

Desire and Deception

by SeverusLovesUs

The war is over, and Snape is now a war hero with plenty of fame, admirers, and adoring witches. Yet, none of that fulfills his real desires. Can the wizarding world ever truly accept Severus Snape?

An Unexpected Apprenticeship

Chapter 1 of 11

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It was mid-July, a popular time to visit the wizarding village of Hogsmeade, and Hermione Granger sat quietly at a table in the village's crowded pub, the Three Broomsticks, with her best mates, Ron Weasley and Harry Potter. She was sipping at her butterbeer, while Harry and Ron were engrossed in a conversation about the Auror training they were to begin that day.

Ron shook his head in response to Harry's excitement over them both being accepted and getting to work together. "It's just good I actually managed to get an 'E' N.E.W.T. in Potions or else you'd be starting training without me, Harry." He turned his head and looked at Hermione, smiling sheepishly in unspoken thanks for the coaching responsible for his success.

Harry leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms out. "Well, if that greasy git had been teaching me instead of Slughorn, I wouldn't have made the grade myself."

Hermione tutted under her breath.

They both turned to look at her. "What?" Ron asked for them.

Hermione pretended not to notice Harry's eyes roll or Ron's amused face. "Oh, honestly, you are completely overlooking the fact that Professor Snape has been teaching you the past two years." Their eyes etched in confusion rather than lit with comprehension, she sighed and said, "The Half-Blood Prince's Potions book, remember?"

Harry coughed. "It's not the same..."

"Oh, come on. You practically revere that book. You had even put a powerful protection spell on it. You obviously..."

"That was before I knew who the Half-Blood Prince was." Harry crossed his arms.

"You still went back and retrieved the book from the Room of Requirement and then used it ever since to produce superior potions in Professor Slughorn's class."

"Yeah, so what? It's helpful, isn't it? It's not as if you didn't use it too. Who cares if he wrote it...." Harry shrugged nonchalantly, turning back to Ron and changing the subject back. He started to speculate on what sort of exciting and skill-refining training their seasoned trainers would have them undergo first, and Ron eagerly joined in.

Hermione snickered to herself as the conversation about the book influenced her thoughts, and she began to think of the Potions master, Severus Snape. While Ron and Harry were glad to be rid of that "overgrown bat," as they liked to call him, Hermione would soon be seeing quite a lot of him.

Just two weeks prior, the trio had received their N.E.W.T.s results. Hermione having received all 'Outstandings.' It was a surprise to no one else, but she had been very relieved. Harry had received an 'O' in Defense Against the Dark Arts and in Potions and 'E's for the rest, while Ron had worked hard enough to get an 'E' in all of his subjects. She was very proud of them, and it had all paid off like she had known it would.

With their N.E.W.T.s up to standard, the Auror office had confirmed Harry and Ron's first day of training. And along with her own results, Hermione had received a confirmation letter from Professor McGonagall, Hogwarts Headmistress. At McGonagall's earlier, encouraging suggestion, Hermione had applied for a student-teacher position at Hogwarts for the new school year. And she was now waiting at the Three Broomsticks until it was time to go down to Hogwarts for the first staff meeting.

Hermione was shaken out of her reverie by Ron telling Harry that he had heard the Aurors get to refine their flying skills by practicing Quidditch together. Due to entirely too much experience, Hermione knew the word 'Quidditch' was a trigger for the beginning of entirely too lengthy conversations. Confirmed by the fervor in her friends' eyes, it also had become the keyword for a safe diversion of her attentions. She started to think instead about how fortunate she was to be able to work at Hogwarts.

So many wizards and witches had died or relocated during Voldemort's last rise to power. Now that the war was over, there was cleanup and restoration work to be done, for which volunteers were sorely needed. There were now so many job openings that many small businesses were struggling to survive. And Hogwarts was struggling to find instructors to fill this year's empty staff positions. Though it has been a year since the end of Voldemort's reign of terror, reminders were everywhere. It was one of the unforeseen consequences of the war...the slow healing of both heart and hearth.

Hermione took another sip of her butterbeer as scenes from the most climactic point of the battle returned to her.

Severus Snape stood tall and domineering next to Harry, whose stance showed he was determined and ready, as they faced off against Voldemort. Snape snidely proclaimed his true loyalties were to Dumbledore and had been since before Voldemort's first fall.

His eyes glinting with relished maliciousness, Snape took the moment for what it was worth and went on to describe in a savoring tone just how he had managed to fool Voldemort all this time, how Dumbledore had been dying already, and how they had taken advantage of his predicament to make it appear as though Snape murdered him out of loyalty to Voldemort.

This revelation startled everyone present: the Aurors, the Order members, the Death Eaters, and the trio. A crowd of astonished faces, a burning look of fury on the snake-like face, and all of their wide-eyed gazes focused on Snape, he turned to Harry and said, "Your turn, Potter. You were never more ready."

Hermione shook her head, reliving the amazement, then smoothed the tips of her fingers in a small circle over the center of her chest, as if soothing away the sudden pang of guilt she felt there. She reached for her glass to reattach herself to the present, but there was no need because just then, Ron jumped out of his seat so quickly one would have thought there was a sudden emergency. Like an immanent battle attack...

"Harry, we need to Floo to the Ministry now! It's five 'till three, and we're going to be late!"

...or being late for the first day at a new job.

Hermione smiled, grateful they no longer had to anticipate danger lurking in every shadow.

Harry looked alarmed and then angry that they had lost track of the time. He stood up quickly, almost knocking over his chair. They both hastily said goodbye to Hermione, Ron pressing a quick kiss against her lips. Hermione called out to them as they headed over to the pub's fireplace, "You two really need to get over your Quidditch obsession."

Ron turned his head, but Harry had already thrown their pinch of Floo Powder, and they both whirled away through the green flames.

Hermione still had another hour before the staff meeting was to begin. She pulled out a favorite reading book to pass the time, but instead found that her mind was insistent on returning to its previous train of thought.

All three of them had been given Orders of Merlin. Consequentially, they were highly honored wherever they went. In fact, if she had not cast a Do-Not-Disturb Charm around herself that day, she was sure she would be shaking hands endlessly with so dense a crowd of witches and wizards bustling around the pub.

Severus Snape had been cleared of all allegations regarding his service to Voldemort as a Death Eater, and it had been made clear that he had secretly helped the Order of the Phoenix the entire time.

Harry and Ron were still shocked to learn of this twist, having been so certain that Snape had betrayed them. Even now, Harry held strongly to his resentment of Snape for having initiated the events which led to the death of his parents. Nothing could atone for that. Or for his general nastiness. Ron agreed with Harry, but Hermione could not help feeling some admiration for her former professor.

How hard it must have been to have all his friends think he was the enemy just so he could infiltrate the real enemy to further the cause and all the while risk being caught by friend and foe alike! The man definitely deserved the hero status the wizarding world had honored him with.

Hermione put her forgotten book away, stood, smoothed down her flyaway curls, and straightened her robes. She hurried out the door of the Three Broomsticks, but made her way more leisurely through Hogsmeade.

After Voldemort's defeat, everyone in their year had returned to either repeat or attend their seventh and final year of school. It had been a relief to return "home" and to a way of life that had been unchanging since they first stepped through the castle doors all those years ago.

Yet, the last year at school had also been too *different* with Albus Dumbledore gone. Despite the general feelings of happiness, many could hardly bear a Hogwarts with no Dumbledore. Many of the teachers who had dutifully returned the past year would not be coming back again this year. They had each found reasons why it was the perfect time to retire.

And together with the general shortage of employable persons, this was the reason Hermione had been accepted for a teaching position while fresh out of school herself. She would be apprenticed as she taught, as would the other student-teachers taking over this year.

Hermione reached the gates of the castle and let herself in, the new staff members having been recently keyed into the castle's wards. She headed up through the castle doors and along the passageways to the staff room.

When she entered, she discovered she was the first to arrive, aside from the Headmistress, who beamed at Hermione and offered her greetings. Hermione took a seat in the circle of chairs to wait.

She frowned while Professor McGonagall finished speaking to a house-elf who stood attentively in the corner of the room about the dinner menu for the evening, then turned to Hermione as if intending to speak to her. Her eyes were serious, and Hermione's nerves reacted. However, more staff members arrived just then, and her former teacher turned to welcome them. Joining them was Firenze, Professor Sinistra, and Professor Sprout. Professor Vector came in, followed by Ernie MacMillan, who had been a fellow prefect, friend, and D.A. member from Hufflepuff House. Next, Neville entered the room and took a seat. Hermione was surprised and overjoyed to find that

two of her old classmates would be joining the Hogwarts staff along with her.

