveal an equally luxurious bedroom and a bed that looked as though it would swallow me whole. "The bathroom is through that way," she added, nodding demonstratively at a large door on the right side of the room. "Once you have begun sorting through the memories, I will have the house-elves change the sheets. I can also have them remove the majority of his belongings, if you wish."

Was it my imagination, or was there a slight threat in that sentence, as though she would hold me in contempt if I were to request it? I wondered for the first time...found myself really, intensely debating...whether or not she agreed with what the Wizengamot had decided upon as the best course of action. Would she have preferred to commit him to Azkaban automatically? Or was she upset because Veritaserum alone should have been deemed adequate to prove his innocence?

"No, that's all right," I hastened to reply as I noticed a somewhat warning glint beginning to enter her eyes. "I won't be here long, after all."

She looked as though she wanted to open her mouth and add to the statement, undoubtedly something about her grim view of Professor Snape's chances of ever returning, but she snapped it shut and nodded. "The Pensieve is in his office," she said quietly. "I will show you."

As it turned out, he had concealed it rather cleverly, and I waited patiently while she retrieved it and placed it on his desk. I hadn't really had reason to venture into his office...*Just the store room*, I thought rather guiltily, and quashed the thought immediately...but Harry had described it to me after every one of his fateful Occlumency lessons. It was just as horrifying as he'd painted it to be, covered wall to wall with shelves containing the most hideous assortment of things I had ever had the displeasure to witness. I wondered if they were significant to his field of study or if their pertinence was of a more personal nature.

I stared at the Pensieve, willing it to inform me perfunctorily that I was not suitable for this exercise and might as well leave straightaway. I felt as though his life hung in my hands, and suddenly I didn't think I was the right person for the job.

"I cannot see anything," Professor McGonagall informed me in clipped, irritated tones. "He has rigged it to be utterly inaccessible to anyone of my power. No doubt because he always did distrust his colleagues." There was no mistaking the venom in her tone this time; she was profoundly unhappy at the assignment put before her, and probably did prefer to see him land in Azkaban for the remainder of his miserable life. "However, you should be able to see whatever memory is on top."

I glanced over and saw amongst the silvery, viscous liquid the hazy image of a small, pale, black-haired child sitting under a tree. The bleak sky threatened rain, but the child clung stubbornly to an overly large book, cradling it in his skeletal hands, and stared at it intently. I was raptly fascinated by the sight of my professor as a young boy, so vulnerable and yet threatening, for I knew what he had become.

"All right," I said. "I just wait for them to surface and dive into them one by one?"

She nodded and seemed pleased with my immediate grasp of the task. "There is loose parchment"...she pointed to a stack of parchment on a the corner of the desk..."for you to jot down your notes and impressions after each immersion. I will leave that up to your discretion. The Wizengamot has only specified that you view each memory and report back to them in a professional, objective manner befitting the circumstances." Her lip curled and I looked away, pained. My heart still twitched whenever his name ran through my mind, and not because I agreed with her.

She left the room then, her form stiff, and I gulped. I didn't allow myself the hesitation to second-guess myself. I said a quick prayer to whatever deity held my professor's fate in its hands and plunged in, headfirst.

The little boy still sat there, looking obstinate. I noticed then that the neighborhood was ill-kempt and desolate, marked by run-down houses and mud-streaked streets. The tree under which he sat appeared to be the only one in the vicinity. The house nearest him suddenly emitted a furious-looking woman in a threadbare robe who began stalking across the expanse of dead grass, looking murderous.

I wanted to warn the boy, but of course I was powerless to do anything. He tried to ignore her approach, but she reached him all the same, grasping his frail forearm in her bony fingers.

"Severus!" she snapped. "What have I told you about reading out here? Your father doesn't like you wandering around here unchecked..."

"I wasn't *going* anywhere." Even at nine or ten his voice seemed to carry an underlying threat. "I was just sitting here. I wasn't doing anything *wrong*."

"I don't care." She dragged him viciously to his feet, and he stumbled slightly, his juvenile weight little counterbalance for the massive text he carried. I took a quick glance and realized that it was, unsurprisingly, a potions text.

"Your father will take it out on *me* when he gets home. Now come on. Get inside."

"But I want to practice..."

"There'll be plenty of time for that when you're in school." He made to pull away from her, and she turned on her heel and slapped him ferociously across the cheek. I cried out and tried to reach him, but my transparent fingers went right through his small wrist. He stood there, cheek a bright, stinging red, but his lip did not even tremble. I realized with a sinking heart that he was, demonstrably, used to this type of treatment.

"That's nothing compared to what your father will do to you if you don't get inside," she snarled, and I saw beyond the mask of dominance and contempt: the area on both cheeks and around her lips was bruised badly. She had obviously felt her husband's wrath on many occasions, and several of them fairly recently. "I'm not going to say it again. *Get inside*."

She finally let him go, and he began to follow her obediently. He turned back only once, black eyes boring right through me, and I felt a shiver course down my spine. It felt as though he could see me, as though he were silently acknowledging my presence and demanding, *Why didn't you help me?* But I knew it couldn't be true. He was probably just looking longingly at the tree, wishing he could be free from his horrible mother....

He turned then and resumed walking, his gait slightly stilted, and I noticed that he favored his right leg. The thought that his own father might have hurt him so badly flared within me an anger unlike anything I'd ever felt. I was overcome by the irrational urge to shout, "Severus!" but by then he'd already disappeared into the dismal excuse for a house.

Two

Chapter 2 of 18

Hermione continues to delve into Severus' memories.

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It took me very little time to jot down what had occurred when I emerged from the Pensieve and found myself once again in his dank office, shivering despite my warm robes and the fact that it was mid-August. I forced my trembling hands to still and then set myself to the task of documenting the proceedings in a professional and purely objective manner.

What the hell was I supposed to call him? Subject? Defendant?

Victim, my mind supplied, and I reminded myself that despite the injustices of his childhood, he had still committed terrible crimes while in the Death Eaters' ranks, crimes to which I would soon become witness.

The thought of my professor murdering someone, torturing them, filled me with an unimaginable dread, and I felt suddenly sick. What if he cut them? Burned them? Administered poisons with unspeakable effects?

What did he do to women? I wondered. Did he...?

I couldn't bring myself to consider it, so I drew in a shaky breath and began to write with as much false confidence as I could summon.

Defendant, approximately age nine, was sitting outside home reading. Defendant's mother emerged and demanded that he return to the house, stating that his father did not like him sitting outside. Defendant refused, saying that he had been doing no harm. His mother then forcibly dragged him halfway home before slapping him and threatening him further physical violence if he did not comply. She also threatened that his father would cause him even more harm if he did not obey.

Defendant then quieted and obeyed his mother, returning to the house. Evidenced a slight limp in gait and appeared to be in pain physically. Mother also showed signs of obvious and recent physical abuse: right eye blackened recently and still bruised, bruises on cheeks and around mouth area.

There. That seemed like an objective and thorough analysis of the situation. With a deep breath, I returned to the Pensieve and stared at the scene which awaited me.

Oh, God. I definitely did not want to enter this one.

He was sitting in the Hogwarts library. I pegged his age at somewhere around fourteen or fifteen, though judging by his awkward position in the chair and his long legs, he was obviously gangly and very tall for his age. At a nearby table several girls adorned in Ravenclaw and Gryffindor colors snickered nastily and cast disapproving glances in his direction. Sirius sat among them, his arm wrapped rather possessively around two of them, looking as smug as though he considered himself the ruler of the place.

I cast a quick glance over Severus' papers...it was becoming more difficult to detach myself from him as a person now that I'd witnessed him beaten as a child...and saw that he appeared to have made considerable headway on a Transfiguration essay. I did a quick calculation and decided that Dumbledore was likely already Headmaster at this point, which meant that the essay would be for Professor McGonagall. I took in his expression, the stiff posture of his bony shoulders, and the loose, baggy robes which hung on his spare frame. He looked for all the world as though the nine-year-old he'd been only years before had been stretched out on a longer frame but denied the advantage of further muscle and strength. I thought I could snap him in half if I tried.

Sirius, on the other hand, was nicely filled out even at fifteen. I felt a rather irrational surge of jealousy on Severus' behalf as I strolled over to the table at which he sat, surrounded by his adoring legion of girls. The two who sat next to him clearly courted his highest favor, fawning over him, one of them quick to offer him a Chocolate Frog she'd had in her pack for several days. He accepted it without much in the way of thanks and gobbled it down whole.

"Look at his hair," one of the Gryffindors whispered, nodding at Severus. "Do you think he ever washes it?"

"If he does, it isn't doing him much good," chimed in a beautiful Ravenclaw who was reclining in her chair, making desultory progress on an essay in front of her. Well, at least she was making a visible effort at finishing her work, even if barely. The others had fashion magazines spread out in front of them and were strongly reminiscent of Parvati and Lavender on a Saturday night, surrounded in our dorm room by all their magazines, makeup, and clothing accoutrements, planning the evening's ensembles before sneaking out to meet the male flavors of the week.

"You'd think someone so good at Potions would be able to come up with something to clean that awful hair," the first girl remarked, nibbling on another Chocolate Frog before offering the remainder to the insatiable Sirius.

"Spends too much time hexing everyone to have the time," a third girl retorted, and they all began giggling. Sirius grinned, and as one they turned to Snape, whose air of superiority and disinterest had finally abandoned him. He turned stiffly in his seat, and it set them off on an even more raucous chorus of giggles, finally alerting the librarian, an old woman who looked to have a temper as ghastly and unaccommodating as Madam Pince on her worst days.

"Where were you?" I demanded of her rather harshly, though I knew it would do no good. She hushed them forcefully and threatened to have them removed if they did not remain silent. They obliged, though with visible reluctance, and the girls continued to roll their eyes at Severus, who had snapped his quill from gripping it so tightly. I wanted to disengage it from his fingers and run my hand across his soothingly, but I was powerless to stop what happened next.

He rose from his seat and began to gather his papers hastily and messily, so of course several slipped out and drifted traitorously to the floor. He bent quickly to retrieve them, but the athletic and ever-watchful Sirius was too swift for him. In mere milliseconds he held a sheaf of them in his hands, and he glanced over them disdainfully.

"What's this, Snivellus? Not working on Potions, for once?"

The color was rapidly draining from Severus' already sallow face. "It's none of your business," he growled, and the depth and timbre of his voice sent a shiver throughout every inch of my body. I'd never heard the adult Snape growl that way, but it was obvious that by the age of fifteen, his voice had long since dropped...and he'd mastered its use, that was for sure.

I glanced over at the girls, who were looking at him speculatively. Apparently the display of masculinity had piqued their curiosity. I wanted to slap them across their

ridiculously pretty, fake faces. They hadn't wanted him before, but the moment he displayed any of the juvenile rashness to which they were accustomed in boys, they became intrigued.

"Oh!" Sirius crowed, the triumph veritably dripping from his voice. "It's *astory*. So, Snivellus, you're a writer, are you?"

Severus looked on the verge of growling again. I caught myself using his first name and tried to correct it, but I was too engaged in what was passing between the two young men.

They circled each other like large, predatory cats. The stiffness had drained entirely from his lanky frame, and now Severus seemed alert and moved smoothly, almost gracefully, in every way a match for Sirius' easygoing athleticism. His fingers twitched as though he longed to make a desperate grab for the pages, but he was not stupid; he knew that Sirius would see it coming, and it would only hasten the inevitable mortification when he began to read them aloud.

"Shall I read it, then?" Sirius asked brightly, and I groaned aloud. I wanted to grab for them myself.

He lifted them up and opened his mouth as though he were about to read off the first line, and Severus lunged. They landed in a tangle on the floor, and I was surprised to see them physically fighting like two Muggles; but then I realized that both their wands lay on their respective tables, and they had no choice but to fight with their fists. Within moments Severus had him pinned and was grasping his throat threateningly.

The librarian had long since come over and begun shrieking for someone to alert the Headmaster. She tried to reach down and separate the two boys, but Sirius struck back, catching Severus across the nose. Blood sprayed over Sirius' robes and ran down Severus' face, coating the white collar of his shirt and the gray wool of his school-issue vest. He clutched at his nose, breathing heavily, but his eyes lost none of their anger, nor did he cry out.

After what seemed like an eternity crammed into a single instant of absolute terror while we all wondered whether or not he would strike back, Dumbledore strode hurriedly across the room and took in the scene before him with eyes suddenly weary and very disappointed. He instructed Severus to report to the hospital wing and took Sirius out of the room to escort him to his office.

"And Mister Snape?"

Severus looked over at him with a mutinous expression, but remained silent.

"You will join Mister Black and myself in my office as soon as Madam Collins has discharged you. Is that clear?"

He nodded, a short, broken movement, and then swept off with a dramatic exit befitting his older self. I had to trot in order to keep my shorter legs moving in concert with his much taller frame and longer strides. He quickly reached the hospital wing and the old mediwitch began to fuss over him, cleaning the blood and trying to set the nose with healing spells.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to get it back in place perfectly," she said with a sigh. "It's going to remain slightly bent up here. It might move back on its own over time, but..."

"I don't care," he snapped viciously, and she recoiled at the hatred in his tone. "Just fix it. I have to be in the Headmaster's office."

She shot him a look that said quite clearly she felt he deserved the disfigurement facing him for the foreseeable future, if not the remainder of his life, but proceeded without further remarks. He bore it silently and resolutely, and once she'd finished, he spared her a quick and perfunctory nod before heading toward the Headmaster's office.

I had just begun to burn with the desire to know what happened when the scene surrounding me faded, and I found myself once again in his office, staring dazedly at the Pensieve before me.

It appeared that after Dumbledore's death and Snape's capture and subsequent incarceration, the faculty at Hogwarts had been striving to regain and maintain normality in the castle as much as it was possible to do so. The old rules still applied: dinner was served promptly at five-thirty, and I made my way hastily to the Great Hall. It felt as though I'd spent practically no time whatsoever locked inside his memories, but in reality quite some time had passed, and I was perilously close to being late by the time I finally reached the Great Hall and began searching for a place to sit. I didn't have to stare aimlessly for long because Professor McGonagall motioned me up to the faculty table, which was surprisingly full considering that school was not in session. Several of the professors were missing, and Hagrid was still healing in St. Mungo's, but it still seemed so shockingly normal that it made my heart ache.

Most were there except for Professor Snape, of course. He wasn't there. In fact, she placed me in his usual seat, and it felt distinctly wrong. I was unable to eat much of my meal, and judging by the speculative and at times disapproving expressions on my professors' faces, I had no doubt that they did not have a very favorable opinion of my reasons for being in residence. No doubt half wanted him in Azkaban permanently, and the other half, while they might have desired that he receive a fair trial, thought me far too young and incompetent to be the instrument of his defense...or destruction.

I ate quickly and with little appreciation for the food, realizing belatedly that I'd been staring at an empty plate for nearly five minutes. I rose quickly and walked over to Professor McGonagall, who noticed my approach and turned in her chair.

"If there is anything you would like to discuss, I will be available in my office this evening," she said. Her words were strictly professional, but something in her tone reassured me that she felt sorry for asking so much of me and despaired that I had to spend the remainder of my summer holiday sitting here among such uncomfortable company. I nodded and turned, intent on returning to the office and viewing a few more memories.

Thereafter I became more selective in my choices. I did my best to distinguish by what little I could see of the memories as they flitted past what Severus' age had been at the time, in an effort to follow in the best approximation of chronological order which I could manage. Thus I saw plenty of abuse, plenty of despair, and enough hatred and bitterness to destroy a young boy from the inside out. His mother was frightfully violent and nasty towards him when her husband was absent, but the moment he returned home, she became meek and unresponsive, except to defend herself piteously when he went on drunken tirades and hit her. He would take his anger and his frustration out on his wife and his son, and she would follow in turn, verbally and physically abusing Severus when her husband was not home.

He grew up lonely and isolated, unaware that distant, inconceivable emotions such as love and tolerance existed in the world. He sat in his room and stared at the ceiling, seemingly counting tiles, or flies, or remaining immersed in some unreachable fantasy world to which I was never made privy. At thirteen he returned home and sought a summer job with a potions supplier at the nearest apothecary, desperate to escape his parents' presence. Struggling to read through the basics of potion-making at the tender age of nine had left its mark on him: he was a natural, and from his employer he received the first genuine compliments of his life. At fourteen he began writing stories, losing himself utterly in his imagination. He would sit at his desk for what felt like hours to me, his quill flying furiously across the page. I took a few quick glances and realized with a faint pleasure that while undoubtedly violent and at times disturbing, his protagonists were fundamentally good, honorable people. They seemed preoccupied with victory, power, and girls, and I chuckled happily to realize that he was, in many ways, just your average fourteen-year-old, his more ambitious thoughts interspersed with his curiosity about the enigmatic opposite sex.

At sixteen he returned over the summer with his first issue of a mildly pornographic magazine, and I felt a sudden surge of pride. It actually thrilled me to see him curl up under his blanket and night and stare longingly at the half-nude women spread seductively across the pages, winking and giggling at him. He seemed to flip past the majority and show little interest, but once in awhile he would land upon a witch who seemed to capture his immediate attention. His dark eyes would become a beautiful liquid brown, and I realized with a sinking feeling that I was becoming absurdly aroused at the sight of *him* aroused.

In July of that summer, he discovered his favorite...a petite, brown-haired, brown-eyed beauty with quirky black-rimmed glasses who sat on a bed covered in cream-colored silk sheets, her head cocked inquisitively to one side and her hands strategically placed between her legs. Her breasts, full and plump, hung free, and he reached out and hesitantly touched the pad of his finger to the paper, tracing the outline of her waist and hips, running his finger down her thighs and then back up to her neck. He traced

the shape of her collarbone and the pout of her lips, and then his fingers landed on the glasses and I noticed a slight smile curving across his lips. He stared at that page for what felt like hours, and when he began to unzip his pants, I had to turn away. It did not, however, stop me from shuddering...though whether from disgust or desire, I couldn't distinguish...when I heard him come hard, gasping and muffling the sound in his pillow. His breathing was heavy and his face flushed, and though there was no doubt that he was not a classically attractive youth, I couldn't deny to myself that the sight of him lying naked in bed with his cheeks flushed and his eyes hungry for a woman was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

I forced myself to exit the memory. The images which remained on my mind had caused my own face to flush, and I could feel the sweat trickling between my breasts when I finally returned to his dungeon office.

I took in my surroundings anew, amazed that the passionate, if repressed, sixteen-year-old I had just watched had somehow developed a taste for what lay before me. Seized by a sudden and completely inappropriate compulsion, I returned to his rooms and headed straight for the bedroom. I threw open the drawer of his bedside table and rummaged around. Socks, men's underclothing...perfectly normal articles met my gaze, and I became slightly frustrated.

Where was it? He had to have kept it. That look in his eyes....

I turned to his bureau next but found only pair after pair of black trousers, neatly pressed and folded. There were sweaters, too, and short-sleeved shirts...things I'd never seen him wear and which I was confident he hadn't worn in quite some time, judging by their stiffness. My eyes alighted on a snug black sweater which I knew instinctively would have looked fantastic on him, and I slammed the drawer shut and moved on.

The few potions in the medicine cabinet appeared to be painkillers, remedies for upset stomach, etc. There was a simple razor and a container of what I took to be shaving cream sitting on the marble counter top, and I was surprised to find that he didn't simply resort to using a shaving spell, even if only for the efficiency. He hadn't struck me as the type of person likely to favor his part-Muggle heritage, even if his father had strictly banned magic from his house growing up.

I was invading his privacy horribly, but something thoroughly inhuman compelled me to continue, driving me to find some kind of validation. I knew why...I knew perfectly well why...but I would not admit it to myself.

I picked up the other container on the marble counter top and took an inquisitive sniff. The scent which caressed my nostrils made me gasp and reel, and I had to reach out and grasp the edge of the marble for support. Oh, my God. That was him...the delicious, musky combination of botanical scents, but with that slight edge missing, that particularly masculine scent which had to be him alone.

I remembered that brief moment during the final confrontation when I realized with a heady feeling that he was, indeed, directing his hexes toward the Death Eaters; that once the fighting had started, he'd turned irrevocably to our side, and he'd saved me. One of them had had it in for me. I could see it in his eyes when he threw off his mask and lunged toward me, thrusting out his wand and screaming, "*Crucio!*" Severus...Professor Snape...had darted forward and knocked me to the ground, the two of us narrowly missing the jet of sickly bright light the Death Eater's wand had emitted.

Time had halted for me as I registered the fact that he was lying half on top of me, his chest pressed against mine. He was balanced on his forearms, and I could feel the solid weight of him on every inch of me. I'd been dreaming of him for some time before that...I can't even recall at exactly what moment during my fifth year I had the revelation that the dark stranger haunting the sexiest, most frustrating dreams of my life was, in fact, my Potions professor. But I knew at that moment that I would never be able to get over it...not wholly, anyway, because I couldn't think of him as anything in that instant but a man. I could feel him, every inch of him, and I was never more aware than at that precise moment of how much taller, broader, and more powerful than me he actually was.

It probably should have been painful, or frightening, but it wasn't. My gaze rebelled and lovingly traced the outline of his shoulders and chest, and I realized that being held immobile was in fact the most potent aphrodisiac I'd ever encountered. I'd felt a moment of shame before it was replaced by pure, unadulterated lust, and I'd had to mask the small moan of disappointment which had escaped my lips when he had risen hastily to his feet and helped me to mine. I had quickly returned my attention to the fight before us, berating myself for my immaturity, but there was nothing to be done: I had never been able to forget the warmth and the weight of him on top of me.

The sound of the medicine cabinet door creaking jolted me back to the present, and I slammed the bottle of aftershave on the marble counter top, my body shaking. This wasn't right. I knew that there was a very strong probability, almost a guarantee, that if what I discovered in these memories didn't incriminate him completely, the Wizengamot elders would imprison him nonetheless. Still, it was wrong. It was an unforgivable invasion of his privacy, and shame was burning across every inch of my skin.

Something drove me forward. I abandoned the top of the counter and opened the single cabinet below it. Beneath the large pipe which fed the sink was precisely what I'd sought: the tattered, well-read pages of the magazine he'd bought twenty years ago, the sexy blonde witch gracing its pages still reclining suggestively on her chaise lounge, bouncing one well-toned, tanned calf in tune with some melody only she could hear. She glanced up and gasped at my appearance, quickly resuming her pose of turning away coyly, allowing me a better view of her scantily clad backside.

I dismissed her and began flipping through the pages. He'd stared at the picture for so long when he was younger that I automatically knew where to go...about three-quarters of the way through, after the feature spread on the red-headed Quidditch player who'd dared to bare it all for the voracious hordes of male fans.

There! There it was, as pristine and clean as the day he'd bought it. I was shocked until I touched the page and sensed the faintest hint of magic. He must have placed some kind of spell on it to preserve its appearance. The petite brunette still smiled, her bedroom eyes low and seductive, while tilting her head and peering at me through those glasses. I stared at her for a moment and breathed in deeply.

She was me, if I were beautiful. She was average in every possible way...average height, her legs belying a frame similar to my modest five feet, four inches. She had typical, medium brown hair and brownish-hazel eyes behind black-rimmed glasses which seemed very librarian-ish. Her body was toned, her waist small and her hips full, but she was no tall, Amazonian, red-headed Quidditch babe. She looked, in fact, like your average university student who just happened to put in a few extra hours of exercise before posing mostly nude in order to earn some additional Galleons to put toward paying off her school loans.

I could be her. Would he notice? If I had done that throughout fifth and sixth year...if I had put those slightly dark, molasses lowlights in my hair, worn striking black glasses and spent a few extra hours a week going for a brisk walk around the grounds...would his eyes have lingered on me in class? Would he have noticed the resemblance? Our faces were the same shape, our hair curly and rather too full and a plain, unremarkable brown.

Except for those lowlights, of course. They were really rather pretty.

I scolded myself for becoming so caught up in a teenager's superficial, adolescent fantasy and began to close the magazine. The page containing the witch in question fell forward, and I saw that on the page behind it...just an advertisement for some restaurant featuring beautiful, provocatively dressed witches...he had scrawled something in thick black ink.

Curious, I opened the page fully and read.

Monday

Double Potions

Arithmancy

Ancient Runes

History of Magic

Tuesday

Care of Magical Creatures

Herbology

Arithmancy

Ancient Runes

History of Magic

Wednesday...

It continued like that, and it was, in fact, my sixth year schedule.

Three

Chapter 3 of 18

Hermione witnesses the pivotal event of Severus' life.

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When I returned to his office the following morning after a sleepless night in his bed...which was hardly conducive to rest, as I lay there remembering his distinctive, spidery scrawl in the magazine...I had managed to convince myself that it had nothing to do with me. It was an unusual schedule, as I had taken more classes than strictly necessary in order to gain the requisite number of credits to graduate, but that didn't mean that it was *my* schedule. There could have been other people with that schedule. Hell, it might have been *his* schedule during one of his final years of school.

I returned to the memories of his past and resumed where I'd left off, sparing a glance at the neatly stacked and organized sheaf of papers on the edge of the desk. My notes now took up the better part of twenty to thirty pages.

During the summer after his seventh year, he took the Dark Mark.

The ceremony itself was mercifully short, a concession which surprised me greatly. Voldemort, practically unrecognizable to me with his less serpentine, far more human appearance, inducted four members that night; and when the pain he channeled into their new brands became too great, he allowed them the respite of fainting. It almost seemed as though he channeled the command into them along with the misery and the domination, and they followed his instructions, promptly fainting at his feet. He had them dragged out of the circle, and once Severus had fainted, the memory faded as well.

But it bled seamlessly into the next one. I was not given any opportunity to exit and jot down my observations before Severus awoke again, groggy and with blood running down his damaged arm, in the middle of a clearing with three other young men.

A woman walked up to them, slowly, seductively, and I recognized her immediately: Bellatrix Lestrange, with her beauty and power in full force. Her hips swayed, her thick black hair shone in the moonlight, and she looked for all the world like a succubus sent to provide the men their last temptation before their resignation to Hell. She singled Severus out immediately and began advancing on him.

"Snake," she murmured, kneeling between his legs. He stared up at her with a look of fuzzy confusion, and she cackled richly.

"The Dark Lord has told me about you," she murmured, running an absent finger along his thigh. He immediately recoiled and made to shrink away, but I noticed the desire flare in his eyes.

She laughed even louder. "No, you can't resist me, can you?" she whispered, running her fingers along his lips. I suddenly noticed their fullness and longed to do the same. "You've probably never had a real, live woman before, have you?"

He didn't respond, but the amazement in his eyes set her off laughing again, and the hunger there took my breath away. "You're going to have to learn to control that," she told him in a husky voice. "You give that look to too many women and everyone here will be losing their wives."

She turned toward the three others, who were staring at him in obvious envy. "Well," she said, "I suppose you can watch, if you must, but I don't think I have much interest in the rest of you." Her tone was purposefully distant and disdainful but not without a trace of malice. "If any of you touch me... our lord will hear about it. Do I make myself clear?"

The other three young men nodded dumbly, and she began to strip off her robes. The cool night air spread gooseflesh across her skin and peaked her nipples. The other three young men...boys, really, I thought with a pang, staring at Severus' face, harsh but still youthful...released groans of desire, but he stayed silent.

She began to strip him of his clothes, starting with his robes and shirt. She ran her fingers through the soft array of hair on his chest, still sparse with youth, and I had to ball my hands into fists to stop from lunging at her. I had no right to feel so protective, but I couldn't help it. In my dreams I had straddled him so, stripping him of his shirt and running my hands and my tongue down his chest, along his jaw, down his ribs to his....

Sure enough, she wasted no time. Before I...and he...knew it, his trousers had been pulled halfway down his legs and she had wrapped her hands around him, beginning to stroke gently. He did groan then, a deep, reverberating sound that elicited a slight moan from me before I could stop myself.

His arms seemed to be giving up their strength beneath him. He struggled to keep his top half upright as she pulled off what remained of her clothing and straddled him, completely naked, taking him in her hand and running him slowly against the inside of her thighs. He was breathing erratically now, and I could see his knuckles where his fingers were knotted into the grass. They were pure white.

"You can touch me, Snape," she murmured with a self-satisfied smirk, and he didn't need to be told twice. He let his torso fall back upon the grass and mimicked the movements I'd seen him perform on the picture of that witch in the magazine. He ran his fingertips underneath her breasts and traced the shape of her collarbone, her shoulders, the dip of her waist, and the flare of her slender hips. When she sank down onto him, he threw his head back and released a sound that was half gasp, half groan and that made my knees buckle.

I couldn't stand on my own two feet anymore without trembling uncontrollably. I sank to my knees and watched, enraptured, ignoring the uncomfortable sensation of the dampness of the grass spreading over my jeans and my legs falling asleep beneath me. As she rocked on top of him, he continued to trace her body. He seemed to have a fascination with the curves of her, the shape of her thighs and hips. He tangled his hands in her hair and then returned them to her stomach before sliding them around her to grip her ass, pulling her tighter against him. She moaned delightedly when he began thrusting his hips up in time with her movements.

I was a virgin. I doubted anyone held any illusions otherwise. I couldn't suppress the arousal that was rapidly spreading throughout me. The mere sight of his hunger for her, his open admiration for the shape and the feel of her, was rapidly undoing me. Finally she threw her head back and let out a high, keening wail, and I noticed his eyes widen and realized that she'd come, and he could undoubtedly feel the sensation. This was the loss of his virginity. It had to be the most incredible feeling in the world to him.

He came then, too, and I stared hungrily at his face, memorizing the beautiful, almost pained look that crossed his sharp features as he closed his eyes and groaned, the deepest, rawest sound I'd ever heard come out of his mouth. She smiled slowly and languorously, like a cat, and began to trail her hands down his chest. He was panting, his eyes closed, and she leaned forward and began to trace her still hard, jutting nipples across his chest. He gasped, and his eyes flew open.

"Mmm," she murmured thickly. "I think I like you."

A man strode into the clearing then and began shouting angrily. I didn't register much at first, but then I realized that he was screaming at the three voyeurs, all of whom had long since divested themselves of their trousers and lived vicariously through Severus' experience with the aid of their own hands. They scampered, their trousers still around their ankles, and he began to advance on the naked couple with murder in his eyes.

"What do you think you're doing with my wife?" he growled. She looked up and pouted at him briefly, and I realized that this had to be Rodolphus Lestrage.

Severus' eyes widened beyond human capacity, and the first and only apology I had ever heard him issue escaped him. "I'm sorry," he croaked, "she didn't say..."

"She doesn't have to," Lestrage snarled, snatching the woman by her upper arm and dragging her forcibly from Severus' prone body. I could see the sweat and the remains of their coupling glistening on his legs. "You must be one of the new ones."

He nodded and began to struggle to his feet, his legs shaking beneath him, unused to the strain they had just experienced.

"Then it's time you learned what I do to men who fuck my wife without my permission." His voice was soft, almost amused, but I could tell from the soulless darkness that passed over his expression that Severus was about to be beaten to within an inch of his life.

He turned to his wife, who spared him another pout before shrugging boredly and handing over a long black wand, which I immediately recognized at Severus'. He saw it too and began to sway slightly on his feet. His face took on a hard, determined look, the same defiant expression he'd worn throughout all those beatings at the hands of his father and mother. He knew what was about to happen. He didn't bother with another glance toward the woman who had calculatingly seduced him, stolen his wand, and turned him over to her vengeful husband for her own obviously sadistic enjoyment.

After the first minute of torture at Lestrage's hand, using his own wand, nonetheless, I literally could not watch. I turned away, tears having long since obstructed my vision, and tried not to let the screams sink into my heart too deeply.

Professor McGonagall noticed my deadened, hollow expression at lunchtime and motioned for me to sit beside her. Professor Vector, who normally sat on her left, was absent that day, and I sank into her chair gratefully. I needed a familiar face to talk to, someone to ground me in the real world even if I couldn't actually tell her what I had experienced.

I still hadn't written down what I had witnessed after his induction into Voldemort's circle. It was simple enough, effortless enough, to be professional and emotionless in my description of the initiation ritual, but of what happened afterward, I truly could not bring myself to write. Simply stating, ***Defendant was seduced by female Death Eater, copulated with her, and was then tortured brutally for the better part of an hour by female's husband*** seemed not to encapsulate the true horror...and, frankly, the deep, aching arousal...of what I had witnessed. It felt untrue not to bring the emotion into it, though I rather suspected I couldn't have described it in a manner which would have done him justice if I'd spent the remainder of my life in front of a parchment with a thesaurus.

Words couldn't describe the fascination and the tenderness with which he'd traced her every curve, lifted his neck and tasted her breasts, her skin... And the expression on his face when he came, the groan that nearly toppled the trees themselves... God. I would be reliving that moment in every one of my dreams for the next fifty years, slowly and torturously, and I would never cease to wish that it had been me. If it had been me, we would have lain in that clearing for hours, exploring one another's bodies. I would have traced my tongue along his throat and listened to the vibration of that beautiful voice in his chest. I would have let him run his fingers over every inch of me, let him taste every part of me before begging him to fuck me again, and again...

"Hermione?" McGonagall's soft, inquisitive tone tore me from my ruminations. She was being unusually gentle today, especially in calling me by my given name, and I had a feeling that she'd surmised I had delved into his more unsavory memories. I wondered how much he had told her of what transpired at the gatherings and his part in them.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm just a little tired. I'm not... I'm not sleeping well." I knew it was terribly dishonest of me to lie by omission, but of course I neglected to mention the fact that my wakefulness had been due to staring at that magazine obsessively and imagining myself as the witch in the picture. I spent hours wondering what he would do to me if he found me spread so seductively across his bed. He would come up behind me, wrapping one large hand possessively around my waist and running it across my stomach. I would gasp as it delved down between my legs while he ran his tongue along my jaw and murmured into my ear...

The juxtaposition of disgust and arousal that I'd felt after viewing that last memory had sapped me of all energy and appetite. Professor McGonagall seemed to understand, and for the remainder of the meal she engaged me in mundane conversation about my parents' health, my plans for seventh year and beyond, and my desires for my future. Did I want a husband, a family? I prevaricated slightly, saying that a husband would be fine in time, but I was unsure about a family. It was so early to wonder about those things.

She nodded understandingly, and a slightly wistful smile crossed her face. "Severus talked once about what he would do if he survived the war...take a wife and perhaps start a family." I thought I saw tears in her eyes, and I realized with shock that her previous disapproval of me had not been due to her hatred of him. She was, if anything, afraid that I hated him and that my testimony would sentence him to a life in Azkaban that he did not deserve. "He wouldn't admit it to anyone else, of course, but I know that he mentioned it to Albus, too." She chuckled sadly. "It's rather amusing to imagine him having to entertain a wife, locked away in those dungeons."

I thought of the way he'd moved under Bellatrix, clasping her to him and rotating his hips, thrusting up into her in a way that had made her positively howl with pleasure. I somehow doubted that living an isolated life in the dungeons with him would be without entertainment.

He was probably, when it came down to it, the same sexually desperate but incredibly passionate man I'd seen emerging from that cynical, bitter eighteen-year-old who had looked at Bellatrix Lestrage as though she were ambrosia sent directly from the gods. He had worshiped her, and I had never thought I would witness a man truly worship a woman; not in this day, anyway, with all the eye candy adorning the billboards and magazines readily available.

"I apologize," Professor McGonagall said softly, her tone regaining its professional veneer. "I should not have spoken about that. It was inappropriate to in any way try to..."

sway your opinion."

"I know you're not trying to sway my opinion," I told her reassuringly, picking at my dessert of strawberries and cream. "In any case, it isn't my job to give an opinion. I'm going to give an accurate and completely objective account of the *facts* of what happened, not my opinion."

She turned to me then, all pretense and professional façade gone from her expression entirely. What remained was a naked sadness that took my breath away. My chest clenched, and I felt my eyes filling with tears.

"Bless you, my dear." She covered my hand with hers. "I was so afraid that you would carry the same tainted opinion of him as your friends, but you have shown all the maturity I hadn't dared to hope for." She then pressed a hand against my cheek and expressed what I'd been desperate to hear all along. "Whatever happens," she promised gently, "we all believe that you have been fair to him, and you will give him the justice he deserves, even if they cannot see it."

She didn't need to elaborate. I knew then that her previous contemptuous remarks and looks had been entirely for the Wizengamot. She would not blame me for being unable to overcome the seemingly insurmountable public bias which had built up against him over the past two decades.

"He would be proud of you," she said and left me staring at my mutilated strawberries.

I returned to the dungeons feeling invigorated, determined that I would judge what passed in all fairness, refusing to allow myself to be frightened by anything terrifying or repugnant. I was witnessing a mistake he'd made solely under the peer pressure of Lucius Malfoy and his fellow Slytherins, the only people who had ever accepted him at Hogwarts. I'd seen where he had kept his small Pensieve even as a child, the one his mother had given him. He'd carried it with him to Hogwarts, storing away his precious, scant memories as he grew, and I was being given an unparalleled glimpse into the man's psyche. If he could withstand this mistake and survive, then so could I.

I jumped into the next memory and quickly lost all confidence, determination, and my lunch.

He was older now, perhaps close to twenty; I could not say for sure how large was the gap that had passed, but he looked to have aged by at least a couple years. Gone was the gangly youth who had lost his virginity to Bellatrix Lestrange. He had filled out, gained muscle and presence, and when he stood beside Lucius Malfoy at the gathering, I could distinguish him immediately even beneath his mask. The shape of his shoulders and his stance were the same as I'd always seen in the classroom: commanding, purposeful, and unyielding.

I did not hear any of what had been discussed by Voldemort, which I assumed meant he'd considered it immaterial, or at least not nearly as important as what would occur next. A young woman of perhaps sixteen was dragged into the center of the circle, obviously a Muggle, judging by her clothing and hairstyle. She struggled but was mute to protest, having undoubtedly been struck with *Silencio* during her capture. The Death Eater who held her captive wasted no time in murmuring a spell which bound her wrists and threw her violently onto the ground.

He raped her then, and I was powerless to stop it and nearly unable to watch. He was brutal, inhumanly ferocious, and I could see the tears which streamed down her cheeks. Blood covered him when he had finally spent himself and stood, and there was no doubt in my mind that they had sought long and hard for a girl who was not only a Muggle but also a virgin.

Lord Voldemort was chuckling and called off another name, a man I didn't recognize. He placed the girl under the Imperius and stood there, the picture of aristocratic ease and indifference, as he forced her to strip what remained of her tattered clothing and perform sexual favors.

Cringing, I began to make my way around the circle, walking behind the men and studying them. I caught a glimpse of one whom I thought was Igor Karkaroff...he was exceptionally tall and large. Severus stood calmly by Lucius, and though outwardly his affect betrayed no sign of unrest, I noticed that his hands, where they were clasped behind his back, were balled into fists, the knuckles white with anxiety.

I smiled sadly, remembering him sitting at his desk when he was younger, writing furiously as adventure and romance flitted through his mind. His young protagonists overcame their abusers to attain ranks of power and glory, knighthood and admiration...but always, *always*, these boys he'd admired and envied had gotten the girls whom they had desired. Like him, they had watched these girls from afar, daring to dream that perhaps one day they would be handsome and worthy, and one of the beautiful creatures who seemed so distant and unattainable would finally be theirs.

Even at that age a boy's mind was far more inventive and graphic than mine had ever been. It had amazed me at the time, watching over his shoulder by the faint light of the candle he'd stolen from his mother's pantry, that he could imagine sex so fluidly and vividly, but I supposed it was something with which adolescent boys spent a great deal of time preoccupied. His women were not whores, however. They were stunningly beautiful, as could be expected, but also witty and without a doubt highly intelligent; and when his characters had finally fallen into bed together, it was tempestuous and passionate with plenty of screaming and writhing on the woman's part...but never, not once, had he imagined something like this.

It would likely have surprised many people to know it, but Severus Snape, even at his most bitter, had never fantasized about dominating or harming a woman. He had fantasized about pleasing them, worshiping them, making them scream his name and no doubt worship and beg him in turn, but I felt a strange certainty that he was disgusted by what was playing out before him.

Finally it finished, and I thought, with a feeling of sweaty relief, that it was over.

And then Voldemort called out his name.

"Severus," he murmured, his tone evil even for him, "why don't you entertain us for a while? I don't believe that she's... outlived her usefulness quite yet."

Lucius murmured, "I envy you, my friend. It has been some time since I've had... the pleasure." I wasn't yet certain what they were discussing, but I felt an overwhelming urge to slap Lucius Malfoy nevertheless. The man could probably have made a normally benign conversation about writing an essay positively drip with evil and debauchery.

Severus' shoulders had grown progressively stiffer, and I noticed that his hands were shaking. He took a hesitant step forward and then said with false bravado, "My lord, as delighted as I am to entertain you, another of your servants has just expressed his... interest in the task at hand. Surely he, who has served you for much longer, deserves this... pleasure more than I."

Something in the way he said *pleasure* made the cold presence of dread begin curling through my stomach and into my chest. I had a sinking feeling I knew what Voldemort wanted, and it could not have been more obvious to me that Severus didn't want to do it.

The girl knew it, too. She was shaking on the ground, whimpering, and with an absent flick of his wand Voldemort released the silencing spell. She began to scream, a harsh, croaking sound.

"Please," she gasped, turning desperate blue eyes in Severus' direction, "don't...just let me go, please..."

"But you're still alive, my dear," Voldemort said sweetly. His attempt to be kind, though feigned, was somehow more terrifying and sickening than the most cruel and degrading words which had ever passed from his semi-human lips. "And I can't let one of my loyal followers simply pass up this opportunity, can I?"

I understood. Suddenly, with clarity so nauseating it nearly knocked me over, I understood.

"Severus." He turned, and his glowing red eyes bored into my professor from across the clearing. They were becoming increasingly more dangerous.

Finally Severus stepped forward. He was endeavoring to walk confidently and smoothly across the clearing, but I noticed that twitch in his step, the one that crept in when he was unable to completely control his anxiety. As an adult he would no doubt master it and suppress it during the process of becoming the stealthy, silent bat who roamed the dungeons; but at that moment, he was nothing like the man he would become. He was barely out of his teenage years and clearly sickened by the prospect of what he was required to do to this girl.

The man who had just received her favors cast her a filthy leer and stepped back, blending in with the others. In the back of my mind I began to chant *No, no, please, don't do it*, as he slowly unzipped his trousers and sank weakly to the ground.

"On your knees," he growled, the anxiety visible in his shoulders somehow completely absent from his voice. There was nothing but cold, dispassionate sadism, and it terrified me, completely and utterly. I couldn't look at his eyes. I, too, sank to the ground, kneeling in front of the girl. My tears were no match for hers, and I could see her lips moving, praying silently. I thought she was praying for death. I reached out a hand, but it went right through her cheek. I could not touch her.

I stared at him, gasping and crying freely now, and I noticed that he was not hard. With his back to the others, his eyes were darting around, and I could see by the rise and fall of his chest that he was frustrated, scared. He began to stroke himself surreptitiously, and I felt a slight wave of relief that the sight of her bent over like a sick offering had not been able to do it for him.

Then he grabbed her throat roughly and tilted her head back, ostensibly to murmur something threatening in her ear, but only she and I were privy to the words which actually came from his lips. His face twisted into a cruel smile as he sensed the other men drawing closer, their own faces deformed with lecherous grins, but his voice, when it emerged, was broken.

"I'm sorry."

He thrust in and I saw her blood flow freely. I covered my eyes, sobbing.

It seemed to last forever, though in reality I suppose it was not more than three or four minutes. I forced myself to watch the expression on his face; he kept his eyes closed the entire time as though trying to detach himself from what he was doing. When he came, it was more than I could bear. She screamed just before, as though sensing its imminent arrival, and I thought I saw him mouth the words 'I'm sorry' again. His eyes were deadened, glassy, and the girl collapsed beneath him, now fully unconscious from the pain. I could see the self-loathing in his eyes as he looked down at her, and he trembled slightly.

For the second time, he looked up and seemed to stare directly at me. Once he'd been little boy, nine years old and lost in the microcosm of his parents' cruelty and intolerance; and this time he was barely a man, and already he had violated another human being beyond all description. The remorse and the sadness in his eyes were almost unendurable. I could have sworn that he saw me, and for a moment his lips moved as though he meant to utter something, but nothing emerged. He let his head fall forward. It hung there, penitent, until he heard Voldemort call him, and he rose to fasten his trousers. He did not bother to clean the blood from his legs.

They left the girl that way, lying helplessly on the ground, until the meeting had concluded. Then Voldemort turned and cast an idle *Avada Kedavra* at her tattered body.

The moment they were dismissed, Severus returned to Hogwarts for the first time since his graduation and sought Albus Dumbledore's forgiveness.

Four

Chapter 4 of 18

McGonagall offers Hermione Severus' side of the story.

Disclaimer: All characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I intend no infringement and am making no profit.

When I emerged from the memory, Professor McGonagall was standing in the office waiting for me. I don't know how she sensed that I had been facing a particularly difficult experience, but it seemed to me when I took in the expression on her face that she had simply known it was about the right time for me to witness the true horror of the Death Eaters' atrocities.

I staggered through his living room and bedroom and into the bathroom where I lost what little I had eaten at lunch. She wiped my brow with a cool cloth and fetched me a glass of cold water, but it sat heavily in my stomach and only served to make me feel all the more queasy. I could not erase the girl's screams from my head. The sound of her voice, haggard and barely audible as she'd prayed to God to take her before he could do that to her, ran through my mind like a broken record.

And his face... I had never seen anyone look so haunted, so utterly lost to the world and dead inside. I supposed that if anything were sufficient to turn even a bitter man like him away from Lord Voldemort and compel him to seek forgiveness from Dumbledore, it would be the memory of that night, the sudden and bitter realization of the depths to which he'd actually sunk.

I couldn't think about him. It hurt...made me physically ill...to recall what I had fantasized about for so many years. I knew he hadn't truly gotten off on it; it couldn't have been more evident that it was difficult, nigh impossible, for him to perform Voldemort's bidding. Yet that didn't make it any easier to contend with the memory of him driving into her as she screamed and begged for him to stop.

I leaned back against the cool porcelain of the toilet and felt the tears streaming down my face. McGonagall was staring at me with a depth of sadness I'd never before seen.

"Hermione," she murmured, "I cannot tell you how sorry I am that you have to witness what is contained within those memories." She cleared her throat and closed her eyes momentarily before opening them again and saying in a stronger voice, "The Wizengamot would have me held in contempt for asking you this, but I assume that what you just... endured... was the night Severus returned to us?"

I nodded numbly, feeling my stomach roil again. I clasped my hands against it and doubled over, forcing myself to inhale and exhale deeply and rhythmically until the

queasiness had subsided somewhat.

"Severus is a very private person." She refused to let her gaze leave mine, and I found myself caught in it. "I do not know for certain what happened on that night, but he alluded to it once. I am not a naïve woman...nor, I suspect, are you. I can fill in the blanks appropriately."

A sob burst forth from me.

She knelt in front of me. "I know what you just saw, Hermione. I know what he did, and while I cannot discuss it with you, I want you to hear his side...the side that you won't see in that Pensieve because it happened after he confessed to Albus and turned himself over. Albus sent him to me for the night, and I arranged for him to have lodging here at the castle rather than returning to Lucius' home, as was customary after their... meetings."

I nodded again. I hadn't yet seen any memories of these after parties, so to speak...apparently he hadn't deemed them noteworthy, as he hadn't put them in the Pensieve.

Tears were filling Professor McGonagall's eyes now, and I realized that I had never seen her without a single hair out of place. She rarely looked at all flustered or harried, but now her hair, more liberally streaked with gray than I recollected, was falling out of place and her eyes were bright and glassy. She was caught up in a memory, as surely as I'd been in the Pensieve, and she was shaking with the force of it.

"He came to me that night sobbing like a young boy." The first tear fell and ran slowly down her weary, lined face. "He had nightmares that night like I cannot even describe to you. What he did to that girl... He will never forgive himself for it. He cried himself to sleep and then screamed himself hoarse until he woke again. He relived that moment again, and again, and again, and I can assure you that despite what you may have seen...despite how he may have acted in front of the others...it brought him no pleasure." She cleared her throat again, her voice having become croaking and inconstant. "And he has never deemed himself worthy of a woman's love since that night."

Somehow, that was what finally broke me. I fell into her arms and sobbed until the force of my grief put me completely to sleep.

I awoke half an hour or so later, around three o'clock, and plodded with heavy steps back into his office to glance at the Pensieve. Severus had placed precious few memories in it. Already, I noted, memories I'd previously viewed were returning to the surface, the cycle revealing how few he'd put in there. It was a testament, I felt, to the monumental importance of each one.

Professor McGonagall intercepted me before I became lost in the next tragedy and insisted that I take the remainder of the afternoon off. She promised that she would ensure the Wizengamot never found out that I was relaxing rather than submitting to my duty. I went for a leisurely stroll throughout the castle grounds and Hogsmeade, and I was shocked to find, when I stopped after feeling the chill creeping into the air, that I'd been walking for nearly four hours.

On my way back I stared up at the battlements while approaching the castle. I recalled quite vividly one particular evening toward the end of my sixth year when I'd sought solace in the silence and moonlight, sitting up there alone and thinking about the enigma that Ron Weasley had become. I had always hastily judged boys as being too immature to truly hide their feelings, and thus I'd assumed ever since his blatant display of jealousy during the Yule Ball that he cared for me in far more than a platonic fashion. However, his egregious flirting with just about every other female member of my year had made me doubt that repeatedly until I couldn't handle the force of my insecurity.

I had known, as I'd sat there, that we could never be anything but good friends. There were moments when I felt that no one could possibly offer me the understanding and comfort which he was capable of extending. Perhaps it was the product of being born one of a large family and empathizing with the need for one-on-one attention...a true friend who would simply listen and refrain from judging. In any case, during the lulls between our notorious fights, he had always been able to offer me such immense emotional comfort. I remembered Dumbledore's funeral, when I'd given in and leaned against his shoulder because my shaking no longer allowed me to remain upright without swaying.

I'd felt it then, too...he was a comfort, like an older brother, but the sexual confusion was not genuinely due to him. I was growing up, noticing the male half of the species and the odd fascination they provoked in me. Ron was simply an easier target, having been even less brother-like than Harry, for whom I could never imagine harboring any kind of romantic feeling.

I wandered back down to Severus' dungeon office, wrapping my cloak tighter around my body. During the evenings it was horrendously cold in the Hogwarts dungeons, and it had always made me wonder if his many layers of clothing were due more to necessity than to any twisted desire on his part to appear intimidating. I risked a peek at the topmost memory in the Pensieve and caught a flash of firelight and the amber glow of liquor in a glass. It was not a memory I'd seen yet.

Judging it to be relatively tame, I thrust my head into the Pensieve and hoped for the best.

It was him as I'd always known him. He had to be at least in his early thirties; he was sitting before the fireplace in his living room, and it looked precisely the way it did presently. He was in a white dress shirt and his habitual black trousers, and his Death Eater robes were carelessly strewn on the sofa beside him. I was momentarily surprised by what I judged to be a risky indiscretion, but then the Headmaster emerged through the flames of the fireplace, and I surmised that he'd just returned from a meeting and was giving a report of sorts.

"How many?" Dumbledore asked quietly, sitting in a nearby chair and summoning a glass of the liquid for himself with a graceful wave of his wand. I leaned over and took a quick sniff of the bottle as it drifted in midair on its way back to the liquor cabinet, but I couldn't recognize its identity.

"Seven." Then Severus snorted. "All girls, but Lucius had the magnanimity to inquire if I would prefer a boy."

Dumbledore spluttered in his drink, but Severus' eyes remained glued to the fire. I allowed myself a small smile at the sight of the normally imperturbable Headmaster so thoroughly disconcerted.

"Would you?" Dumbledore asked with obvious amusement.

He shot Dumbledore a glare of absolute malice, and I couldn't prevent myself from giggling. Clearly the idea didn't appeal to him in the slightest.

"I am not... alone... because I cannot manage to find a member of my preferred gender," he snapped, returning his gaze to the fire. "Lucius just can't bring himself to understand why I don't... partake unless it is demanded of me. Obviously he has reached the conclusion that the girls do not appeal to me." His lip curled scornfully.

The years had hardened both his face and his voice, I noted; it was the professor I remembered from my schooling, not the determined but uncertain young man who had brutally raped that poor young woman whom I had seen earlier. I wondered at the enormous gap in time and if perhaps he had neglected to put many other such occurrences into his Pensieve.

"It is a source of constant amazement to me," Dumbledore remarked softly, his voice holding a gentle reproach, "that after so many years they have not caught onto the fact that you're the straightest wizard alive." He chuckled and shook his head. It was my turn to be shocked and feel a little out of my element. I'd never thought to witness a conversation involving either of these men and the discussion of sex or sexual preferences.

Severus glowered. "I am no different than any other man," he grumbled, downing the remainder of the liquid. "I simply have less tolerance for other men because they are not..."

"Women?" Dumbledore supplied with a hearty laugh. Severus didn't speak; the assent didn't need to be verbalized. "You're growing soft in your old age, my dear boy, favoring women simply because you find them so alluring."

Severus' lip curled in half a sneer and he refused to answer.

"Have you thought"...Dumbledore forged ahead with a more serious expression on his face..."of what you will do when this comes to an end? Harry has been making excellent progress in our lessons, and I have no doubt that even with my inevitable absence..."

Severus' fingers tightened on the brandy glass, but I only noticed it peripherally and paid little attention, as I was suddenly dumbstruck. This was during our sixth year! There were no windows to afford a view by which I could judge the season or time of year, but it had to be our sixth year. During fifth year Harry had taken lessons with Snape...that disastrous introduction to Occlumency...but he'd only ever visited Dumbledore for regular lessons during sixth year.

"...he will certainly be capable of locating the remaining Horcruxes." I tuned back in to find Dumbledore still talking softly, and Severus doing his best to bore a hole through the fireplace with the power of his concentration.

Definitely sixth year, I thought, still astonished to be viewing something which had happened so recently. I watched the play of expressions across Severus' face, so easily readable...shockingly so...now that he was safely in the Headmaster's company and secluded from all unwanted society.

"You can survive this, Severus." Dumbledore's voice was deathly quiet, and there was no humor whatsoever remaining in his tone, only absolute gravity. "You are capable of surviving this, and you are a young man yet. You have the rest of your life ahead of you. I don't want you staying locked up in these dungeons when I'm gone."

It was clear that Severus didn't want to discuss anything relating to a time when Dumbledore was gone, but the Headmaster, ever the leader, continued. "You and I both know what Draco has been charged to do, and you have made a Vow to me. You cannot break it. My end will come, and it will likely be at your hand. I know that you're not happy out there...you make that quite obvious to all of us as you well know...but you will not be any happier in here if you remain by yourself. There is nothing stopping you"...his voice rose in force and pitch as Severus started suddenly and moved quickly to his feet, beginning to pace..."from meeting someone, perhaps a good friend..."

Severus put his glass back on the liquor cabinet and continued to pace back and forth behind the couch, looking tense, as though he were repressing his true opinion.

"You know I don't want just anyone, Albus." He sighed, a deep, discontented sound, and clasped his hands behind his back. His shoulders relaxed somewhat when he turned his back toward the Headmaster, as though he were mustering the strength to make a confession he considered weak or shameful. "I don't want to change my lifestyle. I want someone who will be content with me here... A woman," he finished, his tone suddenly raw with loneliness and longing.

"I know that," Dumbledore murmured softly and sympathetically. "But there is nothing stopping you from having *that*ow."

Severus snorted, the unpleasant Potions master once again filling his shoes. I immediately pined for the human being who had been standing before me only seconds prior. "You know I cannot put anyone at that kind of risk," he shot back in an irritated voice. "Besides which, no such woman exists."

"You don't know that." Dumbledore had finished his drink and was regarding Severus with a wistful expression, as though they'd covered this territory many times before, and he was rapidly losing hope that he could ever convince Severus otherwise.

"I do!" Severus insisted with surprising emotion and vehemence. "You've met them...sniveling, gossipy, vacuous witches who spent all their time focused on everything in life that is sordid and unfulfilling. I do not *favor* them simply because they are women, as you so eloquently put it." He turned suddenly and strode back to the liquor cabinet, pouring himself another generous helping of liquor. I grimaced when he downed nearly half of it and found myself speculating, not for the first time, whether the Potions master frequently drowned his unhappiness and sorrows in alcohol. "I despise them all equally."

"And yet you claim you would prefer a woman's company," Albus joked gently, and Severus shrugged.

"Only for one activity." The corners of his lips quirked slightly, and Dumbledore threw back his head and laughed loudly. Severus' scowl remained in place, but I noticed the light flickering in his eyes and realized that despite his apparent isolation and misery, he found a certain bizarre humor in his own eccentricities. It made me unbearably happy.

"Be sure you put that in the advertisement," Dumbledore remarked with a grin. "Give the poor witch a warning." He rose to leave. "Is there anything about the gathering you require me to know, Severus? Or was it simply...?"

"Hedonism, pure and simple." Severus put his glass back down and began unbuttoning the cuffs of his sleeves. I felt my face burn when I realized that I was paying little attention to Dumbledore's next words and far more attention to the glimpse of dark hair across his muscled forearm.

"Be sure to alert me before you leave next Saturday," he murmured. "If I am not there, it is due to my lessons with Harry. I had planned to take him out..."

Severus nodded a little too quickly and forcefully, and it was clear he did not care to know about the progression of Harry's lessons with Dumbledore. "I will do so."

"Thank you." Dumbledore bade him a quiet but affectionate good night and disappeared through the flames, leaving Severus standing in his living room, staring broodingly into the fire. After what felt like hours, he turned on his heel and left the room quickly, heading for his bedroom. I caught only the barest glimpse of his broad, pale back as he began to strip off his clothes before the memory ended, and I was deposited once again on the floor of his office.

Five

Chapter 5 of 18

Hermione confronts Severus and lets slip her involvement in the trial.

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I was aware, having spent so much of my time immersed in his memories, of the deep-seated feelings I was developing for the man I watched. As far as I could discern, there remained only one memory that I hadn't yet witnessed, and I was in dire need of the opportunity to reassess my motivations, look over my notes, make any additional comments, and critique presentation and grammar.

My notes remained as distant and objective as they had begun after that first memory. I reported none of the emotional upheaval and debilitating loneliness the Potions master displayed in his most private of moments. Of that fateful meeting with the young Muggle woman and his subsequent defection to Dumbledore, I reported only the

barest facts...he had raped the girl at Voldemort's behest and then returned to Hogwarts castle, where he informed Dumbledore that he was turning himself in and preferred to be of any assistance he could provide before he was killed. The flat, emotionless tone in which he had delivered his submission absolutely floored me. Their meeting had been surprisingly short and businesslike considering the seriousness of the agreement they reached, and I recalled Professor McGonagall's words: the true extent of his cruelty had not hit him until later that night, when he'd sought solace in sleep.

The next morning Professor McGonagall inquired as to the progress I was making, and I informed her quietly that only one memory remained. It was the twenty-second of August; I intended to finish with the memories that day and report immediately to her so that she might then convey them to the Wizengamot. They wanted nothing more than my written notes on the memories, she informed me, not my verbal opinion; they would brook no further involvement on my part. The moment the notes entered their possession, they instantaneously became confidential government property.

"What about him?" I cried, and she looked slightly startled at the vehemence of my outburst. "Surely they plan to give him the opportunity to defend himself against the charges verbally? I've been keeping a tally of all the crimes he committed versus all the times he himself was victimized..."

"Hermione," she said gently, putting down her toast and sighing, "they have promised to give him another opportunity to defend himself, but you and I both know that he stands little or no chance against them. Unless there is a memory contained within that vessel in which Albus specifically orders Severus to murder him atop the castle, which will prove beyond all doubt that he deserves to be freed..."

My stomach was literally sinking through my body and into the floor. I thought of the hours he'd spent at his father's mercy and the sight of that small, frail boy crouched in his room, biting down on his tongue until it bled in an effort to repress the need to scream with terror and pain.... No one, having seen the misery and loneliness which comprised his life, could possibly doubt that he had paid his dues and served all the time necessary for his sins. Yet there was nothing concrete...nothing that would offer him the Wizengamot's unquestioning exoneration. Dumbledore had mentioned the Vow that Severus had been insisting from the time of his capture he had agreed upon, but they might consider that circumstantial.

What if they claimed he had tampered with the memory, altering it somehow so that if he were ever caught, he would have something to substantiate his false claims?

They're not false, I thought furiously, recalling the look of misery that had crossed his face when Dumbledore had openly stated the fact that his death would likely be at Severus' hand. He had known throughout that entire year what was likely to happen, and due to Dumbledore's stubbornness and damned omnipotence, he'd had no choice but to agree to carry out the act, maintaining his cover for as long as possible.

"Now," McGonagall said softly, "I suggest you finish with that last memory so that I can report to the Wizengamot, and you may then have the remainder of the day off. I'm sure you would like some time to spend with your parents before..."

"I want to attend the trial," I repeated obstinately, unwilling to let the matter drop. She sighed again.

"You cannot. It is not a public trial...only Severus and his solicitor will be present to face the council. You can, however," she murmured with a conspiratorial smile, "sit in the waiting room with me, as I will be... listening in on the proceedings, shall we say?"

I had a sudden flash of Ginny crouched down on the dusty floor of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, clutching an Extendable Ear as she desperately sought to eavesdrop on the Order meetings. I grinned despite myself. Professor McGonagall was a more devious woman than I'd taken her for. She'd always seemed so rule-bound, even more so than me.

"And might I add, Miss Granger," she continued with a small smile, "that there is nothing stopping you from visiting him in Azkaban and... informing him of what will proceed."

I understood, then, and I didn't spare a moment to say goodbye to her. I had to make a copy of those charges I'd written down in the hope that he could formulate some kind of defense. I would see him granted the freedom for which he'd suffered and toiled so long if it was the last thing I accomplished in life.

The final memory was shockingly familiar to me; I realized it the moment I stepped in, for there I was...sitting on the battlements, staring out at the Forbidden Forest. It was that evening during sixth year when I'd fled from Ron and yet another of his acerbic comments about my lack of a love life. I'd sat up here for hours, alternately reading and reminiscing about my childhood, my life as it was currently, and what...or whom...I wanted so badly.

I remembered sitting there thinking of him and of a dream I'd had the night before in which we were brewing the Wolfsbane together in the dungeons. I had often thought of pursuing a career as a Healer, ideally in a close-knit, supportive community such as Hogwarts, and in my dream I had succeeded Madam Pomfrey as resident mediwitch. He had required my assistance with the brew for some obscure, half-cogent reason I couldn't possibly remember; in dreams it never mattered to one's subconscious *why* one's presence was required, only that it was. I still remembered how it had progressed, with his hand wrapped around my waist and his warm fingers encircling mine.

"You are stirring it incorrectly, Madam," he'd murmured, his breath hot and caressing against my ear, and something about the way he enunciated my title seemed completely lascivious. It hadn't been long before the potion was abandoned altogether, and I was propped up against his desk, my legs wrapped around his naked waist, running my fingers through his hair.

My dreams had certainly been graphic, I realized with a sigh. And then it belatedly occurred to me that during all my time spent observing the ethereal memory-Hermione as she sat and stared contemplatively at the soft night around her, I had not thought to locate him. In fact, he was nowhere to be seen, and yet it was his memory. Where was he?

Ignoring my memory-self, I wandered around the small area and found him ensconced in the shadows, arms crossed over his chest, leaning with a surprisingly relaxed countenance against the wall of the castle. He was watching me, simply staring at me, and I noticed the speculative look in his eyes, absent for once any scorn or accusation.

The memory-Hermione rose with an audible sigh and began to pace back and forth. It had been an unseasonably warm night, and she was wearing my favorite summer dress, seafoam green with spaghetti straps and a long, loose skirt. The light breeze made it catch around her legs, and I thought I saw him swallow hard.

Surely he wasn't... Was he *attracted* to me? Impossible...I was only seventeen, and if anyone was bound to consider the many unpromising dunderheads who walked the halls of Hogwarts completely repugnant, it was him.

But then the memory-me stripped off the light sweater I'd been wearing, baring her...my...shoulders, and he shifted slightly but silently. I watched as his eyes followed her, never leaving her form, while she paced back and forth, bare feet slapping lightly against the brick of the castle. He cocked his head slightly to one side, and I choked on a giggle. I could have sworn he was openly regarding my ass as the breeze blew the dress forward, molding to my body more obviously.

Why did he not say something or give me detention? It was not past curfew, but it was highly unorthodox for a student to be up here unless they were pursuing more illicit endeavors...which I certainly was not, but he would have been within reason to demand that I return to the castle nonetheless.

Instead he simply watched me as I took my hair down from its ponytail and ran my finger through it thoughtfully, meditatively, untangling the many curls as I stared off into space. He watched the movement of my hands, and I noticed his own fingers twitching lightly.

Then, a grim set to his mouth, he turned and stalked out as silently as he'd no doubt entered, leaving the memory-me standing alone, still staring forlornly out at the Forbidden Forest; and I remembered with sudden clarity that at the moment I'd taken down my hair and run my fingers through it, I had been contemplating what it would feel like if it had been his fingers dancing lightly through it.

It was nearing two o'clock when I emerged from the final memory and jotted down my hasty observations. I quickly copied the two sheets on which I had been tallying his crimes and those crimes committed against his person, respectively, and then I gathered all the materials. I shrank the two extra copies and slid them into my pockets; then I dashed up to the Headmistress' office, where I presented them to her rather nervously.

"Thank you, my dear." Her face had grown grim with the passing of the last couple hours, and I knew that she was deeply dreading the errand before her. "Whatever happens, Hermione..." I struggled to refrain from tearing up. "All of us here at Hogwarts know that you tried to help him, and that is all anyone could have done."

I nodded mutely, and she left, her shoulders slumped with the defeat she no doubt felt lay before us all. I wasted no time in drying my few tears and flooing off myself, but to an entirely different destination.

Diagon Alley was filled with people, throngs moving quickly past the little boutiques and apothecaries. I cast my eyes around in vain for the opportunity to slip into the crowd but had to wait several moments before I could safely join the sea of people moving in a slow, inexorable current along the sidewalks.

It did not take long for me to locate what I sought, the Wizarding equivalent of an ophthalmologist's. As vision exams could be completed efficiently and rapidly with magical equipment and spells, I had only to step inside and wait a few moments, during which time I removed my contacts and tossed them in the nearest trash bin. I'd never really bothered to research whether or not I could pursue some magical equivalent of contact lenses; when I'd complained the summer after my fourth year about being unable to see, my parents had suggested glasses or contacts, and I had immediately chosen contacts and never thought about it again.

The woman attending the desk ushered me into a nearby booth where a distinguished-looking older wizard of perhaps eighty or so stood patiently. He waved a wand quickly in front of my eyes and then examined them more closely.

"Hmm," he remarked. "You definitely need glasses, I'm afraid." He peered at me curiously. "How have you managed to see in school, young lady?"

I shrugged and demurred, muttering something about sitting in the row nearest the blackboard, and he scowled reproachfully at me and grabbed a catalog off a nearby table. He handed it to me and instructed me to flip through it and choose the frame which I felt would be most appropriate and flattering for my face and lifestyle. The entire speech seemed, and undoubtedly was, dully rehearsed, and within moments I was ignoring him in favor of paging excitedly through the catalog, seeking just the perfect pair...

There! I smiled in triumph and pointed at them. They were perfect, indeed: black, medium to thick rims, slightly upturned at the corners...a very intellectual, sexy-librarian type of look, and they were precisely identical to the ones Severus' favorite witch had been wearing in the magazine. While he Transfigured them for me, I stared at my feet shamefully, attempting to justify to myself my rationale for suddenly and spontaneously tossing out my contacts and getting myself into this mess.

It's not for him, I assured myself halfheartedly. I just think they're cute, and those contacts were irritating my eyes and making them rather dry. In fact, they have been for some time. It's time to accept that it wasn't healthy to wear them anymore and seek an alternative...

Oh, who the fuck was I kidding? I cringed at my own mind's vulgarity, but really, I knew better than to insult myself with these absurd excuses. I wanted to see if wearing the glasses would get a rise out of him. Over the past couple of days, I had been confronted...not once, but *twice*...with indications that he might actually be attracted to me. I intended to pursue it as boldly as I dared, and the glasses were a bold statement indeed.

The older wizard finished, and I was startled from my mental self-examination when he put them on the table in front of me, along with a small hand-held mirror. My heart fluttering nervously, I put them on and then dared a glance in the mirror.

And immediately, much to my humiliation, I squealed happily, causing the poor old man to jump. They looked absolutely fantastic.

"Thank you!" I cried, and he nodded, rather perplexed by my change in mood. I dashed quickly back out to the waiting area, where I charged them...and they were quite reasonably priced, I thought...to my Gringotts account. I had always lived frugally while at school, and my parents would never begrudge me the use of the money when I had saved my allowance for so many years rather than squandering it on clothes or makeup like other teenage girls. After getting hasty permission from the witch at the counter, I grabbed a bit of the complimentary Floo powder, stepped through their fireplace, and found myself in my parents' living room.

"Hermione!"

My mother was of course startled to see me, as I was her. I hadn't expected her to be home. I'd fully anticipated that she and my father would both have a full day at the office, and when they returned, I would have dinner prepared for them and surprise them with my new glasses.

"Hi, Mum!" It was fantastic to see her after all the time I'd spent at The Burrow. We hugged for what felt like ages, and she praised my glasses to no end, saying how intelligent and *grown up* they made me look. When I couldn't stand to continue blushing under all her praise, I finally asked, "What are you doing home? I thought you and Dad would be at the office."

"Oh, it's been a slow day," she replied with a shrug. "Everyone off on holiday, you know. I thought I'd get some errands done and then make a nice dinner for your father. You know"...she glanced at her watch and then beamed at me..."I've still got a couple hours before he can be expected home. Do you want to go shopping with me?"

I didn't, in all honesty; I'd been looking forward to a relaxing afternoon in my childhood room, reading or napping, but she looked so elated at the prospect that I simply couldn't turn her down. She grabbed her coat and keys, and we were off to wander the streets of Muggle London, looking for, according to her, "the *perfect* evening dress" for some charity benefit she had agreed to attend later that month.

As we continued our leisurely stroll past a young women's boutique, my gaze was arrested by a simple, sleekly cut black business suit: snug, flattering pants, a fitted but appropriate jacket, and a nice little pair of black heels to complement the sharp quality of the ensemble. I must have stopped and stared for much longer than I realized because I caught my mother smiling fondly at me.

"You'll be working soon," she remarked wistfully, and I detected the faintest hint of tears in the corner of her eyes. It hit me then that I had never truly appreciated the sacrifice she and my father had made to see my youthful wishes fulfilled. They had been wonderfully supportive of my magical education, and it had to have been exceedingly difficult for them to live without seeing me ten months of the year for seven years. Now they would be giving me up to adulthood shortly.

"Would you like it?" she asked me with an encouraging nod in the direction of the boutique window. I stared at her for a moment, my mind whirling with sudden guilt over my new glasses and the thought that I shouldn't even consider costing my parents money for frivolous belongings; but she had me irreversibly hooked when she added slyly, "Every girl needs a nice black suit she can wear to impress someone, you know."

What is it with mothers and their omniscient ability to sense their daughters' secret, burning infatuations? I knew, through some inexplicable instinct, that it was precisely the sort of look that would turn Severus' head. I berated myself for thinking of him yet again rather than being an individual, but I had already made up my mind.

"May I?" I asked hopefully. She nodded and put her arm around me, and I didn't have to be told twice. We both giggled and dashed quickly into the shop, and I was reminded why my mother, for all her stern rules, uncompromising standards, and sage advice, was my first and only best friend.

Professor McGonagall owed me later that evening, a short but meaningful missive informing me that the trial had been set for the day after next. Her words urged me to act quickly if I intended to provide Severus with any kind of warning. Thus the next morning, after a night of restless turning and no sleep whatsoever, I bade my parents good day, promising them I would return that evening and spend the remainder of my summer holiday with them. Then I flooded to the one place on earth I'd truly hoped I would never see.

The Wizarding prison Azkaban lived up to its terrifying reputation with pride. The guards who met me at the gate snarled and shoved me through the admissions process, forcing me to wait an hour before they verified that, as a temporary prisoner, Severus was technically allowed visitors. It was clear that they did not want me to enter and would have been perfectly happy to send me away, but they could not deny me entrance within the law, and I suspect they realized I knew that.

The halls of the temporary wing were dank and desolate, enough to drive anyone to slow and seductive madness, and I had no doubt that those of the permanent wings were infinitely worse. His cell was at the very end, set apart, and I felt a surge of righteous indignation at the thought that they had probably kept him separate so that they could tease and torture him independently of the others. Glowering at the guard who opened the door for me, I took a deep breath and glanced down at the floor, examining my reflection in the fetid puddle at my feet. My hair was pulled back in simple but artfully arranged chignon, courtesy of my mother; the glasses were perched perfectly on my nose; and I wore my lovely seafoam-green summer dress, a snug black sweater, and the black heels my mother had bought me the afternoon before. Telling myself that I was well equipped to handle anything, I stepped through proudly...and was then nearly knocked over by the sight that met my eyes.

He struggled to his feet the moment I entered, and I recognized immediately that he was in dire need of medical attention. He had no shirt, and his ribs poked prominently through the skin of his torso. They were violently bruised, several of them possibly slightly fractured. Long cuts and wicked lacerations were spread liberally across his chest and around his back, and his hair was scraggly and filthy. It was clear that they hadn't allowed him to wash properly in weeks.

Yet the cell was surprisingly clean. I noted a small rag in one corner and a pile of dirt nearby and realized that he had actually attempted to sweep the floor. A single blanket lay in one corner, obviously his bed, and a small, dirty toilet was located in the other. There was no sink, no chair on which he could sit to take his meals, nor any table. But then, perhaps I was being optimistic: there was no guarantee that they had even been feeding him. I doubted anyone would consider it a particularly remorseful loss if he were to die while languishing in prison.

"Miss Granger." His voice cracked from disuse, and I stifled the sudden and utterly irrational urge to fly into him and wrap my arms around his bony shoulders. "To what do I owe the... pleasure?" The scorn was still evident in his tone, but he somehow lacked the force and venom of the acerbic Potions master of my youth. The energy required for him to simply stand had to be enormous, considering how poorly they had obviously treated him. The thought of him existing day after day with such debilitating injuries was beginning to make me feel physically ill with disgust and sympathy.

"I've come to warn you," I began haltingly, "that the Wizengamot will be holding your trial tomorrow. They have in their possession..."

"My memories." He gave a short, abrupt nod. I wasn't sure if I imagined it, but his gaze seemed to linger on my figure a bit longer than strictly necessary, and it definitely caught when he registered my glasses. I resisted the anxious compulsion to adjust them on my nose. "I know. Minerva warned me." He narrowed his eyes at me then, the paranoia returning. "Why are you here?"

"I... I came to bring you this." I retrieved the two sheets of parchment from my pocket and enlarged them, handing them over to his filthy hands. He sank heavily to the floor and looked over the sheets, reading them silently and intently. I registered when his eyes reached the end of the first page, where I'd written the heaviest charge against him other than Dumbledore's murder: the young woman's rape. His knuckles grew white on the sheet, and his mouth twisted into something that might have been loosely termed a sneer. It almost pained me to realize he couldn't even sneer properly. So much of the life had gone out of him.

"These accusations are... surprisingly vague," he drawled softly, and I could see his eyes were fixed on the end of the sheet. They seemed incapable of leaving the harsh words, and I wondered at the depth of his remorse when he was confronted with such a cold and unforgiving summary of his life's transgressions.

I maintained my brusque, professional tone and simply said, "Rape is rape, Professor."

He became enraged then, and it happened so quickly that I jumped back, teetering precipitously on my heels. He was clenching the paper so tightly in his fist that I feared it would shred. He rose rapidly to his feet and proceeded to tower over me, no doubt attempting to intimidate me into leaving him to wallow in his own self-pity and loathing. Though the months in Azkaban had been inhumane, he was still as terrifyingly tall and dark as I recalled from six years of undue intimidation and unfair treatment, and my beloved heels no longer seemed to afford any additional confidence.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," he growled, his eyes blazing. "If you had any idea what I had...what I did to that girl..." He shook the paper at me with halfhearted force. Already his energy seemed to be leaving him, and his posture was growing alarmingly weak and unsteady.

Immediately I was incensed, and all hope of remaining coolly detached fled from me. I had not asked, I reminded myself for the umpteenth time that week, for access to his private memories; yet I was forced to live and relive those moments in my own nightmares.

"I saw *exactly* what you did to that girl, Professor," I whispered in a poisonously soft, deadly tone which could have rivaled his voice at its most wounding. I advanced on him. To my immense satisfaction, every last bit of blood drained from his face, and he began to step backward, staring at me as though I'd just read him his execution sentence. "I saw every... single... excruciating... minute of it. Don't stand here and lecture *me* about how much she suffered. I heard her scream. I watched her bleed, and I watched her *die*." He flinched as though I had struck him when I spat out the final word.

I knew my behavior to be completely inappropriate, but my rage at what had happened to that poor, innocent girl...probably only my age...had been festering inside me. It had metastasized, unspeakably filthy and painful, and though I knew he had been forced to do it, I couldn't help but seize the opportunity to tell him *precisely* what I'd been through.

For the first time in my life, I had rendered my Potions professor totally speechless. He stared at me, the papers loosely dangling from his thin, bony fingers, looking as though I had slapped him across the face. He was stark white, a shocking contrast against the scraggly, dirt-streaked black of his trousers and hair. His gaze captured mine, and I truly believed, for one breathtaking moment, that he was about to reach out and touch me.

Then the normally implacable professor regained his composure, and he drew back slowly and deliberately. The suddenly haughty expression on his face seemed to dare me to try to hurt him further. His eyes, however, belied his continued unrest.

"You ought to be thankful I kept those observations as neutral as possible," I snapped at him. Then I turned on my heel and pounded on the door. The guard opened it quickly. As I exited, I heard him sink back to the floor, the papers falling alongside him.

Six

Hermione reveals her secret under duress.

Disclaimer: All characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I intend no infringement and am making no profit.

Professor McGonagall and I spent the first day of the trial harried and half ill with worry, pacing around the antechamber of the Ministry's main courtroom because we were not allowed to be present during the proceedings. Naturally, there was nothing we could do...no charm, no trick, no fabulous invention of the Weasleys...that would allow us to eavesdrop on what was being said within. Even Professor McGonagall, as brilliant and resourceful as she was, confessed that despite putting herself in her best Slytherin mindset, she couldn't conceive of a way to listen in.

Finally she sank into her chair and simply sat there, lips pursed, looking furious. I knew that she was indignant the process had even taken seven hours; as far as we and the majority of his colleagues were concerned, there was simply nothing to debate. My notes were self-evident: he *had* made a Vow to Albus Dumbledore that required him to go through with the murder if it became necessary. In light of the circumstances, it really could not be considered murder. It was, if anything, assisted suicide. Dumbledore had undoubtedly been perfectly aware of Draco Malfoy's duplicity or he wouldn't have approached Severus about taking the Vow in the first place.

Professor McGonagall, who was marginally more composed than I was during this time, was growing visibly irritated with my incessant pacing. Nothing she could say managed to calm me. When the door opened, and she was beckoned to enter the chamber, I released a squawk of frustration.

"I will be back momentarily," she promised. Her tone was entirely businesslike, but she sought my hand with hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze. I nodded and managed to sit down for the first time in hours, sipping absently at a cup of tea that had long since reached arctic temperatures. I could taste nothing.

A few minutes passed before she emerged again and motioned for me to follow her. I did so, my stomach in such a state of upheaval that I could barely walk straight. Blood began pounding in my ears as I anticipated what she would say. It was, in all seriousness, either his second chance at life or the end of it. Execution would have been preferable to a lifelong sentence in Azkaban.

When we reached a more private segment of hallway, she paused and placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. "They have reached a standstill, it seems," she explained in an undertone. "I'm afraid there is nothing more that you or I can do. They are going to debate throughout the night, most likely." She sighed and pulled out a handkerchief, wiping at her exhausted eyes, which had long since begun to water with anxiety and fatigue. "They will most likely deliver the verdict in the morning. I think it would be best if you were to go home, Miss Granger."

I opened my mouth to protest but let it slowly drift shut. Her expression was one of the utmost sympathy...she knew how I felt, but nothing I did could possibly change the course at this point. I nodded, defeated, and turned to leave. She murmured good day to me and promised that if she heard anything before I arrived the next morning, she would owl me regardless of the time.