Professor Grubbly-Plank came in next, followed immediately by a woman Hermione did not recognize. The room buzzed with excitement, and before Hermione could find out what her friends were going to be teaching, Professor McGonagall shushed them all and said they would discuss everything once the meeting began. When it was one minute before four o'clock, Professor Snape skulked in and slid into the last chair, an expression of resignation on his face. Professor McGonagall hid a smirk and nodded to him.

"Now that everyone has arrived," the Headmistress said, "let's get straight to business. We have many staffing changes this year, and we will all need to work together to make everything flow as smoothly as possible. Now, since Sibyll has... gone..."

Despite knowing how she and Professor McGonagall had both rather disliked Trelawney, the former Divination professor, Hermione could understand why she had paused, her eyes becoming glassy.

The night the Death Eaters had broken into Hogwarts two years ago, one of them had kidnapped Trelawney. They had taken her to Voldemort, where he delved into her mind to learn, finally, the contents of the prophecy. After extracting the information from deep within her mind, she was so addled that she could no longer function.

When former students of hers had found her roaming the streets of Muggle London last year, she was taken to reside in a permanent ward at St. Mungo's, babbling inane drivel and declaring that her fellow resident, Gilderoy Lockhart, was destined for greatness.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat as if it could also clear away the unpleasant thoughts and bring back everyone's attention. "Firenze will be the school's Divination teacher." Everyone in the room nodded at the centaur, and he replied with a soft word of thanks.

She then turned to the unfamiliar woman and announced that she had agreed to teach Charms, since Filius Flitwick had retired. Professor McGonagall introduced her as Matilda Fletchley, who had been in Hufflepuff House and whose credentials included being Head Girl some ten years ago.

After nods and thanks were exchanged, the Headmistress continued, "We welcome back Professor Sinistra who will continue teaching Astronomy and Professor Vector who will continue with Arithmancy. Professor Grubbly-Plank will continue teaching Care of Magical Creatures."

Hermione smiled slightly, remembering her dear friend, Hagrid, who had taught the class while she had been a student. He had married his love, Olympe, and moved with her to the south of France.

"Now, many of the teachers who have been with the school for awhile will take on some extra responsibility this year. In addition to your own duties, some of you will be apprenticing a student-teacher. The student-teachers themselves," she turned to look at Neville, Ernie, and Hermione, "will be teaching their classes while studying their subjects more in-depth with their mentors. It will be a lot of work, but I expect everyone," and her eyes scanned each person in the room, "to step up and put forth their fullest efforts."

When her stern gaze passed the others and came to rest on him, Severus Snape nodded to the Headmistress and said, "Of course, Minerva."

"Now, Professor Sprout," she inclined her head towards the Herbology professor, "wishes to retire, but she has agreed to remain for the first term to oversee Neville Longbottom's progress as he takes over the Herbology classes." Hermione beamed at Neville, who looked positively elated.

"In addition to my duties as Headmistress, I will be coaching a student-teacher to take over Transfiguration lessons. That position will be filled by," she paused, and Hermione sat up straighter, "Ernie MacMillan." Everyone nodded politely, but Hermione was confused.

"Er, Professor McGonagall?"

"Dear, you must remember to call me Minerva since we now work together as professional associates," she said. Hermione nodded. "I know we had discussed you taking the Transfiguration apprenticeship, but certain events have forced me to make even *more* changes. We had thought Horace would be staying on as Potions professor, but he has suddenly discovered he ought to retire and spend his remaining years with as much crystallized pineapple as possible."

Her nostrils flared as she attempted to suppress a disdainful sniff. "So, I will have Ernie teach Transfiguration, as he is quite adept with it." Ernie's eyes sparkled, and he was not quite successful in his attempt to restrain a grin from appearing on his face, though he tempered it with the apologetic look he threw Hermione's way.

Professor McGonagall now turned to her. "And, Hermione, I ask that you teach a different subject since you are the only available instructor who received an Outstanding N.E.W.T....an essential qualification considering the complexity of the material."

Hermione took in this new information. *So, then what will I teach? What is left to teach? Professor Snape will take over Potions again, and that leaves..* Hermione spoke, "Prof...Minerva, does this mean I will be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

Before her former Head of House could respond, a snide voice interjected. "Actually, I will be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts." Snape saw Hermione's confusion and rolled his eyes.

McGonagall said, "Yes, Severus will continue to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. It was always his preferred subject, and since he proved himself so admirably in the war," she beamed at him, "it is only fitting he should be rewarded."

Snape seemed not to appreciate the praise, but kept his composure calm as he said, "Minerva, that is quite unnecessary. I did what I must. It was my job. That is all."

"Hmph. Well, it is high time you accept the fact that the wizarding world has declared you a war hero." She set her gaze upon him as if she could press him into agreement. After a slight shake of his head, she turned back to Hermione again. "Now, back to the matter at hand. This means, Hermione, I need you to consent to teaching Potions, and Severus, you to agree to being her mentor."

A moment of silence lingered after Professor McGonagall's announcement. Hermione noticed Snape regarding her with a calculating look. She did revere his skill, knowing he was a genius in the art of potion-making. It could, indeed, be a very rewarding learning experience. She then saw Snape glare at her, a smirk crossing his face. *Really, now! What does the man have to be so hateful about? The war is over...*

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At McGonagall's announcement, the girl had gasped, but Snape saw how she then managed to hide her incredulity. He could see in her eyes a mixture of surprise, fear, and...excitement? He had resigned himself to mentoring *somebody* to be the new Potions professor when McGonagall had agreed to let him continue with Defense Against the Dark Arts. Snape supposed he would rather have an overachieving perfectionist like Miss Granger than a dunderhead like Longbottom or the others. If she got too annoying, well, he knew he could easily set her in her place. Severus Snape knew he was a master at instilling fear to manipulate. He gave Miss Granger an icy stare and smirked at her startled response...

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"Well?" Professor McGonagall waited expectantly.

Hermione jumped and turned her head back towards Professor McGonagall before giving her answer. "Yes, Minerva, I will stay on and teach Potions. Well, that is, if Professor Snape agrees to mentor me?"

Snape raised his brows slightly and looked uninterested, but said, "Yes, I shall do as the Headmistress has requested."

"Good. All settled," Professor McGonagall said with no hint in her voice of the relief that could be seen in her relaxing shoulders. She turned and looked at all the gathered teachers. "We will meet again later this summer to discuss the details of running the school and taking charge of the children. This summer I expect apprentices and mentors to get together regularly so as to be thoroughly prepared for the school year. For now, let's all go down to the Great Hall where the elves have prepared a celebration dinner."

As the teachers filed out of the staff room, Hermione lingered back, hoping to walk down with Professor Snape, who did not seem eager to join the throb of teachers exiting the room. When he looked up, his sharp gaze took in the way she was dallying, her finger twirling a curly lock of hair as she gathered her nerves. It did not help that he looked forbidding, as if anticipating a tirade of bothersome questions from her.

"Miss Granger!" She looked at him, locking her eyes with his to show him how unaffected she was by his show of reluctance to have her as his apprentice. "You will meet me in my office tomorrow at five o'clock to discuss your apprenticeship. Is that understood?"

Hermione smiled and tried to sound agreeable and professional as she said, "Oh, yes, sir. That will do just fine..."

"Then that is quite settled." He swept past her through the door, hurrying in the direction of the Great Hall. His black robes fluttered slightly behind him in the wake of his swift, but graceful movements. Hermione followed several paces behind, her thoughts on how interesting this year would be.

Surprise Surprise

Chapter 2 of 11

Severus Snape has never been one to be taken by surprise. How is it then, that Miss Granger has so successfully caught him off guard?

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The next day, Severus Snape sat at his desk carefully perusing his sample Potions syllabi for each year. At exactly five o'clock he looked up expectantly and was not surprised to hear the rat-a-tat-tat of Hermione's knocking. "Enter."

Miss Granger came in beaming entirely too brightly.

"What is it?"

Her smile faded away, and she spoke cautiously. "Pardon me, sir. I am just so pleased by the opportunity to learn from one so accomplished and brilliant as you are in the exact art and science that is potion-making."

Snape was momentarily stunned that she remembered the words with which he had once passionately described Potions. Then her words of praise struck him, but he knew better than to believe them. She had to be using flattery so that he would go easier on her. How juvenile of her to think that it would work.

Miss Granger took a breath, reasserting herself. "I do hope that we can have a truly productive working relationship this year. I am eager to learn from you, and I hope to be a very pleasing apprentice, Severus."

Snape suddenly stood and glared at her. She jumped back a bit, unnerved by his sudden change in demeanor. "How did you just address me, Miss Granger?"

The girl looked positively aghast at his reaction. "I do apologize, *sir*," she said. "I just thought that since I am no longer your student..."