My parents' house was chilly and dark when I returned. The trial had been delayed in favor of more pressing matters and thus had not begun until nearly four; it was now past eleven. Until that moment, I hadn't noticed the pervasive hunger in my gut, but now, far from the Ministry of Magic and incrementally less upset, my stomach rumbled loudly. I grabbed the nearest food I could find as I stalked through the kitchen, which happened to be an apple and several biscuits my mother had made a few days earlier. I downed two glasses of milk and then wandered out into the backyard. I knew it would be impossible for me to find sleep anytime soon, and I didn't want to chance waking my parents. They remained as blissfully ignorant of my involvement in Severus' trial as the Wizengamot had demanded they be kept, and my mother was far too perceptive for me to fool if she were to find me moping around the living room.

I stood for a few moments in the cold, dewy grass, simply staring at the faint outlines of distant stars in the night sky. I wondered if they would take him back to Azkaban to spend the night or allow him to stay at the Ministry under heavy guard. A brief, frantic thought of breaking him out flitted through my brain, and I dismissed myself as an idiot and flopped down beneath my mother's favorite rose bush.

As a child, I would often lie there when confused or frustrated. The fresh air, the sounds of the outdoors, and the calming presence of the beautiful blooms just overhead were somehow amazingly conducive to deep contemplation. I had never wished more desperately that I could once again be that lonely seven-year-old who lay on the grass for hours, reading or thinking about my future. Though I knew that what lay before me was bright and promising, I couldn't shake the irrational feeling that with Severus irrevocably sentenced to Azkaban, I would never manage to reach some distant potential which somehow, in my addled brain, involved him.

It never ceased to amaze me how completely my heart was able to rebel even when my brain assured it that its desires were nothing short of absolute stupidity. Was I so incredibly stupid, my brain wondered in awe, as to think that something would develop between us if my evidence exonerated him? He was my instructor and easily twenty years my senior. I'd never even given a thought to the age difference before, in all honesty...even while viewing him as a younger man, I was always painfully aware that the peak of my attraction had developed from seeing him as an adult, tall, intimidating, and completely prepossessing. Still, I couldn't be so naïve as to think that it would not be of significance to him and anyone else. A twenty-year gap between partners was not unheard of in the Wizarding world, but it was hardly commonplace.

I was forced to admit that on some level, as much as it made my cheeks burn, *had* honestly thought that we might stand a chance...once I had graduated, of course. I didn't know how my delusional heart imagined I could possibly pursue him, but it was slowly shattering as I envisioned what it would be like to have him as a lover and considered the possibility that I might never have the chance.

He would be a fool not to notice the resemblance between myself and that witch with whom he'd become so enamored all those years ago; and if the similarities had been subtle before, my glasses had certainly changed that. In point of fact, I probably couldn't have made it more obvious *why* I'd bought them if he'd put me under Veritaserum and interrogated me himself.

Even the rational part of me continued to insist that our personalities were suited to one another, and that if he were open to the possibility, I could make him happy. Whereas other women would have shunned outright the idea of spending their lives cloistered away in his dungeon quarters with nothing for entertainment but books and one another's company, I was positively turned on by the notion. But even before that...even if we never managed to reach that level of intimacy which would induce him to ask me to live with him...we would undoubtedly get along fine as close friends and as new lovers.

Tears slowly began to fall as I realized that in all likelihood my contemplation was moot: we would never even have the chance to pursue such a relationship. My own cowardice at the thought of openly declaring to him how I felt would never have to be surmounted; any plans I might develop in order to meaningfully admit my feelings would never have to come to fruition because of the immense probability that he would spend the remainder of his life wasting away in Azkaban, his mind bereft of even the scant few memories he had of times he'd been content. They said that Azkaban, like the Dementors, fed off one's good temper, slowly leeching all comprehension of love and recollection of joy. For normal men, it was a long, torturous, horrifying process as they unwillingly relinquished each and every remaining facet of happiness in their minds. But Severus? He wouldn't even stand a chance. He had virtually no happiness to recollect and nothing left to give.

My vision was just beginning to blur with salty tears when I heard the familiar beating of wings and looked up to find a large gray owl hovering above me. It performed a graceful circle, swooped down, and landed beside me with a soft hoot. I sat up and squinted at it, but I didn't recognize it as belonging to any of my friends or acquaintances.

"Where did you come from?" I murmured *sotto voce*, conscious that my parents' bedroom window was generally left open during warm summer evenings. I accepted the message, and with a hastily whispered, "*Lumos*," I read through it, my excitement mounting with each word.

Miss Granger,

As interim Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, I regret to inform you that my colleagues and I have reached somewhat of an impasse regarding the sentencing of Severus Snape. While we appreciate your boundless efforts in providing us with the necessary facts regarding his past, we find that we are unsatisfied with matters as they currently stand.

Therefore, as you are the only person who was capable of viewing Mr. Snape's memories firsthand, I regret to inform you that we must subpoena your testimony for tomorrow at 10 AM sharp. Mr. Snape has not been informed of this involvement and does not have to be present to witness your examination if you do not wish it.

The remainder was the general blabber in legalese about the need to maintain discretion and the consequences if I did not. I ignored it and offered the owl the remaining half of my last biscuit, which he accepted gratefully before taking flight again. I waved him goodbye, struck with a sudden, inexplicable cheeriness, and then I resumed staring, though this time in astonishment, at the rose bush.

They needed *me*. They could not reach a decision themselves, and now...*finally*...I would have the opportunity to sway their opinions directly. Though I was terrified to the very marrow of my bones at the thought of being insufficiently persuasive, I was at least being granted a shot. I could, if I played my cards right, presented myself in a professional and credible fashion, and delivered an appropriately sympathetic but not overtly biased testimony, possibly sway their vote.

I jumped up and made a break for the back door, desperate to begin planning. I might not be able to work miracles...least of all in this instance...but I would never let it be said that I hadn't given my all in trying.

The following morning dawned hot and oppressive, the air streaked with dust and humidity. Locked in my bathroom for nearly an hour, I fussed with my hair and makeup. I wanted to look like an adult, not a young woman who had tried too hard to impress her elders. I didn't habitually wear much makeup anyhow...a bit of foundation to even out my skin tone and the occasional swipe of mascara...but that day I wanted to use what little cosmetics skills I possessed to the ultimate advantage. After finishing with my foundation and applying a light, matte gloss to my lips, which had been ravaged by constant biting during my anxiety the day before, I made a covert trip to my parents' bathroom.

My mother was always accepting of a young girl's desire to look older. Though she never would have allowed me to leave the house at fifteen while fully made up, she taught me everything she knew about applying cosmetics in a classy, understated way, and she would have granted me far more freedom than my passing interest in my appearance had ever demanded.

I owed her an immense debt of gratitude, for now it was all going to pay off. I rummaged through her bag, pulled out her contouring rouge, and set about creating the illusion of much more prominent, adult cheekbones than I actually possessed. I was conservative about it, of course, and it wasn't as though I had none to begin with; but by the time I'd finished blending properly and had pulled my hair back and fastened it with a simple silver clasp, I was satisfied that I had managed to add a few years to my appearance.

I yanked off the zippered sweatshirt I was wearing, careful not to upset my hair, and pulled on my best black dress robes. A few simple, muted Transfigurations dispensed with the decorative silver trim and loosened the waist slightly, making them seem equally formal but much more business-appropriate. Then I slipped on pantyhose and my black heels and regarded myself in the mirror.

I sighed but refused to let my spirit fall too drastically. I was never going to win any beauty contests, but that day I didn't have to care. I was only concerned about being presentable, and I certainly thought I had achieved that aim.

I was too nervous to eat, so I packed a light lunch in my purse and then locked up the house securely. My parents had left for work hours before, and with any luck, I would be home before they returned. I grabbed a handful of the Floo powder my mother kept in the living room for me and Flooed quickly to the Ministry, hoping that the dread and nervousness twining through my stomach would not cause me to become ill.

Mr. Weasley met me in the Atrium as I stumbled out of one of the many fireplaces and joined the other commuters in dusting off my robes and regaining my equilibrium. "Hello, Hermione," he said with a gentle smile, patting me on the shoulder. "Professor McGonagall's running a bit late. She asked me to escort you downstairs."

"All right. I know I'm a little early..." I glanced down at the simple silver watch of my mother's I had borrowed: 9:52. "Are they ready for me yet?"

He nodded. "I'm sure they'll stop their discussion to question you. Come with me."

I had no doubt that my terror, which had rapidly been building since I'd risen from bed and showered that morning, was now effortlessly readable on my face. Mr. Weasley led me to the main courtroom, walking just slightly behind me, a steady, fatherly presence that kept me grounded and evened my already erratic breathing. When we were poised at the door, he instructed me in a gentle tone to wait just a moment and walked in to announce my arrival.

I hadn't returned the Chief Warlock's message with a request for Severus to be removed from the room during my testimony, which meant he was in there at that moment, completely unsuspecting that I would walk in. I took deep, calming breaths and closed my eyes, praying for the strength not only to survive their grilling but also to look him in the eye without breaking down. My emotions were still being wrenched in a thousand directions by what I'd seen, and after blowing up at him in his cell in Azkaban, I wasn't sure I could comport myself calmly and naturally in front of him.

The door opened. Mr. Weasley beckoned me in, and I walked with as straight and purposeful a gait as I could manage toward the front of the room. I could feel their eyes burning into me, and out of my peripheral vision, I noticed a large, black void on the side of the room, scrupulously guarded by two equally intimidating Aurors. I knew it was him, but I did not allow myself the momentary respite of glancing at him. I kept my gaze glued ahead of me, and my steps carefully measured until one of the attending Aurors escorted me to the witness chair.

Mr. Weasley graciously took my purse, and I thanked him. I was momentarily surprised that they were allowing him to be present, but my confusion was quickly resolved when he told me quietly that he would be waiting outside with my things when I was finished. I nodded and sat down, crossing my legs and folding my hands primly, surveying the room around me. It bore a striking resemblance to a Muggle courtroom but for the abnormally large dais before me, on which was seated the entirety of the Wizengamot.

The Chief Warlock...whose name I couldn't remember for the life of me; I was, simply put, far too nervous...thanked me for my timely arrival. I just nodded. Severus...*Professor Snape*, I reminded myself sharply, transitioning into student mode...was sitting about five yards to my right. He was indeed being guarded very closely by the Aurors. He shot me a speculative look, his expression rather cold and rapidly hardening as he deduced why I was there. I tried to wrench my gaze away from his face, but it was momentarily arrested by the sight of his haggard appearance and sunken eyes. He looked, if possible, worse than he had a few days prior. His hair did not appear to have been washed or cleaned, and his clothing was barely intact, let alone passable or appropriate. In my growing cynicism, I marveled at the lengths to which they would stoop to keep him looking grimy, immoral, and inferior.

"Miss Granger," spoke up a woman on the side of the Chief Warlock, "I realize that you have already been apprised of our reason for calling you here, so I'm going to dispense with the usual formalities. As you have been officially subpoenaed for your involvement in Mr. Snape's case, we are going to dose you with the accepted amount of Truth Serum and ask you several questions."

My entire body became cold and my stomach plummeted. *You should have known they would require this*, a small part of my brain taunted; but I was too busy succumbing to my personal terror to take much notice. It was undoubtedly routine procedure...I wasn't questioning their motives...but if they asked me how those memories had made me feel, I was going to have to tell them the truth... the *whole* truth.

And that was not, I reflected, my mouth suddenly dry and cottony, something I cared to do in front of Sev...Professor Snape.

Why hadn't I requested that he be kept elsewhere during my questioning? My outrageous desire simply to see him...for the barest, briefest glimpse of his face or sound of his voice...was not worth the unthinkable mortification facing me if they were to ask me a sensitive question.

"Yes, ma'am," the more socially intact portion of my brain forced my mouth to enunciate. I nodded, though I suspect the motion was rather stilted, and waited while one of the Aurors approached me and handed me a vial of Veritaserum. I gulped it down, nearly choking in my haste, and then handed the glass back to him. I stared back at the Wizengamot, who were waiting for the potion to take effect.

It was, in all honesty, the stuff of nightmares.

"Now, Miss Granger," the Chief Warlock began, waving a demonstrative hand toward his colleagues, "would you state for those assembled your full name?"

Slightly taken aback by the formality when the woman had just told me they would be dispensing with it entirely, I had to regain my voice before I could say in a steady tone, "My full name is Hermione Jane Granger."

"And you are a seventh-year student at Hogwarts, is that correct?" he continued, sounding bored by the rehearsed questions.

"Yes, sir, that is correct."

"Miss Granger, how did you first become involved in Mr. Snape's case?"

I cleared my throat, squared my shoulders, and faced the onslaught. "Headmistress McGonagall approached me approximately a week ago and told me that you required my help to view the memories from Professor Snape's Pensieve, as no fully trained, adult witch or wizard would be capable of doing so."

"You will refer to him as Mr. Snape, please," a rather snooty-looking wizard on the far right called out. "He is not currently employed at Hogwarts."

"With all due respect," I retorted in a slightly snappish voice, "Professor Snape has *not* been proven guilty and is therefore still eligible for tenure at Hogwarts, and I am still his student. I will show respect and use his full title."

The wizard narrowed his eyes at me, and the Chief Warlock looked faintly amused. "Very well, Miss Granger," he interjected rather diffidently. "You have a point. You may call him what you wish."

You're damn right I have a point, I fumed internally. You're treating him as though he's been sentenced since the day he was born.

"Now, Miss Granger, in the memories of Mr. Snape's you viewed, was there any mention of an Unbreakable Vow made to Albus Dumbledore?"

"Yes."

"Who mentioned this Vow?"

"Professor Dumbledore reminded Professor Snape that he had made a Vow to him and could not break it."

"And did Albus Dumbledore mention anything else pertaining to the Vow?" They were all leaning slightly forward in their chairs, growing increasingly more twitchy and on edge. This was the dangerous part, I knew.

"Professor Dumbledore also stated that his end, and I quote, 'would likely be at Severus' hand.' " For a moment I wondered if they would rebuke me for using his first name, but they seemed content to accept that it had been a direct quote and said nothing.

"And how did Mr. Snape respond to this statement?" The Chief Warlock was regarding me shrewdly, his rather large nose poking unpleasantly over the edge of the wooden dais.

"He did not reply to Professor Dumbledore verbally, but he seemed very upset by such a frank mention of his death, sir."

"Is it your opinion, Miss Granger, having witnessed these memories firsthand, that Mr. Snape killed Albus Dumbledore because he had made a legitimate Unbreakable Vow to do so in order to maintain his cover as a spy and *for no other reason?*"

"Yes, sir," I declared without hesitation. "There was no doubt in my mind after viewing the memory that Professor Dumbledore anticipated the need for his own death and forced Professor Snape to make an Unbreakable Vow promising that he would carry out the deed if it became necessary."

"I see," said the Chief Warlock simply. Just when I thought they were going to maintain their integrity as a governing body and refrain from asking me any personal questions, the uppity wizard who'd had the audacity to tell me Severus wasn't worthy of his title spoke up once again.

"Miss Granger," he said in a slow, poisonous tone, "tell us... What is your opinion of *Professor* Snape?"

I gritted my teeth and tried to suppress the reflex to speak, forcing it back just long enough to interject. "With all due respect, *sir*, I believe giving my personal opinion in this matter would be entirely inappropriate, considering that we are supposed to be dealing with facts alone. Don't you agree, *sir?*" The magical compulsion to answer his question was overwhelming my senses. I began to sweat and tremble slightly, hoping the Chief Warlock would make him retract the question.

"Now, now, calm down, Miss Granger," the Chief Warlock said amiably, as though his colleague weren't at all out of line. "As a Hogwarts student, you are in an excellent role to give your opinion of Mr. Snape's character...and that is, after all, entirely relevant to this investigation. Please answer the question."

So *now*, after all the emphasis on recording only the bare facts and leaving the character judgment to them, they wanted my opinion of him as a person? Fine. I would answer it, all right.

"I consider Professor Snape to be a brilliant scientist and a very effective teacher." I was aware, as I said it, of how pathetic, how dissembling, it must have sounded, but the Veritaserum lay heavily on my tongue; it was difficult to refrain from speaking the many negatives of his personality let alone naturally deliver the positives.

"Is that all, Miss Granger?" Snooty Wizard asked in a bemused tone. I felt my cheeks grow hot.

"No, sir."

"Well, do continue. What else do you think of Professor Snape?"

I wanted to bite off my tongue, but there was nothing to be done to stem the flow of words. "I think he is extremely antisocial, unjustly cruel to students not in his own House, biased toward his Slytherins, and a highly unpleasant human being."

That about said it, didn't it? I wanted to crawl in the nearest hole and die.

Not a member of the Wizengamot didn't have a surprised and faintly skeptical eyebrow raised. "That's quite a mouthful," the Chief Warlock remarked while the others tittered unpleasantly. Snooty Wizard, it appeared, had only just begun his offensive.

"Tell us, Miss Granger, what did you feel while going through Professor Snape's memories? You've given us your factual observations, but how did his actions make you *feel*, one person to another?"

I panicked, thinking they could hear the thumping of my heart. Certainly Severus would be able to. He had probably given up hope of ever seeing daylight again the moment I'd waltzed into the room, hopelessly young and ill-prepared to defend him against the bias and scrutiny of these vile people.

"I felt... that he was treated badly by everyone he came into contact with and was very misunderstood."

"Is that *all* you feel about him, Miss Granger?" asked a snide voice from the left that I quickly realized, with a sinking horror, I recognized perfectly: Umbridge. Undoubtedly she and Snooty Wizard had gotten together earlier that morning to discuss this particular stratagem for bringing me down.

"I feel that he has paid far more than his fair share of pain for what he has done and deserves to live the remainder of his life in peace," I ground out, no longer able to maintain a cool facade despite their eyes on me.

"Miss Granger, you and Professor Snape were both members of the... oh, what did you call it... Order of the Phoenix, is that correct?" Umbridge was making short, spiky scrawls with a lurid pink quill while purposefully avoiding my gaze and looking disinterested.

"Yes."

"And during this time, what was your *relationship* with Professor Snape?"

I imagine my shock looked genuine; I couldn't fathom how she could possibly have known that this was my weak point. Had she seen me staring at him? Had I daydreamed too deeply in her class and blurted out his name? Or was she just that incredibly evil?

"I had no relationship with Professor Snape other than as his student."

"But did you *want* one?" she asked sweetly, her grating voice echoing off the courtroom walls. They were, I was certain, the fateful words that would haunt me to my grave. The Veritaserum drove me forward while every nerve and instinct in my body was shrieking in futile protest.

"Yes." I tried to maintain a normal volume and tone in my voice, but it was difficult. I knew I'd been discovered, and all I could do was wonder, belatedly and miserably, why I hadn't demanded that he be kept somewhere else. He didn't need to hear this. "I would have liked to be his friend," I added, hoping, though I knew it was in vain, that it would placate her.

"Ms. Umbridge," spoke up the Chief Warlock, "I really don't see that this is relevant..."

"Oh, but don't you see? It's no wonder the girl is defending him. Are you attracted to Professor Snape, Miss Granger?"

Fuck.

"Yes." I had to consciously keep my gaze straight forward and my head erect. I wanted nothing more than to curl up and avoid the world.

"And for how long has this attraction been going on?"

My jaw felt so tight that I thought for a moment I'd snapped it so hard I had damaged it. "Two years."

"And are you *still* attracted to him despite...let's see, what was it..." She snatched up a piece of parchment and began to recite in a cheerful voice, "A history of violence against others, sexual promiscuity, treason, *rape*..."

I wanted to refuse to allow her to make me feel ashamed, but I couldn't hide the increasing despair in my voice. "Yes."

"Well, as you can all see, there is clearly no case here. The girl is practically in love with him. She has been for years. No doubt she tampered with the memories after seeing their true contents..."

My own humiliation I knew I could bear, but I simply couldn't sit there while she contorted the facts to her own wicked ends. "Sir," I said to the Chief Warlock, "may I have your permission to speak freely while I am still under the influence of the Veritaserum?"

"Yes, Miss Granger. Ms. Umbridge, you will stand down." He looked slightly peaked, and I had no doubt that he hadn't foreseen that this farce of an interrogation would drag on for so long before they could convict him even half-credibly.

"My personal feelings for Professor Snape are not the slightest bit relevant to this investigation. They have not compromised my ability to recognize faults within his character, and I have demonstrated that to you under the influence of Veritaserum. I could not possibly have fabricated that. Furthermore..." I glared in Umbridge's general direction..."I have given you a truthful assessment of his past and all the facts necessary for you to pardon him of this crime. It was, as I have said to you, at Albus Dumbledore's behest, and you are holding him captive when you have no right to do so.

"This does, in fact, illustrate a very good point: I do not like Professor Snape as a person, and you have given me no opportunity to lie or claim otherwise. Yet somehow I am able to accept that for the sake of justice, it is necessary for me to put aside my personal feelings on the matter because he has sacrificed his *life* countless times so that we could be here today. Think what you want of his personal morals, but you are not trying him for those. You are trying him for murder, and that is one crime he has *not* committed."

In the wake of my outburst, the members of the Wizengamot began nodding thoughtfully, murmuring amongst themselves. Umbridge's face had become a rather interesting, violent shade of puce as she realized that the tide was turning. I felt my heart drag itself off the floor and begin to climb its way slowly back into my chest. It seemed as though my rant had had the desired effect.

"You have spoken well and very wisely, Miss Granger," the Chief Warlock announced, his voice once again formal. "I don't believe any of us has viewed the case in such a frank manner, in fact. In light of your testimony, we will take what I hope will be our final vote." He turned toward the other members. "Now, all in favor of pardoning Severus Snape for the death of Albus Dumbledore, please raise your wands."

All but two wands, Umbridge's and Snooty Wizard's, rose slowly but steadily into the air. I was so happy that I thought, for one moment, I would surely faint.

Author's Note:

I would like to thank everyone who has reviewed thus far. I amso happy you're enjoying it, and I would like nothing more than to keep updating at the pace I have set. However, I have two exams to study for and an enormous laboratory report due soon, and schoolwork is, and always has been, my top priority.

I'll do my best to fit it in between classes and bouts of studying, but please forgive me if I'm slow. :) And again, thank you so much for your reviews! You've made posting this such a fun experience.

Seven

Chapter 7 of 18

As Hermione returns to Hogwarts, Umbridge exacts her revenge.

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Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place was a riotous mass of chattering, shrieking Weasleys as Harry prepared to legally take possession of Sirius' former home. With his seventeenth birthday having passed nearly a month before, he had packed all his earthly belongings, bid the Dursleys good riddance, and moved his things to The Burrow, where they had waited while the final confrontation with Voldemort passed.

Professor McGonagall, as it turned out, had been delayed because Tonks was not only awake and pissed off, but she was making tremendous progress in moving her lower body, a feat for which the Healers had warned none of us should waste our time hoping. Her progress over the past few days, according to Professor McGonagall, had been nothing short of miraculous. When Mr. Weasley informed me after the conclusion of the trial that she had woken up two days prior and was now out of the hospital, under Remus Lupin's unceasing supervision, I was anxious to see her immediately.

Despite the wan cast to her features and her unusual thinness, she was very much herself, enjoying Remus' close attention. She was wrapped tightly in several layers of clothing, seated on his lap, her legs propped up on a nearby chair at the kitchen table. Mr. Weasley and I had arrived to find Professor McGonagall pursing her lips in disapproval at their rather intimate arrangement and Tonks loudly demanding food.

"I'm hungry," she announced again, and Remus sighed.

"Is this really... necessary?" Professor McGonagall demanded, motioning toward the two of them, her brows puckered in distaste.

"If I don't keep a hand on her at all times, she tries to move," Remus grumbled. Tonks promptly stuck out her tongue in his direction and loudly demanded food again. Remus looked slightly tired.

"Not to worry, dear, I'll fix something," Mrs. Weasley promised. Both Weasley parents were there, as well as the twins, Ron...curiously accompanied by Luna Lovegood, a development which aroused my interest greatly...and Ginny. She and Harry, having gotten back together in the two milliseconds after Voldemort's defeat, were currently entwined in one of the other chairs, staring with sickening devotion into one another's eyes. Fred and George had their latest girlfriends with them, but I had no idea what their names were. I hadn't bothered to pay much attention, in all honesty.

While Mrs. Weasley fixed Tonks a heaping supply of food...she had plenty of weight to regain; that was certain...Professor McGonagall informed me that I was eligible to move into Hogwarts that very evening and take possession of the Head Girl's suite of rooms. I thanked her, saying that I would sleep there but that I had promised to spend the remainder of my time with my parents. She understood and bid us all goodbye, saying she wanted to be back at Hogwarts when Professor Snape returned.

"Oh!" Ron exclaimed suddenly, staring at me with renewed interest. Luna had not moved her hand from his shoulders in the hour that I'd been there, and I was definitely getting the vibes of a fairly well-developed relationship from the two of them. "How'd the trial go?"

"They acquitted him of the murder charge," I said blandly. He raised an eyebrow.

"Why do you sound so unhappy? You wouldn't shut up for so many weeks about how unfair it was that they were keeping him locked up..."

"I *am* happy," I insisted, though I suspected that my exhausted tone would seem to indicate otherwise. "It's just... He knows that I'm the one who viewed his memories, and I think he's really upset. He hates me," I finished lamely, alarmed to feel tears begin to well in the corners of my eyes.

Ginny had the decency to pry her mouth away from Harry's and look at me worriedly. "He doesn't hate you, Hermione," she said gently. "And even if he did, who cares? After this year, you'll never have to see him again...and we all know you're the reason he's not spending the rest of his life in Azkaban. That's what matters."

I felt my eyes beginning to water even more, and she looked startled. "Hermione, do you...?" She seemed unsure how to finish the sentence, and just when I became alarmed that her usual perspicaciousness would land me in even more trouble, Mrs. Weasley bellowed from over in the vicinity of the stove.

"Done!" she announced loudly, and she proceeded to serve us the most enormous lunch imaginable. I had little appetite, but I made a valiant attempt to munch on my sandwiches and eat some of her soup. Tonks nearly inhaled three servings and then impolitely inquired if dessert was included.

"I'll make dessert," Ginny interjected emphatically. "Hermione, would you give me a hand?" She nodded toward the cupboards. I rose stiffly to my feet and followed; my stomach felt terribly queasy, and it wasn't from overindulging.

As she began to whip up a chocolate mousse and boss me around with surprising familiarity, she murmured under her breath, "Why is Snape bothering you so much?"

"I just... I think I embarrassed him."

"How? You got him set free. He owes you his life." Her bright eyes searched mine, and she seemed to be attempting to read the emotions on my face. I schooled myself to be expressionless and shrugged.

"I doubt he wants to be remembered as the war hero who owes his life to some stupid student."

She actually brandished the whisk at me. "You *are not* stupid!" she exclaimed, the words a little too loud. Several heads turned in our direction before drifting back to their owners' previous conversations. "Don't you dare say that. And you know Snape doesn't think you're stupid. They took the vote for Head Girl before last year ended, and McGonagall told me it was unanimous. They all wanted you."

Pride flashed through my heart, and I was relieved somewhat. I decided to change the subject before she asked me to elaborate on why I might have embarrassed him. "By the way, Gin, are Ron and Luna dating now?"

"Yeah. For a couple weeks now. He's crazy about her." She tested her confection and then offered me a bit. I declined, and once again worry flashed through her eyes. "Does it bother you?"

"No!" I hastened to assure her. "No, not at all. I'm glad, actually. The end of last year was a little... awkward for both of us, you know?"

She nodded understandingly. "I think he figured you guys were both on the same page and it was okay to move ahead. I'm glad too, actually. I don't think he's right for you."

"No, he's not," I agreed, glancing back at the table. Luna was laughing at something he'd said, her face positively lit up with enjoyment. I could see his satisfaction at the reaction he'd provoked dancing in his eyes. I was surprised to find that it ached just a bit to see them together, but not in an unpleasant way. It was more a melancholy desire for someone with whom I could share such moments, not jealousy for Luna in particular.

She would, in fact, likely prove to be a wonderful partner for him. Ron made no secret of the fact that he wanted a big family environment like the one in which he'd grown up, and I knew Luna liked kids as well. If theirs proved to be an enduring relationship, they might one day raise such a family together. It would be a wonderful thing to see, I thought.

"Hermione?" Ginny was waving a hand in front of my face. "Are you sure you're okay? You seem really distracted."

"I'm all right. Still a little nervous, I think. I'm going to go back to my parents', if it's okay with everyone."

She nodded, and I followed her to the table, where she proceeded to serve the dessert to the guest of honor, who would have polished off the entire thing in mere seconds if not for Remus' hasty intervention on everyone else's behalf. Tonks feigned a pout and thanked Ginny before digging in heartily. I wished her a speedy recovery and then said goodbye to everyone else before flooing for my parents'. We would be starting classes very soon, and I needed some time to regroup before being faced with the sight of him again.

School commenced, it seemed, before I'd even had the opportunity to blink. The Welcoming Feast was chaotic, as usual, and I collapsed into bed that first night thinking I would never have the energy to move my body again. My rooms were beautiful, very spacious and homey, but I had practically no chance to enjoy them. The next morning I was up and out early to take a brisk walk around the grounds before breakfasting with everyone at the Gryffindor table and beginning classes.

NEWT-level classes were going to be an enormous challenge. I had Transfiguration first, followed by Arithmancy and then a break for lunch. After lunch I had Herbology and then Potions, and I was terrified at what Potions would bring.

It was, as I had feared, an absolute nightmare. Recalling the necessary information for our lesson was not the issue, of course; I had read through the vast majority of the text already, and I had reviewed the first chapter before coming to class, as I always did. Still, I raised my hand only once before the force and cruelty of his expression drove me to absolute silence. He made several undeserved, cutting remarks as he stalked around my cauldron. Rather than maintaining the vindictive silence he'd trademarked during my first six years whenever I presented a flawless potion, he mocked my technique. When he demanded to know if any of us had already considered the topic of our research projects, he sneered at me for being the only one to raise my hand. Naturally I had to admit that I hoped to learn how to brew the Wolfsbane. He stared at me for a moment before brushing me off as though my stupidity didn't even warrant a response.

Finally we escaped, and I rushed immediately back to the Great Hall for dinner. Once I entered, however, I found I couldn't stand to be in my classmates' presence. I couldn't stop dwelling on the coldness in his eyes as he'd stared at me.

I muttered a lame excuse and dashed for my rooms, but I hadn't managed to do much more than pull out my Transfiguration text before the tears became too great and obscured my vision. I was curled in one corner of my massive bed, shaking with the force of my silent sobbing, when I heard a knock on the door.

Terrified that one of the professors would find me in such a state, I called out in a broken voice which belied my condition, "Who is it?"

"It's me," Ginny called back. I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or dismayed. Surely she would discern the cause of my misery. I wasn't going to be capable of lasting much longer before sobbing his name.

I let her in reluctantly, and she gasped when she laid eyes on my red, puffy face and tear-stained shirt. "Hermione!" She threw her arms around my shoulders and began stroking my hair. "What's wrong? I knew you didn't seem normal the past couple days. *What* is going on?"

We managed to make it back to my bed, where I collapsed once again on the pillows, and she murmured soft words of comfort to entice me to open up to her. "You know you can tell me anything," she said gently. "This has something to do with Snape, doesn't it?"

I didn't need to voice my shock. She smiled and chuckled a bit. "You thought I didn't notice? When I mentioned Potions to you at lunch, you actually turned green."

"I..." I couldn't get a sentence out without spluttering on my own tears.

"Would you just tell me what's wrong so I can help you?" Desperation was beginning to creep into her voice, and I felt terrible for not admitting my problem sooner.

"I'm sorry, Gin, I really am, it's just... There's nothing you can do to help me. I..."

She sat up suddenly, impossibly rigid, and stared at me for a good thirty seconds. Then she emitted a small gasp and put one small, warm hand over my own clammy, trembling one.

"You like him, don't you? I mean *really* like him," she whispered. I nodded, my eyes filling with refreshed tears, and she groaned.

"Oh, Hermione... When did this happen? When you were looking at those memories? I don't have to see what happened when he was younger to know that you feel sorry for him, but really... You're smart. You're *brilliant*, in fact, and you don't need me to tell you that he's not the same person." In the faint light of my bedroom, she seemed impossibly petite and tiny, suddenly far too young to be so mature and perceptive. I was barraged by flashbacks of our first years together at Hogwarts when we were still so young. I hated myself for what I couldn't help but feel was a retrogression in maturity. Hogwarts' Head Girl...after so many years of relentless ambition and unshakable independence...had degenerated to a wet, sniveling mess.

I took several deep, calming breaths and focused on her once more. The Ginny of the present day had returned, and the sympathy in her gaze warmed me somewhat.

"No, it wasn't the memories." I grabbed a tissue and wiped at my runny nose, uncomfortably aware of how pathetic I sounded. "I've liked him for years. It's just... After seeing those things, I can't ignore it anymore, you know? And then they almost incarcerated him for the remainder of his life, and I wouldn't have stood a chance. Now that that crisis has been averted, I feel like I need to do something."

"Why? Why do you feel like you need to do something all of a sudden? Hermione, love, listen to me: we've been talking about Snape in my family *fgears*. All my brothers had him, and not a day has passed that he hasn't been a truly horrible person to someone. I can't..." She pressed her hand against her eyes as though warding off a sudden, pounding headache, the waterfall of her beautiful red hair cascading forward to hide her face. "I can't imagine what he's done to deserve your tears. He's not worth crying over, really." She spoke with such soft regret that her words were almost inaudible.

"But he knows!" I cried far more loudly than I'd intended. She winced and lifted her hand away, brushing back her hair.

"He knows how you feel? How?"

"They made me take Veritaserum at the trial. Umbridge was there. She..."

"She asked you about him and made you confess." She said it in a flat, toneless voice entirely devoid of emotion, but the anger and hatred flashing in her eyes was astonishing. "I can't believe that she would abuse her authority like that."

"Oh, please," I retorted with a cynical snort, grabbing another tissue. "She's made a career out of *abusing her authority*. And I'm pretty certain that if she hadn't asked me, I wouldn't have had the courage to speak up and say what I did. I don't regret having it out in the open if it means that he avoids Azkaban, because we all know he didn't deserve it."

"How can you be so sure?"

"You didn't see what I saw, Gin. The things he's done... They're terrible, yes, but he was in far too deep before he ever realized what was going on." I groaned and buried my face in my pillow. "I shouldn't even have spoken about it."

She pried the pillow away and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. "I know you can't tell me what happened. I wasn't trying to press you. I just want to know *why* you feel like you owe it to him to say something just because he's heard them drag it out of you that you like him." She wiped a tear from my cheek. "You don't owe him *anything*."

"On the contrary...I owe him an apology." My wracking sobs had subsided somewhat, so I grabbed my brush and began to work my way through the many tangles in my hair. Ginny shook her head and motioned for me to hand it over to her. I did so, feeling numb, and she crawled around me and positioned herself at the head of the bed. Slowly and gently, she began to brush through my curls. I closed my eyes, and for several minutes we simply sat there while I enjoyed the meditative rhythm of the brush strokes and attempted to calm my breathing.

"Say you *did* decide to say something to him, even though you *don't* owe him an apology." The emphasis was still present, but she sounded much more accepting of my decision, as irrational and hysterical as it must have seemed to her. "How would you do it? Just march into his office and say, 'By the way, Professor, I'm sorry you had to find out from Umbridge how I feel about you'? Do you really think you could face him?"

I had a momentary vision of the harsh, stony look that would cross his features before he informed me in that impossibly silky tone that my actions were entirely out of line and condemned me to detention for the remainder of the year. In fact, that was probably giving him too much credit. The Professor Snape I knew would undoubtedly seek to humiliate me thoroughly before handing me over to Professor McGonagall for serious reprobation.

"I have to. I can't go the rest of the year like this. As if the trial wasn't bad enough, he was further humiliated by having the entire Wizengamot find out that one of his students has a ridiculous *crush* on him."

"It is *not* ridiculous." She was now plaiting my hair into a long braid. "You don't owe him an apology for how you feel."

"Look..." She set aside the brush, having finished with the long French braid, and crawled around my body to face me again. "I'm going to go to bed. Do you have to do rounds tonight?"

I nodded. "Third floor and up."

"Then you'll have plenty of time to think this over," she said in an almost lecturing tone, "but I would *really* discourage you from making any quick decisions before you've slept on it and thought about this seriously. I'm not saying that telling him you're sorry for what happened would be inappropriate, but I really think you might regret it afterward, and you can't take it back. Just bringing up that subject with him is going to be horribly uncomfortable, you know?"

I sighed. "Yes, I know...I've been dwelling on it all day. Listen, Gin, I can't tell you how incredibly grateful I am that you've listened to me. I needed a rational viewpoint on all this."

She smiled, a genuine, beaming smile. "You know I'm here whenever you need to talk. I wouldn't have gotten through all that stuff with Harry if you hadn't been there."

I nodded, feeling my eyes tear up again slightly. Seeing the two of them together was almost achingly beautiful. They were enormously, blissfully happy to the extent that it was almost impossible to imagine how their lives would have progressed without the other's involvement. Ginny had, I believed wholeheartedly, really and truly found the man with whom she would spend the rest of her life. Though I despised their frequent and extended public displays of ardor, I couldn't have been more thrilled for them.

"I'm going to go to bed. Get some sleep and think about it carefully, okay?"

I nodded again and followed her to the door. "Goodnight. And Ginny... Thanks again."

"You're welcome. And don't forget..." She turned, her hair whipping over shoulder, sparkling in the soft light of the torch hanging outside my door. "Whatever happens, he ought to be proud to have you feel that way about him."

I watched her small, retreating form, shimmering in the firelight, and tried to bring myself to believe her.

I had set my alarm to wake me promptly at quarter after six the following morning. I was in the bathroom, charming my hair dry after my shower and attempting to wrestle it into submission, when there was a soft knock at the door.

Thinking it must be Ginny once again, I dashed out still wearing my bathrobe and opened it to find Luna Lovegood staring off somewhat dreamily into another world I couldn't see. She was humming gently to herself. In one hand she held a rather ratty old book bag with many odd-looking stickers; in the other she clasped a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. It was, all in all, a classic Luna encounter; I felt heartened, thinking she only wanted to say hello.

"Hi, Luna. Come on in." I was a little surprised to see her, actually, as she'd seemed somewhat uncomfortable in my presence since I had found out she was dating Ron. Still, I bore her no ill will and was anxious that we should become good friends, so I wanted to invite her in.

"I can't stay," she said in her lilting, ethereal voice. "I was just off to the Owlery. Have to send my dad a message. Anyway," she said, "I got this in the mail this morning, and I thought I should warn you."

I glanced down at the copy of the *Prophet*, nervousness beginning to sink into my chest. "Warn me about what?"

She handed me the copy of the paper, and my heart plummeted. Umbridge had gone tattling to the *Prophet*. I suppose I shouldn't have been so astonished...she, of all people, would have been utterly incapable of handling defeat gracefully and rationally...but it still hurt abominably to see my face splashed across the front page, my eyes narrowed and my expression impassioned as I lit into the Wizengamot about keeping Severus captive illegally. The headline read, **Hogwarts Head Girl in Love with Professor and Ex-Death Eater**. Beside my face was a shot of Severus, glowering in what appeared to be the Wizengamot's general direction. I could only hope his malice had been directed solely at them.

I stared at it, feeling as though I had entered a brand new nightmare. Luna's face took on a surprisingly grounded expression, one of complete pity, and she said, "I'm really sorry, Hermione. I just wanted to warn you before you go down for breakfast, because all the common rooms get the *Prophet* every morning for the students to read..."

I nodded shortly, regretting that I came across as a bit too brusque. "I know."

"Hey," she said, smiling at me, her eyes regaining their mistiness, "don't let them get to you. They didn't see what you saw. Whatever they say, it's out of total ignorance."

She left me standing there gaping slightly, still holding the *Prophet* in my hand, my burgeoning respect for her only slightly less profound than my absolute dread of what the day would bring.

Eight

Chapter 8 of 18

Hermione focuses on her schoolwork amidst the gossip.

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Ginny met me as I was just about to enter the Great Hall. She murmured a quick offer to accompany me in, but I shook my head and motioned for her to go forward without me. "I have to do this myself," I insisted softly, swallowing hard and squaring my shoulders. "It's going to be like this the rest of the year."

"Are you going to write the *Prophet*?" she asked. "Set everything straight?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, praying they wouldn't begin to water again. "No. It's partially true, isn't it?"

"Hermione..." She put a hand on my shoulder, and I saw that her eyes were watering too.

"No, Gin, I have to live with it. I'd look like a stupid child throwing a fit if I wrote in and complained. That's the last thing I want him to think about me. *Noggo*."

She nodded and advanced through the doors. I took a brief step to the right so that no one would see me and inhaled sharply. I'd already passed several students in the hallway thus far, all of whom had stared at me with a strange mixture of fascination and repulsion. It was obvious that the first few people to read the article had quickly passed along the gist, and now everyone knew I harbored feelings of an alarmingly sexual nature for the most reviled teacher in the school.

Life was fantastic, wasn't it? I reflected wryly to myself. I'd been having enough difficulty imagining how I would continue to face Severus on a daily basis, and now the *Prophet* had graciously provided me with an additional couple hundred people with whose scorn I would have to gracefully coexist. I had no idea how Harry and Ron were going to take the news; they would likely see it as a betrayal of trust that I hadn't told them first. I cringed, envisioning them finding out in the middle of a mouthful of porridge that their best friend had been secretly harboring a crush on a man they both patently despised. I somehow doubted they would calmly let the matter drop if I peevishly pointed out that I hadn't wanted *anyone* to know; I'd fully intended to take the secret to my grave.

I lifted my head, told myself to keep my gaze focused ahead and ignore the others' stares, opened the door, and strode into the room. I had the strap of my book bag slung over my right shoulder, and when I saw that the gaze of every being in Hogwarts, both living and otherwise, was indeed plastered on my body, my palms grew sweaty. My breath quickened, and I concentrated on my steps...one foot before the other, calmly, rhythmically...until I finally reached my place at the Gryffindor table. The Hall was oppressively silent. The sound of my book bag hitting the table seemed to resonate throughout the entire castle.

"Morning," I said to Harry and Ron, reaching for a slice of toast and some jam. Ron's mouth was gaping open, its half-masticated contents fully on view. I cringed and snapped, "Ron, chew with your mouth closed. Harry, would you pass me the butter, please?"

Both boys did as they were told, their eyes impossibly wide. Finally, after what felt like hours, as I liberally applied strawberry jam to my toast, the usual breakfast chatter amongst the House tables resumed, though at a markedly lower volume. People were still shooting me what they apparently considered covert glances. In reality, everyone took turns swiveling in their seats and gaping at me in the most ridiculously rude manner. They would then turn back to their friends and whisper as though I hadn't clearly seen their actions, thinking they were being totally unobtrusive.

"Hermione..." Harry began. Ginny elbowed him in the ribs, and I giggled. She gave me a small, conspiratorial smile and then glowered at Harry, who had the good grace to look chastened. Ron looked alarmed at the emergence of such a foreign sound from me.

"No, come on, Ginny, she has to tell us what's going on." Ron let his fork fall back to his plate, clattering unpleasantly, and commenced with the interrogation. "Hermione, *how* could you say those things about *him*? Were they true?"

I paused mid-chew and stared at him while Ginny snorted and shook her head. "Ron," I said in a calm, measured tone, applying more jam to my toast purely out of mounting nervousness, "if you'd read the entirety of the article...which is precisely what you should have done before thinking you had any right to interrogate me, I might add...you'd know that I was put under Veritaserum. Of course they're true."

"So you're serious, then. You're in love with Snape." Harry's eyes were flashing dangerously, but his voice remained surprisingly calm. I had the distinct impression his ribs were afraid of further retaliation from Ginny's elbow if he became too vehement with me.

"No, I'm not."

"But you said..."

"I *know* what I said, Harry, and I did not say that I was in love with him. I most certainly am not." I bit into an apple and chewed thoughtfully, turning toward the teachers' table and staring out the large windows at the far end of the Hall. It appeared to be a beautiful day outside: bright blue and absolutely cloudless. No doubt it would be quite warm as well. Mentally I began to pencil a late afternoon walk into my schedule, directly after my last class and before supper.

As I allowed my gaze to wander back to my friends, it crossed Severus', purely inadvertently, of course. I was shocked to find that there was no malice present in his expression; he was regarding me with an almost appraising look as he sipped at a mug of what I assumed to be tea or coffee. A thrill of purely feminine satisfaction ran

through my chest, and I hoped that I had succeeded in acting like a mature young woman who handled the situation gracefully rather than the petulant child who was still residing in my mind, pounding and wailing to be let out.

I wanted revenge. I wanted to exact my vengeance on Dolores Umbridge with a passion so intense I could feel it sitting there in my gut, a constant presence that was very much physical. I suppressed it and turned my attention back to Ron, who was floundering to explain what he still viewed as a cosmic impossibility.

"So... You like him, but you're not in love with him," Ron finally recited, his eyebrows furrowed like large, fuzzy red caterpillars. It was woefully clear that he'd spent the whole five minutes he'd been silent struggling to solve the apparent contradiction I'd become overnight. Harry looked equally confused, and an angry expression once again overtook his dark features. He opened his mouth to say something, but I interjected.

"Brilliant use of deductive skills, Ron." I downed the remainder of my milk, clamped down on my apple, and rose to my feet. I took it out of my mouth again just long enough to tell them that I would see them in Transfiguration and left the Hall feeling oddly satisfied with myself. I let the door bang shut, dousing the malicious whispers that resumed circling the moment I left my seat, and headed for the Transfiguration room. Now I had to hope that the other instructors would be reasonable...or at the very least, as dumbstruck as my friends.

Though I often thought it was an immense mistake not to approach Severus...Professor Snape...and apologize for the unsavory manner in which the rest of the world had been apprised of my affections, I felt it best to remain quiet and allow him time to cool down. In class he was as unrelentingly nasty as ever, but I simply murmured, "Yes, sir," and corrected my technique per his instructions. I never talked back, never raised my hand, and most importantly, I never sought to address him unless he addressed me first. I was, in short, a model student, and before long my classmates' petty insults became irritation on my behalf. No one understood why he saw fit to continue with his execrable treatment of me when clearly I was doing nothing to provoke his reactions.

Fall drew to a close, and the transition to winter came upon us suddenly. Between my duties as Head Girl and my focus on my studies, I rarely saw Harry and Ron outside of meals, and they were wholly absorbed in their girlfriends; with the exception of a few nasty remarks from Harry and disgusted looks from Ron, neither appeared to have the time or the desire to harass me. They had undoubtedly deemed it a passing infatuation that would disappear once I regained my senses. Not wanting to upset the delicate truce, I refrained from mentioning him in any respect other than as my Potions instructor, which seemed to keep the boys' horrified expressions at bay.

In mid-November talk amongst the Gryffindor seventh years was dominated by the progress of our independent NEWT Potions projects and the upcoming Yule Ball, which Professor McGonagall had decided to resurrect partially to raise students' morale and partially in recognition of Harry, who had yet to be formally congratulated by the Ministry. Minister Scrimgeour was by all accounts furious that Harry had scorned his aid and then made a wild success of bringing down his enemy without the Ministry's support, and none of us had any doubt that the official gratitude of the Ministry of Magic would be a long time in coming, if indeed they ever proffered it.

My NEWT-level Potions class contained very few students, and most were consulting with older siblings or relatives in completing their projects. As I had no such help and was still desperate to learn to brew the Wolfsbane, I went first to Remus, who had been reinstated as Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor. His post-war status as a hero had warmed public opinion considerably, and no one had seemed to put up much protest before the Board of Governors when Professor McGonagall had announced the appointment in July.

He pronounced it a brilliant idea and one he was certain I would be capable of pursuing, but he also admitted that he was hardly the one from whom I should seek advice. He must have noticed my stricken look at this pronouncement because he then hastily added, "Don't worry, I wasn't going to suggest that you ask Professor Snape."

It hung unspoken between us: he was really the only one capable of brewing such an immensely complicated potion and procuring the finest quality of ingredients. I had filed him away as my last resort, but I continued to tell myself firmly that if it became necessary, I would make a formal request for his help via Professor McGonagall so that my motives could not possibly be construed as anything other than legitimate.

"What about Madam Pomfrey?" Remus suggested over tea that afternoon in his office. "I don't know that she's ever brewed it, but I know she occasionally helps Professor Snape get ingredients. And she had to be pretty proficient at Potions in order to pass her exams, so..."

I brightened immediately and dashed off to visit Madam Pomfrey, who seemed thrilled at the prospect.

"Mind you, I've never done it myself," she told me after I had turned down her enormous plate of cookies for the seventh time in the past ten minutes. "It will be a learning experience for both of us, certainly. And the ingredients will be difficult to find...you'll have to ask Professor Snape to order some of them for you since they're controlled substances. I don't know if he'll have enough in stock for both of you to be brewing at the same time."

We began our brewing sessions Tuesday and Thursday evenings. After supper we would meet in one of the unused laboratory rooms in the dungeons, which Madam Pomfrey explained were typically used to increase brewing area if large numbers of students suddenly became ill and emergency brewing became necessary.

I found the potion itself to be amazingly stimulating but also frustrating in a way I'd never before encountered. Regardless how many times I read through the directions, they would never become truly cohesive in my mind. I would recite the steps to myself and struggle to fill in the gaps. It seemed virtually impossible to remember all the brief instructions to be performed in the milliseconds between larger stages, which, if neglected, would render the potion useless. At several critical points I would put myself at enormous risk if I didn't add the proper ingredients in the indicated manner.

Nevertheless, I persevered. I spent every available moment with my head shoved in the pages of countless textbooks, all brimming with information pertaining to lycanthropy as a condition, medicinal ingredients, and other related topics. The library became my primary base of operations. While conducting my evening rounds, I would recite ingredient lists to myself, mentally cataloging them and cross-referencing them with the particular point in the brewing process at which they had to be performed. When Harry and Ron found me curled up in the Gryffindor common room with Nearly Headless Nick, who was quizzing me with a set of flashcards on which I'd written the name of each ingredient and the proper dose and stage, they concluded that I'd let slip the last vestiges of my sanity.

Madam Pomfrey and I began by practicing the brewing of the base. After two weeks of relentless research, study, and memorization, we successfully brewed the base of the potion, an incredible exercise in endurance. We began Saturday morning at ten and did not finish the final processes until nearly one o'clock Sunday morning. We had completely lost track of time and were spiritedly discussing one of the more difficult steps when powerful footfalls in the hallway caused us to jump.

I didn't even need to wonder who it might have been. As I was bent over the cauldron, studying the subtleties of the base's hue with complete concentration, I heard Madam Pomfrey greet him as he walked into the room. I glanced over and found him in my peripheral vision, standing near the workbench with his arms crossed over his chest.

"I think you've done it properly, dear," she cried happily, patting me on the shoulder. "You were right, obviously...stirring a bit more gently was the better choice. Look at that color! Absolutely perfect." She hauled a gigantic textbook off the workbench and thrust it at Professor Snape's face. He did not flinch...he simply stood there, impassive...but I noticed his dark eyes flicker to the picture she was attempting to show him.

"I do not need a picture to determine whether the brewing has been done properly, Poppy," he murmured, his voice almost too low for me to hear. Then he began to advance on me. Alarmed, I drew back sharply, and when our eyes met, I noticed something akin to regret flickering in his for just a moment.

He leaned over slowly and examined it with an exacting eye for what felt like ages. Finally he announced in a firm tone, "Your shredding should have been more precise. The color is very slightly off. However..." He stirred it slightly, watching the viscosity of the liquid as it flowed. "Everything else appears to have been done correctly. It will be effective."

I couldn't contain a gleeful exclamation, and Madam Pomfrey laughed delightedly and hugged me. "We'll have to start on the next step tomorrow evening," she reminded me, handing me my book bag. "And now I think you'd better get back to your rooms...I've kept you up far too late, even for the Head Girl!"

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you for all your help." I began to shove my notes and quill back into my bag, my fingers shaking as I frantically wondered what I should say to him. I wanted to thank him for his appraisal, but I had no idea how to walk the precipitous line between being too impersonal and too effusive. Finally I settled for meeting his eyes and saying, "Thank you, sir."

I thought he gave a short, brusque nod, but I couldn't be certain. I fled the room before his eyes could draw me in too deeply.

November led into December with astonishing speed. I hadn't seen much of Harry and Ron, or anyone from my year, admittedly; I spent all my spare time in Madam Pomfrey's office or the lab, discussing the latest stage in the brewing process. When curfew fell and my rounds were completed for the evening, I would generally retire to my rooms for the night; the girls in Gryffindor were constantly chattering about nothing but the Yule Ball, even Ginny, and I had no particular desire to spend any amount of time in the common room.

Just over a week before the ball and the beginning of our holidays, I was working on the third trial of one of the more difficult stages. I had gone immediately to the lab after dinner and begun to work at shredding and dicing the ingredients with absolute precision. I had already told Madam Pomfrey I would speak with Professor Snape that weekend about ordering several items we would require over the holidays, as I had decided to remain at Hogwarts in order to continue working with her. However, before long I had lost track of time, utterly absorbed in the rhythm of chopping and stirring.

Nearly an hour before, my casual humming had progressed to outright singing. There was never anyone in the dungeons on a Friday evening. Even Professor Snape, who doled out a notoriously large number of weekend detentions, generally lingered over supper or had a meeting with the other teachers, so the possibility of being overheard wasn't exactly foremost on my mind.

I was in the middle of a particularly heartfelt rendition of the chorus, all the while stirring the cauldron and keeping a watchful eye on the level of the flames, when I felt the distinctly disconcerting sensation that someone was standing directly behind me. I knew it had to be him, and though my voice wavered for just a moment, I didn't want to show fear or back down. I continued singing and stirring as I had been, adding the next ingredient at precisely the right moment. He did not move. I couldn't hear him breathing over the hammering of my heart.

We stood that way for what felt like ages. I finished the song, adjusted the flame, and then stepped carefully away from the cauldron. I walked over to the workbench with my back remaining toward him and resumed chopping ingredients.

"The flame must be less intense."

My small knife slipped, and I nearly chopped off my left thumb. I had never heard him speak without at least the barest suggestion of mockery or contempt, but neither were present in his voice. His tone was simple and quiet, and the timbre of his voice when it was not impeded by unpleasantness sent an involuntary shiver coursing down my spine.

Reluctantly I turned toward him and walked over to the cauldron. I wanted to replay the sound in my mind until I was driven mad with wanting. Instead I forced myself to forget it and bent down, altering the height of the flame almost imperceptibly.

"There?"

"Yes."

I returned to the workbench, trying to maintain an outer facade of calm despite the fact that my hands were beginning to tremble very lightly. Grasping the small knife and resuming the rhythm of my work helped to calm me somewhat. I heard the slight rustle of his cloak as he leaned over to examine the potion. When I turned to steal a quick peek, I found him crouched over on one bended knee, examining the cauldron more closely than I'd ever seen him stare at anything. I lingered in my observation; his hair had fallen forward to obscure his eyes, and I had no doubt that he could not see me as I regarded him.

Just as swiftly as I'd heard him kneel, he rose back to his feet. His voice, when again he spoke, was still remarkably neutral. "You will soon be requiring several items Madam Pomfrey cannot furnish you."

I nodded and didn't turn from my position. "Yes. I made a note to find you and ask you about them this evening, but I sort of got lost in all this." I motioned to the stack of plants to which I had yet to attend, feeling myself blushing.

"Got lost?" he drawled. Something about the way he caressed the words as he spoke them made me flush.

"It's very... meditative. I tend to lose track of time. Maybe that's just me." Terrified that I might begin rambling, I focused instead on adding the final ingredient for the night and preserving the others.

He made a noise that almost sounded like an expression of assent. "I agree."

My hand slipped again, and I nearly dropped the container I'd been holding. *Heagreed with me?*

The Professor Snape to whom I'd become accustomed after so many years did indeed appear to be absent that evening. It was Severus who'd examined my potion; Severus who had nodded and understood the amazing feeling I couldn't communicate, that complete dissociation from reality that was the natural extension of the slow, precise chopping and cutting. I found myself wondering if it was the reason he'd opted to pursue the field professionally. He had been a solitary creature his entire life, a progression I had been fortunate enough to witness, and the silence and the respite of potions preparation were unparalleled.

I had nearly finished cleaning, and he simply stood there, following my movements with his gaze. As I bent over to place a mild stasis charm on the cauldron, I could feel the heat radiating from his body and caught the slightest suggestion of the scent that always heralded his presence. It had to be aftershave, I realized...I had discovered that he shaved the Muggle way, after all.

As I drew up, we were face to face. Time stood still, and I couldn't drag my eyes away from the contours of his face, the dark shadows cast by his hair that covered his eyes and caressed his cheekbones. His lips looked impossibly soft and so very close...

"I will order your ingredients." I almost cried out in protest when he broke the spell and turned on his heel, stalking out of the room. His tone had regained its usual haughty air. Groaning when I was sure he was out of audible range, I muttered several curses and finished with my cleaning. I'd been too obvious in my admiration, and it had driven him away.

Way to go, Granger.

I could have had a rewarding conversation with him, but rather than take advantage of his presence for legitimate gain, I'd been unable to do more than stare at him like the lovelorn fool I was. It was going to make an even greater impression on him when he saw me at the Yule Ball, moping miserably in the corner because I couldn't dance with the only man who truly interested me.

Or could I?

Nine

Chapter 9 of 18

Hermione gathers her courage.

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Hogwarts was filled with girls who gave little thought to their regular classes but seemed constantly preoccupied with the thought of the upcoming Yule Ball. I'd seen their type my entire life...they penciled in dances, dates, and other social engagements weeks, oftentimes *months*, beforehand. Their preparedness was both confusing and astonishing to me; while I envied their obvious enthusiasm, I simply had never possessed the time or the patience to give such matters more than passing consideration.

With my attention wholly focused on our progress with the Wolfsbane, I spent little time that week aware of the fact that the Yule Ball was imminent. Ginny frequently shot me questioning glances and looked as though she wanted to speak with me, but though I smiled at her guiltily every time, I always had to rush off after my meals to attend to one chore or another in order to free more time for my research. When I was not attending lecture or making rounds, it was almost solely Madam Pomfrey with whom I interacted, and she paid no mind to the castle's social goings-on.

Needless to say, our last day of classes and the evening of the Yule Ball didn't simply rush up on me...they pounced. I was in the laboratory finishing with my work when Madam Pomfrey, who was just about to leave, made idle mention of it.

"I'd better be off," she grumbled, making no effort to hide the disgust evident in her voice. "I'm sure I'll have to treat at least a dozen students for love potions tonight. They never *do* learn."

"What?" I called distractedly from the work bench, where I was putting my nervous energy to industrious use. A sudden collision with Professor Snape in the hallway earlier that day had left my heart unable to settle at its normal pace, and I still felt taut and on edge. He had been as caustic as ever in his remarks to me that week, and so gradually I'd slipped back into the mode of viewing him as my professor and admiring him from afar.

"The ball," she called back. "Every time they promise me they'll make sure the students don't manage to get a hold of illicit potions, and every time Severus confiscates at least six and sends the poor students to me. Merlin knows *he'd* let them suffer rather than help them."

Her mention of the ball only faintly registered in some distant compartment of my mind. I was torn between paying continued attention to the ingredients I had to preserve and the fact that she had, four days ago now, ceased to refer to him formally as "Professor Snape" in my presence. She'd reverted to calling him by his given name every time, and I couldn't help but wonder if she even realized what she was doing.

Perhaps, I thought wryly, she figured that between the two of us, there was no further need to be formal...I had, after all, admitted before the Wizarding world's largest judiciary committee that I was attracted to him. What use was any further dissembling?

I could hear her footsteps receding down the hallway and had just turned back to make one final observation of the cauldron when the remainder of her statement began echoing in my brain.

The ball.

I'd *completely* forgotten about the damned ball.

My immediate thought was that becoming panicky over a ridiculous ball was nothing short of pathetic. A week prior, I had honestly fantasized about strapping on a great dress and boldly asking him to dance, but the rational part of my mind knew that I would never muster the courage to do such a thing. And, after all, it had been an absurd schoolgirl crush that had led to my previous conniving in the first place. Of what importance were lovely dresses and fixing one's hair when I had a potion to attend?

I had done everything I could possibly do for that particular trial, however, and I now had at least twenty-four hours to wait before I could continue. In the process of expending as much of my nervous energy as I possibly could, I had never spared a thought for stopping early enough to prepare for the ball.

I made the run from the dungeons to the main floor in record time. I was horrified to see who was standing just across the hall, staring intently at me, when I burst onto the scene, looked around for the nearest clock, and swore rather loudly.

"Damn!" I cried, noting that I now had less than an hour before it began. I hadn't had an evening engagement for which to prepare since our fourth year, and as I recalled, taming my hair had taken a great deal more time than that.

"Is there a problem, Miss Granger?" his silky voice called softly from the entrance to the Great Hall. He appeared to be standing watch just outside the doors, accompanied by the taciturn Slytherin ghost, the Bloody Baron. I was momentarily surprised to see the two of them standing together, obviously having been in conversation, but I supposed their somewhat saturnine personalities were acceptable to one another.

I opened my mouth to respond but shut it immediately and shook my head. I could *feel* my ratty, unmanageable hair as it tangled and snarled behind my head. I was in for a hell of a battle if I intended to present myself looking at all decent, and judging by his narrowed eyes and the slightly cruel slant to his lips, Professor Snape knew it.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for inappropriate language, then," the voice murmured again, its register almost too low for me to discern. Even from that distance, the sheer masculinity of his voice made my knees weak. The fact that I was flushed and overheated from brewing all day did nothing to alleviate the sudden spike in awareness.

I didn't stick around to hear what nasty commentary he might have regarding my obvious distress. I turned tail and ran up the stairs two at a time, praying I would be able to find something in my closet suitable for the festivities.

I had always been a jeans-and-T-shirt type of girl, as any of my friends could attest. I occasionally exchanged the jeans for a comfortable pair of corduroys, but I certainly had never been the type to waste half an hour or more on my morning cleansing and dressing ritual. I had only my green summer dress and black heels, and I had absolutely no idea how I could possibly Transfigure the dress to make it acceptable. I could change the shape, naturally, but the color or any other details? I was at a complete loss.

I pulled it on hastily and Transfigured one of my winter scarves into a very slim but nonetheless effective black shawl, which I draped over my shoulders. Then I tripped through my door and ran for the Gryffindor common room, where I found Ginny seated comfortably in front of the fireplace. She'd roped a fellow sixth-year girl into helping her with her hair, it seemed.

"Gin," I gasped, mildly out of breath. A month ago I'd traded walking around the grounds for slow jogging, and my endurance had improved considerably, but a combination of increased studying and heavy snowfall had impeded my progress somewhat as of late. I couldn't seem to breathe deeply enough to slow my heartbeat.

Ginny stared at me, clearly lost for words. "Hermione!" she exclaimed. "Did you... Are you *just now* getting ready?" For a girl who did include her appearance among her priorities, my hasty approach to preparing must have verged on the sacrilegious.

"I forgot," I admitted, collapsing beside her. She was now laughing outright at my alarm.

"I didn't even think you'd go," she managed to gasp through her giggles. The girl arranging her hair frowned in consternation and muttered for her to keep her head still.

"Okay," Ginny said, "I don't know what to do with you." She eyed my dress critically. "You didn't even buy a different dress?"

"I told you: I *completely* forgot. I remembered a week ago and told myself I'd have to try to order something through a catalog, but it totally slipped my mind. And then Hogsmeade was canceled this past weekend due to weather and I had no other reminders..."

I stopped for breath. "Okay, look: can you give me something for my hair? I've got an idea what to do with the dress, but I don't have anything for my hair."

Ginny nodded and began fumbling through the many beauty products on the floor beside her. Her dress was a beautiful deep green that threw her fair skin and bright eyes into stark relief. Harry, I thought smugly, was going to have a heart attack when he laid eyes on her.

"Here." She handed me a bottle whose label had long since flaked off. I had no idea what it contained.

"What...?"

"Run upstairs and take a quick shower," she instructed me. "Make sure to grab some of my stuff off the counter. You smell like the dungeons." She wrinkled her nose to emphasize her point. "When you're done, you can use my lotion and whatever, but make sure you put plenty of this in your hair before you cast a drying charm, okay?"

I nodded. "Any other instructions, beauty guru?"

She bit her lip pensively and fingered one of my flyaway curls. "Yeah. After you put that in, take a few hair bands...there should be plenty of them on the counters from all of us, don't worry...cast a cleaning charm on a couple of them, and roll up large sections. *Then* cast the drying charm. It might help to give you curls instead of just frizz."

She grinned, unrepentant, when I smacked her arm in outrage. I dashed up to the sixth-year girls' dorm, my access unimpeded thanks to my position as Head Girl, and hurriedly undressed. The shower stung painfully after the cold, drafty air of the dungeons, but I ignored it and plowed ahead with her directions. I washed my hair, scrubbed at my skin until it shone, and slathered on a lightly scented lotion that Ginny had left sitting on her bedside table.

I tugged the dress back on quickly and began to run the mystery concoction through my hair, separating the damp curls and applying it as consistently and thoroughly as I could. After casting a perfunctory cleansing charm on several hair bands, I separated my hair into six large sections and wrapped them tightly, securing them with the bands. Praying for more controlled, defined hair rather than, as Ginny had so eloquently put it, "just frizz," I closed my eyes and directed a drying charm at the damp sections.

Placing my wand on the counter, I kept my eyes closed while carefully extricating the hair bands and unrolling my hair. When I opened them a moment later, I very nearly screamed. After the ball, I planned to waste no time in demanding from Ginny the name, price, and ingredients of whatever it was I'd just slicked through my hair because its effects were far superior to the Sleek-Eazy potion I had applied fourth year. My hair was still thick and curly, undoubtedly preparing to fluff out rebelliously at any second, but for the time being it looked fantastic. Devoid of the usual kinks, which had been replaced by looser spirals, it now fell past my shoulder blades.

Grinning madly, I dashed back down into the common room. The two girls had now exchanged places, and Ginny was studying the blonde girl's long, straight hair carefully, mulling over what to do with it.

"Hey!" she cried when I reentered. "You look terrific!" She ran her fingers through my hair and beamed at me. "I'm jealous. Your hair's so pretty like that! Here..." She grabbed another product from the mess they'd created in the center of the room and began to run it through her fingers. It looked barely more viscous than water, but when she ran it through my hair and offered me a small cosmetic mirror, I was thrilled. Each individual strand shone like it had been recently burnished.

"Gorgeous," she pronounced me, and then she pointed firmly in the direction of the Fat Lady's portrait. "Now go! You've got"...she glanced at her small gold watch..."twenty minutes to figure that mess out." I knew without asking that she was referring to the dress.

I had frequently hoped I would soon have the opportunity to be reunited with Dumbledore, in the form of his portrait, of course, but I had rarely seen Professor McGonagall, with the obvious exceptions of class and the regular meetings with the Heads of House and the Head Boy and Girl. I couldn't imagine how she'd been controlling the immense stress of both teaching Transfiguration and running the school, but when I entered her office, I found the answer immediately.

She was sitting at her desk, looking positively exhausted, with a massive tea service in front of her. Professor Sprout sat across from her, munching on a biscuit, and the portrait-Dumbledore, wide awake and twinkling benevolently, waved me a jovial hello when I entered. A painful clenching in my chest reminded me instantly of just how badly I missed him, and I knew instinctively that he had been Professor McGonagall's source of sanity.

"Miss Granger!" she exclaimed, putting down her tea cup and appraising my unusual attire.

"Hello, Professor. Hello, Professor Dumbledore!" I cried, tears pricking at my eyes. I'd momentarily forgotten my errand, but Professor McGonagall seemed to understand.

"Hello, dear girl. How are you enjoying your last year?" he asked, motioning for me to have a seat in one of the chairs across from the desk. I did so, and Professor Sprout poured me a cup of tea, which I began to gulp nervously.

"It's wonderful so far," I admitted. "But I'm afraid I haven't exactly kept on top of things like the Head Girl should...I completely forgot that the Yule Ball is this evening, and I never went to buy a dress!" I gestured in chagrin to the light summer dress and rather pathetic attempt at a shawl, and Dumbledore burst out laughing.

"No need to worry," he said. "Our dear Minerva is not a Transfiguration instructor for nothing, yes? Minerva, surely you can do something for her."

"That's why I'm here," I admitted, turning my gaze guiltily to Professor McGonagall, who was smiling slightly for the first time in weeks. "I'm truly very sorry, Professor. I know I should have been prepared to help with the ball, but between research and classes and all my other duties, I really did forget."

"There's no need to fret," she promised. "Now, stand up. Let's see what we can do."

I did so, and she and Professor Sprout immediately began volleying ideas back and forth.

"Burgundy!" Professor Sprout threw out. "Long, and with long sleeves. I think she'd look lovely, don't you, Minerva?"

"She'll get rather too warm in all that," the practical Headmistress pointed out, pursing her lips in thought. "No, I think if you're going to go with something long, Miss Granger, it had better be strapless. Now, what color would you prefer?"

I thought for a moment, tempted to say black or blue, but I decided black was far overdone, and wearing blue to the Yule Ball seemed completely cliché. Half the girls

present would be hoping to achieve the sleek, icy look that had predominated at the last ball.

"Something light, please," I said. "Rose, or cream."

"Cream would look lovely with her complexion," Professor Sprout piped up with a clap of her hands. "Strapless and cream-colored, perhaps a little tucked in at the waist? She'd look beautiful, Minerva."

"Yes, she would." Professor McGonagall raised her wand and said, "Now, lift your arms, Miss Granger. I don't want to get your limbs tangled while the fabric rearranges itself." She cast a quick incantation, and I felt the disconcerting sensation of my clothing melting and slipping, disappearing from one area only to reappear, snug and silky, in another. When she'd finished, it fit perfectly across my breasts, dipping in to complement my waist and flaring out with the shape of my hips.

"Beautiful! Just as I thought," Professor Sprout said happily. Professor McGonagall made no comment; she had begun to work her way around the massive wooden desk and was now circling me critically, eyeing the fall of the fabric in every location. Finally she gave a satisfied nod and an unusually bright smile.

"You look lovely, Miss Granger."

"Thank you." I was half breathless with relief. "I really do apologize, Professor...I feel very ashamed that I forgot about all this."

She gave me a warm pat on the shoulder. "Not at all. I've never seen a student with a course load as challenging as yours this year...there's no reason to feel ashamed. Now," she continued, "I think we'd best get down to the Hall. They'll want to start at any moment, and Merlin knows Severus can only hold them off for so long before abandoning his post entirely." She finished on a good-natured grumble, and from overhead, Dumbledore chuckled richly.

"I told you not to entrust that to him," he chided her gently. "The poor man couldn't care less if they trample the place before it's properly decorated. He hates chaperoning these affairs."

"I don't care how he feels about them personally! My command should be word enough!" she exclaimed in frustration. Professor Sprout, dressed in rose-colored dress robes and a frighteningly ornate beaded shawl, started laughing and took my hand gently. We began to make our way downstairs, Professor McGonagall following closely behind. The noise emerging from the Great Hall had already reached deafening levels.

"Go ahead, dear," Professor Sprout murmured to me with a mischievous wink. She gently prodded me in the direction of the doors, which had already fallen shut behind the last party goer to enter. Steeling myself against the overwhelming compulsion to skulk unnoticed on the edges and seek a glimpse of one person in particular, I pulled open the doors and walked forward purposefully. The light tapping of my heels, perfectly in sync with those of the other women, bolstered my confidence. We made our way across the room. As had been done in my fourth year, the usual dining tables had been cleared out to provide ample space for an arrangement of smaller, cozier tables and an area for everyone to dance.

As we forged ahead, the crowd parted to admit us entry. I became slightly flushed and a little embarrassed at the thought of my lack of preparedness; I hadn't even put on some makeup to give myself a little color and confidence. My lips were bare, and my skin was undoubtedly still tinged red from the fierce scrubbing in the shower. I began to worry that I might closely resemble a lobster wrapped in a toga.

Finally we reached the front. I quickly stepped aside and sat next to Ginny, who had already scouted out a table for us. Professor McGonagall gave a brief but heartening speech about our victory as a community and Harry's incomparable courage in defeating Voldemort the summer prior. The Hall saluted him with a rousing bit of applause, and then the party commenced, the small group of chamber musicians breaking into a lively waltz.

"You look great!" Ginny informed me, rather too loudly. I took a suspicious glance at what her glass contained and concluded that someone must have spiced the punch just a bit too liberally. "I love that color on you, by the way." She began to finger the folds of my skirt admiringly while Harry and Ron snickered at the picture we made, me looking uncomfortably warm and self-conscious, and Ginny with her hand halfway up my skirt.

"Think you could give me my girlfriend back now?" Harry teased. I glared at him, smacking Ginny's hand away, and she laughed and crawled into Harry's lap.

"Good God," I moaned, "you're not going to do *that* again, are you?" I found myself half hoping one of the teachers would reprimand them for indecent displays of affection in public; but then again, I was probably the only one at the moment who was sufficiently lovesick and bitter to begrudge them their intimacy.

"It's only because he won't dance with me," Ginny retorted with a displeased, feminine pout. "He says ~~he~~ *doesn't dance* after the last Yule Ball."

"What's wrong with you?" I demanded of Harry, pouring myself a glass of water. My hand shook lightly, setting the ice cubes crackling and tinkling in the liquid. I was endeavoring to pay attention to my friends while keeping one eye on the people milling about, scouting around for the large void of black I knew had to be contained somewhere within.

"You and Parvati were fine last time," I hastened to finish when they began giving me searching looks. I'd spent too much time feigning concentration on my water when in reality, I'd been scanning the crowd.

"I hate dancing," Harry griped, "and unless they force me, I'm not going to do it."

"But what if you're the only one not dancing, mate?" Ron pointed out. Luna was nearby, chatting with a friend, and Ron was continually shooting her longing glances. She looked particularly alluring, I thought, with her long, dark blonde hair piled atop her head and a gauzy, light blue dress floating around her. It completed her general air of surreality nicely.

Harry snorted. "You *know* Snape won't dance." He clamped his mouth shut the moment the remark emerged and glanced over at me with sudden remorse. Ginny had been halfway to elbowing him in the ribs, but she halted when she took note of his visible regret.

"How do you know?" I returned lightly. "Just because he didn't dance last time, that doesn't mean he won't this time."

Ron choked on his drink. "What, you mean with you?" I felt my ears burn when several people from the nearby tables turned to glance at us interestedly. There was *definitely* an illicit additive in that punch. I wanted to smack him.

Luna, having heard his rather loud and cynical outburst, seemed to float as she meandered over to us. She alighted next to Ron and began to lightly run her fingers through his hair. "You look really nice, Hermione," she told me in her lilting, half-absent voice.

"Thanks, Luna." I sipped at more water. "That's all thanks to Ginny and Professor McGonagall, though...I totally forgot this was even scheduled until about an hour ago."

"Really?" She raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I would've thought it would take far more than an hour to get your hair under control."

Ron spluttered again, and his cheeks grew very red, but I laughed it off. I was accustomed to Luna's unusual frankness, and God knew that after eighteen years, I'd come to agree with that particular opinion wholeheartedly. "I thought it would too," I assured her, "but Ginny proved me wrong, I guess."

"You really do look lovely. You should ask Snape to dance."

This time Ginny had to abandon her comfortable position in Harry's lap in order to dash around the table and forcefully pound on Ron's back several times. He'd inhaled so much of his drink that he couldn't breathe properly for the next three minutes. The rest of them simply sat there silently, each loath to be the first to respond.

"You know..." Mercifully, Ginny finally broke the silence. "Why *don't* you?"

"...You mean other than the fact that he'll say no?" I supplied dryly.

"You don't know that. One of the Hufflepuffs has already danced with Professor Sprout, and one of the Ravenclaw girls is out there dancing with Flitwick. And she's a fourth year," Ginny added, her brows crinkling slightly in distaste. "That actually *does* seem inappropriate."

"There's nothing wrong with a friendly dance."

I realized belatedly that I'd just annihilated my own argument, and the two girls continued to goad me until finally, the butterflies in my stomach fluttering wildly at the thought of being in his arms again, if only for a moment, I rose. Hesitantly I began to search for my target. He was standing across the room on the outskirts of the crowd, his arms crossed defensively over his chest. His entire posture bespoke his disgruntled attitude, and it hit me with astonishing force just how foolish I was to think that he would warm to anyone in such an environment.

"Go on," Luna prodded softly. "You'll always regret it if you don't at least try."

"Well, there *is* a Valentine's dance this year," Harry interjected. "You don't have to ask him now. You could wait..."

I knew that Luna was correct, however, even if only for the short term. If I didn't at least make the attempt, I would spend the entire night...and undoubtedly the next few months...wondering if I'd passed up the opportunity to discover sensations that, theretofore, I had only been able to imagine: what his hand would feel like wrapped around my waist and the warmth of him swaying against me. The thought was intoxicating.

I waved off Harry's objection and started forward, aware from the moment I began to move that his sharp eyes had caught me. They were watching every centimeter of my progress in his direction.

Ten

Chapter 10 of 18

Hermione realizes the gravity of her mistake.

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A pregnant hush fell over the entire Great Hall as I made my way toward him. People subconsciously stepped out of my way, casting agitated glances back and forth between my face and his. Everyone expected to see him explode, to lash out and strike me where I stood, for my intentions could not possibly have been more evident. But no one spoke, including him.

My heels clicked softly as I alighted before him. He still towered over me, as dark and impassive as ever, but if I was not imagining it, there was a slightly amused set to his lips as he ran his dark gaze over my face. I noticed it linger on my shoulders, where my hair tumbled freely, before continuing upward to meet my eyes. I felt the sudden and irrational desire to impertinently ask him if he liked what he'd seen.

"Professor."

"Miss Granger." The tone was neutral, but the voice was very, very silky, almost seductive. The rest of the world seemed to fall away as our eyes caught, and the reverberation of his voice in my blood made heat suffuse my entire body.

"You are not about to ask me to dance, are you, Miss Granger? That would be... imprudent indeed." I noticed a slight rustling of his cloak where his fingers lay beneath the thick fabric. If I hadn't known any better, I would have said he was rubbing his fingers together nervously.

The thought that I might possess any power of him at all was a heady notion indeed, but I was a student, and we were standing in the center of the Great Hall. A dance was all I could possibly hope to achieve, and even then, I strongly doubted he would be at all receptive.

Why, *why* had I thought this would be successful? I hadn't, really. I'd known the second I had departed our table that Luna's suggestion was ludicrous, though she undoubtedly meant well. But I, foolish girl, had felt the need to test my resolve, to determine whether or not I could ask him the fateful question before nearly the entire student body.

"And if I were?" I replied slowly after a moment, resisting the urge to cock my head slightly and peer at him even more closely. A muscle was twitching in his lower jaw, and he seemed to be gritting his teeth tensely. He was far too confident and self-assured a man to be truly embarrassed, I knew; my retrospection over the incident during the trial and the debacle of the *Prophet's* article had led me to that inevitable conclusion. To believe it was at all possible to shake his unflappable self-confidence was absurd.

"I am afraid I would have to decline," he returned with alacrity, "and express my astonishment that you would entertain for even a moment the notion that I would care to dance with a foolish eighteen-year-old girl."

You deserved that, I told myself, the stinging emphasis of the word *girl* lashing into my gut. I felt the fateful pinpricks of disappointment and self-pity beginning to spark in my stomach. *You deserved that completely*.

"Then count yourself fortunate, Professor Snape, because I had no intention of doing anything so foolish." My words may have been cool and composed, but my tone was far too terse to maintain the illusion of complete disaffectedness. "I merely wanted to thank you for ordering those ingredients for me. They arrived earlier this morning."

I turned on my heel and fixed my eyes firmly on the door of the Hall. A few whispers began to circulate, skeptical classmates positing that I had, of course, wanted to dance with him but had lost my courage when faced with his typical cold-hearted detachment. I exited as calmly and deliberately as I could, but the moment the doors fell shut, I broke out into a hasty run.

I barely managed to stay upright, running precariously on three-inch heels. Finally I collapsed against the wall of one of the less popular corridors, fighting the urge to cry as I tore off the damned heels, rebuking myself for wearing something so frivolous and wholly impractical. My feet were throbbing horrendously.

Finally I managed to remove the wretched things from my feet and cast them aside. My breathing was becoming shallow even as I tried to calm it, placing a hand against my lower abdomen and forcing myself to focus on deep, measured inhalations. The window before me presented a beautiful view of the grounds, blanketed in a serene covering of snow, but I was immune to its charms. I couldn't get the derisive curl of his lips out of my mind; the expression I'd taken for bemusement had been nothing but his habitual contempt for me, inferior that I was.