"Enough." He looked at her for a moment before continuing. She was not a Hogwarts student anymore, true enough. She was a co-worker... but was it not a bit presumptuous to acknowledge the change in their status so quickly? Ambitious, but after all, he *was* still her mentor.

"Miss Granger," Snape said pointedly, "it is my job to mentor you as you take on this new teaching role. In that regard, I see you still as my student, and therefore I shall watch your progress carefully. When I feel that you are quite capable enough in this endeavor, then I shall take into consideration your status as a fellow staff member."

"Certainly, sir," she said. "I want to express my gratitude that you are willing to take me on as your apprentice."

"Oh?" Snape said, allowing an expression of curious disbelief to cross his face. "I was under the impression that you hoped to teach Transfiguration. Why is it you are so insufferably excited about taking on Potions instead?"

"Well, sir, while I do love Transfiguration, I had no idea that Potions would be available to teach. Of course, I was very surprised that neither you nor Professor Slughorn had elected to teach it, but it was a pleasant surprise, and I am gratified to have been asked."

Despite the effected formality of her words, he could see her nervousness and tension in the way she shifted from one foot to the other. Since they were both still standing, Snape gestured for her to sit in one of the chairs facing his desk and returned to his own behind it. His apprentice's avid interest in pursuing an education in Potions was mystifying, and he was filled with the insatiable desire to quench his curiosity about the matter.

He nodded to her. "So, what do you hope to gain out of a continued education in Potions and from teaching it to others?"

"Well, sir, you may have noticed that I have a certain... fondness for reading books and learning as much as I can," she said as she gestured toward Snape's massive bookshelves with a covetous gleam in her eyes.

Crossing his arms and leaning back, Snape snorted in response, then turned his face away. "Noticed you're a know-it-all?"

She pretended to not have heard his retort and went on to say, "Potions is different. It's special. I've already learned what I could about potion-making from books, but potion-making is an art form as well, isn't it, sir?"

Snape gave her the slightest nod, inwardly interested in the girl's unpredicted passion.

"Well, if I am to challenge myself and my abilities, I need to go beyond the realm of book-learning. I know you are an artist in this form...you can vastly improve even the most well-rounded potions with your inspired, subtle changes."

Snape was startled. No one had ever shown such appreciation for Potions before. He found himself imagining sharing his mastered secrets with her... showing her how subtle and beautiful his creations really were. Snape cleared his throat, but found himself uncharacteristically not knowing what to say. "Miss Granger, how is it you have come into this... appreciation?"

"It was the book, sir. Your *Advanced Potion Making* book."

"Ah, indeed," said Snape. He knew that the Potter boy had got his unworthy hands on it. "That reminds me, I must ask Potter to return my book to me. Now, tell me more about how my book influenced you, Miss Granger."

"Well, sir, at first I found the book repulsive, and I just completely detested it."

"Oh?"

"Yes, well, I was not willing to believe that the book's scribbled deviations from the original instructions could be better. How could anything be better than the standardized methods? Yet, time and time again, Harry produced the better results, and I admit that it had me feeling a little bit incensed."

Snape smirked. "So, Miss-Know-It-All finally gets outdone. I knew Potter was good for something." She glared at him, looking as if she were barely constraining an angry retort. He nodded to her and said, "Do continue, Miss Granger."

Taking in a deep breath, then biting her bottom lip to compose herself, she went on, "Well, it's not only that the potion-making methods were better; I also did not trust the anonymous author."

"A wise judgment on the whole," Snape said. "So, then what did you do when you learned the identity of the Half-Blood Prince?"

"Well, I was really torn, sir. It was a relief to find out it was you, actually, and it all made sense, but..." her voice faltered, but the look on Snape's face urged her to continue, "but you had just killed... you know..."

"Yes, yes, I do know." Snape frowned in irritation. "I see where you are going. Skip ahead and tell me how your initial revulsion turned into an appreciation of my potion-making skills."

Sighing, she said, "Although I had always secretly admired the genius mind that created the alterations to the potions and invented all those spells, I finally allowed myself to fully appreciate it when I knew you had not really betrayed us."

"I see. So, you are ready to expand your knowledge beyond the realm of books. How admirable. I am surprised you did not go in for a Divination apprenticeship," he said, consciously allowing his tiniest of smiles as well as the ease in his tone, curious how she'd respond and curious of why he was experimenting at all.

The expression was affecting, the teasing inflection of his voice satisfyingly surprising, but the absurdity of his suggestion was enough to make her overlook it for now and come back with a retort. "I said I wanted to expand my knowledge, sir. I did not say I wanted to throw knowledge out a tower window and strut around acting All-Knowing."

Snape's mouth twitched, and he let out a chuckle. It was a brief chuckle because he managed to regain control of himself, feeling appalled that he had let that slip.

"Sir?"

"Miss Granger, I think we've talked quite enough for today. If it should be convenient for you, I wish for you to return tomorrow at the same time to discuss your course outline."

"Okay," she said, looking slightly uncertain about the dismissal. "I can come at five tomorrow."

"Fine. And there is also the matter of an extensive task I have been given by the Ministry. They require a regular supply of a certain potion, and I shall wish to have your assistance with it as it will be quite laborious work, especially given the many extra responsibilities I have already this year."

Miss Granger's eyes widened. "Certainly, sir. I would be glad to help."

Snape only said, "Hmmp," and then, "Well, you are excused, Miss Granger."

Later that night, Hermione felt a little light-headed, so she lay down to get some rest. Harry and Ron had come over to the flat she was renting for the summer and had brought over a batch of Ogden's Old Firewhisky, which they had all drank to celebrate the beginnings of their new careers.

Before long, Hermione was drifting in that place between waking and sleeping. Half-conscious, half-dreaming, images came unbidden to her mind. She saw Severus Snape inspecting the finished result of a complicated potion she had brewed. Severus turned to Hermione and offered her his congratulations. Then, before she could understand what was happening, he had swept down and kissed her...passionately.

The shocking image stirred Hermione to consciousness. "I must be more intoxicated than I thought," she mumbled to herself. Sighing, she finally drifted off into a deep sleep, not remembering any of her dreams the following morning.

Ensnaring The Senses

Chapter 3 of 11

Hermione starts off having a really bad day. It ends much better than it began: nice and hot, and Hermione feels as warm inside as the warm summer sun.

The following Monday, Snape was seated in his office, his mind contemplating his mentorship of Miss Granger. The girl had just left his office after the meeting they had that afternoon.

Snape had arranged to meet with Miss Granger every Monday and Thursday for the duration of the summer. In the meeting that day, Snape had outlined a design for her training. She would demonstrate her knowledge of each potion taught at each year level. She would know what the potion was used for, why each ingredient was used, what its effects were, and how to spot where students went wrong when making them.

Most of this would be a review for Miss Granger as she was admittedly brilliant enough to remember the slightest details, even from the potions she had studied way back in her first and second years. It would not take long for the review, and after that, he would set her to the task of helping him make the medicinal potions that Poppy often needed for students injured or ill in the hospital wing.

Snape sneered at the thought of how little appreciation potions usually received when they were so useful and always needed. There had always been vast amounts of demands on him as the Potions master. It had never seemed to ease up, even when Slughorn instructed the Potions classes for two years. If Miss Granger were to successfully take on the role of the Potions professor, she would need to be more than capable of handling the seemingly continuous need for her to make potions for others.

Although the Potions apprentice would have a lot of work to do already, Snape would also be teaching her how to make brews so complicated that even your average wizard with a N.E.W.T. in Potions dare not attempt them. She must learn to be diligent and disciplined with her skills, and the constant brewing of difficult potions would aid the process. All this work would be sufficient enough for her to serve as an adequate Potions professor, yet Snape had decided to teach her even more...

Sure, Miss Granger had always annoyed him with her need to draw attention in class to the fact that she knew everything. Intellect was a virtue no doubt, one that had been his crux during the years he spent as a spy. It had been her need to make a show of it that had irritated the hell out of him. It reminded him of bloody arrogant James Potter and his friends who flaunted their intellect and skills around the block. Yes, Severus Snape despised arrogance.

However, Miss Granger had *astonishingly* surprised him. Her intellect was incontestable, he had to admit. She was not the top of her class every year for nothing. Yet, she did not seem as eager these last couple years to make an ostentatious show of it all. Her intellect was real, primal, delectable. He savored such purity of mind in another person. And so, each Thursday lesson would be used to teach Miss Granger to use her knowledge as a base on which to build and develop the skill to improve and create potions on her own. She had desired to expand her knowledge beyond what was required, and so Snape would show her his art.