I heard footsteps approaching, heavy and slow, and I immediately identified them as male. Thinking it was probably one of the boys come to ensure that I was all right, I said in a broken voice, without turning around, "I really don't want to talk right now."

"You have little choice."

It was him. I bit my lip and remained resolutely facing the window.

"Would you care to explain that little display to me, Miss Granger? Does it amuse you to embarrass one of the faculty of this school with your impetuosity?"

Well aware that I had no right to feel angered, I turned around slowly. "Why does a simple thank you embarrass you, Professor?"

"Don't play coy with me, girl," he growled, and I actually flinched and stepped back upon hearing the malice in his voice. "We both know what happened in there, as does the rest of this school. You have made a mockery of my position as your superior, and you *will* pay for it."

"I have done *nothing* inappropriate," I shot back shrilly, "and frankly, Professor, I think the Headmistress will agree with me that your *vanity* is causing you to jump to totally unwarranted conclusions."

He said nothing, but I swear his eyes were literally aflame.

"Is this"...he swept his hand demonstratively in the direction of my frame, encompassing the now windswept hair, the unkempt dress, and the heels cast aside so haphazardly..."how you think to entice me into your little game, Miss Granger? Do you really think me so profoundly stupid?"

"What exactly," I growled back with enough force to rival his own voice, "are you implying, Professor?"

"Did you really think that I could be won over like some incompetent boy?" he whispered venomously. "I do not appreciate being toyed with, Miss Granger."

"If you're referring to the glasses, I might remind you that it was you who made the connection first, Professor."

The unspoken "and so you must be attracted to me" hung between us, strung more tautly than I had ever imagined the tension between two people could become. The fury of final verification flashed in his eyes, and I knew that he'd suspected that his magazine had been the impetus behind my sudden transformation, but of course he hadn't wanted to believe that I had discovered such a dirty secret. We both knew I couldn't possibly prove whose schedule had been written on that page, but the mere suggestion was damning in itself.

He began to circle me threateningly like a large, predatory animal. "If I find," he hissed, bringing his face within scant inches of mine, "that you have trespassed upon *any* more of my private belongings, I will have you expelled from this school before you have the time to exhale."

"Now I suggest you return to your little friends before I reconsider too deeply the decision to expel you." At his full height, standing directly before me, he obscured everything from my vision. The world narrowed to the black expanse of his chest and the intense heat of him so near, and I forgot how to breathe. "It is a pity," he added, almost achieving a diffident tone, "that you have abandoned your books for these juvenile, coquettish games. You did show such promise."

Then he was gone, and Ginny was rushing toward me, alarmed when my knees gave way.

It became increasingly obvious to me over the course of the Christmas holidays at Hogwarts that Dumbledore's constant and at times subversive presence was very much in charge of the school, even posthumously. Madam Pomfrey and I popped in and out of the Headmistress' office, apprising him of our progress and commiserating about our setbacks. He seemed genuinely anxious to help us, though I could never quite understand why; but every so often I would catch him shooting me a concerned glance as though he found himself unsure whether or not he should inquire about the source of my obvious distress.

I had endeavored to avoid Professor Snape as much as possible after our confrontation in the hallway the night of the ball, and I had no doubt that he was equally determined we should have no contact whatsoever. Several times Dumbledore suggested in an unnaturally gentle voice that perhaps I should take my questions to Severus...he never referred to him as Professor Snape anymore in my presence...but if he was disappointed when I demurred, he didn't allow it to show.

I was positive, however, that he was behind the Christmas Eve celebration held for those who remained in the castle. Professor McGonagall, the four Heads of House, and several of the other instructors had no family whom they were obligated to visit over the Christmas holidays, and thus Dumbledore began plotting with the house-elves in an effort to plan a celebration which would cheer us all up.

Madam Pomfrey and I finished up at six o'clock Christmas Eve and retreated to her office, where we were just about to indulge in steaming cups of tea and some warm biscuits when there was a silent "ahem" from the door. We both turned, startled, and found one of the kitchen house-elves standing nervously, tiny, wrinkled hands clasped behind its back. I felt momentarily outraged that Professor McGonagall had required them to work so late, but the elf quickly dispelled my fears.

"Miss and Madam are requested in the teachers' lounge," the skinny elf piped up. "If Miss and Madam will come. We is able to go when the teachers is all there..."

"Of course," Madam Pomfrey said automatically, setting her cup aside and hastily cleaning up the tea service. "There is no need to escort us. We'll be along directly."

"Thank you, Miss, Madam." The elf bowed briefly and then popped out of existence. I was relieved that they were allowed to return to their kin once they'd finished with whatever arrangements lay in store for us.

"What's Albus up to *this* time?" Madam Pomfrey grumbled as we approached my room. We were by now quite accustomed to one another's presence, so I invited her to stand inside my sitting room while I disappeared into the bedroom in order to change my clothes. Had she been one of my class instructors I would have hesitated to do so, but I doubted if anyone would mind.

"What makes you so certain it was Professor Dumbledore?" I called absently through the door. I rummaged around in my trunk until I found a pair of stretchy, comfortable black jeans and an equally cozy black sweater. I pulled on both, ran a brush through my hair, pulled it back into a ponytail, and emerged again to find her examining my book collection.

"I doubt Minerva would have gone to all this trouble to ensure that we all socialize," she replied with a good-natured grumble. "She does not worry so much about those of us who aren't quite so merry on Christmas."

I had no doubt of whom she was speaking, but I simply nodded. I had developed the unfortunate and childish habit of assuming anything even remotely mysterious or cryptic automatically implicated him, and I knew it was a ridiculous way of thinking. Perhaps Dumbledore had simply wanted an excuse to see everyone gathered together closely and conveniently so that he could talk to us all in turn.

We found several others already convened in the teachers' lounge, sipping eggnog and chatting idly. Dumbledore's portrait had been hung proudly above the fire, its frame polished smartly. No doubt he had enlisted the house-elves' assistance for that as well. I sank into the chair farthest from the center, surprised that no one else had already appropriated it. My puzzlement was answered when the source of my preoccupation strode into the room and shot me a decidedly irritated look. I held my ground, accepting a cup of tea from Professor McGonagall and slouching even further into my seat.

Eventually he returned to his usual refusal to acknowledge my presence. He sat in the chair nearest the fire, where he commenced trying his damndest to avoid a conversation with Dumbledore, who was asking him in a rather annoyingly jolly voice if he was enjoying his holiday thus far. Professor Snape, of course, merely grunted noncommittally and buried his nose in a cup of tea.

Dumbledore released an audible sigh and turned to the rest of us. "How is everyone?" he asked cheerfully, and most returned his good mood with equally upbeat greetings and wishes.

"Minerva and I agreed that it was time the staff had an evening to socialize and be themselves," he said idly by way of explanation. "The house-elves have kindly made us quite the feast, so everyone sit back and enjoy! It's rather a shame our Head Boy couldn't be here as well," he remarked, his eyes sparkling in my direction. "It's wonderful to have you with us, Miss Granger. You've really brightened things up for us this year."

I wondered if it was a slightly sarcastic remark about my somber choice of clothing encroaching upon what was intended to be a joyous occasion, but I simply smiled. "Thank you, Headmaster. I'm glad to have helped."

"Best Head Girl we've had in years!" Professor Sprout agreed through a rather large mouthful of roast beef. "You really have been a marvelous help this term, Miss Granger. Especially sitting up all night with Helena, poor thing." She shook her head compassionately. "The first years do get so homesick around this time of year, especially my Hufflepuffs."

"I can understand how they feel," I replied quietly. I was in no mood for food now that I had been thrust into the public eye, and I wondered how little I could get away with eating before I retired to my room. "It was my pleasure to help."

"How are you parents, Miss Granger?" Professor Flitwick called from somewhere in the vicinity of the fireplace. It sounded as though his voice emerged from one of the chairs near Severus', but I couldn't be certain.

"They're... fine," I called back uncertainly. My gaze had caught on him and I had been forced to reassert in my brain the command to breathe. He'd removed his robe and unbuttoned his frock coat slightly, probably as a concession to the blazing fire so close to him. I had no doubt that he'd stubbornly weathered it as long as he could before giving in and removing his armor. Though I'd seen it all before...and more, God knew...I couldn't help but feel terribly distracted.

"Any plans for after graduation, dear?" Professor Sprout couldn't seem to get enough of me. I smiled, hoping I looked more excited than I actually felt.

"Well, I've been to talk with the Healers at St. Mungo's. I had hoped to apprentice there..."

"Surely they'll be thrilled to have you." She beamed.

"Well, they are. That's... not really the impediment. They said they'd admit me even before seeing my NEWT scores. The trouble is that they don't offer any type of scholarship, and I simply haven't got the money..." I trailed off, mortified to have embarked upon a conversation about such a private topic amongst my teachers.

"But that's terrible," Professor Vector interjected suddenly. "They ought to be damn grateful to have you. And there's nothing your parents can do?"

I shook my head miserably. "No. They're anxious to help, but... Well, they were a bit older than average when I was born, and they've got their retirement fund to worry about now. They've already spent so much to send me here, to Hogwarts, and it *is* the most expensive apprenticeship training in the Wizarding world."

"I hadn't realized the cost was so prohibitive," Professor Vector admitted. "No wonder so few of the students who are admitted manage to make it all the way through."

"The curriculum is quite challenging too, of course," Professor McGonagall pointed out firmly. "Even for Miss Granger, it would be a difficult accomplishment."

"But it's such a shame the poor girl can't even try!" Professor Flitwick called again, his squeaky voice resonating over the room. I still couldn't actually see him.

I sought solace in my cup of tea, relieved when the conversation swayed to Professor Sprout's direction, and she began to talk about some marvelous vacation she'd been planning for ages in order to harvest some rare plants in the tropics. Dumbledore was watching me with sad eyes, and I noticed him give me a slight nod when our gazes met. I smiled at him, and then his eyes moved rather prominently to Severus' direction, almost as though the movement were meant to lead me.

I allowed my gaze to follow, though as briefly and surreptitiously as I could, for I found that he was studying me with unabashed scrutiny. I couldn't fathom what was running through that labyrinthine mind of his, and I strongly doubted that I would be at all satisfied even if I were successful. It was the first time I had seen him since the Yule Ball, and I wanted nothing more than for him to forget I existed altogether. It was a perfectly agreeable strategy to me.

I stared into the fire, mesmerized by the prancing of the flames, but I continued to observe him in my peripheral vision. Like me, he hadn't touched any of the food; he was probably just as desperate to return to his quarters and escape the others' chatter, which was of little consequence to him.

Discovering that I was in a decidedly retrospective mood, I replayed in my mind the conversation with Professor McGonagall at the head table when I'd been observing his memories over the summer. She had mentioned him saying that he wanted to move on with his life if he survived the war, perhaps marrying and eventually having a family. Looking at him at that moment, I found it perversely easy to imagine him passing Christmas in the capacity of a husband and a father. He wouldn't be too tolerant if his children woke him up at four o'clock on Christmas morning, of course, but I could envision him sitting in his living room nursing a cup of tea while his kids opened their presents, periodically allowing himself a small smile of benevolence when they thanked him and hugged him.

It was painfully easy to imagine myself as his wife. I would make us our tea while he walked the children into the living room to gasp and exclaim over their pile of presents. I would sit on the arm of his chair, handing him his tea, warmly congratulating the children on their presents while he scolded me softly for spoiling them so badly. When we would all finish with our presents, the equivalent of the Hogwarts library would be spread out before us, and I would send the children off to bathe and dress before allowing them to curl up with their new books and toys.

An unusually loud crackle from the fireplace jolted me from my daydreaming. When had I become so sentimental? I wondered. I wasn't even certain that I wanted children, and yet I was sitting here morosely, imagining all that I would be missing if I weren't the one to marry him and raise a family with him. There was no guarantee he still wanted such a future for himself, and the chances he would be capable of envisioning that future with *me* were infinitesimally small.

"Miss Granger?" Professor McGonagall's voice called softly. I looked up, suddenly aware that my tea had long since gone cold, and I was still holding the cup halfway to my mouth. I put it down, clattering it loudly against the saucer.

"Professor Sprout was just asking if you'd care to go gather some mistletoe with her this evening."

"Sure," I replied, relieved at the prospect of escaping the lounge. "What time did you have in mind?"

"I thought we'd finish our dinner and then go have a look." Professor Sprout had finished her roast beef and was exuberantly working on her dessert. "And Severus did promise me last week that he'd help out, and I intend to hold him to it!"

The expression on his face betrayed the groan I knew was resonating in his mind.

"Meddlesome woman," he muttered, though not entirely without affection. She waved him off.

"Every year he says he'll no longer waste his time helping me, and every year he goes along because he wants to be sure I don't ruin his ingredients!"

"I'll just... go to my room and get my cloak, then." I stumbled slightly in rising from my chair, suddenly aware of how drowsy I'd become during my introspection. "I'll be right back."

"No hurry, dear, no hurry. And don't forget...there's plenty of dessert to go 'round!" She saluted me with her fork as I left the room, questioning how much more uncomfortable the night could possibly become.

Eleven

Chapter 11 of 18

Hermione discovers that she owes Severus an immense debt of gratitude.

Disclaimer: All characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I intend no infringement and am making no profit.

I found Professors Sprout and Snape standing in the entranceway of the castle, the latter looking decidedly unhappy to be included in our adventure. He was wearing a thicker black cloak than I was accustomed to seeing, and he had exchanged his typical indoor boots for an even more rugged pair. Professor Sprout was wearing a light blue winter cloak and carrying a large sack, presumably to hold the plants we gathered.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," I said hastily. "I was waylaid by Peeves..."

Professor Sprout sighed. "Did he drop peppermint syrup all over you?"

"Yes! Has he done it to you?"

She nodded, grimacing. "Yesterday. I've never had so much difficulty getting rid of a substance with a cleaning spell!"

Severus...for he certainly didn't seem to share much in common with my professor at that moment, dressed to go traipsing through the heavy snowdrifts...looked back and forth between the two of us before drawing, "If we could proceed...?"

"Of course!" Professor Sprout pulled her hood over her hair and led the way. She walked more briskly than I would have expected, considering her legs were even shorter than my own. I followed her pace, trying to keep alongside her in order to avoid walking beside Severus, who trailed behind. It was most disconcerting to feel his gaze on my back as I endeavored to maintain a constant flow of niceties between Professor Sprout and myself.

When we had gone perhaps ten minutes past the border of the Forbidden Forest, I began to notice mistletoe growing wild on many of the trees. The vivid berries made a wonderful contrast against the black limbs and white dusting of snow, and Professor Sprout began pointing out the healthiest specimens for Severus to gather. I watched him idly out of the corner of my eye while she continued chatting.

He circled with light, almost silent footsteps, making my own lurching and crunching through the drifts seem all the more clumsy and childlike. When Professor Sprout motioned for me to examine a particular plant a couple trees away, I did my best to give him a wide berth as I passed, but I succeeded instead in tripping over a large root.

I tumbled sideways and was vaguely aware that I was falling when I felt his arms encircle me midway to the ground. I let out a gasp when one of his wrists connected with my abdomen and tried to right myself. He steadied me with both large hands wrapped around my waist. Dazedly I was aware that even beneath the layers of clothing, he could practically have wrapped those long arms around me multiple times. I felt positively tiny.

A moment passed between us, heavy with awareness, before he finally spoke. "Have you injured your foot, Miss Granger?"

In the dim light I couldn't discern the expression in his eyes, but an almost worried slant creased his lips, and his voice was soft enough to envelop only the two of us.

"No, I think I'll be fine."

"You had better sit down." Without waiting for my assent, he removed his cloak and placed it upon a patch of downy, unblemished snow. Then he literally lifted me from my feet and lowered me onto it, his hands still placed snugly against my ribcage. His right arm abandoned its delicious position and began to remove my boot while the left remained in its place.

A quick spell dispatched with the boot in no time, and he began to very gently palpate my ankle. It was sore, to be sure, but not especially swollen, and I had no doubt that the mild throbbing was not indicative of anything serious.

"It does not appear to be sprained, but wait here all the same."

I nodded and opened my mouth to thank him. Our eyes met, and something flashed through his face that seemed to say *Hold your tongue*. I did so, merely nodding again, and we exchanged a silent conversation. I glanced down and stared at his hand, mesmerized by the warmth seeping from his palm into my body.

He flinched and removed it sharply, as though I'd shocked him. I forced myself to meet his eyes and hold his gaze steadily, desperate to demonstrate to him that I felt neither fear nor repulsion at the force of his touch, which he had deemed for so many years repugnant and unworthy of a woman's body. Determination quickly metamorphosed into desire. My breathing grew shallow, and I was absurdly grateful that he'd removed his hand. Had he left it there, he would have felt the telltale racing of my heart that seemed always to betray my discomfiture in his presence.

This time it felt as though his eyes were the ones to silently extend their gratitude, and he rose smoothly to his feet and pocketed his wand once again. Professor Sprout had not moved from her position beneath the tree opposite us, and she was staring at him with unabashed happiness. Her eyes slid over to me, and she spared me a small but brilliant smile before calling, Miss Granger, why don't you wait here and give your foot a chance to recover? We'll only be a few more minutes."

"I will, thank you," I called back to her, but my eyes connected with his as I said the words. His chin moved ever so slightly, almost imperceptibly, in a nod of acknowledgment before he turned his back to me and strode over to Professor Sprout.

Ten minutes later, when they'd finished gathering the night's crop of mistletoe boughs, I rose unsteadily to my feet and found that my ankle, while still sore, was more than capable of holding me. We made our way at an easier pace back to the castle and up to the teachers' lounge, where Professors McGonagall and Flitwick still sat, talking with Dumbeldore's portrait.

"Are you quite all right, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked when I entered somewhat stiffly, one arm thrown over Professor Sprout's obliging shoulders in order to lessen the discomfort on my ankle. "Madam Pomfrey has gone to bed, but she won't mind being woken if you need attending to."

"There is no need, Headmaster." Severus had carried his heavy outdoor cloak draped over one arm, and I felt suddenly guilty that I'd been the reason it had ended up covered in snow. He was reaching for a handful of the Floo powder kept just above the mantel. "I have a salve that will lessen the soreness. Structurally Miss Granger's ankle is uninjured."

"Very well... If you're sure." Dumbledore sounded satisfied by the Potions master's response. Severus tossed the Floo powder into the fireplace and disappeared swiftly, leaving me with the other three professors voicing their concern over my pain.

"It's really not that bad," I assured them. "It's feeling better already, and Professor Snape is right...there's no sprain or fracture."

He reappeared just then, and while in his rooms he had divested himself of his frock coat. There was nothing but a soft, white dress shirt separating my hands from touching his body, and I was all too conscious of that fact as he approached me with long, powerful strides and handed me the small container. Lacking the oppressive appearance of his coat and teaching robes, he was once again the man I'd seen in the Pensieve, and he was by no means the greasy old bat of student mockery. His shoulders were broad, his entire frame beautifully sculpted, and I swallowed hard before accepting the salve.

"Thank you."

Again he did not verbally acknowledge my gratitude, but the way his eyes lingered on my face was acceptance enough for me. He bid us all a rather terse goodnight and disappeared once again. I remained in the lounge for another hour, the pain in my foot entirely forgotten in favor of replaying in my mind the feeling of his hands wrapped around my body, their presence in my fantasies taking on an altogether more provocative purpose.

The Christmas holidays concluded quickly, and January began to transition ever so slowly into February. I was not, I reflected every day when my alarm woke me in the total darkness, especially fond of the winter season. I enjoyed its picturesque beauty, but I had no patience for the constant cold and wind, and I absolutely despised the unrelenting darkness. I collapsed into bed every evening after my rounds utterly grateful to escape the world, and what little free time I had was spent toiling unceasingly over my Wolfsbane.

We turned in the vials containing our NEWT Potions projects two weeks before the Valentine's Day dance. I was exhausted, having been up the night before scrutinizing every possible aspect of my potion. I couldn't accept the possibility that he might find even the subtlest nuance to be unsatisfactory. He said nothing when he accepted the small vial containing the equivalent of months of my life, sweat, frustration, and time, but a week later we all found small pieces of parchment waiting for us upon our arrival to class. Mine contained my name in simple, spidery masculine scrawl, followed by, **100%**.

There were no words of praise, nothing congratulatory about the simple object, but my chest swelled with pride, and I cared little that my largest contribution to his class had not elicited anything other than the grade itself. All that day I imagined the expression on his face as he examined it and the motion of his fingers as he wrote on my small parchment my name and grade. Somehow the thought of meeting his absolute highest expectations was to me an infinitely greater thrill than the sensation of being held in his arms.

It was by taking solace in these and other, similar thoughts that I managed to survive until Valentine's Day. Bereft of any additional work for Potions, I had been drawing up my NEWT revision schedule and relentlessly badgering Ministry officials and anyone I thought might possibly know of scholarships, grants, or any other forms of funding available to Hogwarts graduates in order to attend St. Mungo's.

The morning of Valentine's Day arrived sickeningly bright and cheery. I was never one to put much stock in such ludicrous holidays, and it didn't make me feel any worse about my situation than I already had, thank God, so I paid little attention. I had already promised Ron that I would dance a few times with him that evening since Luna was laid up in the hospital wing with an especially Pepper-Up-resistant head cold, but beyond that, I had no particular plans to celebrate the day. I deemed it otherwise beneath my notice.

As it was a Saturday, I sat in Ginny's room while she performed innumerable strange procedures on her hair in preparation for the evening. Finally, having long since grown abominably bored, I told her I was going to go for a walk and left her to her primping. I had no intention of even putting on a dress, so I saw no reason to hang around and continue to pester her. I indulged in a long walk around the castle before deciding that I could do with a hot bath and a relaxing trip to the library.

I was meandering back to my room when I heard breathless panting behind me. I turned to find Ginny dashing toward me, fair skin flushed with exertion and the hair she had been so painstakingly styling all in disarray. Astonished, I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Gin, are you okay? Is something wrong?"

"N-No... Good news," she managed to croak through her wheezing. "Merlin, it's hard to run in these things."

Five-foot-one-inch Ginny had developed over the years a serious attachment to very large heels. I took one look at the monstrosities on her feet and felt sympathetic pain flaring in both my ankles.

"Listen"...her coloring was gradually returning to normal, though she continued to teeter somewhat worrisomely..."I've just been to the hospital wing to visit Luna, and Madam Pomfrey says you're to come at once. She needs to talk to you. She said Snape's been looking everywhere for you; he's been searching for ages..."

"What's he want with *me*?" I quashed the irrational hope blooming in my chest. It was likely related to my project if he'd gotten Madam Pomfrey involved, and that couldn't be good news at all. I had faith, though, that she would vouch for me if he sought to impugn the validity of my work. I and I alone had done the exhausting brewing of the final batch...a strict requirement for any student who accepted counsel from another person in the preparation of their project.

"I don't know, but she says it's great news and you're to go there at once."

"All right, come on." We set off at a quick pace, Ginny's heels clacking inelegantly on the stone floors. She was still breathing too hard to hold up a conversation, and yet when we were in sight of the doors of the hospital wing, she beat me to it, and soundly. I think she was more excited by the prospect of whatever was to greet us than I was.

I walked in with trepidation to find Madam Pomfrey and Severus deep in conversation in her office. I suppressed a gasp when I saw that he was wearing a pair of very sharp, very attractive formal dress robes in a deep, dimensionless black, and he'd cut his hair. It threw my equilibrium entirely out of balance to see him with shorter, precisely groomed hair that barely brushed his ears and such a polished look about him.

"I've found her," Ginny called triumphantly. Madam Pomfrey's face broke into an enormous smile.

"Excellent! Thank you, dear. Hermione, I'm glad we've finally found you! Where have you been?" She sounded as though she was almost scolding me, which only increased my confusion.

"I was out for a walk.... I'm sorry, did we have an appointment that I've forgotten about? What is going on?"

"Severus has the most wonderful news!" she exclaimed. He opened his mouth calmly to tell me the news in what would have undoubtedly been a cool and wholly composed manner, but Madam Pomfrey simply couldn't keep quiet. "Tonight is the annual gathering of the International Potions Masters' Consortium, and they've had a contest for all the members to bring in their best student's work. They're giving away a full scholarship for the apprenticeship of the winning student's choice. You've won, Hermione!"

I stared at her for a full thirty seconds before Ginny elbowed me in the ribs, and I squawked, "I've won?"

"Yes! Severus entered your Wolfsbane brew, and it was no contest...the second-best entry was just a Draught of Living Death, and we all know yours was far more challenging, and it was perfect besides!"

"...I've won the scholarship? And it's not just for Potions?"

"No, dear." She was still beaming widely. "It's the first year they've had the contest...in celebration of our victory and all, now that the students are safe and everyone's able to focus on their futures again. They were originally going to offer only a Potions apprenticeship with the master of the student's choice, but Severus told them about your predicament, and they agreed that being a Healer is just as noble a profession!"

"Then... Then I can do it? I can use the money to go to St. Mungo's?" I breathed.

"Yes!"

"I'm going to be a Healer!" I shrieked. Ginny was bouncing up and down on her crazy shoes, practically vibrating with excitement.

Before I could take stock of what I was doing, I had thrown my arms around the shocked Potions master and cried, "Thank you, sir! You don't know how much this means to me."

"I suspect I do now," he remarked dryly, the vibration of his voice thrumming through my chest where it connected with his. Madam Pomfrey laughed delightedly when I pulled back, horrorstruck.

"I'm sorry!" I cried. "I didn't mean anything by it. I...I wasn't thinking. I'm just so grateful..."

Genuine amusement sparkled in his eyes, and I think his cheeks were very faintly flushed as well as we both continued to stare at what had been, mere seconds before, the nexus of our joined bodies. "I just received the results a few hours ago," he informed me in a purely businesslike tone. "The conference is in two hours. I suggest you prepare adequately, Miss Granger. I will meet you in the castle foyer in precisely three-quarters of an hour."

As he walked past his cloak brushed lightly against my hand, already incredibly sensitized with the lingering feeling of the soft, hot skin of his neck. I suppressed a shudder and turned to Madam Pomfrey, who was still beside herself with happiness, smiling indulgently.

"I'm so proud of you, my dear! A year from now, you'll be finishing your apprenticeship. And it's high time for me to train in a successor, I should think..."

"Really?" I gasped. "Would you do that for me?"

"Of course." She waved it off as though the offer were nothing. "Albus always trusted me to appoint my successor when I was ready. I'm sure Minerva will be no different."

"Thank you!" I cried, and I hugged her as well, though both of us expected the motion. She patted me on the back, overjoyed tears pooling visibly in her eyes. "Now, dear, I suggest you head off with Miss Weasley and do something to freshen up. They'll want to present you to everyone there, and it *is* a highly respected group of men. You should look your best."

"Of course...I...right away!" I finished lamely, looking desperately at Ginny. She was grinning positively evilly.

"You can't do it without me, can you?" she teased, and I shook my head in concession. She laughed and grabbed my hand, tugging me toward the door.

"All right, let's go. We've got to do something with that hair. Do you know what you're going to wear? We could always have McGonagall Transfigure something for you. Otherwise, Luna has this gorgeous black dress, and you two are the same height. I'm guessing it'd fit you..."

I lost track of her words, completely overcome with shock and elation.

Twelve

Chapter 12 of 18

Hermione meets the crème de la crème of the Potions world.

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Ginny practically shoved me through the door to my room and then proceeded to demand that I get in the shower. When I made to protest, she silenced me with a glower and pointed forcefully in the direction of my bathroom.

"Go! You've got forty-five minutes. Why are you arguing with me?"

Terrified beyond reason of the thunderous expression on her face, I meekly shut my mouth and did as I'd been told. Not ten minutes passed before a small hand parted the shower curtains and thrust itself inside, causing me to shriek.

"Stop screaming and use this," she bellowed. I took the object and her hand reappeared again, sporting yet *another* container. Growling in frustration, I applied every one of the products she handed me, wondering why I allowed myself to be bossed around when all our efforts would come to nothing.

"You *do* realize that this does not constitute a date, right?" I called through the bathroom door when I had emerged from the shower, wrapping a towel around my body. "You don't have to do all this, Gin. I appreciate it, but it's not like anything can possibly..."

I shrieked again when the door flew open, and Luna stood there staring at me. "You dropped your towel," she stated matter-of-factly, and I gasped when I realized that she was right.

"Luna, aren't you supposed to stay in the hospital wing? I thought you were sick."

"Ginny told me you needed help. I'll go back when we're done." She looked pale and rather wan, but she was not trembling or excessively weak. I made a mental note to admonish Ginny when I returned for taking a chance on her health.

I was standing in my bathroom naked, Luna regarding me quite nonchalantly, when Ginny reentered.

"Put this on."

Neither seemed fazed by my nudity, so I shook my head in amazement and did as I was told. We were all girls, I reminded myself; it was nothing they hadn't seen before. When I finished applying another round of her ridiculous products, Ginny eyed me critically and then beamed.

"You're so pretty, Hermione. You should dress up more often."

"Not when it takes so long to do all this," I grumbled, reaching for my towel. Seventh year had only heightened my determination that it was absurd to waste all one's time in the bathroom when there were chores to be completed. Now, however, I was grateful for what I'd always deemed one of Ginny's more frivolous habits.

Ginny's hand caught mine and stopped it short. "You're dry enough. Let's get you dressed."

She'd taken several outfits from my closet and displayed them on my bed for us to pick and choose. Luna had brought her dress, which was indeed quite lovely, but it didn't take long for us to reach a consensus. They both loved the sheer novelty of the black Muggle business suit my mother had bought me over the summer, and Ginny insisted excitedly that she could definitely "do something" with it.

I pulled on the suit, uncomfortably aware that while I had been diligent in my exercises that winter, I had developed enough over the course of the school year to make the trousers fit quite snugly indeed. I was about to bemoan the additional weight when I caught Ginny and Luna grinning at me.

"You've filled out a bit, Hermione," Ginny teased gently, and I glowered at her. She had always been enviably voluptuous in all the right places, but up until just before my eighteenth birthday, I'd had hips that were far too wide to qualify as a teenager's, no waist to boast of, and absolutely nothing on top. Somehow, caught up in my busy schedule and preoccupied with my duties as Head Girl, I'd failed to notice that I was finally sporting a reasonable facsimile of a woman's body. My upper dimensions finally seemed proportionate to my lower.

And, paradoxically, I didn't like it.

"Damn it," I muttered irritably, wondering if the jacket would even fit. "Why didn't you two tell me? I would've had Professor McGonagall make that dress looser..."

"Are you crazy?" Ginny demanded. "You looked fantastic."

"It *doesn't* look good!"

"I imagine Professor Snape would beg to differ." Luna's voice was dreamy, but her tone had a teasing, suggestive edge to it that nearly made me choke on my own inhaled breath.

"Okay, look, you two: I am going to have dinner with the most prestigious professional society for Potions masters in the *world*," I hissed. "You can't send me out there looking like I'm trying to seduce someone!"

"Who said anything about that?" Ginny handed me a lovely red silk blouse that I didn't recognize; it obviously belonged to either her or Luna. "Here. That's mine, so we know it will fit you. And I'm sure the jacket will be fine. We can always ask Professor McGonagall to loosen it..."

I felt my cheeks beginning to burn at the thought of having to seek out the Headmistress for such an errand. "No," I breathed with relief, pulling on both the blouse and then my black heels. "It fits, thank God. Okay, am I finished?" I ran a hand absently through my hair, realizing that I needed to fasten it back somehow.

"One more thing. Luna brought this." Ginny motioned to Luna, who held up a breathtakingly exquisite Japanese hair ornament, a lovely black and red fan with gold accents. I gasped, dumbstruck.

"My dad brought it back from Japan over Christmas," she explained. "It should look nice with your blouse."

"Luna, I can't accept that. That must have cost your dad a fortune!"

She shrugged. "There are protective charms on it. I wouldn't worry about it." I tried to protest again, but she waved me off while Ginny pulled up my hair and suspended it, deftly inserting the hair ornament. A quick look in the mirror revealed that it looked even more beautiful on than off, and the suit did indeed seem to fit rather nicely. It threw off my equilibrium momentarily to realize that the new shape of my body really belonged to me. I felt disoriented, trapped in an older woman's body, unable to reconcile years of adolescent desires with their actual physical fulfillment.

Ginny smiled at me benevolently. "You look great. You'll get used to it, I promise."

I returned her smile gratefully. She'd been the embodiment of every boy's enticing fantasy when she'd developed rather early on in her school years, and they hadn't stopped talking about her and taking notice of her since. I privately thought it was a wonder that Harry hadn't been driven positively mad with jealousy, constantly reminded of the force of the other boys' admiration for his girlfriend.

I found, upon further inspection in the mirror, that I didn't mind the rather softer look of my body now. Running had developed the lines of muscle in my calves, barely hinted at beneath the fall of the trousers, and I was secretly thrilled with the contrast between my slimmer waist and the more pronounced curve of my hips.

They pronounced me finished, and while I resumed spluttering uncomfortable exclamations about their kindness, they dragged me bodily from the room and hauled me off to the castle foyer. I had at least had the presence of mind to grab my dress cloak and a pair of gloves. By the time we came within sight of Professors McGonagall and Snape, who were waiting in the entranceway, I had almost managed to convince myself that I was prepared for the evening.

"He's staring at you," Ginny whispered conspiratorially as we hastened down the stairs. I was doing my utmost not to stare myself, so I hadn't noticed that I had neglected to actually put on my dress cloak. The way my hips naturally swayed as I walked in the heels suddenly seemed ludicrously overexaggerated. I fumbled with the cloak, pulling it around my body.

He was indeed looking me over. I hadn't realized how inappropriate the gesture must have seemed until we landed before them, and Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly and ostentatiously, an action entirely too reminiscent of Umbridge. She, too, seemed to realize it belatedly, and she cringed slightly.

"You look wonderful, Miss Granger. My congratulations on such an admirable achievement. Miss Lovegood, have I been misinformed, or should you not be in the hospital wing?"

Luna seemed unperturbed by the harsh expression on Professor McGonagall's face. She nodded and gave me a quick hug before heading slowly back to the hospital

wing...and, undoubtedly, Madam Pomfrey's incomparable wrath. I sincerely hoped she would not be disappointed with me for being the reason Luna had so quickly disregarded her own health.

"Thank you," I managed to get out, pulling on my gloves. "Professor, I'm sorry I won't be able to make it to help supervise the dance. Oh, and Gin"...I felt terrible over renegeing on my promise to Ron..."tell Ron I'm sorry I won't be able to dance with him..."

"I'll have you back in time for your precious dance," Severus murmured.

"Too right you will," Professor McGonagall murmured, and he shot her a very sharp look, which she returned with a challenging glower of her own. I followed the volley of expressions between the two, aware that Ginny was shaking with silent giggling beside me.

"Very well. Enjoy yourselves. And Miss Granger..."

I was fully expecting something as demeaning as "Please behave yourself." Given my inappropriate display at the Yule Ball, it had to be enormously difficult for her to condone our unsupervised absence for the course of several hours; I deserved any reprimand she might send my way. A muscle in the corner of her jaw twitched unpleasantly, but her tightly pursed lips gradually slackened into the barest smile.

"Congratulations again. Have a wonderful time."

"Thank you, ma'am." The door slammed shut behind us, and we were overtaken by vast clouds of thick, swirling snow. I burrowed deeply into my cloak, clutching it more tightly against my body while keeping an eye on Severus' back.

The walk to the edge of the grounds was misery itself. When we finally exited the gates, and he had located a reasonably comfortable place to stand on the leeward side of a large tree, I emerged turtle-style from my cloak and tried to speak through the irrepressible chattering of my teeth.

"Sir... If you don't mind my asking..."

"As if I could possibly prevent you, Miss Granger," he conceded with a sigh, waiting expectantly.

"Why aren't we using the Floo?"

"Security concerns prevent the Consortium from allowing the use of Floo travel this year," he replied brusquely. "We are not yet certain that there will be no retaliation by... hostile parties."

I surmised that he was referring to the fact that they were awarding a significant sum of money to a Muggle-born student in commemoration of the end of a war fought largely to protect the rights and welfare of Muggle-born and half-blood citizens. No doubt renegade Death Eaters still roamed free, desperate to exact their revenge through any pathetic means they could find.

"Have you your Apparition license, Miss Granger?"

"Yes."

"Have you Apparated a distance greater than several kilometers yet?"

"No..." I hadn't ever had reason to Apparate all that much since successfully completing my Ministry-approved test.

"Very well. I shan't risk splinching you on your first try. Come here."

I must have stared rather unattractively...gaped, really...because he released a disgusted snort.

"We will have to use Side-Along Apparition, and that, as your unparalleled intellect might recall, requires physical contact," he snapped. I jumped to obey, and when I was within several feet of him, a long, black-clad arm snaked out and wrapped itself firmly around my back.

He Apparated us smoothly, the typical roiling unpleasantness allayed by the sensation of once again being snugly pressed into him. I happily drank in his scent and warmth, reluctant to part with his body when we landed firmly in an area I could not immediately recognize.

I followed his long, silent strides down several winding side streets until we intersected with a much larger boulevard, revealing a cityscape that made me gasp with unrestrained delight.

"Venice!" I cried happily. Though it was very likely my overactive and now rather overfed imagination running rampant, I thought I heard him chuckle. I stared with unabashed awe at the astonishing beauty of the buildings we passed as I followed him into what was unmistakably the Wizarding portion of the city.

Shaking hands with the most prominent and renowned Potions masters in the world was an emotionally taxing ordeal indeed. By the time we had negotiated our way through the large crowd to our assigned table, I had met the researchers, authors, and editors of the most prestigious periodicals and journals imaginable, along with more than a few witches and wizards who had ascended to administrative and bureaucratic positions of great fame and influence. Romania's current Minister of Magic was, I soon discovered, formerly a Potions mistress, a stunningly beautiful woman who comported herself with distinctly patrician elegance, and she seemed to take an instant liking to me.

After wracking my brain for the strength of intellect to hold my own in several lengthy conversations, we were finally able to retire to the table. He seemed rather stiff, almost tense, and I sensed that he was not altogether greatly thrilled to be visiting former colleagues. Though I did my best not to reveal the fact, it was impossible for me not to take notice of the disapproving and at times outrightly hostile glances he was provoking.

"Sir," I began haltingly when we were seated, unsure how to proceed. "Thank you for submitting my potion. I... You've really saved me." I finished lamely. He took a large gulp of water, an alarmingly nervous gesture for the normally implacable greasy bat of the dungeons, confirming in my mind that he was decidedly unhappy to be present.

"I was bombarded by requests from the Board of Directors to submit the best sample of my students' work, Miss Granger. Nothing more."

It was positively inarticulate for him, and the venom in his voice lacked any real conviction. Sensing that it would be best to avoid any topic directly relating to myself, I chose instead to inquire about the next most intriguing thing at my disposal: his hair.

"Might I ask..." I began, and I came perilously close to upsetting my glass of water when he barked out a laugh.

"Just ask, Granger. I am under no delusions that I'll escape this night without being subject to at least several thousand of your incessant questions."

"Well, then..." I grinned despite myself, stubbornly deciding to take the remark as a compliment. "Why did you cut your hair? It's very..."

"Not me," he supplied roughly, and I clammed up. "I was issued several very poorly veiled threats by the Chairman to distance myself as much as possible from my... appearance of recent years."

An astoundingly personal confession, I thought dazedly, and quite freely given. I found that my throat had constricted, suddenly dry. I had hoped to relieve the tension, but

he appeared more tightly strung than ever.

"I'm sorry," I offered, my voice cracking slightly. "I quite liked it before. Well, that is...I mean...I like it now, too..."

He sighed. "Quite a compliment, Granger. You'll forgive me if I don't feel the need to return the favor and fawn over yours as well." His gaze darted slightly to the left, temporarily arrested by the Japanese fan, truly the only standout feature of my entire ensemble.

I began to feel defensive, but I waited until he had finished rearranging the food that had suddenly appeared on his plate before retorting, "Luna lent it to me, and it was very kind of her. Her father brought it back from Japan."

"I did not say that I did not like it." His voice was impossibly soft and dark. Every hair on my arms stood on end, and I was tremendously grateful for the omnipresent full glass of ice water. I immediately downed several large gulps, unsure how to respond. The implications of the statement had set a low, steady heat thrumming in my lower body.