Snape kicked back and leaned his chair on its back legs, his hands behind his head. If the bookworm could free herself from her need of "how-to's," and she could betray her loyalty to the standard instructions, she had the potential to become a master of the art herself. He had not intended to go so far with his apprentice, but after learning of Miss Granger's strong appreciation for the subject, he was anxious to see if she could turn that passion into masterful skill. Truthfully, he did not think the girl had the capabilities of closing her inquisitive mind to the "rules" and opening it to intuition and insight. However, he was determined to at least allow her to try.

It was Wednesday evening and the day of Harry's eighteenth birthday. There would be a party at the Burrow with all of the Weasleys, most of the Order, and some of their old school friends in attendance. Hermione was excited for the celebration and was looking forward to a fun time with all her friends. There was, however, one person she was not looking forward to seeing... Hermione sighed, resolute in the decision she had made, and Apparated outside the front door of the Burrow.

The party was in full swing, and Harry was quite jubilant. Hermione could not help but grin too when she saw how Harry's smile reached his eyes and heard his laughter as he talked to each of the guests. He had not had the chance to have birthday parties growing up, and the only one he did have had been marred by wretched news of Voldemort's gruesome doings in the wizarding world.

Bill and Fleur, having just celebrated their first wedding anniversary, were off in a dark corner, sneaking lingering kisses whenever they thought no one was paying any attention to them. And Hermione tried not to. Ginny and Hermione still secretly called Fleur Phlegm because she was just as snotty and self-assured as she ever was. Thankfully, they only saw Bill and Fleur at get-togethers like this. The newlyweds both worked long hours at Gringotts, and they shared a flat down in London.

Remus and Tonks were sitting together on a divan in another corner of the room, holding hands and laughing, while their son, Teddy, a Metamorphmagus like Tonks, changed his hair color from pink to black to green and back to pink again. Hermione smiled. She really felt very happy for the couple. Each of them deserved to have the chance to be in love and have peace in life. Gods know that Remus Lupin was the only one of his Marauder friends to get that chance!

Tonks had nearly died during the confrontation with Voldemort. She had spent two months in St. Mungo's recovering from the combined hexes of two different Death Eaters. Tonks was no longer considered a novice Auror and was one of the Aurors leading Harry and Ron's training.

Remus Lupin headed a new office at the Ministry. Working hard to establish positive relations between wizards and werewolves, he fought the legislation that prevented werewolves from being allowed to work in whatever fields they were otherwise qualified to work in. Remus had some success already, having started a society: AWWERE...Association for Werewolf and Wizard Essential Relations of Equality.

Molly was busying about, frantically attempting to get enough plates and silverware together for everyone. Arthur was helping her by taking the food out to the large table outside where everyone would be eating dinner.

Neville and Luna had come to the party as well. From the occasional glances they stole at each other when the other was not looking, Hermione wondered if they might become a couple soon. She would ask Luna about it if she got the chance to talk to her later.

Two other couples were in attendance at the party. The guest of honor himself had his arm locked around Ginny's shoulder, a wide grin on both of their faces. They had been back together since the original celebration of Voldemort's defeat. Hermione was quite delighted with her friends' romance. At least they were proof that there was true love in this world.

The last couple in the room was not so happy together. Well, the happiness was only one-sided anyway. The unhappy person wanted to end their status as a couple. She didn't love him.

Hermione felt a pair of arms wrap around her waist from behind. She looked down to see the freckle-covered arms and cringed as a voice in her ear said, "Hey, 'Mione!"

Ron noticed Hermione's withdraw from his embrace and turned her around to look at him. "What's the matter? Are you okay?"

Hermione sighed. "Listen, Ron. I need to talk to you. Will you come take a walk with me?"

Ron's expression of concern changed to one of uncertainty and curiosity. "Er, sure. Let's go around the garden."

As they walked, Hermione remained silent, wringing her hands as she prepared to speak. Ron's apprehension became more and more apparent as her reluctance to speak continued, but he waited for her to say whatever it was she had on her mind. Obviously thinking she must be upset and in need of comforting, he reached out and put his arm around her shoulder.

Hermione stopped short and spun around so that Ron's arm was no longer around her. "I'm sorry, Ron, but I don't think we should be together anymore." There, it was out.

From the look on his face, she knew that he had not expected this. "What? Why?" He stepped closer to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "You can't be serious, Hermione?"

She nodded, finding that her voice was unable to rise to its normal pitch. "I am."

Ron growled, the hurt and anger evident in his eyes. Hermione felt tears welling up in her own eyes. She didn't want to hurt Ron, but she knew she needed to do this. She said, "Ron, I really am sorry. I just don't feel that this is right for us..."

Hermione had not finished explaining, but Ron cut in, "I can't believe this, Hermione! Haven't you been pining after me since our fourth year? Finally, you have me and you want to just let it go like I don't even matter to you after all?" His breathing was heavy, and he let go of Hermione's shoulders and clenched his fists at his sides.

Hermione was tempted to point out that it was Ron who had done all the pining, but instead she said, "Ron, of course you matter to me. You are one of my best friends. I..."

"Friends?" The word was a whisper.

Hermione rushed on, not wanting Ron to keep interrupting her, "Yes, Ron. I love you as my friend, my very best, and I think we made a terrible mistake getting together. I didn't know it before we tried it, but now I know that we are not meant to be together. I know you are upset, Ron, and I hope that you can forgive me for this."

Ron glared at her and took a deep breath. His eyes still angry, his voice low and deep, he said, "I don't know, Hermione. You're asking an awful lot, considering I thought that for the past several months we were perfectly happy together. Not two weeks ago you were snogging me to high heaven! Can't you see how I feel about you? What changed?"

Hermione was silent for a few moments. She reached out to touch Ron's arm in comfort, but he pulled it back and crossed his arms over his chest. "Why?"

"I wish this didn't have to be so uncomfortable. Please try to understand. It's what's best for us," Hermione finally said.

"Bloody Hell, Hermione! That's it?" He glared. "That's all I get?"

Hermione stood up tall and looked Ron in the eyes, willing him to see the truth of her words. "I really did not want to hurt you, Ron. It's hard to explain why, but I just don't see you in a romantic way anymore."

Ron gave her one last scowl and turned away, walking quickly back to the door and slamming it behind him as he went inside. Hermione stood out by the garden and cried silently for a few minutes. She really could not express why her feelings for Ron had changed exactly. She just knew that lately she could not stand his caresses and touches, and she felt no spark whatsoever when kissing him. She missed him as her friend.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione went back inside, determined to keep her demeanor happy for Harry's sake. Ron had glared at her often throughout the dinner and the cake eating, but most everyone was too involved in the celebrations to notice.

After cake, the celebrations continued for quite awhile longer. Firewhisky was making its rounds, introducing itself to all the guests, and meeting with Ron on more than one occasion. During this time, Ginny came over to Hermione and gestured for her to follow her to her room. Hermione obliged, and when Ginny had shut her door behind them, she whirled around to face Hermione with a hurt look on her face.

"Hermione, how could you do this to Ron? I can't believe you broke up with him! What were you thinking?" Her voice was hard and accusing.

"I *was* thinking about how this kind of relationship isn't good for us, and *now* I am thinking how perfectly anticipated it is that you have so candidly taken his side." Shouldn't Ginny have given her the benefit of the doubt as her friend? Listen first, yell later?

It was amazing how icy the voice of a person fuming with anger could be. "I *am* your friend, Hermione, but I am not going to take kindly to you hurting my brother. I saw the looks he was giving you at dinner. You hurt him deeply, Hermione. You should have broken things off from the get-go if you realized you didn't have romantic feelings for him. How does it take you several months to realize your feelings are wrong? Just last month you told me you loved him! What is wrong with you?"

Hermione looked away and started walking to the door. She was not in the mood to hear any of what Ginny had to say. But, the first step made everything too real. She was losing too much. Hermione stopped and turned and said, "Ginny, I'm sorry. I'm not sure why my feelings changed, but they have. Perhaps I wanted to believe they were there and tried it for too long. This may have cost me Ron's friendship. I don't want to lose yours too!"

Ginny ignored Hermione's pleading look. "Whatever, Hermione. I need to go back downstairs before Harry misses me. You see, I actually care about my boyfriend, and I would never do anything to hurt him."

She sauntered out of the room, walking right past Hermione who was standing still, aghast at her friend's cruelty. Losing two friends was two too many, and she did not want to stick around any longer in case Harry caught on to what was going on. She did not know if he would be mad at her too, but she knew he would be mad if she stayed and her drama ruined his party. Hermione walked quietly downstairs and made her way to the Apparition point outside.