I was saved from the further mortification of struggling through a response when a loud tinkling announced the first speaker of the evening. As we enjoyed our dinners, we were treated to countless boring speeches by the more prominent members, followed by an impossibly unemotional and, frankly, laughable eulogy for a brilliant colleague who had been killed in the final struggle against Voldemort. An uncomfortable silence issued when the eulogizer's malevolent gaze landed on Severus, and several people in the back commenced whispering maliciously amongst themselves.

The Romanian Minister of Magic...whom I then decided was a wonderful woman indeed...rose hastily to her feet and crossed over to take her place at the podium.

"And now," she began, "I would like everyone to wish very warm greetings to this year's winner of our students' brewing contest, Hogwarts School's very talented Head Girl, Miss Hermione Granger."

Polite and surprisingly full applause followed. She motioned me up toward the podium, so I rose shakily to my feet and made my way up there to accept the symbolic plaque handed to me by one of the many nondescript, middle-aged wizards filling the room.

"Congratulations, Miss Granger," she said brightly, addressing the room as well as me. "And if I might ask, what are your plans for apprenticeship?"

"I've been accepted to pursue an apprenticeship under the Healers at St. Mungo's," I replied. Turning to regard the crowd for the first time, I realized that I was garnering more than my fair share of incredulous stares at well. I suspected that many of them were familiar with my less than illustrious appearance in the *Daily Prophet*.

"A very challenging curriculum," she praised me, and a wave of assent ran through the murmuring crowd. "Congratulations to you, my dear, and congratulations to your instructor as well. Professor Snape, you've trained a wonderful student and potion-maker."

He rose slowly at her gesticulation and gave a short bow. I was pleased with the enthusiasm of the applause he received considering the looks they'd been hurling at him only moments prior.

I escaped quickly to my seat, plotting desperately to find exactly the right words to express my gratitude. If they were not going to acknowledge him beyond the barest token of appreciation, I was going to see to it that he was made aware of what a difference he had truly made.

It was evident that there were several hours yet remaining in the scheduled activities for the evening. Once dinner had concluded...the majority of which I spent alternately staring at gourmet cuisine that did little to interest me and attempting to study his face...he began to affect the appearance of someone who was preparing to leave. He did not *fidget*...such an ungainly term could never have been applied to him...but it was clear that he was anxious to leave. I watched the way the short strands of hair gently framing his face shifted as he turned in his seat, set into sharp contrast by the light, tasteful silver detailing along the collar of his robes. It struck me that the sallowness of his skin was little benefited by the harsh, cold tones of the silver, and I found myself wondering if gold might not suit him better.

Sunlight, for that matter, would have suited him better. When his dark eyes met mine, I thought, not for the first time, that he had the profile and long-neglected coloring of a man of Mediterranean blood who had succeeded in drastically altering his natural appearance by refusing to emerge beyond ground level.

"I am prepared to leave when you are, Miss Granger," he said neutrally. I was touched by the conciliation in his voice; I genuinely believed he would have allowed me to stay and enjoy my enchantment with such a new experience, much though he wanted to escape. I nodded.

"I'd like to go too, please. I did promise Ron..."

His lips curled scornfully, but he said nothing. We rose and made our way out of the room, sparing a few goodbye wishes to the few people who cared to notice our departure. When we were within sight of the door, the Romanian Minister of Magic noticed us making our hasty escape and walked over, her tall, slender frame looking impossibly delicate in the dim light.

"Severus," she called lightly, her seductive accent sibilantly caressing the consonants of his name. Despite my immediate and violently jealous reaction to her behavior, I mentally filed away the manner in which she'd spoken his name. It was enough to make a lesser man collapse to his knees.

He, of course, merely nodded and halted.

"If I might have a word with your lovely student?" She was a perfect match for him, and I was terrified to look at his reaction lest I find his eyes lingering on her a bit too long. She had long, thick black hair arranged beautifully at the nape of her neck, and she couldn't have been more than three or four inches shorter than him. She possessed that particular sort of towering, immortal beauty, reminiscent of a Muggle supermodel, that made girls want to skulk in dark corners and throttle her as she passed.

Which was, I supposed, why it was so difficult to find myself really liking her. She'd been friendly to me when we first arrived and had done her part to save Severus the humiliation of his colleagues' whispering and jeering. Now, however, she had a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"Come, Miss Granger." She led me a few paces away so we could murmur in private. Startled that she'd even requested a private audience with me, I followed.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I wanted to congratulate you again. Your potion was truly remarkable." She smiled, perfect white teeth gleaming through full, deep red lips. The woman was shockingly beautiful. "Severus is fortunate to have had such a talented student. I regret," she continued with an air of disdain, "that he did not offer you an apprenticeship long before now, but he has never been amenable to taking on apprentices."

"I don't mind," I assured her, wholly sincere. "While studying Potions *would* interest me, of course, I'm much more interested in being a Healer."

"I'm glad. This world could use the talents of a smart and compassionate young woman like you. And I'm glad to see"...that Weasleyesque, trouble-making glint in her sharp eyes had reemerged..."that he seems to have taken a liking to you."

"Excuse me?"

She placed a friendly hand on my shoulder. "I realize that it was probably very embarrassing for you to come here tonight, given that horrible Umbridge woman's article in your... *Daily Prophet*, is it? But I would like to offer you some measure of comfort. That article may have done you far more good than you think. Don't give up on him just

yet."

"What?" Was she *encouraging* my less than condoned feelings for a teacher?

"Go on," she replied mysteriously, motioning for me to return to Severus, who was leaning against the wall near the door, arms crossed disinterestedly over his chest. "I imagine it is time for you to return to your school. You have a curfew, I assume?"

"Yes... but..."

"My dear, you are a lovely girl," she replied, smiling, her fingers lightly brushing my shoulder. "I have three young daughters myself, all growing up to be very much like you. In my experience, girls of your intellect rarely consider themselves to have much to offer a man emotionally, or in any other respect. But Severus..."

She shot him a bright smile, and he glowered at her.

"Ah, I never tire of harassing that man... He will never admit it to you freely, but you, my dear, are precisely his type."

I couldn't suppress a knowing smile, and she laughed delightedly. "You see! And you know it, too. I have never seen him *spolite* and accommodating with a woman. I suspect you have one foot in the door already."

She bade me a gracious goodbye, and I stammered inadequate thanks as she floated off, her expensive designer dress robes trailing behind her. I was struck by the sudden clarity of finally having found someone whom I could view as inspiring, an idol of sorts...someone who had made an immense success of herself professionally and yet was so kind, so unassumingly beautiful, that she took my breath away. It was virtually impossible for me to imagine that a mother of three girls struggling to balance such a busy lifestyle could possibly be so serene.

Shaking my head, absolutely confounded, I wandered back to Severus. I was too caught up in my own revelations to truly appreciate the frisson of awareness that ran through my body when his fingers landed lightly at the small of my back, guiding me from the building.

Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 18

Severus proves surprisingly amenable to Hermione's invitation.

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Despite the passage of several months, I awoke two mornings prior to our graduation ceremony to find that it felt like I'd just returned to Hogwarts to begin my seventh year. NEWT testing had since concluded, but I couldn't fathom that I was officially beginning the remainder of my life.

I rose from bed and wandered over to my bedroom window, staring with an odd sensation of emptiness at the castle grounds. Spring had given way to one of the most beautiful summers in recent memory. For the first time in his entire life, Harry had a summer of absolute joy and freedom impending; he and Ron had been accepted into Auror training for that fall, and they both planned to spend their summers peacefully at The Burrow.

For my part, I was due to begin my apprenticeship in slightly over a week. It was a minimum of one year's commitment, and I was already debating whether or not to immediately continue with advanced training in one certain discipline. The particulars of my life as an adult had yet to be resolved, and I couldn't seem to find within myself the energy to imagine a life beyond Hogwarts.

I went down to breakfast that morning to find Ron, Harry, and Ginny laughing delightedly at the Gryffindor table. Ginny may have had a year left to complete her schooling, but to look at her, one wouldn't have guessed the fact. The expression on her face made it glaringly obvious that even she was capable of feeling some brand of childlike enthusiasm I was being denied. I wondered idly how she could be so happy when all I felt was an overwhelming, deep-seated sense of melancholy.

"What's wrong with you?" were the first words out of Ron's mouth when I sat down. "Not going to get all emotional, are you? Honestly, girls..."

"Shut up," I retorted good-naturedly, staring hungrily at a plate of cinnamon buns, mentally deliberating whether or not I should eat one. I'd spent so much time over the past few weeks ensconced in the corner of the library, wholly focused on books, and I'd been eating increasingly rich food as the weather got warmer and the house-elves' spirits rose along with the soaring temperatures. Their breakfasts were now positively decadent.

"You're deciding whether or not you should eat that, aren't you?" Ginny peered at me, far too shrewdly for my liking, in fact. A frown of consternation must have crossed my face because she suddenly burst out into laughter.

"Just eat the damn thing, Hermione. You've got all day to do... whatever it is you sneak off to the Room of Requirement to do for exercise."

That had been precisely my thought as well. I happily reached for the treat.

It took me a moment to register that Ron's and Harry's heads had swiveled in my direction, and Harry choked on his bacon so violently that he spit a piece back out. "Excuse me? What are you sneaking off to do?"

"Nothing," I replied evasively, grabbing the cinnamon bun. "What are you three doing today?"

"Exams," Ginny immediately replied with a long-suffering sigh. She turned to Harry. "You?"

"We were thinking," Ron began with a calculating grin, "that we'd go say hello to the giant squid. You know, now that we can't possibly be expelled and all."

"Idiots," I muttered under my breath, liberally slathering my cinnamon bun with even more frosting. In a louder voice I continued, "Do you really think Professor McGonagall will let you get away with harassing the giant squid just because you're two days from graduating?"

Ron made a noise of grudging assent. "Y'know, she's right, mate. We really ought to hold off... Say, we could come back night of graduation!"

"Oh, for the love of God..." I downed my glass of milk and glanced over at Ginny. "You're not in on this, are you?"

"Merlin, no. How stupid do you think I am?"

We were shaking our heads and chuckling at the universally acknowledged stupidity of teenage boys when a large, dark owl veered dangerously in my direction and deposited an official-looking envelope onto my plate. Puzzled, I put aside the remainder of my bun and opened it, my anxiety increasing exponentially when I realized that the letter was from my parents.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, leaning over to sneak a peek at the missive. My parents had intended to attend the enormous graduation party the Weasleys were hosting for the three of us, but as it turned out, my mother's mother had fallen terribly ill just the night before.

"Oh, no..." I breathed, continuing. Apparently the doctors were aghast at her sudden decline. "My parents can't come to the party," I admitted to the worried gazes of my three friends. "It's my grandmother...she's very sick."

"Oh, Hermione, I'm so sorry." Ginny was searching my eyes anxiously, likely hoping to discern whether or not the news was worse than I was willing to reveal.

"They say they'll come up for graduation, but they want to get immediately back to London, so they can't come for the party... And I can't go see her! I start my apprenticeship soon." I tossed the letter onto the table and groaned, pressing my fingertips into my temples. Harry ran a warm and comforting hand across my back.

"There's nothing you can do to get out of the first couple of days?"

I shook my head. I was surprised to find only a feeling of silent acceptance settling over my stomach rather than the churning fear I had expected. There truly was no other course for me; I couldn't miss the introductory days of my apprenticeship, and I especially couldn't risk asking for a special allowance when I was attending on a scholarship.

"I couldn't possibly. How would that reflect on the Consortium and Severus? They've done so much for me..." Across from me, Ron's blue eyes, so kindly and soft moments prior, assumed a steely look. Ginny was regarding at me with something akin to pity, and Harry's grip had tightened painfully on my shoulder.

"Hermione..." Ron cocked his head to one side, and his jaw twitched as he clenched his teeth. I got the impression he was reining in the impulse to grab my shoulders and shake me soundly. "This thing... It's still going on?"

"What?" I asked distractedly, still preoccupied with thoughts of my grandmother's health.

"Did you even hear yourself a moment ago?" Harry's voice was quiet but unrelentingly harsh.

"No... Honestly, what is wrong with you two? I just said..."

"You called him Severus." Ginny leaned forward in an attempt to keep my gaze locked with hers. "Hermione, you just called him by his first name. Are you two... Are you supposed to be doing that?"

"No," I admitted, feeling my cheeks flushing hotly. "I'm sorry; it just slipped."

"Are you two on a first-name basis now?" Harry barged ahead, his voice becoming alarmingly loud. I felt bile rise in my throat when several people at a nearby table turned to stare at us inquisitively. "Are you seeing one another? In that way?"

"What?" I exclaimed. "No! I never said anything of the sort. It just slipped out, and I told you I'm sorry. There's no need to interrogate me."

"Look, Hermione, it was bad enough when this was just a little... infatuation." Ron was twisting his fork in his hands, the grip of his knuckles shockingly white. "But when you start calling him by his first name... Are you in a relationship with him? Is that what this is?"

"What if I were?" I snapped. "Would that bother you? Would it destroy your precious image of him as one-dimensional greasy bat with nothing in the way of human thoughts or emotions? Is that how you still see him?"

"Are you two really still that immature?" I finished softly, trailing off when I saw the devastating answer to my own question reflected in their eyes. I'd been loath to entertain over the past few months the idea that the odd camaraderie he and I had shared over dinner might be of any import because I couldn't imagine my friends would be accommodating of such a warming between the two of us. Thus I had never allowed myself to dwell on the possible gravity of my friends' reactions were we to ever pursue anything beyond mere acquaintanceship.

I had been foolish, I realized as the air gushed out of my lungs in resignation, to think that they might be agreeable to the very idea. They had indeed deemed it simply a phase, and they were repulsed by the thought that it continued still.

Ginny's expression was the only one of the three even remotely welcoming at the moment. Her petite features carried a mingled look of pity and remorse, and I thought that surely she, who had been my confidante over the course of the year, would have realized that it wasn't simply a phase. But perhaps she did, and she simply couldn't bring herself to risk coming between the boys and the notions they clung to so childishly and pettily.

Unable to respond, I fished around in my small school bag. I had brought it downstairs with me thinking that I would enjoy a day basking in the sun while reading and taking notes on several tomes covering medicinal potions and clinical magic practice I'd encountered in the library; but at that moment I was far more concerned about the small, rather abused piece of parchment stuffed into one corner. I pulled it out and glanced it over, my heart racing.

Hermione,

Do let your parents know that they're more than welcome to attend the party, especially since you'll be staying with us until you start up at St. Mungo's. I've got some wonderful ideas for the afternoon, so we'll need plenty of time to prepare! Let them know it will begin at three sharp, and you're more than welcome to bring anyone else you would care to invite.

Congratulations again on your apprenticeship. Arthur and I are so proud to have you as a friend of the family. I can't possibly express to you what a wonderful influence you've been for Ron and Ginny!

Give all my love to your parents,

Molly Weasley

I shoved the parchment back in my bag, fastened the clasp, and rose to my seat so quickly that I nearly upset my dishes. Judging by the gape-mouthed, rather fish-like look on Harry's face, he'd been preparing to ask me a question...or had been badgering me for some time now while I ignored him entirely...and his brows knotted together in annoyance when I rose without so much as an errant apology.

"Where are you going?" he demanded. I glanced up at table, raking over the line of professors until I arrived at the very last seat, which was aching empty. Torn between wanting to see him, a staple of my formative years, scowling in his normal seat and the desire and nervousness I felt over seeking him out elsewhere, I turned to leave.

"Hermione," Ginny called, a tone of warning in her voice, "what are you doing?"

"Something I should have done weeks ago," I yelled back, allowing the door of the Great Hall to slam shut decisively behind me.

The dungeons were damp, as usual, the walls literally running with condensation. I approached his office quickly and purposefully, not allowing myself to entertain second thoughts. In two days' time I would officially be a graduate of Hogwarts, and we would have no further connection as teacher and pupil.

I rapped lightly on the door, keenly listening for the sound of movement within. He was a preternaturally quiet human being...it was virtually impossible to locate him by sound alone, as many students pursuing illicit activities had discovered over the years...and I could see no light emanating from beneath the door, so I had no idea whether or not I'd sought him out in vain. Finally, however, I caught the faintest sound of rustling and a voice issued forth.

"For the last time, Lupin, I have no interest in your pathetic attempts at offering advice, however apt the situation may be. You have three seconds to remove your presence from my door before I reduce you to your constituent elements," he growled in a voice so forceful it shook the heavy door on its hinges.

I recoiled, temporarily unbalanced. It took a moment for my determination to reassert itself, whereupon I called softly, "Sir, it's Hermione Granger. May I have a word with you?"

The rustling ceased immediately, and the silence that filled the air was wrought with discomfort. I found it almost amusing to discover that I had managed to render him speechless. The embarrassment seeping through the cracks of his office door was almost palpable. A lightly murmured, barely audible word released the lock on the door, and it swung open with an annoyed creak.

I stepped in on my tiptoes, fearing that given his current mood I would soon be nothing but a quivering pile of carbon atoms laced with phosphorus and nitrogen. His gaze was not altogether that menacing, however, and so I advanced toward him and boldly took a seat across from his desk. He had several large books laid out before him as well as a very thick sheaf of parchments; it took every iota of my self-control not to sit forward and peer at the top sheets. The thought that he might be poring over research was nearly enough to make me salivate.

"Miss Granger." For him, the tone was positively welcoming. "I apologize. I mistakenly assumed you were Professor Lupin... returned to exhort the choir once again," he finished on a mutter. I had to lean forward to catch the final words.

"Pardon me?"

"Miss Granger," he reiterated in a far more brisk and standoffish tone, "what do you require? I am very busy, as you have undoubtedly surmised."

I sucked in a full, deep breath, praying the movement was not as obvious as I feared, and then let the words spill forth precisely as I'd rehearsed them. "Well, sir, Arthur and Molly Weasley are throwing a graduation party for Ron, Harry, and me... They've invited all the Order members, as I'm sure you've heard."

He offered me a terse recline of his head in acknowledgment.

"Well, I wasn't sure if anyone had come to invite you personally, so I wanted to ask you myself. It would mean a lot to me if you could attend." I stumbled through the final words hastily, determined that I should explicitly offer my personal desire for him to be present. It was more difficult than I'd anticipated to express the words in a normally paced and modulated tone with his dark eyes locked unwaveringly on mine.

"Miss Granger..."

"Hermione," I insisted intrepidly, my throat constricting at the thought that he might throw me out for sheer impudence. "I'm only here for two more days, and all the other teachers are calling me by my first name since exams finished."

It wasn't entirely true, of course...only Professors Sprout and Vector and Madam Pomfrey had taken to regularly referring to me by my given name since the conclusion of exams, and Madam Pomfrey had been freely doing so for months, so she hardly qualified as an appropriate example.

He regarded me searchingly for a moment. I could almost distinguish the deep irises from the pupils as his eyes flickered over my face.

"Very well. Hermione." The low caress of his voice over the syllables of my name made the hair at the nape of my neck stand on end. I realized too late that he'd noticed my instinctive reaction to his voice; something dark and liquid briefly flared to life in his eyes. "As I was saying... I am flattered by your invitation, but a Weasley graduation party is not an event I would particularly enjoy. Of that I am certain," he concluded wryly, and I chuckled despite myself. One side of his lips curled slightly in the tiniest, sexiest smile I'd ever seen. I spared myself a moment to regain my regular breathing pattern.

"I realize that, sir, but really, it won't be that bad. I'm sure the boys will be off playing Quidditch the entire time, so you won't have to put up with them. And I'm sure Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would love it if you agreed to go. They would be thrilled."

I placed lingering emphasis on *they*, knowing perfectly well that with his sharp ears and acumen, he would never overlook the significance. He sat back in his chair, resting one long leg across the other, and I watched the montage of emotions and indecision flashing across his eyes even while his face remained characteristically stony.

"Very well. I shall be there. But I make no promises..." He could see me opening my mouth to express my thanks, and he held up one slender finger in forewarning.

"...as to how long you'll stay?" I finished, unable to restrain my smile. Again I fully expected him to hurl me from the office for my cheek, but he simply nodded, a slower, almost languorous movement this time. I rose and offered him my biggest, brightest smile.

"Thank you, sir. It means a great deal to me...to everyone...that you'll be there."

I exited the room, suppressing the agonizing urge to break out into a wild, triumphant dance.

I was absurdly grateful when graduation passed, unremarkable and wholly without incident. We had all subconsciously expected, I think, for something terrible, or at least unpleasant, to occur on the day The

Boy Who Lived graduated from Hogwarts, a living hallmark of the ultimate victory of impure blood; but the entire day progressed as smoothly as anyone could have desired. When the ceremony had reached its conclusion, Professor McGonagall could be heard heaving an enormous sigh of relief before ushering everyone over to the buffet table.

Thus I found myself the day after, completely absorbed in what I was doing, at The Burrow helping Molly Weasley to decorate for the party. Ginny was aiding with the cooking, a task I would have botched entirely if they'd put me to it, so I had been assigned to setting the table in the garden. Fred and George had graciously agreed to do it the day before, but I still had to kick aside a few of the tenacious little creatures as I circled the gigantic table, carefully arranging the place settings.

Harry and Ron...who had been nothing but an absolute nuisance since graduation, when they'd unequivocally declared themselves adults who did not need to take orders from anyone...had disappeared earlier that morning, most likely to play Quidditch. I had been aggravated by their lack of respect for Mrs. Weasley, but she seemed perfectly accepting of their behavior.

"They're not like you," she'd explained with an indulgent smile. "The idea of being adult and independent is completely new to them. I doubt they think beyond the next ten minutes."

It was rather foreign for me as well, I thought dizzily, dwelling on the small flat a few blocks from St. Mungo's that awaited me. The stipend provided by the Consortium had been far more generous than I'd originally thought. The day before graduation, I had received a letter from the Romanian Minister of Magic...signed with a simple and affectionate, **Best wishes, Marina**...informing me that the remainder of the money, as it was not required to cover my tuition, was free to rent a living space for myself if I so chose. When she'd inquired if a very nice, very spacious place several blocks from the hospital was satisfactory to me, I could do nothing but return her inquiry with a letter of highly unprofessional, far too effusive thanks. I still couldn't believe my luck.

"Hermione!"

I started and turned around, barely catching one of Mrs. Weasley's dishes before it clattered to the table, and caught sight of Mr. Weasley jogging excitedly towards me. He was carrying in his right hand a rather large Muggle CD player, a sight so incongruous that I immediately broke out into irrepressible giggles.

"Look what I've fixed up!" he proclaimed proudly, letting it thump down onto the table. I quashed the urge to cringe when he upset several of my geometrically perfect place settings. "But I can't get it to work on electcity...electority..."

"Electricity," I corrected through my convulsions of laughter.

"Yes, that's the stuff. Anyway, I couldn't get *that* to work, but look what this wonderful chap at work found for me..."

He pried open the back of the device rather clumsily to reveal a standard set of batteries.

"Batteries!"

"**Batteries**," I replied automatically, beaming at him. "That's great, Mr. Weasley! Do you have any music to play on it?"

"Well, no," he confessed, his face falling piteously. "See, I found some of these"...he pulled a tape out of one of his pockets, a terribly battered old thing..."but they don't fit."

I gave a cry of alarm and stopped his hand before he could shove the tape into the CD player, concerned that he might damage the equipment. "It doesn't take tapes, Mr. Weasley. It takes CDs. Do you know what those are?"

"No." His crestfallen look was beginning to rip into my heart.

"Well, here..." I handed him the last few plates and napkins. "I'll tell you what: you finish setting the table for me, Mr. Weasley, and I'll Floo back to my parents' and grab a couple of CDs. Then I'll show you how it works. Okay?"

His eyes lit up like a child's. "That sounds terrific!" he agreed, applying himself enthusiastically to the table settings.

I dashed through the kitchen, yelling a quick, "I'll be right back!" to Ginny's questioning shout, and grabbed a handful of Floo powder off the mantel. Seconds later I was standing in my parents' living room, wondering what on earth I ought to play for the people gathered at the party. I somehow doubted that the majority of the Order of the Phoenix would be at all familiar with popular Muggle artists, and I hadn't the vaguest idea what would be universally enjoyable to all present.

I tramped up the stairs, trying in vain to remember what albums I owned. I'd only had opportunities to buy music during my summer stays at home, and while I truly did love listening to music, I simply hadn't had the money or the time required to amass a decent collection. I regretted that deeply at times, but there was nothing to be done about it now. I filed through my meager music collection, vetoing nearly everything for fear that one person or the other would find it intolerable.

I finally settled on a few basic staples and then returned to the Weasleys'. I found Ginny in the kitchen. Mr. Weasley, presumably having heard the undignified whooshing and stumbling of my arrival, ran into the kitchen, lugging the beloved CD player.

Ginny dusted off her hands and meandered over, peering curiously at the items I carried. "Are those CDs?" she gasped, her eyes widening appreciatively.

I nodded, pulling out a U2 CD and popping it in. "Did Harry tell you about them?"

"Yes! Can I see it?" I handed her the CD case while explaining to Mr. Weasley how the laser was capable of reading microscopic variations in the topography of the disks, translating the resulting signals into sounds.

"Fascinating," he murmured repeatedly to himself, poking at the various buttons. I laughed and hit the play button, turning up the volume so that everyone in the house would be able to hear it.

Ginny read eagerly through the lyrics as the first song played. "Sing with me!" she cried, glancing down the page in order to locate the proper point in the song. I helped her to orient her gaze on the page. She latched onto the lyrics with shocking accuracy and immediately began belting them out. I followed suit as we began dancing around freely, giving no thought to the fact that it was fast approaching three o'clock, and the other guests would be arriving at any moment.

Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 18

Hermione contends with her reaction to Remus and Tonks' good news.

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As it happened, Tonks strode into the room next, followed very closely by Remus. He took one look at Ginny and I flapping our arms and singing...and at Mr. Weasley's bemused smile as he swayed to the music in a way that could never, by any stretch of the imagination, have been termed *dancing*...and he promptly burst out laughing.

"Having fun?" he teased us all. I watched with awe the way his gaze slid over Tonks' smiling face as she accepted the lyrics from Ginny and read through them. It could not have been more evident to even the most unobservant parties that they were tremendously, deeply in love.

"I know this one!" Tonks cried suddenly, skimming over the book. "I think my dad has this album. Where'd you guys get it?"

"It's mine," I explained as I stopped dancing, clutching a hand to my ribcage. I was positively breathless with a combination of laughter and exhilaration I hadn't felt in months. "Mr. Weasley fixed up the CD player, so I offered to give him a sample of how it works."

Mrs. Weasley came bustling back into the kitchen and took one look at us in our state of idleness, gathered around the pulsing CD player while visibly accomplishing nothing. "Girls!" she admonished, gesturing wildly at the half-completed meal. "Get to work!"

"What can I do, Molly?" Tonks asked cheerfully, tossing her light summer jacket over the back of the nearest chair. I, too, had abandoned all modesty hours before and stripped down to just my denim capris and red tank top. I'd felt distinctly odd being the only person wandering around in Muggle clothing, and thus it was a relief to see that Tonks was strongly in touch with her Muggle half that day, dressed in a light skirt and a far skimpier shirt than I was sporting.

We each sized up one another's outfits and laughed. She began by peeling and chopping the carrots while I lent Ginny a hand with the dessert. I'd never had much of a knack for kitchen work, a fact my mother had bemoaned on numerous occasions, but I was a reasonably useful companion where dessert was involved. We'd had it so infrequently at the house of two rabidly healthy dentists that it was one of the few culinary pursuits in whose creative process I'd cared to interest myself.

"So Hermione," Tonks called from the vicinity of the sink, "Remus told me you won a scholarship to St. Mungo's.."

"I did," I affirmed loudly, murmuring to Ginny to turn down the music. She shot me a look that plainly suggested she thought I was crazy to want to turn *down* the volume of the music. I released a groan when I saw her shrewdly eyeing the buttons, undoubtedly endeavoring to determine which one would turn it *up*.

"So Snape submitted your potion?" Tonks yelled. "That's what Remus said."

"Yes, he did," I called back, "and it was enormously generous of him to go through the work. He's the entire reason I'll be able to afford to pursue my apprenticeship directly out of school."

"I'm amazed he was even willing to go through all that," I heard her remark in an incredulous tone. "I figured they'd have him thrown out for sure."

It took several moments for her words to sink in. Once they had, I paused in my ministrations and put down my utensils, frowning.

"What was that?"

"I said I'm amazed he was willing to go through all that," she reiterated, carrying the bowl of freshly washed and peeled carrots over to the table, where she commenced arranging an enormous garden salad. She was astoundingly deft with food considering her usual clumsiness pertaining to life matters in general.

"All what?" I queried, confused. "He said he just turned in the potion. The board of directors requested that he submit the best sample brewed by his students."

Tonks snorted indelicately. "That's what he told you, huh?" She shook her head, and I saw a rueful smile crease her lips. "I gotta tell you, Hermione, I'm surprised you didn't figure it out. But then again, he didn't survive two decades of spying because he's an idiot."

Having long since broached the point of being baffled...and, in fact, progressed to downright concerned...I abandoned my post at the dessert counter altogether and immediately seated myself beside Tonks. She was using two gigantic wooden spoons to toss the various vegetables in Molly Weasley's large serving bowl. The crisp greens and carrots looked delicious paired with juicy tomatoes and a light sprinkling of oregano, but I couldn't seem to concentrate on anything but the mounting feeling of apprehension in my chest.

"What didn't he tell me?" I prodded her, my tone more demanding than I'd intended. She glanced up, her dark eyes scrutinizing mine.

"Great," she exclaimed suddenly, and I thought she'd departed from the topic at hand until she sighed and murmured more privately, "Now I regret bringing it up. He probably *really* didn't want you to know."

I opened my mouth to ask yet another terse question, but she cut me off with a wave of her hand.

"I suppose I have to tell you now.... Look, Hermione, I'm not saying this so that you can run off and thank him again. It'll only embarrass him, and you more than anyone have gotten a look of how private a person he is, hmm?"

Though my instantaneous reaction was to agree with her, I wisely kept my mouth shut and waited for whatever else would be forthcoming.

She sighed, pushing aside the salad bowl. "Snape was a member of quite a few professional societies up until the end of your sixth year. He's a brilliant Potions master, after all... He still belonged to who knows how many honor societies from when he did his apprenticeship...three of them, in fact, all in increasingly more difficult aspects of potions...and when he got his rank, all those prestigious societies like the one you met were dying to get him.

"Of course," she admitted, "I only know this because of what Remus told me. I had no idea he was so popular among his colleagues, but then, he never says anything about himself. Certainly not to me," she added with a wry grin. "Anyway... Once Albus' murder became headline news, they all threw his name out immediately. He was lucky to maintain connections with any of them after the first time he was pardoned, for that matter, but I suppose over the years being a teacher at Hogwarts would have earned him *some* trust back. After last year, though..." She swept the edge of her hand threw the air, mimicking the slicing motion of a blade. "Cut him out completely. They were mortified at the thought that they'd ever had anything to do with him."

"Then how...?" I whispered into the ether. She nodded as though sensing the gist of my unfinished train of thought.

"I guess Remus read it in one of his journals. He keeps up with all the latest stuff in Defense, and of course a huge area of that is Dark potions. There was some blurb in one of his journals last month about Potions masters in the UK capable of brewing some particular potion, and there are very few of Snape's caliber. He was surprised they didn't mention him."

"So up until a month ago, they still hadn't readmitted him?"

"No, Remus looked into it...felt sorry for him, I think. Up until a month ago, all his ties with professional societies were still severed."

"Then he...?"

"Right in one," she pronounced; how she was able to complete a thought even I hadn't managed to fully formulate, I couldn't imagine. "He must have convinced them to let him back in so he could submit your potion... I've got no idea how. How long has he known that your parents didn't have the money for the apprenticeship?"

"Since Christmas," I replied slowly, the lingering memory of Christmas Eve resurfacing in my mind. "I was telling Professor Vector and Professor Flitwick why I didn't have an apprenticeship lined up, and he was in the room..."

Tonks shook her head in amazement, her short, spiky, vivid purple hair swaying from side to side with the movement. "I've got no idea how he did it, honestly. He must have fought tooth and nail to get back in. But then," she said with a chuckle, "Snape's bark's always been worse than his bite. He probably just named a few unpleasant repercussions and they let him back in out of sheer terror."

"He wouldn't do that," I insisted automatically, "least of all if they'd cut off ties with him due to his involvement. I refuse to believe that he could possibly have threatened his way in. But how did he convince them?"

"I don't know," she replied, shrugging. The thin straps of her tank top were making dangerously rapid progress toward the edges of her shoulders. "Haven't the foggiest."

Maybe he was only able to do it because he had your potion to convince them that it was still worthwhile having him as a member. Or maybe," she added diffidently, "he did it because he wanted to submit your potion. The timing would be right."

Ginny, who had been irretrievably absorbed in her cooking, looked up to find me staring pensively at my hands, wringing them in frustration. "You okay, Hermione?" she asked with furrowed brows. "Tonks, what've you been doing to her?"

"Nothing," Tonks insisted. "She didn't realize Snape had to fight his way back into the Consortium to submit her potion is all."

Ginny gasped, her eyes flying to me. "I don't think any of us realized it. You okay, Hermione? You're not going to start feeling even more indebted to him, are you?"

"Hey," Tonks interjected suddenly, her tone firm to the point of being nearly maternal, "I didn't tell you this so that you'd think you owed him something. You should be grateful to him, sure, but don't allow him to convince you that this means he has any kind of power over you. You might not have been able to get in right away, Hermione, but there's no doubt in anyone's mind that you could have done it on your own, given enough time."

"He hasn't pressured her about it." I glanced up, relieved, to find that there was no trace of hesitation in Ginny's voice when she delivered the statement. "I was there when he told her... He did it just to help her out. He didn't seem like he expected anything in return. But I know you, Hermione, and I know you're feeling guilty that he's done so much for you."

It was just as well, I reflected dryly, because I had only one thing to offer him...and he hadn't seemed too enthralled by that particular prospect thus far.

My opinion was destined for a diametric change, however, as the afternoon wore on. At precisely three-thirty I stood alone in the kitchen, enjoying the soft breeze entering through the open window above the sink as I put the finishing touches on the dessert. I had been trying in vain to ignore the fact that he hadn't yet shown up, choosing instead to devote my utmost concentration to the arrangement of the raspberries on Mrs. Weasley's delicious cake. She and Mr. Weasley were sitting in the garden sipping aperitifs along with most of the other Order members. Ginny had strolled off to alert all the boys that the meal was being served.

Presuming that it would take her some time to sway their attention...even if the proffered alternative was food...Mrs. Weasley had suggested that the rest of us gather in the garden. I hadn't felt much inclined to surround myself with company at that moment, so I had offered to see to the final arrangements of the dessert until Ginny returned with the boys.

I had turned the volume down on the CD player significantly, but it was still loud enough within the kitchen to drown out nearly all the ambient sounds. I was singing along with purposeful passion, hoping to distract myself from my dispirited feeling, as I was crouched over the cake.

"*I... I... believe in love,*" I sang loudly, adding more berries to the dessert with a flourish. I was going into the next verse, wholly unaware of my surroundings.

"*I feel like I'm falling...*"

I jumped and cried out when I met with a solid wall of resistance upon turning around. Severus stood there, the look in his eyes unmistakably amused, when I nearly dropped the colander of raspberries on the floor. I panted, half due to shock and half due to the sight of him before me. He was sporting a casual buttoned shirt...black, of course...rolled up nearly to his elbows, and the first two buttons at his throat were undone. I stared at the strong, muscled shape of his throat and shoulders, willing myself to cease staring at the exposed skin.

"I'm so sorry!" I exclaimed, placing a hand against him in a reflexive gesture of conciliation and goodwill. I realized belatedly that it probably came off as worse*Much, much worse, Granger,* my traitorous brain chimed in) to place my hand against his chest after staring unabashedly at the breadth of his shoulders in that shirt.

It was, however, the only thing I could reach at my current height, for I was barefoot, and he wore his usual black school boots. I yanked my hand away hastily, my fingertips relishing far too much the lingering sensation of the hard planes of his chest.

He remained silent for a moment, observing me, and then spoke up. "I apologize for startling you...and also for the rudeness of my late arrival," he continued, his voice neutral. "I was detained in the laboratory."

"Oh, that's all right." I set down the colander of raspberries and wiped my hands on the nearest dishtowel, relieved to have an excuse to turn away from him to compose myself quickly. I had to resist the urge to use the towel to fan my flushed face and chest.

Turning back to meet his eyes, I said in as natural a tone as I could manage, "Ginny's just gone to fetch the boys, but everyone else is in the garden. They'll be thrilled that you could come."

He gave a short nod, still apparently reluctant to release my gaze. We stood there, locked in one another's eyes, until Molly Weasley's entrance into the kitchen startled us both into tearing away.

"Severus!" Her tone, when it first emerged, was an amalgamation of surprise and concern. "I didn't realize you could make it." She shot me a searching look, and I could almost see the moment of realization clicking in her mind. "Hermione must have spoken with you?"

He nodded. "Miss Granger approached me to... request that I reconsider my decision."

"Well." She took in the two of us, her sharp eyes missing not an inch of my flushed skin and obvious discomfiture. Abruptly she raised her head, her eyes and expression brightening, and clapped her hands in a gesture of finality. "We're so thrilled you could make it! Remus will be glad to see you. Would you care for a drink?"

"Yes, thank you."

Her eyes widening almost imperceptibly at his atypical politeness, Mrs. Weasley directed him to the garden, leaving me to myself once again. I brushed off my capris, straightened my shirt, and downed an enormous glass of cold water before chancing to make an appearance in the garden. Ginny and the boys were just cresting the hill, lugging their brooms and laughing in good humor. I detoured to one of the flower pots to admire Mrs. Weasley's gardening skills, remaining there until Ginny had entered the garden.

"We're back, *finally,*" she announced in mock irritation. Harry gave her a brief, good-natured kiss on the back of her neck, and she blushed violently. "Hello, everyone. Hello, Professor Snape," she added in obvious pleasure. "I'm glad you could make it."

I noticed for the first time that Luna had arrived, taking a seat beside Professor McGonagall. Ginny sat beside her, and Harry, Ron, and the others followed suit, choosing seats offering a location near the people with whom they'd been conversing. When everyone had settled and begun exclaiming in admiration over the appetizing array of dishes, the only seat left available to me was beside Fred...and directly across from Severus.

I sat with trepidation, ignoring the food for the time being in favor of another drink of water. Severus watched me with his lips flat and expressionless, but a rather sardonic look had entered into his dark eyes. We reached simultaneously for the salad bowl, and in a moment of cliché discomfort, his fingers brushed mine. He immediately retreated, nodding in concession, and I offered him a smile as thanks and dished myself out a small serving of salad.

Mr. Weasley was passing the wine around the table when I heard Tonks giggling slightly at the other end. Remus whispered something to her I couldn't distinguish, and she giggled and murmured back. Severus' head shot up suddenly and he stared at them with such intensity that it made me shiver. I wondered if he'd been able to discern the words I hadn't.

A fleeting look of triumph flared in his eyes when Remus cleared his throat and rose to his feet, smiling benevolently down at Tonks. I gasped...rather too loudly, I admit...and Ginny began jumping in her seat, squealing. The boys merely looked baffled, but every female at the table and most of the men knew instantly what he was about announce.

"Everyone," he said, "as much as I hate to spoil what is essentially Harry, Ron, and Hermione's day, there's something Nymphadora and I would like to say to you, and I think this is perhaps the most advantageous opportunity."

"Oh, Remus!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, tears already visibly filling her eyes. He glanced rather nervously at Harry, Ron, and myself in turn as though seeking our silent approval. I could feel a few tears pooling in my own eyes as I beamed at him and nodded.

"Well," he said, "I've asked this lovely woman to be my wife"...Tonks snorted, her usual humor reasserting itself..."and for some reason, she's consented."

"Oh shut up!" Tonks exclaimed, hitting him gently on the shoulder as everyone laughed, clapped, and offered their exuberant congratulations.

"I realize," Remus continued, "that the differences in our ages might make some of you nervous, but we have discussed it, and Nymphadora insists that it does not bother her." He placed a hand over hers, and while I was conscious of the fact that it was precisely the sort of sentimental tripe I ought to have brushed past, a familiar feeling of longing and rebellion passed through me. Of course it didn't bother Tonks...she loved him totally, unconditionally, and it had been obvious to all of us for some time. I could imagine precisely how she'd felt through all those long weeks of seeking in vain to convince Remus of the sincerity and depth of her affections despite the age disparity and his unfortunate condition.