She was home in an instant, and she collapsed upon her bed, weary with emotional drain and tears shed. After tossing and turning for what felt like hours, she realized she would never get to sleep if she could not take her mind off of Ron. She needed to be well-rested for her Potions lesson the next day. Snape had promised to show her how potion-making was an art and how he worked to enhance his potions. It felt like having the lucky chance to unveil carefully cloaked, treasured secrets.

Hermione kicked her feet out of the sheets and rolled herself over onto her stomach, burying her face in the crook of her arm and hiding the smile there. Having such an intelligent, ingenious mentor? She could not wait for her lesson. It was a strange feeling. Even though Snape's name was cleared and she felt she had the freedom to really respect him, it still felt a little strange to enjoy being in his presence because of how often he had been cold and cruel to her in the past.

He might still be cold and cruel, but she had seen snippets of another side of him. A side that could possibly enjoy himself, could laugh, could feel passion...as those who were truly alive always did. She admitted to herself that she was curious about who he was inside. Thoughts of Severus Snape still on her mind, Hermione finally drifted off to sleep.

Hermione arrived on time for her lesson with Professor Snape. He noticed the dark rings under her eyes and the tension she carried in her shoulders. Hermione had not slept well the night before. Then, Harry had sent her a Howler that had her in tears all morning. She had been miserable all day thinking about how the three people she loved most were all angry with her.

Hermione knew that Ginny had probably fancied becoming sisters-in-law one day. She knew that Harry had fancied the happy notion of himself with Ginny and Ron with Hermione. Bloody Perfection. Harry clung to everything that made him happy, and Hermione knew he could get very upset if anything changed the sources of happiness he relied on to get by. Still, she wished they would understand. Ron had a right to be angry with her, but not Harry and Ginny too.

Hermione looked bad enough that Snape sourly remarked that she was nowhere fit enough to be able to handle the work for that day and that he was wrong to assume she could take it on.

Hermione was incensed. After all she had been through in the last day, she *needed* this! Frankly, this lesson was the only thing keeping her from shaking, crying, and pulling out chunks of her still fairly bushy hair. Hermione rounded on Snape, glaring at him, and said, "Sir, you already agreed you would give me these lessons, and you cannot go back on that now without even letting me have a go at it! I did have a restless night, yes, but I guarantee you, sir, that it shall not impact the energy and effort I will put into this work."

Snape snorted and said, "Do not disappoint me, Miss Granger. Come..." He led her through a door at the back of the Potions office that was to be hers, which led to the Potions lab. There was a workspace cleared with a cauldron, a set of brass scales, and the necessary ingredients set on the side. There was one chair, and Snape gestured for Hermione to sit in it.

"Miss Granger, can you guess at which potion you will be making?"

Hermione took note of the ingredients, including roots already chopped and beans already squashed...their juice contained in a decanter next to them. "Yes, sir! These are all the ingredients needed to produce the Draught of Living Death!" Her excitement faltered, and she said, "But, sir, I already know this potion. We made it in N.E.W.T.s with Professor Slughorn."

Snape sneered at her. "Miss Granger, I am fully aware of that fact. Now, if it pleases you, I will *explain* to you what you are going to do."

"Certainly. Please continue."

"Now, you are going to attempt to forget the instructions for this potion, which may be an impossibility as they are undoubtedly forever scribed in your mind," he said, and his mouth twitched. "You are going to attempt to find a way to make this potion better using your intuition. The best way to begin is to make sure you are completely relaxed..."

"Now, I want you to close your eyes and take slow, deep breaths," he continued, his voice growing soft. "I want you to gently tighten the muscles in your feet. Tighten them only for a moment, and then allow them relax."

Hermione had her eyes closed, and she let his soft voice overcome her. She let him guide her as he had her relax each body part, one by one, from her feet up to the back of her head. His voice was velvety, and she felt like it was caressing each part of her body as she let all the tension out. She was floating....

"Continue to breathe slowly and deeply. Start making the potion and let your senses experience everything you do. Watch how each ingredient changes the color and consistency of the potion. Listen to the crackling of the fire as you light it underneath the cauldron. Listen as the potion bubbles and boils. Breathe slowly. Let the fragrances and fumes consume you. Breathe them in. They are strong enough to taste...."

Hermione was slowly stirring the potion counter-clockwise, feeling the weight of it against the spoon that swept through it. *Bewitching the mind. Ensnaring the senses.* The aromas from the soporiferous beans and the earthy roots intoxicated her. The almost pale pink potion swirled around the spoon as if in a dance. Suddenly, she felt a hand close around hers. Snape had come up behind her, his right hand covering hers as she stirred, and his left hand pressed gently against her lower back. She gasped as she felt a surge of strong heat flow through her body. She was tingling, and the rush led her even further into her altered state of mind.

Snape's voice was whispering into her ear. "Feel it, Miss Granger. Stir slowly, just like that. Feel what the potion wants. What does it require?"

Snape kept his hand upon hers, but he did not move it. Hermione continued to stir the potion, when suddenly the potion seemed to want to be pushed the other way. Impulsively, she stirred it once clockwise. The soft pink potion started to become clear, shimmering with an opalescent glitter. She gasped.

"Very good, Miss Granger," Snape said smoothly into her ear. He released her hand and stood up straight, but Hermione could still feel his warmth flowing through her.

Flushed, Hermione turned to look at Snape and said, "This potion... it is nearly unheard of for it to progress beyond a pale, but still opaque, pink! This became clear so quickly and easily, and it is *shimmering*! The opalescent gleam could only mean that it has a refined purity to it that would pretty much negate any of the potion's potential defects...like leaving the drinker immune to a restorative draught!"

Severus Snape gave her the tiniest of smiles and nodded his head. "Very good indeed. Very well then, your apprenticeship shall include more lessons like this one, starting next Thursday. There is more, and you will want to understand the principles, I am sure. On Monday, we will continue reviewing the classroom potions. Afterwards, I will have you begin assisting me with that Ministry project I mentioned last week."

Hermione was flushed with excitement. She felt she had been very successful in this endeavor, and for the first time, Professor Snape actually seemed pleased with her work. She stammered over her words as she said, "Oh, I...er, I look... I am looking forward to it." Then, more as an afterthought, she added, "Sir."

"Have a biscuit," he said, offering a tin full of them. "I find it helpful to eat something after working with a potion this way. Otherwise, you may soon start to feel as if you were that spoon you stirred with and as if the potion is surrounding you, pushing and pulling against you, leaving you disoriented. You need to bring yourself back from that connection."

She took the biscuit gratefully, her mind latching onto the words "pushing and pulling." The potion had felt like ocean tides, ebbing and flowing. She had indeed felt the pushing and the pulling within herself. Finally, the push had become forceful, and she had moved the spoon the other direction. Push and pull. Ebb and flow. Need and release. There was an erotic feeling to it, almost a spiritual quality. Hermione looked over at the dark-haired man who was busying himself by removing the contents of the cauldron and bottling them. Hermione swallowed the last of her biscuit, took a deep breath, and said, "Thank you very much for my lesson today, Professor. I look forward to Monday. Good evening."

Turning from the shelf where he had just delicately placed the bottle filled with perfect Draught of Living Death, he nodded and said, "Monday then, Miss Granger."

She exited quickly. Just outside the castle doors, she paused, panting slightly. She still felt jittery and flustered *It must be the aftereffects of the potion-making. I should have had another biscuit.*

Hermione sat down on the steps for a few minutes, breathing in the light of the warm, summer sun, before making her way past the gates and Apparating home.

A/N: Thank you for reading. Muchos kudos to my beta, Moon Revel!

Erised Foror Rimeht Niepans

Chapter 4 of 11

Realizations and Racy Revelations.

Snape adjusts to his post-war life. He reveals the mystery project to Hermione. And for each there will be a discovery....

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Secluded in his office, waiting for Miss Granger to arrive, Snape's mind was deep in thought, and his thoughts were troubling him.

All the world's a stage, and the men and women merely players. Snape remembered the epigram given by William Shakespeare.

Snape had quite an expansive collection of Muggle books, having been raised in a household where his father insisted that he and his witch mother follow the Muggle style of living. "No foolish wand waving in this house!" echoed his late father's words in his mind. Despite his father's oppressive contempt of magic, his upbringing had provided plenty of opportunity to delve into both Muggle fiction as well as the Muggle books on science and math that he had been given to study in the years before he went to Hogwarts.

Snape strolled over to one of his bookshelves and perused a section full of classic literature. He pulled down a compilation of Shakespeare's works and flipped the old tome open to a page held with a marker to read a passage he already had memorized word for word.

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day

To the last syllables of recorded time.

All our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out! Out brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

And then is heard no more, a tale told by an idiot,

Full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing."

Snape laughed softly at that melodic expression of sheer beauty and terror. Words too true to forget...