"And so," he concluded, "I'd like to invite everyone to the wedding...when we finalize the date, that is...and I promise you I'll do my best to see that she doesn't regret it!"

Most everyone laughed and raised their glasses in salute. I did so as well, catching Tonks' eyes. *Congratulations*, I mouthed, feeling certain that I'd never been happier for a friend than I was at that moment. The previously blasé look had passed from her face, and she was shedding tears freely now.

"Thank you!" she called back aloud, and everyone turned to view my reaction. I smiled, feeling the tautness of the motion, and sipped at my glass in synchrony with the others. Professor McGonagall, however, had not stopped staring in my direction, and it took me a moment to realize that she was closely observing Severus.

I glanced over, truly unsure as to what his reaction to his coworker's news might be, and found that while he had the barest of token smiles playing at his lips, his eyes looked positively tortured. He looked over at me, and my throat constricted when he made no effort to glance away or hide his interest. He looked at me...really, truly looked at me...and a subtle understanding seemed to suspend itself between the two of us.

"So Hermione," Remus called from the other end of the table. With reluctance so overwhelming I felt it physically, I tore my eyes away from Severus' to respond.

"Yes?"

"When do you start up at St. Mungo's?"

"Not even a week now," I called back, absently aware that I had been consistently mutilating my food for nearly ten minutes. I put the fork down gently. "I'm moving into my flat tomorrow."

"Really?" Remus raised an eyebrow. "They've got you a flat as well?"

"Yes. The stipend was incredibly generous. There was money left over, and they offered to let me use it to rent a place near the hospital so I wouldn't have to Floo every day from my parents'."

He nodded in understanding, and Ron spoke up through a mouthful of food. "And she's started studying already, I'll bet," he jested lightly. Everyone chuckled and looked at me for confirmation.

I rolled my eyes. "Well, yes, I have, but you can't blame me for that...I've got a lot to cover!"

Evening arrived far too quickly for my liking. I had been rent the entire time between the dueling desires to say the dreaded goodbye to him as soon as possible and the deep-seated need to have him in close physical proximity. As it had gotten cooler and darker, we'd all pulled on our jackets and lit several of the lovely lanterns that spaced the area of the garden.

Seating was limited, and I found that rather than Transfiguring myself a chair, I was able to comfortably rest at the foot of Ginny's chair, leaning my head against her legs. She'd brought the CD player out half an hour before to introduce the adults to the concept of Muggle music, and we'd all enjoyed it greatly. Even Severus was forced to crack a smile when she'd asked cheerfully, "So, Hermione, do you know any great love songs? Harry says they're all terribly sentimental."

"Obviously," I had retorted with a smile, chewing my cake thoughtfully. "That's rather the point."

"Play us one," Tonks called happily. "I'm going to force Remus to dance with me."

I choked on my cake, and Ginny pounded me on the back. "I don't think I want to be the reason Remus calls off the wedding the same day he announces it," I yelled back, rousing raucous laughter from everyone present...including, to my immense satisfaction, Severus. My entire body suffused with pleasure when I heard the dark, rich sound of him chuckling nearby.

"All right," Ginny announced vehemently, "I'll find one, then. Harry, help me out."

Harry bent over the stack of CDs, glancing quickly through them. "Hermione, I wouldn't have taken you for a fan of most of these bands," he joked. "My cousin listens to some of these!"

I raised a challenging eyebrow. "Then I suppose he has admirable taste."

Harry snorted and pulled out one of the disks. "I don't know," he said slowly, dubiously, looking it over with an almost suspicious eye. "I've never had much experience with music."

Ginny shot me a pout, and I glanced down at Tonks to find her presenting me with an equally petulant expression. I couldn't think of a more loathsome prospect than having to choose a love song to play in front of Severus...who was probably already mulling over my deplorable taste...but I couldn't stand to disappoint Tonks.

"Fine," I capitulated, sighing and placing aside my plate of cake. "But only," I insisted with an assertively raised finger, "to celebrate your engagement. Not because I want to embarrass myself by playing you my favorite love song," I grumbled, and Harry clapped me on the shoulder in commiseration when I crouched down near the CD player.

I popped in the relevant CD, turned it to the correct track, and tentatively turned up the volume. Tonks had laughingly dragged Remus out into the grass, and they were dancing with gentle, swaying movements that brought her petite frame firmly against his body. Harry and Ginny quickly joined them, but not before she exclaimed over what a beautiful song I'd chosen.

Ron and Luna were quick to follow, and then Mr. and Mrs. Weasley did the same. Feeling increasingly uncomfortable and embarrassed, I took refuge in Ginny's chair, curling my legs beneath me and dolefully regarding the dancing couples. I didn't want to be pathetically obvious in my longing, so I pretended to watch the fading light of

dusk, feigning admiration for the landscape.

The song concluded on a soft note, and I realized with a jolt of awareness that Severus was rising from his seat, clearly making his exit. I rose instinctively, and we walked in silence to the living room, where he began to take hold of a handful of Floo powder.

"Thank you for inviting me." The living room was unlit and by this time profoundly dark; I could hardly distinguish the outline of his facial features from the overall blurry profile of his body.

"You're welcome. Thank you for coming."

We stood in silence, a few grains of Floo powder escaping his grip to cascade to the floor in a light shower.

"Good luck with your apprenticeship," he continued in a much more recognizable, professional tone.

"Professor..."

"Severus."

I stifled a small gasp, but I could not control the racing of my heart. It was impossible for me to see his eyes, far too dark in the dim light, but I could feel the heat radiating from his body and detect the tantalizing scent of his aftershave. I hadn't stood this close to him in recent memory.

"Severus," I agreed softly, my body thrumming with the joy of accentuating the beautiful sound of his name. "I want to thank you again for everything you've done for me. I will never forget it."

"You're welcome, Hermione." The tension was perilously close to liquefying me. Finally he raised his hand to toss the Floo powder into the fire, and I pulled out my last desperate resort.

"I'm moving into my flat tomorrow," I said as confidently as I could, "so if you're ever in the neighborhood..."

He regarded me, the movement of his hand arrested. I moved forward incrementally, desperate to bring myself closer to the heat so recklessly emanating from his body. He was impossibly enticing, warm and delicious in the emboldening darkness of the living room. For one blissful moment I saw his face lower slightly, inclining, and the desire in my chest roared to life.

"Perhaps I will do that." To anyone else his tone would have sounded casual, perhaps even aloof, but I was forcibly reminded of the eighteen-year-old boy whose voice had cracked slightly as he'd gasped in pleasure while Bellatrix Lestrange was above him. To me it carried all the significance...and the hope...in the world.

He disappeared into the flames.

Author's Note:

I would like to once again offer my deepest thanks to everyone who's reviewed so far, and continues to do so regularly. You're pretty much the reason I have the desire to continue writing despite the stress of school. :) I can't thank you enough. I'm having so much fun posting this, and I hope you'll continue to enjoy the chapters.

As a side note, I made Hermione a U2 fan simply because I was listening to *Rattle and Hum* while writing the chapter, and I think they're a reasonably enjoyable band for most people. Hope no one was horrified by her choice in music. While completing the first portion of this chapter I was listening to "God Part II," which are the lyrics she sings just before bumping into Severus. I can't take credit for that song, which is terrific, by the way. :-P

I purposely neglected to include any lyrics or allusion to the love song she chose because I didn't want anyone objecting to my choice (considering that most of you are probably already sickened by the saccharine quality of the chapter!), but I couldn't resist the thought of her feelings coming across via song when she had no opportunity to escape the revealing. It's such a personal expression for someone who is generally composed and practical. Mentally insert whatever song you feel would best describe her feelings for Severus...that's what I did with mine! I'll post the song title and lyrics I chose to imagine on my PP author profile so that you can view them in the unlikely event that you care. I really do think it is an apt description.

Again, thanks so much for your patience. They are very, very close to the pivotal moment, but I couldn't resist exposing a bit more of Hermione's vulnerabilities first. It will make the moment he kisses her all the more thrilling, I think. :)

Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 18

Hermione is given another glimpse into Severus' private life.

Disclaimer: All characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I intend no infringement and am making no profit.

The day before I was due to begin my apprenticeship at St. Mungo's, I was lying comfortably in the cool grass beneath a tree near The Burrow. The boys...including Fred and George, who were by now far too rich to concern themselves with being at the store at all hours...were all playing Quidditch. Earlier that morning I had received an owl from my parents reporting that my grandmother was doing markedly better and that she had even regained consciousness sufficiently to warn me against abandoning school just to see her.

Chuckling, for I had always loved my grandmother and her rather harsh sense of humor, I had saved the letter and gathered up my books. The day after the party Mrs. Weasley had invited me to join her at Diagon Alley for some shopping, and I couldn't resist checking to see if my book order had arrived at Flourish & Blotts. Since I was now in possession of a fair variety of books, I wanted to read and take notes on as much as I possibly could before I began.

I'd gone through the most important of the group...*Clinical Magic Practice for the New Apprentice*...immediately and had finished the entire thing. I'd also finished off one other and was making considerable progress on the third when Ginny wandered up and sat down beside me.

"Hello," she greeted me with a smile, flopping down on the blanket beside me. She looked interestedly over my books and shook her head.

"You don't have to do any of this for an apprenticeship, you know. They're not going to quiz you on the first day before you've even handled a patient."

"It never hurts to be prepared," I pointed out, regretting instantly how brusque and distant I sounded. I put down my quill, flexing my hand experimentally. I had been alternating between reading and writing for nearly three hours; my hand was unbelievably stiff and sore.

"I'm sorry." She gave me another smile and a nod, suggesting that she understood it was stress affecting my behavior. "I'm just... nervous. I want to be as prepared as I can, and there's so much to learn..."

"I'm glad to see you're able to concentrate," she replied, leaning back against the tree. Her long hair snagged on a piece of bark and she sighed, untangling it. "Have you heard anything about your grandmother?"

I nodded, perking up. "My parents owed me this morning. She's making a remarkable recovery, apparently."

"Good! I'm glad to hear it." She was still eyeing me rather searchingly, and I didn't think I could stand to sit there while she observed me so closely.

"Gin, what is it? I can tell you want to ask me something." I shut the book I'd been using and reduced it and all my papers so that I could tuck them safely in my pocket.

She continued to regard me for a moment before saying slowly, "This thing with Snape..."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "You want to know to what extent I still care for him?"

"I think I know," she returned quietly. "I saw how you looked at him at the party. And I saw how he looked at you, too."

I chose not to pursue that particular avenue of thought for fear my hopes would elevate too drastically. "Does it bother you as much as it bothers the boys?"

She stared off into space for a moment, vaguely in the direction of the boys as they played. "I don't think it bothers me *that* much," she replied, "but you and I talk about stuff like this all the time. They don't know anything about you in that way."

"Nor do I want them to," I muttered dryly, "unless I have their assurance that they won't act like *this*. Harry's barely said a word to me since graduation. Ron *is* taking it better than I had expected," I admitted, "and I'm glad I was proven wrong about that. But Harry... He can't get over the thought that Snape is his eternal enemy, and I can't help but wonder if he'll ever be able to forgive me as well."

She put a comforting hand on my shoulder. "He doesn't hate you, Hermione. He's just confused. He doesn't understand how you could feel that way about someone who took part in so many horrible crimes, especially after you saw them all yourself. We didn't see what went on in his memories, but it doesn't take a lot to guess." A rather cold look had entered her eyes, and I attempted to calm myself before I became too defensive.

"You know..." I wasn't sure how to proceed; I'd felt such an enormous growth of compassion and admiration for Severus since witnessing his memories, but it was a paradox few others would understand, having not experienced a similar glimpse of his reactions. "He did do some terrible things, and logically, it should make me feel disgusted with him, not like this. But I can't help but admire him." I collapsed onto my back, staring at the sunlight diffusing through the leaves above me, casting mesmerizing patterns of light and dark. "He made one poor mistake, and he's spent the remainder of his life paying for it. And he *has* paid for it," I insisted vehemently, "many times over, but he can't forgive himself so he continues to suffer. He'd hate it if anyone confronted him about it, but he's got far more foolish Gryffindor 'nobility' than you or I."

Ginny chuckled. "Yes, he *would* hate being told that."

"And I know," I continued, "because I've heard him say it, what he wants in a relationship. I know he values privacy and tranquility above all else, and I know he's precisely the type of person I want to be with because he wants to be left alone just as much as I do. He wants companionship, but not to the point where it's stifling. He wants to be able to focus mostly on his work but to have someone to come home to as well."

"And that's exactly what you want." It was not a question.

"Yes. I'm not..." I propped myself up on my elbow, wondering how to best express my feelings without giving Ginny the impression that I was denigrating her choice of lifestyle. "I'm not as selfless as you and Luna, Gin. I don't think I want a family or that kind of busy life because I just... At the end of the day, the most important thing to me is that I can be by myself and work, and I refuse to believe that that makes me crazy."

"No," she agreed, "it doesn't. But do you know for sure that it's *what he* wants?"

"I think he would understand. Professor McGonagall told me once that he'd said to her he wanted to find someone if he survived the war, maybe get married. She made it sound as though he's not entirely certain whether he wants a family, but I'd be willing to find out."

From the makeshift Quidditch pitch, Ron let out a howl of consternation as whomever he'd been opposing made a goal. I saw Harry jumping around excitedly and surmised that he was pleased with the outcome.

"I feel terrible even thinking about this." The boys had been an integral part of my life for so long that it was virtually impossible for me to imagine breaking ties with them entirely over a man. It was exactly the sort of thing I had always deemed unforgivably foolish, and yet here I was, contemplating the possibility myself. "I can't imagine them not speaking to me for years on end, you know?"

"Hermione, I don't..." Ginny threw up her hands in frustration and leaned forward earnestly. "I know you're worried about the boys, but I don't think you understand that it's *their* pride that's hurt. They're not trying to hurt yours. They just can't deal with the fact that you loving him is forcing them to reconsider what kind of person he might be."

"I understand that, but I feel terribly selfish even contemplating a relationship with him if it would put them through such pain."

"They'll get over it," she said dismissively. "And it will take them as long as they want it to. They can choose to accept it right away and move on, or they can choose to be idiots about it. It's their choice."

I couldn't suppress a smile. Ginny had an enviable way of reducing any conundrum to its most simplistic state, and I admired the wisdom in her viewpoint. "And what about you?" I asked finally, turning to meet her eyes. They were filled with uncertainty. "Is there anything you have to get over?"

She clasped her hands in her lap and spent a few moments watching the boys as well. "I just want you to be sure that he's really what you want. You've been so happy lately, Hermione, and... Maybe that *is* him, but I don't think he's the only one responsible for it. Last summer after the battle and everything, you smiled...really *smiled*...for the first time in years. You were happy. You giggled and you talked about what you wanted to do for the future, and you seemed like you were finally able to really have some fun.

"But now..." She shook her head, visibly disgusted with her own inability to articulate her thoughts. "When we were singing along with your CD and Remus and Tonks walked in, you thought at first that it was him, didn't you?"

I recollected immediately the moment to which she was referring. I had turned and caught sight of a tall male form entering the room, and I had automatically, through a combination of hope and fear, assumed it to be Severus.

"Yes, I did."

"And you stopped. You immediately stopped and acted like you were embarrassed to be seen having any real fun. If you do end up in a relationship with him, is that what you're going to be like? Afraid to have any fun and be yourself?"

Her voice sounded dangerously close to becoming tearful, so I sat up, gripped her shoulders gently, and looked straight into her eyes.

"No," I promised her, "that's not how it's going to be."

"How do you know that?" she demanded almost angrily. "If you'd be embarrassed to have him see you singing along with Muggle music, what do you think it's going to be like the rest of the time? Are you going to be ashamed to read Muggle books...or anything he doesn't approve of or agree with, for that matter?"

I sat back, sobered. I wanted to believe that I would be strong enough to turn away from him if he were so disapproving of me as a person, but how was I to know how I would react?

"Gin..."

"We're finally starting to see what kind of person you are, Hermione...beyond the books and the studying and talking about professions and scholarships. You're finally starting to have *fun*, and I can tell that you want to. You like to study, and you like to be alone, but I think you're convinced that you have far more in common with him than you actually do. You like to laugh, and sing, and be with your friends. How do you think he's going to take that part of you?"

"If he can't," I began in slow, measured tones, "then clearly we can't be together. It's as simple as that."

"I hope you're right." Her voice had fallen flat, completely devoid of either anger or disappointment, but she stared into the distance over my shoulder with an expression of such emptiness.

While Ginny's remarks had certainly caused me to go through a period of intense reevaluation, I began my apprenticeship the next day with the unshakable knowledge that I still cared for him very deeply, possibly loved him. I knew that the best way to ensure I didn't lose track of myself in my urge to further whatever promise lay between us was to focus on my studies, and so I threw myself into my work wholeheartedly. A week passed by busily, and the Healers at St. Mungo's had no shortage of praise for my single-minded concentration and hard work.

I spent my evenings seated on my small, comfortable couch in the flat the Consortium had arranged for me. I read through my books, preparing for the next day's trials. I was enthralled by my work, but once a week had passed, I was struck overnight by the rather intense craving to visit my friends.

As Harry and Ron had the remainder of the summer to themselves and weren't due to start training until the fall, I woke up Saturday feeling determined to pay them a visit; perhaps they would join me for supper. I had already assured the Healers that I would remain available during the day should they require me or feel that I would benefit from any particular challenge that arose, but my on-call hours ended at five o'clock.

At five-fifteen, I changed into a loose, comfortable cotton skirt, one of the few I owned, and T-shirt. I meandered into the living room to Floo Harry and Ron at The Burrow. When Molly responded and told me they'd already taken Ginny and Luna out for the evening, I hastily decided that I did not care to be a fifth wheel.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to join them?" she entreated. "They'd love to see you, I'm sure. I know where they've gone..."

"That's all right," I insisted. "It was foolish of me not to call earlier. Will they be home tomorrow?"

"I don't know about tomorrow morning, but they'll be here for supper at five. Would you care to join us?"

Thrilled with the idea of a day to myself...to spend walking and reading, enjoying the beautiful weather...followed by a luxurious Sunday supper at The Burrow, I nodded enthusiastically. "I'd love to. Thank you, Mrs. Weasley."

She shook her head fondly. "Really, dear, I've told you a hundred times: call me Molly! And you're more than welcome. We're all very anxious to hear how your apprenticeship has been going!"

We exchanged pleasant goodbyes, and I spent a moment peering out at the streets of London while deliberating what I should do with myself. I was admittedly very hungry, and so I decided to go in search of food. After that, perhaps, more inspiration would come to me.

I was standing in the hallway, locking up the door of my flat, when I heard footsteps progressing toward me. I turned to find Severus, looking rather foreboding in dark Muggle clothing, directly beside me.

"Hello!" I exclaimed, startled. "It's good to see you." I was pleased to find that no sarcastic response followed my heartfelt greeting. Instead, he inclined his head politely and held out a small envelope.

"It is from Poppy," he intoned deeply. "I suspect it is in regard to the mediwitch position at Hogwarts."

Pleased, I accepted the missive and tucked it into my purse. "Thank you. I was just going out, actually, but I'll read it later and send her a response right away."

He nodded again, and I realized that despite his rather haughty air of indifference, he seemed genuinely reluctant to leave.

"Why did she ask you to deliver it?" I inquired, hoping the question sounded more innocent once it had passed from my lips than it seemed in my mind. I would have liked nothing more than for him to have contrived a reason to pass by my neighborhood, but of course a perfectly logical answer was promptly forthcoming.

"I have been shopping for supplies in Diagon Alley," he replied simply. "Rather than have her utilize one of the school owls, I offered to deliver it myself."

That was actually a rather stark admission for him. Doubly pleased, I hoisted my purse further over my shoulder and steeled myself for the inevitable rejection.

"I was just going to find some supper," I offered. "Have you eaten?"

"No, I have not. What did you have in mind?"

Trying not to choke on my own feeling of shock, I forged ahead. "I had a craving for Greek food, actually, but.... Well, it doesn't really matter to me. Is there anything you're particularly fond of?"

He studied me for a moment with an inscrutable look in his eyes before replying in an unusually deep tone, "I think that can be arranged. Follow me."

We exited the building and began walking through several streets. He was striding more slowly than normal, I noted, likely to accommodate my much shorter legs. I began to feel somewhat apprehensive, wondering where he intended to take me and whether it might not have been best for me to change.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you," I began, "but am I dressed appropriately for wherever it is we're going?"

"Adequately."

A little put off by his refusal to divulge the location when it was obvious I was terribly curious, I tried to shrug off my indecision and follow him confidently. Finally he reached

a rather dirty, abandoned old alley and halted suddenly. He held out a hand wordlessly, and I realized that he was once again urging me to move forwards in order to Side-Along Apparate. I moved slowly into the circle of his arms, and his hand landed, gently but firmly, on the curve of my back as we disappeared. I felt a moment of disorientation when we landed before noticing that he'd taken us quite far indeed.

I stared in awe at the beautiful seaside cliff before us. We were just outside a small cottage, tiny but clearly well cared for, and the sea air was delicious on the tongue.

"Where are we?" I asked breathlessly. He, too, seemed to be admiring the view, though much more perfunctorily than me. I got the impression he was totally familiar with the location.

"My late grandmother's home," he replied, and I turned slowly in a full circle to drink in my surroundings. That would explain his comfort and familiarity. The air was impossibly warm and balmy. I took in a deep breath and pushed back my hair to obtain a better view of the ocean.

"Are we in *Greece*?" I asked in sudden revelation.

"My grandmother was Greek, so yes, that is a fair assumption." He was already leading the way into the cottage, which I found to be immaculately clean. I was surprised to find that a small house-elf ventured out to greet Severus, who quietly requested dinner to be served as soon as possible. The elf bobbed its head obediently and disappeared through a nearby door, which I presumed to be the entrance to the kitchen.

I spent an awkward few moments both admiring the beautiful simplicity of his home and questioning whether it could all be real. His financial situation in the aftermath of the war had not exactly been a circumspectly kept secret; I was astonished that he could possibly afford to reside anywhere other than Hogwarts let alone afford the assistance of a house-elf.

He stood in the center of the living area, his dark clothes and countenance startlingly opposite the open, breezy quality of the home. "Sit down, Miss Granger," he said rather imperiously. "The furniture is not toxic."

So we're back to 'Miss Granger' now, I thought with a resigned sigh, taking a seat in a nearby chair and crossing my legs, fussing momentarily with my skirt. I should have been less obvious in my bewilderment.

"So," I ventured as he took a seat himself, somehow managing to contain his long frame within the tiny chair, "how long have you lived here?"

A very small, sardonic smile quirked his lips. I should never have deluded myself into believing that I could conceal from him the real significance of my question.

"If you are inquiring as to how the Wizarding community's biggest social pariah managed to afford this"...he waved a hand demonstratively around the exquisite living area..."I cannot lie and claim that I bought it from her. I inherited it after she died last summer."

Mentally I tabulated the series of events surrounding his capture. "Did you have any idea before you were caught that you would inherit it?"

I expected some sort of irritation or retaliation at the blunt mention of events that were in no way my business and for which he probably still berated himself daily; but he just shook his head silently and rose from his seat, walking briskly over to a small bar area beneath the full window. He poured himself a glass of liquor and glanced at me questioningly. I shook my head, feeling that muddling my thoughts with alcohol would be a poor idea indeed. I wanted to be fully awake and cognizant of anything that should transpire between the two of us, even if it was restricted solely to discussion.

"I did not," he affirmed when he'd once again sat down. "When I was released from Azkaban, I received the news. I have always lived frugally at Hogwarts, and my room and board is provided. Thus I had just enough money to repair it to my liking," he explained in an almost bored tone. "The house-elf is here only once per week. We are fortunate that you happened to experience your craving on the evening she is here."

Our eyes met, and a moment of light humor passed between us. I smiled and continued.

"Do you have any other relatives now that your grandmother has passed away?" I asked softly. I knew both his parents to be dead, and I'd had no idea that he even had a grandmother still alive up until the year before. I suspected no one knew much of his enigmatic past; undoubtedly I knew more than most.

"No. She was my last living relative." He sipped at the liquid again, swirling the glass methodically with long, slender fingers. "She lived in England for many years after meeting my grandfather. Upon his death, she chose to return to her home. I imagine she hoped my father would return with her and choose to begin a family here."

"But he remained in England?"

Severus paused for a moment. "I do not know exactly how events passed. I knew very little of my father. I never cared to ask."

I certainly couldn't blame him for that. He read the silent concurrence in my eyes, and it seemed to spur him on slightly.

"He may have joined my grandmother here for some time. Truly I do not know. At some point he would have returned to England, where he met my mother."

The house-elf pattered in demurely, carrying a glass of water, which I accepted gratefully. She was apparently somewhat used to Severus' routine, even if their days at the cottage did not often coincide. I thanked the tiny creature, who offered me a bright smile and a nod before retreating to the kitchen.

His eyes followed the movement of the glass to my lips. I cradled it in my hand and looked at him expectantly. He seemed momentarily taken aback by my silence, as if quite reticent to continue, but after another sip of his own, he did so.

"I was never here as a child," he admitted quietly. "My grandmother did not agree with my father's choices," he related rather scornfully, "and they broke off all contact. I suspect she chose to bequeath the cottage to me in the hope that I might fulfill the expectation my father did not."

"Settle here, you mean?"

He nodded shortly. "Needless to say, she did not know me at all."

He measured sharply my reaction to the remark, and I derived a certain perverse amusement from the thought that he expected me to automatically either agree with his choice or his grandmother's. I simply nodded and looked around, feeling utterly taken in by the home's quiet and charm.

"It's a lovely place to live," I remarked softly, "even if you don't necessarily want to share it with anyone."

"I never said that I did not."

Wordlessly I watched him watching me, the tension unbroken for several long seconds before the house-elf reappeared, announcing that dinner was prepared. He rose swiftly to his feet and led me outside, where our dinner had been arrayed on a small table. The terrace area overlooked the steep cliffs and the breathtaking, turquoise expanse of the ocean. I spent nearly a full minute entranced by the view before I realized that he was still standing patiently beside me, having pulled out my chair for me.

I mumbled an embarrassed apology and took my seat, still unable to rip my gaze away from everything. The food was amazing and delicious; the weather was warm and could not possibly have been more perfect. I was overcome by a feeling of deep, lasting contentment that must have been effortlessly readable on my face.

"May I assume from your gawking that you approve?" he asked dryly, elegantly sipping at a glass of wine that had appeared in front of him. Giving in to my desire to fully enjoy everything before me, damn the consequences, I sipped at my own wine and nodded enthusiastically.

"It's beautiful, Severus. You must love coming here on weekends and such..."

I noted with a panicked feeling that his glass had stopped halfway to his mouth, and he was regarding me very intensely once again. Feeling pierced by his gaze, I realized that I'd called him by his first name when he had had the propriety to call me 'Miss Granger' earlier. I blushed, sensing that my cheeks were dangerously close to the rich hue of the wine.

"I'm sorry," I said immediately. "... At the party you said..."

"I did," he affirmed, finally drinking and placing the glass once again on the table. "That is not why I was staring at you."

He had a way, I reflected dazedly, of managing to alter the entire undertone of his voice without really changing the pitch. It had not deepened, but something about the way in which he delivered the confession was singularly erotic.

"Then why?"

He studied his plate. "You're very attractive when you're taken in by something."

He couldn't meet my eyes, and I was pleased to note that, judging by the way he'd halted uncharacteristically *attractive* was likely not the first word that had sprung into his mind; but I was exceedingly touched nonetheless, and I told him so. We finished our meal in relative silence, the serenity broken only by the house-elf, who was evidently very anxious that I should enjoy my meal in her master's home. I assured her repeatedly that it could not have been more to my satisfaction. Severus finally bade her leave for the evening when she had interrupted us one time too many.

We heard the soft pop of her Disapparition and finished eating. With a flick of his wand, the dishes disappeared, and he quietly informed me that he was going to make coffee.

Wanting to remain on the lovely terrace but simultaneously desperate to be near him, I followed him into the kitchen and looked around. It was small but fully functional, and the house-elf had clearly made the best of what space she'd been afforded. I lounged against one of the counters, relishing the fresh scent of the air and the pervading feeling of isolation and tranquility. I could imagine waking every morning and enjoying a meal in this kitchen, followed by a day of uninterrupted reading on the terrace. It was the closest approximation of my dream home I'd ever encountered.

Too late I realized that I had migrated during my wondering, and Severus, who was attending to his coffee mug, was now very close to me. Though I had my back to the counter, our shoulders were brushing. My breath caught in my throat, and I looked up to apologize. The words were cut short when I found that he had abandoned his coffee altogether and was watching me with unabashed interest.

At some point his arms moved, though I don't deny I was far too mesmerized by his gaze to take note of them. Suddenly he was in front of me, his arms pinning me to the counter. The warmth of his body and the light scent of his aftershave enveloped us both. I drank it in, longing to have the presence of mind to say something. Before I could convince myself to speak, his head inclined and our lips met.

I was drugged by it. It was not my first kiss, but compared to the others I'd received, it may as well have been. His lips were firm and unyielding, but their touch was in no way demanding. I moaned, thrilled and desperate for more, as he leaned in further, his hands beginning to skim their way lightly, tortuously, along my forearms.

Emboldened by his touch, I wrested my arms free, wrapping them around his neck and tangling them in his hair. It had grown a bit since Valentine's evening, and it was the ideal length to course my fingers through. With a deft movement of his lips he parted mine fully, and my knees threatened to give way beneath me when, all pretense of chastity abandoned, I felt the long, firm heat of his body pressing insistently into mine.

Minutes passed uncounted. Finally, breathless, we pulled apart. His hands remained locked around my waist, the long span of his fingers splayed across my back. I was panting...I couldn't have quieted my breathing if I'd tried...and I didn't think I could continue to exist if he didn't resume kissing me.

"What is it you want?" His voice was thick and husky, deeper than I'd ever heard it. Intimacy had laid bare the emotions in his eyes, the desire and uncertainty starkly reflected.

"You," I managed through gasps, jolted by how raw my own voice sounded. "Everything about you. I want *you*."

We remained that way, his face suddenly expressive, every moment of his longing and indecision mirrored by the curve of his lips and the way his chest rose and fell. I brought my hands slowly to his shoulders and down his arms, mimicking the dexterous caresses he'd treated me to moments prior. A slight shiver seemed to pass through his upper body, and then he tore himself away from me.

"Severus..." I hadn't intentionally tried to say his name in that manner; it had simply come out of its own accord. I drew out the last syllable, practically begging him. I hated to imagine what he must think of me, offering myself to him in his kitchen over coffee, but it couldn't have been more obvious that he wanted it as well.

"I think," he murmured, his voice melting the last of my resolve, "that I should take you home before you do something you regret."

"I won't regret it."

"Perhaps not," he conceded, "but I do not wish to do this before we have clarified some issues."

My stomach plummeted to the floor. "What issues?"

He did not reply but led me insistently from the house, where he once again Apparated us, this time back to London. After following the roundabout path back to my flat, he led me to my door, where we paused. I stared at him again, making no attempt to disguise my hunger. Though he did not vocally reply, I could actually track the change in his eyes, the hard, reflective surfaces melting to liquid black pools as he became increasingly aroused. I wanted to touch him, to run my hands over his entire body in an attempt to make him share the desperation that continued to make my heart race.

"I will speak with you soon," he assured me, and then he turned on his heel and left.

Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 18

Hermione relates to Ginny the events of her Saturday evening.

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"Pass the potatoes!"

"What'd you do with the butter?"

"Mum, can you *please* tell those two to shut it?"

My head was spinning with the maddening but lovable chaos that typified Weasley Sunday evening suppers. The twins were at their boisterous best; Ron had brought Luna and was trying to protect her from their playful jibes; Ginny looked as though she was currently enduring a sizable headache...likely a lingering reminder of their night on the town; and Harry simply seemed amused, regarding the large family with a contented look in his emerald eyes.

I glanced over at Mrs. Weasley to find her looking as flustered and frustrated as ever, but Mr. Weasley, happily settled in the chair beside me, seemed oddly unperturbed. He flashed me a gentle smile and offered me some more wine, which I accepted gratefully. Feeling slightly off-kilter was truly the only reason I'd been able to withstand the sheer volume of the Weasleys up to that point.

Finally, when everyone was satisfied with his or her food acquisition and was busily eating, Ginny found herself able to make her voice heard.

"How's your apprenticeship going?" she asked me, sawing away at a piece of meat. I took a small bite of my own and nodded encouragingly.

"It's terrific so far. They've agreed to let me start doing full days on Saturdays beginning next month, too."

"Will you get done faster that way?" Harry queried. He was torn between paying me due attention and watching the peculiar way Luna cut her food with a bemused expression tugging at his lips. Like most of her little quirks, it was impossibly endearing. Ron was smiling as he passed her each dish.

"No, I still have to do a minimum of a year's study. It's much better preparation, though," I pointed out, the persistent feeling of distraction that had been dogging my mind mollified by academic discussion. "And once I've finished the requisite number of cases under the Healers' supervision, I'll be able to start handling patients on my own."

"So what ever happened with Madam Pomfrey, dear?" Mrs. Weasley called from the opposite end of the enormous table. "Ginny told us she offered for you to be her successor at Hogwarts."

"She did," I affirmed. "In fact, she's already sent me the letter officially offering me the position once I've finished my apprenticeship. She wants me to study under her next summer and for the fall term. She'll retire around Christmas provided I'm doing satisfactorily."

"Why wouldn't you?" Ron scoffed. "No worries there. You'll be a better mediwitch than *she's* ever been."

"Ron!" Mrs. Weasley and I exclaimed reprovingly.

"What?" he demanded, looking defiant. "She was never all that compassionate. Remember second year when Harry broke his arm, and Lockhart practically attacked him and made his bones disappear? She blamed the whole thing on Harry!"

"Well, she really did have a point," Harry spoke up placatingly. "I shouldn't have let the stupid git near me."

"But what choice did you have? You'd broken your arm!"

"True," Fred piped up. "What were you supposed to do, wrench it away from him?"

They continued to debate the merits...or relative lack thereof...of Madam Pomfrey's bedside manner, but I couldn't bring myself to feel at all ungracious towards her. She had a quick temper, to be sure, and she could be rather judgmental at times; yet she was also an astonishingly understanding woman once one began talking with her. I also couldn't possibly ignore the fact that she had sacrificed hours of her valuable time and energy to aid me in the brewing of the potion that had, quite literally, changed my life.

That particular train of thought brought me soundly back to the object of my previous preoccupation, a trap into which I didn't want to fall again. I shoved my recollection of what had passed the evening before into the furthest reaches of my mind.

"You're all being prats," Ginny sniffed irritably. "Look what she did to help Hermione!"

Murmurs of acquiescence passed around, and everyone grew silent again. I was still contending with the niggling feeling that Ginny was suppressing the urge to say something to me. Trying to determine what...and whether I should simply invite her to ask her questions and have it over...was becoming exhausting.

A moment later I looked up from my carrots to find her watching me speculatively. I raised an inquiring eyebrow and opened my mouth to speak, but her eyes immediately grew wide and she shook her head, firmly but surreptitiously. Not wanting to respond if she was so anxious to avoid attention, I returned my focus to my supper.

Once we had, under Mrs. Weasley's sharp supervision, downed at least two helpings each, she announced that she would fetch the dessert she'd prepared. Ginny wiped her mouth hastily on her napkin and rose to her feet. "I'm too full right now, Mum," she said, glancing over at me significantly. "I'm going to go listen to the radio for awhile."

"I'll come with," I automatically offered as nonchalantly as I could. I followed her out into the living room. Once we'd crossed the threshold and the jarring sound of loud voices dissipated, she released an audible sigh of relief. Her pained expression and, presumably, her headache seemed to vanish.

She flipped on the Wizarding Wireless Network, though it was undoubtedly just to substantiate her white lie and held no appeal for her. A slow, droning voice and the underlying crackle of magical energy began to issue from the small set. Flopping down on the sofa, she watched me hawkishly as I assumed a seat beside her.

"So," I began hesitantly.

"Fleur's pregnant." It was a rather abrupt non sequitur. I jumped slightly in my seat.

"Is she? That's terrific," I enthused. "Bill must be thrilled."

"Not nearly as much as Mum," she confided with a wry smile. "She's already bugging Fred and George to start settling down now that the shop's doing so well."

I chuckled. "I take it she wants a lot of grandchildren?"

"You have *no* idea." She shook her head in exasperation. "Oh, and Tonks and Remus have set the date, too. Next month. They decided pretty suddenly...she just showed up a couple days ago and told us."

As this update involved me much more directly, I questioned her for a few minutes about their plans. Apparently they had decided that while Remus was popular as a Hogwarts instructor, it would not be wise to hold the wedding at that location. It was certainly undesirable to draw any more attention than strictly necessary to the marriage of a well-liked, normal witch and a despised werewolf, war hero though he may have been.

"Mum's offered to let them have it here," she related, "and I think that would probably be best, personally. They were at Bill's wedding...they know how decent we can make the place look if we try."

I was left with little to do in response, growing increasingly fidgety and discomfited under her intense gaze.

"So where were you last night?" She finally relented, bursting out with the question. I furrowed my brows, perplexed.

"I went out for supper... I Flooed here first, but your mum said you four had gone out to eat earlier."

She nodded. "Yes, she told us when we got back. We tried your flat, but you weren't there."

"No, I was still out."

"We performed a locating charm so we could catch up with you," she continued, a sharper edge entering into her voice. "It wouldn't work. We even Apparated to London and tried it. You must have gone quite a ways just for supper..."

She was doing a pitifully poor job of disguising her curiosity. I sighed. "I was out with Severus. Is that what you're trying to pry at?"

A sheepish smile skittered across her face. "Yes. He asked you out for supper?"

"Well, not exactly..." I reached over and turned up the volume on the Wizarding radio gradually, not wanting to advertise to the others our need for privacy. Then I curled up completely on the couch, moving closer to Ginny and lowering my voice. "He stopped by my flat last night just as I was leaving to find something to eat. He was dropping off the letter I got from Madam Pomfrey."

"About the apprenticeship?"

"Mm-hmm. Anyway, I admitted that I was hungry and asked him if he'd already eaten. I honestly didn't expect him to be so amenable to going out, but..."

Ginny gawked at me. "Where did you take him?"

She cocked her head in confusion when I burst out into sudden and inexplicable laughter. I sobered immediately when I noticed heads turning inquisitively in the kitchen.

"Well, I didn't choose the place. He rather took *me*..."

"Where?" She looked as though she still wanted desperately to maintain an unbiased, controlled expression concerning a tale of whose conclusion she might not necessarily approve, but her curiosity was getting the better of her. We both leaned forward even more, the long, pendulous strands of our hair beginning to tangle between us.

"He took me to his grandmother's home in *Greece*."

We were so close that I could see the flecks of gold and green in her wide turquoise eyes. "You're kidding!"

"Not the slightest. Apparently his grandmother was Greek, and she passed away last summer while he was in Azkaban. When he got out, her solicitor contacted him and told him he'd inherited the house."

"Is it nice?"

"Girls!" Mrs. Weasley's voice called from the kitchen. She ambled into the living room and shot us a look of mingled confusion and concern at our obvious attempt to conceal our conversation. "*What* are you two up to?"

"Just stupid gossip, Mum," Ginny replied gaily. "What's going on?"

"Are you sure you wouldn't like dessert? Those boys"...she turned and gave the four males in question a formidable glower over her shoulder..."are going to finish off that pudding even though I told them to leave you some."

"It's fine, Mum. We're really not hungry anymore."

"Well, all right..." She sounded unconvinced. "Hermione, dear, would you like to come back next week as well? Remus and Nymphadora will be here. I'm sure Ginny's told you they've decided to have the wedding here..."

"Yes," I replied, "I'd love to come back."

She shook her head fondly. "I'm sure she'll want to discuss dresses with you...you're both to be bridesmaids, after all. It's going to be very Muggle, from what I gather."

I wasn't so sure how I felt about that revelation. I'd never participated in a wedding.

"Merlin knows they'll have to be quick about it if they want to have it before she begins showing," she continued with an increasingly displeased, maternal countenance.

"Wait...*what*?" Ginny and I demanded shrilly in unison.

"Oh, dear. I shouldn't have said that..."

I was reminded forcibly of Hagrid bemoaning the very same thing years ago, but there was no recanting the statement...she'd caught our attention fully. "Just don't tell anyone else," she begged. "Let them do it on their own time. After all, it's not as though they knew when he proposed. She only found out a few days ago."

We solemnly promised, thrumming with the secret. Mrs. Weasley returned to the kitchen and resumed bellowing at Fred and George for one mishap or another. Ginny and I stared at one another in thinly disguised awe, unsure which topic of conversation would now be more fulfilling...my evening with Severus or Remus and Tonks as parents-to-be.

"Well," Ginny remarked rather loudly. "This is turning out to be an interesting day. Anyhow, you were saying...?"

I related the details of our Apparition and the subsequent exploration of his grandmother's property, the shy but exceedingly hospitable house-elf, and our conversation in the living room. I could see the cogs of feminine intuition beginning to whir in Ginny's mind and wondered, not for the first time, what it must be like to possess a sixth sense for reading between the lines.

"He would be willing to have someone else there, but he didn't say in what context," she mused. "You still don't know if he wants to have a serious relationship."

"No-o," I admitted slowly, "but that's not a detail he would just come out and say."

"And you didn't ask him?"

"It was our first date!" I exclaimed vehemently. Harry and Ron both put down their overloaded spoons and stared in our direction. "It wasn't even technically a date. I was

just glad to be there," I hissed in an undertone. "I don't know how to approach these things. I wasn't going to ask him anything about his future *yet*," I finished, loathing the desperation creeping into my voice.

"You should have," she threw back. "Otherwise you'll have no idea if he even wants to pursue anything with you."

I must have broken out into a telltale flush because Ginny let out a crow of triumph. "Something happened, didn't it?" she surmised smugly. "After dinner? *Obefore*? Did you even eat?" Her lascivious grin suffused my face with even more intense heat.

"Of course! It happened after... He kissed me," I confessed.

Her lips were stretched amazingly wide in a giddy smile. "Oh, Hermione!" she gasped, clasping her hands together and wringing them excitedly. "Was it... serious?"

"You could say that."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Was it *good*?"

I suspect a rather glassy appearance overtook my eyes. She whistled softly and suggestively. "Then *you'd*o know he wants to pursue something. What happened then?"

I could feel the skin drawing tightly across my face as my expression darkened. "He said we have too much to discuss, and he took me home."

"Too much to discuss?"

I nodded, feeling the prior night's desperation and melancholy settling into my chest once again. "He promised to get in touch with me soon, but he didn't specify precisely when. I hadn't heard from him up until I came here, and I didn't want to bother him..."

"No," she insisted adamantly, "it's probably best to let him do it on his own time. Can you imagine what he would do if you just showed up at his door uninvited? He'd hex you into the next century."

He was undeniably capable of it, and it wasn't a pleasant thing to envision, I reflected with a grimace. Ginny combed her fingers loosely through her hair and tossed it over her shoulder reflexively. "You're just going to wait it out, then?"

"I've no other choice."

She stretched out her legs and braced them against the carpet, burying her small frame deeper into the lumpy comfort of the old sofa. "You're not forgetting what we talked about, are you?"

"No," I assured her.

"Are you going to discuss it with him?"

I honestly hadn't reached a conclusion pertaining to when it would be best to broach the subject...during the course of our next conversation or under other circumstances. For hours the previous night, I'd paced restlessly around my living room, alternating between drinking irresponsibly liberal amounts of wine and fretting over our imminent meeting. Admittedly, my uncertainty about when it would take place had only heightened the anticipation and anxiety. Finally, somewhere past four o'clock in the morning, I'd collapsed into an exhausted, wine-muddled sleep, my dreams spiced by the distant sensation of long, warm fingers trailing an erotic wake along my forearms.

"I don't know."

With her usual perception, Ginny understood that I couldn't hope to meaningfully explain a question that plagued me so deeply. She simply nodded, and we sat there in companionable, ponderous quiet, enjoying the soft warbling of the radio and the clattering of cutlery echoing from the kitchen.

I fought my way tooth and nail through an unbearably long and stressful week. The Healers were impressed by my continued tenacity, but once I returned home, the determined facade would collapse beneath me. I attended diligently to my work, spending my evenings poring over professional journals and reviewing for the next day's topics, but I had trouble concealing from myself the devastating fact that my heart simply wasn't in it.

Infuriated by my sudden dependence on another person, I passed every spare moment reading and researching, trying my utmost to banish thoughts of Severus altogether. Dashing from one errand and commitment to the next helped admirably, but at night I would bury my head underneath my blankets in frustration. I could feel the phantom heat of his hands on my back, proving that it was impossible for me to wholly ignore him.

That Friday dawned unseasonably cool and oppressively rainy. I stubbornly refused to go for my usual morning run, instead treating myself to a bit of a lie-in and a luxurious breakfast. Work was surprisingly uneventful...the accident-prone masses seemed to be hibernating in an attempt to escape the deluge...and when I had completed my shift, I gathered my things and took off at a brisk pace. I had only the next day and the Saturday following left in the month, and I intended to enjoy them before commencing Saturday shifts in addition to my regular workload.

It was understood when I stepped through the dingy glass window and found him waiting expectantly that no words needed to be exchanged. The harsh breeze tore at his hair and long coat, and the sudden realization of how different he looked...how far removed he was from the man who had the week before exuded such welcoming passion in a small, warm kitchen half a world away...made me clench my jaw in shock. Silently we walked the several blocks to my flat, his dark Muggle clothing perfectly in keeping with the atmosphere. I inhaled deeply, taking in what freshness remained of the day before succumbing to the writhing nervousness in my stomach.

Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 18

Severus and Hermione come to an understanding.

"Would you like some tea?"

Severus had already removed his coat and was standing in the center of my kitchen, black clothing completely incongruous with the light, airy furniture and decorations I'd put in weeks ago. I could see him taking in his surroundings with an expression that varied somewhere between amusement and contempt. The window above my sink, magically enhanced to sense when it was appropriate to slide open, admitted a cool, moisture-drenched breeze that stirred the blue curtains. His attention seemed arrested by the set of decorative cookie jars I'd placed on the sill, a housewarming gift from my rather too exuberant mother.

If he can't even abide my décor, I told myself with a sigh, this is not going to go well.

"Yes, thank you." When he finally spoke, it caused me to shiver slightly. I ushered him into the living room and motioned for him to take a seat. He did so almost reluctantly, the cream-colored sofa likely even less in keeping with his staunchly masculine taste than the fruit-themed cookie jars. His posture still impossibly stiff, he crossed his arms and regarded me studiously. I hastily excused myself and returned to the kitchen to attend to the tea.

Grabbing the nearest dish towel and drawing it nervously through clenched fists, I began to wonder whether I would have to initiate the conversation and, if so, how I should approach it. I had no doubt that what he needed to discuss were the portions of his past I'd viewed; he was understandably hesitant to embark upon a relationship with someone who had witnessed every unfortunate and depraved event in his miserable life.

He was not the type of man to be swayed from his convictions easily. Neither heartfelt sympathy nor detached platitudes were going to persuade him. I had a sinking feeling that there truly was nothing I could say that would change his mind if he was already determined not to allow me in further.

Returning to the living room several agonizing minutes later, I handed him his cup of tea, which he took silently and without thanks. He set it on the end-table beside him and appeared to forget about it entirely. I nursed mine slowly, cringing each time the clock over the television ticked. I was going to drown in the silence if I didn't say something.

"I think..." I began with little idea how to continue cogently, "that I understand why you seem concerned."

He simply observed me, dark eyes glued on mine. It was scrutiny beyond anything with which he'd attacked us in class. The transformation his eyes could undergo when he was cold and shut off was nothing short of terrifying. They, much like the rest of him, were an integral part of the terrible professor I'd known for so many years. It was difficult to overlook them and speak my mind.

"This is about the memories, isn't it?" I finished on an unsure note. "About what I've seen of your past?"

"Astute," he remarked snidely.

His tone did not sit well with me. I loved him, but I was not about to endure his mocking of my attempted compassion in my very own living room. "If you are not going to speak civilly with me in my own home, leave," I snapped back, equally snidely. His eyes widened almost imperceptibly and, worryingly, he actually seemed to retreat. Apparently one small show of temper was all it took to convince him that we were now on level ground with one another.

"Very well. I apologize. Yes, it is about the... events you have witnessed."

I put aside my own tea cup and crossed my legs, watching him expectantly. "What's done is done, Severus. I can't take back the fact that I've viewed them. It isn't like I personally requested the job. You know that."

"And I suppose you would prefer to have never seen them?" His voice was deceptively neutral, but his eyes were blazing. I couldn't suppress an annoyed sigh. How was I supposed to convince him that I accepted his past...loved him because of his sacrifices...if he was bound and determined to believe otherwise?

"I don't know what to tell you." I held up my hands, palms facing toward him, in a gesture of surrender. "I really don't. What I saw.... Yes, it bothered me...sickened me, even, and I know you wouldn't believe me if I claimed it didn't...but I recognize that that's in your past. It didn't define who you were then, and it doesn't now." Leaning forward, I resisted the urge to place a bracing palm on his knee, thinking it would be too overt. "I suspect you think that if you agree to pursue anything with me, I'll hold it against you, that I'll lord over you all the terrible things you did at Voldemort's behest. I won't."

The black ice of his irises melted just a bit, but his lips were still drawn into a tight, repressive line. "You are a perceptive girl," he admitted grudgingly, "but you are still very young."

"Too young to be telling you the truth, you mean? Too young to know my own heart?"

He evidently didn't feel that any other words were necessary. I sat back, both stung and enraged. That was hardly the typical *subtle* Slytherin insinuation, and I found myself at an utter loss as to the appropriate response.

Floundering irately, I finally spoke through gritted teeth. "I would think"...I struggled to contain the vitriol surfacing in my voice..."that you could at least have given me credit, after all these months, for being mature enough to recognize this for what it is."

He shot up from his seat so quickly the sofa shook. "You know *nothing* about me," he snapped as he advanced on me, crossing the small divide between the sofa and my armchair in practically no time at all. He curled his hands over mine, short, blunt fingernails beginning to dig painfully into my knuckles.

"Don't presume to believe that you know what a relationship with me entails," he growled, our faces now level, separated by so little distance that the shaggy black strands of his hair tickled lightly at my brow. "You delude yourself. You believe that you have seen everything there is to me."

Drawing himself up to his full height, he controlled the very substance of the room with an overpowering presence of authority. I, however, refused to be blindsided by immature intimidation tactics. I'd swallowed the tyranny and insults as a child, but I was rapidly losing my patience.

"This is *not* a civil discussion as I requested," I retorted, stretching out my own rather unimpressive frame, "and if you cannot manage to control your temper, why are you here?"

Belatedly I realized that my question...which I had meant more in the rhetorical sense...had sunk insidiously into his mind and taken root. Indecision and anger flashed through his eyes, and just as quickly as the emotions had emerged, they vanished. His expression became flat, impregnable.

"Perhaps you are right. I shouldn't have come."

"But you should have," I whispered back stupidly, my voice broken. For a brief millisecond it appeared that the tearful cracking of my tone had affected him. He flinched slightly, and one hand rose incrementally in my direction as though of its own volition.

I'd made such an immense mess of things. I didn't want his comfort. I wanted his trust, and as he turned and left the room, as coldly and unattainably as he'd entered, I stared at that wretched clock, still ticking away unmercifully.

The second hand crossed twelve, and the minute hand moved in accordance. I thought about my life, its maddening expanse, the many years of it still to come stretching before me in sudden three-dimensional clarity. The time line it formed was tantalizingly close and yet so unfulfilling. I had many years before me still undefined, indeterminate, during which to regret and wonder. Someday in that same unwritten future, I would look back on my actions at that moment, recalling the terrible racing of

my heart and the faint sound of his footsteps retreating down the hallway.

Would I question then, as an old woman, whether I was making the correct decision? I understood my own limits. I needed my family, my friends, and my education. I needed a challenging and rewarding career, financial self-sufficiency, and the heartening knowledge that I had achieved with my life everything in my personal power. He was not a necessary part of that equation.

But I *wanted* him. I wanted to partake of those accomplishments with him and rejoice in his own. He'd admitted to Dumbledore, caught up in a rare moment of self-examination, that he wanted a woman who would be content with him. I knew myself to be that woman. There remained no time to second-guess myself once the horrifying manifestation of my own loneliness set in. I couldn't afford to choose unwisely, but I couldn't afford to wait.

I flew out the door, not even bothering to close it behind me. The hell with my belongings...no one else would want them anyhow. Severus had left the building, but I pounded down the stairs at a furious pace, praying he hadn't already Disapparated. When I landed, panting, on the cold gray sidewalk, he was barely twenty paces to my right.

He turned, hearing the unexpected and decidedly indelicate wheezing. Taking in my look of blatant panic, his lips twitched briefly.

Incapable of preventing the compulsion, I lifted an accusing finger and began stalking forward.

"You are *insufferable*. I have waited *months*"...I hardly registered when I'd alighted in front of him, the pad of my protruding finger butting against his chest..."for the opportunity to have a decent conversation with you...to explain myself and apologize...yes, apologize...for everything that has happened to you as a result of my involvement, and you're going to *walk out on me*?"

I had rendered him genuinely speechless. He simply stared, expressive eyebrows arched almost haughtily.

"I respect you, damn it. I always have, as a person and now...*after* seeing those memories and how you've exhausted yourself all these years in punishment...as a man. Any reasonable human being would have forgiven you a hundred times over by now, but you've never given up. You've never forgiven yourself for what you did to that girl, and *that* is how I know that I want to be with you...not despite what you did to her, but for the remorse you felt afterward. I'm not afraid of you, and I'm not going to be." The eyebrows, if it was possible, scaled his forehead to an even higher altitude. "I am willing," I growled, "despite everything, to put myself completely on the line for you. I want you, and you know that, and I can't believe that you would just storm out of here without even giving us a chance.

"I know that you want to try," I finished lamely, drawing back. I was suddenly embarrassed to see the tension in my hands. My outstretched finger shook as I withdrew it, the fingernail snagging lightly on the thick black material of his shirt. "And you can't deny that to me after last week. So what are you afraid of?"

The joint intensity of our gazes grew too thick to handle. As the indomitable Professor Snape could never hang his head in defeat before an opponent, he tilted it upward instead, staring into the darkening horizon. My entire body was shivering. I clamped my arms across my chest and bounced on the balls of my feet, feeling distinctly ill. He fit the archetypal profile of a man searching for precisely the right words to let a girl down easily, but some instinct assured me that for him it would be far more than that.

Just as I began to seriously question whether I had any fire left in me, he lowered his head and met my eyes again. "You," he said simply in the same low, tremulous tone with which he'd described his loneliness to Dumbledore.

"Me?" I echoed faintly. "Why are you afraid of me?"

His jaw clenched tightly and he looked away again, this time to the side. "You found the magazine." It was not a question, and he certainly didn't deliver it as such. I nodded shortly.

"What is contained within there..." He sighed, and I relaxed minutely at the openness of the response. "Even now, I could lose my job for what I wrote in there. It will never cease to be incriminating. You were only sixteen..."

"Why did you write it?" I was upset that he thought I could possibly betray him by divulging the contents of the magazine. Yet it was the question of his motivations that had haunted me ever since I'd laid eyes on the cramped, spiky scrawl. It had confused me, I supposed, that he would think of something as far removed from the material within the magazine as my school schedule. But now, at least, I had confirmed the delicious suspicion that had tickled my brain for so many months. It was my schedule, and she'd reminded him of me.

"I thought about you unceasingly," he admitted, and my heart shattered when I heard the depthless self-loathing in his voice. "I knew it was both improper and unforgivably stupid, but I was positive that it could fall into no other hands. And she was..."

"One evening," he continued, refusing to meet my eyes, "shortly before the end of your sixth year, I looked at her and saw you."

He delivered it with such finality that I knew he'd immortalized it in his mind as his ultimate disgrace. To even flirt with the idea of lusting after a student was unspeakably abhorrent to him, but to take notice of her because of her striking resemblance to a half-nude woman in a magazine...

"Am I correct in guessing that you've loathed yourself even more for this than for what you did to that Muggle girl?" I asked defeatedly, releasing a sigh of my own. I didn't actually require the answer.

He nodded. "Far more," he averred, his expression suddenly impassioned. "You are an intelligent young woman, Hermione. You understand that I cannot possibly see past the fact that you were my student. Naturally, your looks don't matter to me," he added almost contemptuously. "I was struck by the similarity, but it was not the sole reason that I found myself inexplicably attracted to you. You were... attentive, attuned, and remarkably intelligent. You were a tier above your classmates, someone with whom I suddenly imagined I could converse."

"Perhaps not so inexplicable then," I murmured gently, placing a tentative hand on his shoulder. To his credit, he did not flinch, but he also continued to closely examine some distant location over my right shoulder.

"It is unforgivable. If Albus knew, he would..."

"He would be thrilled," I interjected vehemently, "and you know it as well as I. You're the one who's deluding yourself if you honestly believe he didn't know. I'd wager he knew I'd fallen in love with you before even I did."

His head jerked down then, and he stared at me with a naked hunger that made my entire body tighten and thrum.

I let my hand dangle lightly from his shoulder, brushing against the soft wool of his Muggle coat. "The way I feel," I tried to explain as steadily as I could despite the threatening tears, "is not going to change. You can denounce both our feelings as unforgivable, and we can pass the rest of our lives avoiding one another, but I refuse to believe that this can be overlooked.

"So perhaps you should ask yourself how much worse you're going to feel if we don't at least try."

Pregnant seconds passed between us. One long forearm worked its way up to the level of my face. When he brushed the pad of his finger tenderly against the one traitorous tear that had trailed its way down my cheek, the rest burst through the floodgate. His jaw was twitching again as he watched me cry, looking impossibly rent between conflicting emotions.

I began to turn away, mortified by both my comparative weakness and my reaction. He nearly threw me off-balance when his other hand shot forward, and he gripped my shoulders tightly.

"Hermione"...the way his beautiful voice caught on the syllables of my name filled my eyes again..."you understand that you will be reviled for this. Not for the age difference, ultimately, but for associating with me."

Boldly I walked forward and planted my hands reciprocally on his shoulders. "I've rather made up my mind on that point as well. And I'm definitely not too young to be certain about it."

He kissed me deeply, desperately, and the deal was sealed.

Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 18

Hermione and Severus embark upon their life together.

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"Where *is* he?" I muttered distractedly, glancing at the clock for the fifteenth time in the last three minutes. It was virtually impossible to locate anything in the towering mess of boxes that had become our living room, and I was fairly certain I'd just snagged my pantyhose on one of them.

A loud crashing sound from the vicinity of the door caused me to yelp and rip said pantyhose further. I was in the midst of an impressive stream of expletives when Severus' head appeared above one of the many boxes.

"More of your mother's gifts, I presume?" the silky voice called. I began to whirl around in an attempt to respond, and the echoing *eeeeeeeeeeeeeep* informed me that I'd finally destroyed them altogether.

"Damn it!"

Somehow he had managed to insinuate his long frame in between the boxes, and before long he'd located my lair. Having found it impossible to traverse the living room when I'd exited the bathroom twenty minutes before...foolishly thinking I was dressed quite nicely and prepared for the wedding, at that...I had discovered that the house-elves had since deposited yet *another* shipment of my mother's endless housewarming gifts in our living area.

I was, truthfully, mere moments from snapping. Severus and I had been together a year, and he'd witnessed some profound displays of anger on my part, but he hadn't yet been present when I had completely and utterly lost it. Three months of relentless planning and fretting over Ginny and Luna's double wedding had reduced the leash on my temper to a hair's breadth.

"I don't think," he murmured, encircling my waist with a warm hand and looking me over appreciatively, "that such language is entirely becoming of the maid of honor."

"Fuck that," I snapped back, pulling at my streaming pantyhose. Severus chuckled richly.

"I told you not to wear those."

"Make yourself useful and get me out of here!" I wailed. I'd meant it more as a joke, but he lifted me clear off my feet and began carting me through the labyrinthine arrangement of boxes. I was dazed, both impossibly aroused by the nonchalant strength with which he carried me and amazed at his bizarrely accurate navigational skills. I had officially moved into his Hogwarts rooms only two days ago, and since that time my mother had constantly inundated us with gifts, good wishes, and more gifts. If I hadn't managed to locate a path, how had he?

"How did you do that?" I demanded, admittedly jealous, when he set me down gently at the bedroom door. He was absently running a finger up and down the silky material at my waist, and his eyes didn't appear to have strayed from my cleavage since he'd entered the room.

"Have I told you how grateful I am to Miss Weasley for this dress?" He flashed me a wicked smile, and I had to duck to avoid the oncoming kiss.

"Not now!" I cried, still flustered. My hair, thank God, was being shockingly obedient due to yet another one of Ginny's marvelous products, but the dress she had chosen for me was hardly modest. It was about knee length, more or less appropriate for an afternoon wedding during the summer, but the spaghetti straps and loose neckline made me feel horrendously self-conscious.

Severus straightened up, the seriousness returning to his dark features. "You are right. I will change quickly." He cast a withering glare at the many boxes in our living room. "Do tell your mother that we're fully convinced of her support. She may cease with the gifts now."

I laughed as he disappeared into the spacious closet. I was curious to see what he'd chosen to wear. Ginny and Luna had been adamant that guests could wear Muggle clothing if they so chose, as they'd both been enamored of Tonks' Muggle wedding dress the summer before...hence the rather revealing Muggle ensemble they'd chosen for me.

I shed the pantyhose and stared critically at my bare legs. I wasn't the type to become ridiculously preoccupied with my looks, but I also wasn't anxious to show up to my dear friends' wedding without at least wearing pantyhose under the dress. A quick glance at the clock on Severus' bed-table confirmed that I had no more time to brood over it.

"Severus!" I yelled, casting the ruined garment into the garbage and hastily reviewing my appearance in the mirror. "We're going to be late!"

When he reemerged from the closet, I had to consciously prevent myself from dropping the tube of lipstick in my hand. He was wearing black trousers and boots, of course, but his shirt was a rich dark gray and still partially unbuttoned at that. He'd maintained the shorter haircut, and the combination of the freshly starched, unbuttoned shirt and shorter hair accentuated his shoulders to beautiful effect. I released a reflexive moan of appreciation.

"Not now!" he mocked, gathering his cloak and taking me firmly by the upper arm. "Come. We shall see if I can navigate this disaster again."

Once Severus had wandered off to find Remus, the best man, I set off on my own in search of the two brides. Mrs. Weasley had truly outdone herself on the occasion of her youngest children's wedding. I located Harry and Ron first, both pacing to and fro in front of the fireplace, looking equally ill.

Struck by a sudden feeling of panic, I stopped dead in my tracks upon seeing them. "You two aren't having second thoughts, are you?" I whispered in an undertone. Harry's indomitable hair was more mussed than usual, and Ron was beginning to look rather green.

"No," Harry said immediately, running a hand through his hair. "Listen, Hermione, can we, uh... Can we talk?"

I went on automatic alert, hackles rising slightly. "Is this about Severus? I told you, as cruel as it sounds, that I'm not staying unless you can accept that he and I are together. You two have known this for *months* now."

"No, no...it's not about that," Ron snapped rather tersely. I was relieved to see that neither had reassumed the rather thunderous expressions that had overtaken their features a year ago when I'd revealed to them that Severus and I were together. After months of Ron's rants and protestations and Harry's sullen glares, they had finally come to accept that I would tolerate none of their childish behavior.

Their decision to issue dual proposals to the girls had been a bona fide blessing for me. The month prior, Severus had grown impatient with my thoroughly Gryffindor inability to read between the lines; he'd finally asked me outright if I oughtn't just live with him, as I was having to commute from his rooms daily anyhow. We had taken rather zealous advantage of Professor McGonagall's willingness to look the other way concerning my comings and goings. By all accounts she was thrilled that Severus was finally displaying the telltale signs of imminent domestication, and she made no secret of the fact that she was ecstatic our relationship had come to fruition as I'd desired.

Harry and Ron had been so abominably distracted when I'd tried to gently break the news to them that eventually, after smacking them repeatedly and raising my voice to a level far greater than normal, I'd simply snapped it out and left the room. Neither had said much regarding the subject since that time, and if it was their preoccupation with their impending nuptials that was responsible for their sudden acceptance, then I was absolutely grateful for it.

They led me to the foyer of The Burrow. Harry continued to pace, and Ron leaned against the door jamb, still distinctly green in pallor. Finally, as Harry released an agitated breath, Ron spoke up.

"My dad's going to kill Harry," he whispered in a voice fraught with terror. I suppressed a snort of amusement.

"What are you on about? Your dad was thrilled when you two proposed. He loves Harry. And even if he didn't, I suspect Ginny would force him to," I added wryly. None of us had expected that fiery Ginny would accept anything less than our sincerest support of her decision to marry Harry.

That remark, mercifully, cracked a hint of a smile in the stiffness of Harry's tortured face.

"No, you don't get it." Ron was looking back and forth frantically as though he suspected the Ministry was listening in on our conversation, ten Aurors crouched outside the door with illicit pairs of Extendable Ears. "Ginny's pregnant. She just told Harry yesterday."

"My God!" I exclaimed...rather too loudly, in hindsight. Both boys suddenly hissed and ducked, apparently expecting Mr. Weasley's bevy of Auror assassins to strike. "What is it with the past year? Everyone's getting pregnant." First Tonks had given birth to her little girl, and then Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown, and Hannah Abbot had followed in quick succession. Three-quarters of the girls from my year had long since married, and they were now evidently hellbent on repopulating Wizarding Britain.

"D'you think he'll murder me?" Harry's voice was shaking. From the kitchen, the sounds of Mrs. Weasley's hasty last-minute preparations increased Harry's anxiety. I was beginning to feel a bit on edge myself, though due to an entirely different concern. I'd promised Ginny and Luna that I would pass the final inspection of their dresses before the procession began, and I wasn't keen on facing her wrath if I were to miss the appointment.

"No, I don't think he'll *murder* you, Harry. You're nervous, and you've had a great deal thrown at you the past few weeks. You're being melodramatic. Besides which," I added, resisting the urge to bounce in place with impatience, "it certainly didn't bother Mr. Weasley when Tonks gave birth less than nine months after she and Remus married."

"But Tonks isn't his *daughter!*" Harry's beautiful green eyes were impossibly wide.

I chewed at my bottom lip worriedly. "True. But really, Harry, I've no idea what else to tell you. She must be reasonably far along if it hasn't been brought to her attention until now."

Harry nodded absently. "Six weeks, I think she said."

I offered him as gentle a shrug as I could manage. "Then there's nothing to be done. Her parents are going to know when she starts showing that it happened before the wedding, and you're just going to have to accept that fact. What else could you potentially do?"

"Elope to Tibet."

My already frazzled patience was running suddenly quite thin. I feigned smacking him on the arm as I had when we were younger. Ron opened his mouth to protest on Harry's behalf, so I raised a warning hand against him as well. He shrank back against the door.

"Don't even tell me that Luna's pregnant."

"N-No. Not that she knows of, anyway."

"Good." I turned back to Harry. "You're overreacting. You're getting *married* today, and there's nothing that her parents can do to stop you. Eloping *is not* an option. Now..." I tried to calm my voice, still worrying about Ginny and Luna. "Fix your clothes...and *fix your hair*...and then the two of you need to get outside and take your places. I'm going to go check on the girls."

"Thanks, Hermione," they mumbled in unison, Harry fidgeting with his tuxedo and Ron brushing off his already rumpled dress robes. I personally thought it was going to look rather ridiculous to have one couple dressed in the Muggle fashion and the other in Wizarding dress robes, but theretofore I'd managed to withhold my opinion. I wasn't about to open my big mouth fifteen minutes before the ceremony.

I dashed up the stairs to check on Ginny and Luna, who were sequestered in Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's bedroom as they finished dressing. I had never been the blatantly-sentimental type during wedding ceremonies, but the moment I entered the room, tears began to fill my eyes. Luna was helping Ginny lace up the bodice of her dress, her own emerald green robes a perfect match for Ron's. I could barely see her face through the burnished curtain of her hair.

"Hermione!" Ginny flailed wildly in the constraints of her gown, trying to give me a hug, and Luna admonished her softly. She finished lacing the dress, and Ginny flew at me, gathering me into an enthusiastic hug. "I'm getting married today!" she cried happily.

I nodded, not trusting the state of my voice. Both girls had had an exciting couple of months. Luna had succeeded her father and was now editor-in-chief of *The Quibbler*, a job for which we'd all known she was ideally suited. Ginny, putting her invaluable people skills to good use, had decided to offer Fred and George her talents in expanding their booming business. It suited all parties thoroughly: Fred and George attended to the experimentation and development of their products while Ginny handled the business and public relations issues. I'd never seen her happier than when she'd flooded me to brag about her first paycheck.

"So how is work?" she asked, fussing with her hair. The cream-colored gown and low neckline showed off her lovely, radiant fair skin. Quashing a brief moment of envy, I smiled and tucked a stray red wave behind her ear.

"It's been great so far. We just finished stocking the infirmary for next fall."

"Already?" both girls exclaimed in admiration. Madam Pomfrey and I had been spending all our spare time attending to the brewing for the infirmary, a respite Severus had appreciated immensely, as he was putting the finishing touches on an article to be submitted to a professional Potions journal in the near future.

"Yes, believe it or not," I insisted with a light laugh. "On Monday we'll start with the rest of the stocking."

Luna was standing before the mirror, putting on dangling crystal earrings in the shape of birds. "How did your moving go?" she called in her peculiar, dreamy tone. "Ginny said your mom sent you presents."

"She hasn't *stopped* sending me presents," I griped good-naturedly. "It's a far cry from the woman who acted like she'd disown me for dating my former teacher."

Ginny was pulling on one of her ubiquitous pairs of death-defying heels. "I told you she'd get over it," she informed me brightly. "She just needed time. Besides, you said your dad was crazy about Sn...Severus."

I flashed her a grateful smile. Everyone, with the exception of Ron and Harry, had put forth considerable effort to be kind and accommodating to Severus now that our relationship had been cemented by cohabitation. Harry and Ron's silence was just as enjoyable, however.

"He did. They get along wonderfully well. I'm shocked, actually." I shook my head, remembering my father's endless stream of praise for Severus' manners and intelligence. "I thought they'd disagree over everything, but I guess they have a fair bit in common."

The girls had finished with their preparations and were ready to go downstairs. I dashed down ahead, fulfilling my Muggle duty as maid-of-honor to banish the grooms to the garden lest they catch a glimpse of the brides beforehand. Ginny and Luna then took refuge in the kitchen, where Mrs. Weasley fussed over them ceaselessly and doled out our bouquets. Ginny's contained lilies, a perfect complement to her dress, and Luna's was an unusual arrangement of orchids. Mine was the simplest, a lightweight arrangement of small blooms and baby's-breath, but it suited me. I was already terrified that I would trip halfway down the aisle, as I had nearly done as a bridesmaid at Tonks' wedding; contending with an elaborate bouquet would only have intensified my nervousness.

"All right," Mrs. Weasley murmured, lowering the veil over Ginny's glowing face. "Time to take your places."

We obediently lined up before the back door. Tonks had turned down the opportunity to be a bridesmaid in order to remain with her daughter, but as soon as the first chords of music hit the air and I had emerged from the house, I could see her waving to me from the front of the crowd. Waving back demurely, I nodded at her and commenced with the slow, torturous steps of the march. I could feel everyone's gazes on me, and while they were completely benevolent, I was anxious to have my portion of the ceremony over with.

Once I had reached the makeshift platform at the opposite end of the aisle, I calmed considerably. The ceremony proceeded perfectly up until Harry lifted the veil from Ginny's face, whereupon Tonks started crying so loudly that the perpetually outspoken Cassandra Lupin joined in as well. I offered Remus a consoling smile, and he merely shook his head in fond exasperation. Even with both of his girls wailing, he still looked impossibly happy. That, much more so than the wedding itself, began to make me feel dangerously teary-eyed as well.

I caught Severus' attention and was pleased to find that he had weathered the sentimentality admirably. He was standing toward the back, obviously reluctant to mingle with the enthusiastic crowd closer to the brides and grooms, but he appeared to be comfortable alongside Professor McGonagall. As the guests lined up to shower the happy couples with hugs, kisses, and never-ending congratulations, I slipped away and headed toward him.

"I think that you have had enough to drink," he informed me softly, plucking the champagne glass from my hand. In my euphoric and mildly inebriated state, the warmth and authority of his grip on my wrist was suddenly electrifying.

"It's my best friends' wedding...*all* my best friends...and that's only my third glass," I retorted, reaching for it. He'd already hauled it sufficiently above his head so as to render it impossible for me to reach it. I glared at him.

"I did not say that you were intoxicated, but I don't want you drinking any more than this." He banished the glass to a nearby table so that Mrs. Weasley and the hired caterers could gather it up with the others.

"Fine. Then I guess I'll have some more cake instead." I grabbed his cloak off the back of his chair, finding the evening air growing chilly on my exposed skin. His eyes lingered on my bare shoulders until I'd slipped it on, his gaze eventually working its way up to my face. After a year, it didn't require much for each of us to identify subtle shifts in the other's mood. Immediately I no longer felt the need for a second piece of cake.

"I'm ready to go," I told him neutrally. "I already told Harry and Ron I'd be leaving before they do, so we can go whenever you're ready."

He didn't require a second hint, bless his perception. Placing a hand at my waist, he guided me from my chair, and we headed quickly for the living room in order to gather my purse. Having accomplished that, we managed to sneak out of the house by way of the front door, carefully avoiding a confrontation with Mrs. Weasley and the other women loitering in the kitchen. A run-in with her would have resulted in an additional two hours of exchanging pleasantries.

If the exit from The Burrow was done with mildly increasing haste, the walk from the gates of Hogwarts to Severus' quarters was positively miserable. He thoughtfully kept along with my slower pace, but the warmth of him nearby stirred me to instant awareness. Ducking through the corridors and narrowly evading Peeves' notice, we finally arrived at his rooms. The moment the door shut, we abandoned the charade of detachment.

The straps of my dress had been removed from my shoulders before I'd registered any movement on his part. I clutched at his shirt as he kissed me, running the warm skin of his lips along my jawline and down to the hollow of my collarbone. Moaning, I sought frantically through my distraction to unbutton and remove his shirt, absurdly pleased when I finally parted the material and could place my palms flat against his chest.

He pressed me up against the door, gently but insistently, lifting the hem of my dress and beginning to skate his fingers with ghostly lightness along my inner thigh. His entire form seemed to recklessly radiate heat, passing from the delicious skin of his chest into my body. I gasped into his mouth as he kissed me, eliciting a groan from him in reply. He ran his other hand along the small of my back and along the curve of my rear, pulling me even closer.

"Severus," I managed to get out between panting breaths. "Bedroom."

With obvious reluctance, we made our way to the bedroom, though how we managed the feat while caressing and kissing each other all the while, I haven't the vaguest idea. We'd grown rather adept at such maneuvers over the past year, but with the added obstacle of my mother's mountain of presents, it was a challenge indeed. I looked up from kissing his throat when we reached the bedroom, and somehow I had the presence of mind to kick shut the door before we landed in a tangle on the bed.

Feeling emboldened by three glasses of champagne, I shoved him playfully onto his back and began to kiss him intensely, parting his lips with a light nip. He ran his tongue across my teeth, and I moaned again, allowing my fingers to dance a path down his ribcage until I had reached the waistband of his trousers. I dipped one finger slowly beneath it and began to trace a path across his flat stomach. His hips flexed instinctively against me, the movement delivering a reciprocal rush of heat directly to my lower body. He murmured an impatient charm to remove my clothing altogether.

I was relieved to find that I did not feel at all self-conscious poised above him, likely a result of the alcohol. I wasted no time in employing the same charm to effortlessly

remove his trousers. I ran my lips and tongue slowly down his chest, reveling in the hard planes of muscle and the way he quivered beneath my touch as my tongue skirted his nipples.

"Hermione..." His protests ended in a strangled groan when I grazed my fingernails along his thighs and took him gently in my mouth. He groaned again, the vibrations seeming to pass from his muscles into my hands as I continued to stroke him. I breathed hotly, heavily, on the flesh, and looked up through increasingly blurred vision at the unbearably erotic sight he presented. His eyes were closed in an exquisite combination of pleasure and torture, the wonderfully masculine profile of his shoulders and torso highlighted by the soft candlelight from the bed-table.

"Stop," he gasped a short time later, tangling his fingers in the depths of my hair. After another moment I obeyed, stalking my way slowly and deliberately up his prone body. My breasts brushed unintentionally against the light dusting of hairs on his chest, and we both shivered at the sudden, rough contact.

He captured my lips and kissed me so forcefully that my forearms grew weak. As his lips continued their tantalizing progress along my jaw to my earlobe, he rolled me onto my side. I gave no protest, snuggling into the heat of him as he traced the curves of my back and waist, his long fingers lingering in appreciation over the fall of my breasts and the outward curve of my hips. The glowing, appreciative fire in his eyes still had the power to capture my breath, even after all the times we'd been together. His worshipful gaze was more praise than I'd ever deserved.

He dipped two slender fingers between my legs while continuing to course his other hand through my hair, the pads of his fingers pushing softly but insistently through the tangles. I urged him on, tugging at his upper arms while throwing my right leg over his waist. The feeling of his skin against mine as he positioned himself atop me, snugly fitting into my hips, was unbearable.

"Please," I gasped, tightening my grip around his waist, but it fell upon deaf ears. He was intent on returning my attentions, his fingers circling a dizzying rhythm where I needed it most. He brought me cruelly close to my climax, but his fingers suddenly departed. I let out a high, keening wail that I hardly recognized as my own voice as he thrust inside me, burying his face in the curve of my shoulder.

He groaned and stilled, the rapid rise and fall of his chest alerting me to his own extreme arousal. After a long, languorous moment he resumed moving slowly, steadily, his kisses igniting more of a reaction than the gradual movement of his hips.

"Harder," I begged him, the friction between our swollen lips becoming too heady to handle. "Please...harder...faster..."

He obliged as I continued to plead shamelessly. I lost myself in the unconscious rhythm of our movements, tilting my hips up to meet his every thrust. We became too frenzied to continue kissing, and I wrapped my arms frantically around his slick back, needing something to ground myself. I couldn't keep my eyes open; I was mesmerized by the indescribable feeling of his movements reaching so deeply into me.

Eventually I could hold back no longer, and I came with a tortured scream, feeling him respond in kind. His entire body grew taut and rigid in my arms, and through the haze of my emotion I stole a moment to indulge in my guiltiest pleasure...the sight of his beautiful face as he groaned my name, all his miseries and preoccupations forgotten as he lost himself in the sensation of being stroked by my body. He collapsed with an almost graceful movement to his forearms, his breath hot and ragged in my ear.

I murmured soft words to him, running my hands along his back, not truly aware of what I was saying or why. We wrapped our arms around each other, shifting to our sides as he began kissing me anew. I was reluctant to allow our bodies to part.

He opened his eyes, the latent hunger still clearly visible in their depths. He stroked a finger along my jawline, tracing my lips. Every time he touched me, it was with the same silent reverence that seemed to mark every occasion for us.

I snuggled closer, relishing the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest as we drifted to sleep. Images flitted through my mind: all our conversations, late evenings engrossed in passionate discussion; the first time we'd made love, his overwhelming concern almost heartrending in its compassion; Ginny's delighted face when I'd assured her with a tearful smile that he accepted me, all of me, and we had achieved a level of trust and mutual understanding that even I had never envisioned was possible. It never ceased to amaze me that despite our whirlwind year together, I couldn't seem to overcome my addiction to the feeling of him. I didn't think I ever would.

Author's Note:

Whew. Well, that's it the end of it. I really, truly hope everybody enjoyed it. I agonized at considerable length over this scene, as it is the first extended explicit sexual content I've written. I'm hoping that after so much miserable waiting on Hermione's part, everyone is satisfied by the conclusion. :)

I cannot possibly say enough to everyone who has reviewed in order to accurately express my gratitude. I am anything but an experienced writer, and you have my deepest respect and thanks for sticking with me and being so overwhelmingly kind in your responses. I love to write...I revel in it, whether it's the work of fantasy, as this is, or something as mundane as a school assignment...but this has been another experience entirely.

Please understand that I gave long and intense consideration to the logical point at which to conclude the story, and I believe this to be it. I wanted to express the depth of their passion and dedication to one another, but I feel that if I attempted to continue beyond this point, my writing would become stale and redundant. I already wonder if I've carried it too far beyond my original outline, but I hope that you've enjoyed what I've opted to do. Thank you all so much!