And who was Severus Snape when he was not performing a role? When the multiple personas were cast away with the insincerity that created them? Did he even exist underneath those layers added by necessity?

As a young Slytherin, Snape had been ambitious... before the choices he had made had consequences that killed his ambitions and laughed in his face so that he could never forget. None of them had mattered anymore once he had lost Lily's friendship. That loss had cut too deep. The cost was every part of him that had wanted to be good. With those parts cut away, he had convinced himself that there was nothing left for him but to sink in deeper.

Two events in his life, joining the Death Eaters and becoming Albus' spy, had been unanticipated, unplanned, and life-altering. And after each, he had adjusted and made new plans. The spying let him have plans within plans.

And what now? This was the third major turning point in his life. With the war over, he had given thorough consideration to the idea of leaving Hogwarts and pursuing those dreams of yesteryear. He was, after all, no longer bound to the school to serve one master's wishes or the other's.

Yet, all these years, while the staged drama he spun around him had kept him imprisoned, unable to explore other options, it had also taught him just what it was he valued. In those youthful days, he had not truly known himself, let alone what he wanted from life. He still did not have all the answers, but he had some. His work suited him and gave back satisfaction. It was that revelation and nothing else that kept him bound to this school.

For his entire history as a Potions instructor, he had never actually taken any pleasure in teaching. Nearly all his students were indolent, inattentive dunderheads who could not be bothered to learn from him any more than he had wanted to teach them. For the two previous years, his position as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher had displaced the dismay and dislike he had of teaching. The subject had always held his fascination, and its allure held sway over the students as well. Not many students respected Potions, but all of them were attracted to and enraptured by Defense Against the Dark Arts. Its students actually had drive and initiative to excel. He found he could educate and enlighten those who were actually open to learning.

Severus Snape was inwardly very proud that all his students the past two years had passed their final exams in the subject, quite a few even getting 'E's and 'O's in the O.W.L.- and N.E.W.T.-levels. Although he had as much passion for Potions as he did defensive skills and knowledge of the dark arts, he was quite content to pass its dreaded teaching to Miss Granger.

Miss Granger. She was the first person in a very long time who he had found worthy enough to share any of his mastered Potions secrets with. The only other honorary in this fashion had been Lily Evans. It linked the two of them together in his mind. Lily had been passionate, charming, and kind. Her twinkling eyes and sweet smile had filled him with such warmth. He had fallen in love with Lily Evans. She had given her love instead to the damned James Potter. Snape had hardened his broken heart. Snape knew he had only to blame himself for the way things had worked out. Still, never again would he make such a mistake and give so much of himself to someone else who could take it from him just to twist it and crush it.

Snape came out of his reverie to realize he had a death grip on his book. He replaced it carefully on the shelf. If he wanted to crush worded paper, that stack of lightly scented parchment on his desk would do much better. With that thought, Snape grabbed up the letters from his desk and crumpled them. Just another daily dose of fan mail delivered that morning by owl post. Just a bunch of accursed witches hoping to land the great "War Hero."

Snape rolled his eyes and threw the worthless parchment pieces into the fire going in his grate. Severus Snape had wanted recognition once. Now he had it, but they all only admired the actions of one of his personas. He had acted in the war against Voldemort out of the need for justice and to eradicate the world of a power-crazed tyrant. Everyone had wanted that. His actions, then, should not be so glorified. It was in the nature of people to work to the best of their capabilities when confronted with the threat of losing everything they found virtue in.

He had bedded a couple of these adoring witches in the beginning of his famed existence when he realized they would never see past his glorified hero status. They would never love the man underneath. Severus Snape was so much more than the "War Hero" they labeled him with. He was so much more than the snide, cruel teacher his past students had seen him as. He was so much more than the cynical, sardonic, unkind, and unsocial man he had portrayed by necessity to keep his loyalties covert and to provide fodder to convince Voldemort of his loyalty. Those were all just damned roles. He had been a player on a stage. The parchment letters now lay in ashes amongst the fire's dying embers. He didn't want witches who only loved him for a label...

Knock. Knock. Knock. Snape released all the tension that had built up with an explosive burst of air. "Enter," he said breathily.

Hermione came in the room, offering her greetings as she set down a few bottles on the desk. They contained curriculum potion samples she had made during the interim between meetings. Snape examined each. "Perfect, Miss Granger. I would expect nothing less."

Hermione and Snape continued to go over the next school year's Potions curriculum. Snape instructed Hermione to keep diligent track of when she needed to collect ingredients that would be used in later lessons. "For example, you must remember that the leaves used in the Amortentia potion must be collected on the Full Moon prior to teaching the potion in class."

"I remember, sir. I have that already written on my chart."

Snape looked at her quizzically. Hermione showed him a neat, color-coded calendar filled with entries describing in detail when and how to collect and store ingredients so

she would always have the necessities prepared.

Snape rolled his eyes and said, "Only you could devise such a requisite and precise system of track-keeping." Hermione looked uncertain as to whether he was insulting her or not. "Miss Granger, it seems you are rather well prepared for teaching this year. That is only to be commended."

Hermione beamed and then looked down, staring at her chart as color crept up her cheeks. Snape had enjoyed putting that smile back on her face*Why?* Snape snorted. *It would just be so irksome otherwise: to have her fretting about and worrying so...*

After the lesson was complete, Snape rose and said, "Come. We need to take a short walk while I convey to you the details of the project with which, as I mentioned previously, I will need your assistance, and for which, the Ministry is willing to compensate us well."

"A walk, Professor?"

Snape felt irritated. It was not so much that she asked the question, so what was it? Perhaps it was the way she had said it.

"Yes, a walk. I must collect something needed in order to commence with the potion-making."

Hermione followed Snape out of his office and down the corridors towards the third floor. Along the way, Snape explained the project to Hermione. The Ministry had devised a new plan to tighten security at Azkaban...which still held many of Voldemort's loyal Death Eaters.

Dementors were now a part of the past, and current security measures involved far too much time spent by Aurors stationed as guards. The prisoners were bound against performing magic, but they had been growing over-confident and retained all their sharp mental capabilities.

They were starting to wear out the Aurors, and the guards were starting to fear the prisoners could come up with a plan to unite and break free. The Ministry was in need of a form of containment security that did not require wizards to be on watch. And for that, Severus Snape could provide.

Snape had once helped protect a priceless object that was sought after by the worst of Dark wizards. He had cast purple and black fires to help protect the Stone while it was kept safe at Hogwarts. Only by drinking a potion could a person walk through the flames unharmed. The magic of these flames was powerful. They could not be extinguished by water or by any magical means. Yet, the flames were not everlasting. They could only survive for a year at a time and would need to be recast again each year, but that was the simple part. The Ministry would need to have enough of the fire-immunity potions for the Aurors to enter and leave the island and for any new prisoners sentenced to time in Azkaban.

The prisoners' cells themselves would be surrounded by the black fire. This was the most deadly of the magical flames. Instant death awaited one who even touched Black Flame without having drunk the potion. The potion filled the drinker with an icy immunity that quickly melted away as the person walked through the flames, the protection only lasting a few seconds. Aurors would force new prisoners to drink the potion and walk through the flames and into their cells. Azkaban would become black as night, and the sound of the deadly flames would create an atmosphere of hell for its inhabitants. With Death on the doorstep, none would dare attempt escape. A prisoner's initial walk through Black Flame and into his cell would be akin to being sucked down a black hole. Yes, Azkaban's new prison system would be perfectly secure and strong.

Now, Black Flame was a little known magic, the information on it nearly as hard to come by as information about Horcruxes. Its use had almost become the fabric of legends. Still, there would be a chance that some wizard with dark leanings might discover how to breach the Black Flame and try to enter Azkaban to release the prisoners. Therefore, a purple ring of fire was to circle the edge of the island. Purple Flame was Snape's personal invention. Assuredly, only he knew how to cast the flame and how to brew the potion that allowed a drinker to pass through the fire, so he would brew the potions for both the black and purple fires.

Snape finished his explanation of the plan when they reached a door in a third floor corridor, which Hermione instantly recognized. It was the door that had led to the series of protections that had guarded the Stone. Along with Harry and Ron, she had gone through it back in their first year, trying to save the Stone from Snape. She laughed, just thinking about how wrong they had been. Snape had not planned to steal the Stone; he had vigorously tried to protect it.

Through the rest of her years at Hogwarts, despite all the various misdeeds and suspicions that Ron and Harry would place upon Snape, she had always felt she could trust him since learning the truth about how hard he had worked to protect the Stone. That is, up until he had killed Dumbledore. Thank goodness there was a good explanation for it because Hermione had felt so ashamed at the time for trusting him through the years while all the others had still retained their doubts. And now she felt guilty for having doubted him at all.

"Laughing, Miss Granger? Yes, well, this pass through will certainly be less troublesome than it was for you in your first year."

Hermione smiled. "Sir? I remember you had cast Black Flame and Purple Flame to protect the Stone, but why the need to go down there?"

"Because," Snape began curtly, "I shall need to collect the bottles that once contained the fire-immunity potions. I will need the residue from inside the bottles to compare with my present attempts at brewing these potions. The recipes are intrinsically arduous to prepare, and I shall not take risks considering lives would be at stake if the potions were made incorrectly."

"Yes, sir. Er...are all the enchantments still in place?"

Snape smirked and opened the door to the empty room that had once contained a vicious, three-headed dog, ironically named Fluffy. "Only some of them," he said.

Snape lifted the trap door. "Now, the Devil's Snare will still be there. It likes the dark and damp, and so it has undoubtedly grown to dangerous proportions. This will be the only remaining enchantment that will be difficult to pass. However, we do have the advantage of anticipation."

Hermione nodded, remembering how frightening it had been when she was only twelve years old, and she had feared the plant would strangle Harry and Ron to death. She said, "Since we know that the plant is there, we should plan to jump up as quickly as possible and get off to the side before it has time to wrap its tendrils around us."

"Indeed," Snape said. "Also, I believe I should jump first in case you have any difficulties getting off of the plant. I can reach from the side and pull you out of it."

Hermione nodded, and Snape jumped through the hole, his robes making flapping sounds as the winds of his descent caught them. He landed with cat-like grace on top of the quickening tendrils of the Devil's Snare. He bent his knees and prepared to jump when he was slammed face first into the plant. Hermione had landed on top of him.

Before either could react, the plant ensnared them. Snape was about to reprimand her when shots of blue flame accosted the various snake-like tendrils encircling their limbs. Hermione had quickly assessed the situation and was using her wand to free them.

As they stood to the side of the Devil's Snare, panting slightly, Snape said to Hermione, "It seems as though you can cast your own brand of useful fire."

Hermione smiled, "I had to do the same thing when we were here before. Ron and Harry were near strangulation when I landed and surmised what the plant was."

Snape nodded. "Well done."

They went into the next room, which Hermione knew once held hundreds of charmed, flying keys. The charm had long worn off by now, and all the winged keys now lay on the ground, quite lifeless. It took very little time to look for the large old-fashioned key with the bent wings from its previous captures.

Soon they were in the room that had contained the life-sized chessboard and transfigured chessmen. Everything was in the proper place for a new game to begin.

"Oh, no! I am no good at Wizard's Chess!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Do not be concerned about that," Snape said.

"Er...you play?" asked Hermione surprised.

"Certainly not," said Snape. His smirk showed he clearly enjoyed the effect this statement had on Hermione. After letting her stutter for a moment about getting across the room when they were both useless chess players, he decided to stop her. Snape placed a hand on her shoulder, and she turned to look at him. Her eyes were wide and locked with his, and Snape forgot to release his breath.

After a moment, his mouth moved into a wry smile, and he said, "We do not need to play to get across. "I asked Minerva for the spell to reverse the Transfiguration."

With the silent wave of his wand, the board shrank in size until it was no longer any larger than an average gameboard and the pieces were harmless rather than terrifying.

When they entered the next room, there was no troll there. Snape explained that Dumbledore had returned the unconscious troll to its mountain home the day after Quirrell and Voldemort had tried to steal the Stone. Hermione nodded as if that had been a given and hid her relief. She had been worried they might encounter a ghastly rotted troll corpse, whose smell, she imagined, would send one recoiling to her grave.

Finally, they reached the room that had once been barred from leaving or going forward by the purple and black fires. The parchment with the logic puzzle written upon it was still on the table along with the assortment of oddly shaped and sized potion bottles.

Snape saw Hermione pick up the logic puzzle and read it silently, her mouth moving as she read the words in her mind. "Brilliant," he heard her whisper.

"What was that, Miss Granger?"

She looked up, embarrassed. "Oh, I was just looking over the riddle you created again. It really was clever to use a test of logic to protect the Stone. Not too many wizards and witches would be prepared to handle that!"

"You were," Snape said, his voice low and deep.

Hermione quickly looked down at the bottles on the table. "So, er...should... uh...Well, these two bottles here are the ones you need, right?"

"You need not ask. You know they are." Snape walked over to the table and took the bottles from Hermione's hands. He pulled out something to scrape the congealed potion resin with and two tiny glass containers to put them in. "This will take a few minutes. I need to be careful to retrieve as much resin as possible."

Hermione nodded. "Excuse me, sir," she said. "I'll just be in the next room. I want to take a quick look at it."

Deep in concentration, he did not respond, and Hermione turned to go into the final room. She had never been there before, but it was where Harry had saved the Stone from Voldemort. She gasped as she walked in the room, and a giant mirror with clawed feet drew her attention. *The Mirror of Erised*. She had never seen the mirror before. She had not yet become friends with Harry and Ron when they had snuck out at night to look at it back in their first year. Even if she had been friends with them then, Hermione would not have gone along, even to see this extravagant mirror. Hermione rolled her eyes and laughed a bit at her strict and stubborn younger self. She did know how the mirror worked, of course. Harry had told them about how he used it to retrieve the hidden Stone.

Hermione was very curious. What inner desire of hers would the mirror reveal? She almost decided it might be better not to know. However, perhaps Harry and Ron had influenced her more than she knew because at moments like these, curiosity won over reason.

Hermione stepped in front of the mirror and gazed at her reflection. What she saw made her squeal in surprise.

There she was in the mirror. Severus Snape stood right behind her. She was encircled in his arms, held tight against him. Her mirror-self's arms had come up and crossed themselves over Snape's arms. Hermione gasped and tore her glance from the mirror to make sure that Snape was not really behind her. Assured that he was not, her eyes snapped back to the mirror.

Severus Snape was holding her, his eyes intensely boring into her own. The Snape and Hermione in the mirror seemed to be staring into a mirror of their own and reveling in the reflection that showed both of them holding each other, their eyes locked upon the other's. Severus Snape turned his head down and cradled Mirror Hermione's head under his cheek. His eyes closed, and so did Mirror Hermione's. Their chests swelled as they each sighed deeply in contentment. He then took one of his hands and brought it up to caress her cheek. She leaned into his hand, and he gently turned her face upward as he lowered his own, pressing his lips against hers gently, softly, slowly. Their lips locked in an embrace: two lovers cherishing each other, the softness of their kisses wielding a powerful amount of passion...

Meanwhile, the embodied form of Severus Snape had finished collecting his samples and went to tell Hermione it was time to return. He stood against the wall watching with great amusement as Hermione stared into the Mirror of Erised, her mouth hanging open, and her eyes wide with excitement. Whatever it was that she saw in the mirror, she seemed to crave it desperately. Her body was leaning in towards the mirror, as if she hoped she could fall into it.

"What do you see, Miss Granger?" he said with a sardonic quality to his voice.

Hermione jumped and turned around. She looked flushed, and her cheeks were turning red fast.*That good, hmm?* Snape thought to himself. Hermione opened her mouth and closed it several times before mumbling, the words barely conceivable, "Sir! Are we ready to go?" She did not wait for his reply, but strode out of the room to begin heading back.

"I'll be right along," Snape called after her. He stood and strode over to the mirror. Dumbledore had left it down here. He seemed to feel that anywhere else it would come in contact with too many people. He had known it was best if people did not have easy access to an object that would allow them to fantasize about their desires.

Snape did not know what he would see when he looked in the mirror. The last time he looked into it, he had seen himself as a free man in a world that was forever free from Voldemort. Snape paused for a moment, not ever having fully realized or appreciated the fact that he had attained his strongest desire of that time. Of course he had; that was why he was at another turning point. What was left to be gained in life now? What did he want?

Snape stood in front of the mirror. What he saw made him nearly topple over in surprise. He watched and let the truth of it sink in.*How could I not have known?*

What's In A Name?

Chapter 5 of 11

Hermione and Snape take another step in their relationship. Harry will pay Hermione a visit to discuss what happened

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Hermione stood shaking before the door that led back to the chessboard room. With concentrated effort, she began slowing her breathing down to a normal pace, but her efforts were soon submerged completely when she saw *him* walking towards her: his dark, flowing hair and glowing black eyes accentuating the pallor of his face.

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, needing to regain control of herself if she was going to be convincing in her pretense of normalcy. But if she had been watching, she would have caught the strange look that passed over the usually carefully impassive face of Severus Snape. His eyes glowed even brighter, and if anyone had been looking into them, those normally curtained windows to his soul would have revealed an intense display of awe, desire, need, and fear.

When she looked at him again, her composure felt steady, but she could feel the heat of her flushed cheeks. The blush would only worsen if she kept dwelling on what she had seen. Him. Her. She shook her head slightly as if to clear her thoughts.

Of course, *his* features were controlled and unreadable. Thankfully, he did not stop after his approach, but walked directly to the door beside her.

Though, as she watched him cross in front of her and place his hand on the door handle, there was something different about him. The way he was standing, maybe, his energy more enlivened than usual. Or, she sighed, just a mere projection of her own jittery energy. He turned his face and caught her eye.

"Shall we go?" Snape asked politely. Hermione nodded.

He did not say a word, for which Hermione was grateful. He could have goaded her again about what she had seen in the Mirror. He could have remarked on how pathetic she was. Yet, there was a respectful silence between them. A suspicion crept in: that he had also chanced a glance in the Mirror and was therefore preoccupied with his own revelation. The Mirror of Erised was known to have a profound effect on people.

Reaching the room that harbored the exanimate winged keys, they found that a lone broomstick remained. There had been three brooms when the trio had come down here in their first year. Hermione had used one to transport herself and a semiconscious Ron out to seek help for Harry, who had gone on alone to find the Stone and its predator. Hermione supposed that Dumbledore then must have used the other one in a similar fashion to exit with an unconscious Harry.

"Ladies first," Snape said eloquently, gesturing towards the hovering broomstick. Hermione climbed on near the tail. Snape settled onto the broomstick in front of her. Turning his head towards her he said, "Now, hold onto me tightly. I would not want to hazard you falling and plummeting into that pit of Devil's Snare."

He turned his face forward again, and Hermione tentatively wrapped her hands around Snape's waist. The broom shot up and began to fly out of the room. Hermione clenched tighter around his waist, tighter perhaps than necessary. But of course, that was understandable, she told herself. Flying really was very frightening to her. She pressed her front against his back and let out a sigh as she leaned into him, her cheek resting in the softer place between his shoulder blades.

The wind rushed past them as they soared higher, nearing the trapdoor above. *He really does feel very good*, Hermione thought. *I remember feeling this way when he touched my hand in our lesson the other day.*

Hermione did not know what she would do about the sudden awareness she had of having feelings for Severus Snape. He was the last person in the world she could expect to return her affections. Ha! She had a better chance with that Muggle-hating Draco Malfoy, an old school rival who was currently locked up in Azkaban, than she did with her illustrious professor.

Shoving the concern away until later, Hermione quietly enjoyed these few minutes that she was allowed to be so close to this man whom she was so inexplicably drawn to.

His warmth flooded her, and she felt a disorienting, deep satisfaction flow through her every limb. Thank goodness she was holding on so tightly, or else she very well might have fallen off. Soon, most terribly too soon, they were through the trapdoor, and Snape slid off the broomstick. He held his hand out to Hermione, and she took it as he helped her dismount.

Her hand in his.

*

Snape was aware of each infinitesimal moment as he guided her hand back to her side, releasing their hands from their embrace.

He turned quickly and began heading back down the third floor corridor. After a few minutes of walking in silence, he stopped abruptly. In his mind he had been devising an intricate and satisfying explanation that could counter the supposed infallibility of Soul Magic, the source of magic that powered the Mirror of Erised, but all his reasoning fell flat in the end. Nothing trumped Soul Magic.

Hermione was looking at him strangely for stopping, so he said, "Thank you, Miss Granger, for assisting me today in retrieving these bottles."

"It was certainly not a disagreeable task, Professor," she said politely.

A familiar twinge of irritation gripped Snape at her words. So that is what it was, Snape thought, realizing that he had come to strongly disfavor Hermione calling him "Professor."

Back to business. "Since we are already occupied with your lessons on Mondays and Thursdays, perhaps I should have you meet with me an additional day each week for the brewing of the Azkaban potions."

"Yes, that sounds best. Any day is fine with me, Professor."

Snape cringed again upon hearing that word on her lips. Was it just him or was she addressing him as such more often than was called for? "Will Fridays be convenient for you..."

He wanted to call her Hermione, but it was too soon for that. She would think she had finished earning the respect required of an accomplished apprentice.

"...Miss Granger?" His more irrelevant proclivities did not need to be so consistently relentless. On the other hand, while irrelevant, they were also safe.

Snape silently shushed his irritating inner voice. If he kept arguing with himself, he would not hear her response. He made sure to focus on her eyes, which nearly led to another internal argument.

Hermione did not have a chance to answer though, because...

"Hello!" someone called from down the hallway. Snape and Hermione turned to see a smiling woman with blonde, curly hair approaching them, wearing robes deep maroon in colour and accessorized with gold spangles. She was Matilda Fletchley, the new Charms professor.

When she stood in front of them, she held out her hand first to Snape. "Severus Snape! It is good to see you again! It has been ten years since I last set foot in this glorious

school! I remember you well, but I dare say I do not remember much about Potions!" She smiled winningly as if her admission were somehow cute instead of actually distinguishing the high measure of her density.

Snape composed his face into the same polite look of deference with which he regarded all his fellow staff members. "It is a pleasure to see you again, Matilda."

She laughed amiably and said, "Severus, I do look forward to working with you this year!" Matilda then turned to Hermione and offered her hand. "Miss Granger, is it not?" Her tone was indifferent, but she did have the requisite smile in place.

Snape saw the annoyance flash through Hermione's eyes, obviously offended at the disregard her colleague was showing her.

He spoke before Hermione could answer and before he could deliberate at it for too long. He enunciated each word with smooth precision, sounding helpful and informative in presentation, in keeping with the polite façade of their whole encounter. "Actually, you may call her Hermione, Matilda. If you remember, she is now a teacher at this school."

"Hermione." Matilda acknowledged her with a nod of her head. She released the handshake. "Dear, dear, dear, you just seem so incredibly youthful! Rita's stories about your love affairs as a student are still fresh in my mind. Seems like only yesterday, doesn't it? Do forgive me, but I..." she turned back to Snape and directed the rest of her comment at him "thought I heard you refer to your young apprentice here as 'Miss Granger' when I approached just now?"

An ingratiating smile planted into place on his face, he said, "Yes, indeed, you heard correctly. However, Hermione was my student here only just last year...was simply a matter of habit."

He gave Hermione a nod that was meant to convey his chagrin for the pretended slip. Her eyes widened in surprise then narrowed together as if she was trying to decide if his comment was only for Matilda's benefit.

"Yes, yes, yes. Old habits do die hard, do they not?" she said, drawing their attention back to her. She smiled. "Well, it's been delightful seeing you again after all this time. I do hope you will come by my office sometime so we can catch up?"

"I dare say I shall," came his succinct reply.

"Very good. I am going now to get my office set up." She held up a purple and burgundy purse, showcasing it with a brilliant smile. "Got everything here. The old professor, Flikwit, or whatever his name was, had very poor taste, indeed!" She began to walk past them and said, "See you around, Severus..." She glanced at Hermione. "And you, Hermione."

When she had disappeared out of sight, Snape and Hermione continued their trek back to the office. Snape said, "You will be able to make the Potions office over so that it suits your tastes, Hermione. Slughorn left it looking a bit extravagant, and there is a lingering stench of what bares strong resemblance to old ladies' aromatic balm."

"Er...Professor?"

"That is quite enough going on with that 'Professor' business," he cut in smoothly. "Refer to me by my name; you are a staff member at this school, after all."

Hermione hesitated. They had ceased walking again as Snape awaited her response. "If you wish it...Severus."

For one long moment they shared a look. A look that could be explained simply by the basic rules of social etiquette. People acknowledged each other when something changed between them. That was all it was. But he was caught up in the moment too long, watching her eyes sparkle in the same manner they did when they were leaving the chamber that housed the Mirror of Erised. Glittering specks of light danced atop deep brown, swirling around a shiny, black center. Severus checked in with his breath to make sure it was not moving as rapidly as his heart. He cursed silently, angry that he was letting the Mirror of Erised influence him.

She spoke, breaking the momentary silence, "S...Severus, thank you for acknowledging my efforts to do well as a teacher in this school. I assure you that I will continue to work hard."

"I am confident you will, Hermione."

He said her name carefully; he could not go back now that he had granted her that acknowledgment. Not wanting to see her smile, he turned away, reaching into his robe pocket and pulling out the tiny glass vials as his excuse for doing so.

"Well, Hermione, we have finished our work for today. I shall take these to the lab and begin reconstructing the potions. You may leave, and I will see you Thursday. Remember, you can set up your office whenever you are ready. It has been unwarded for you. I just ask you to key me into any new wards you set since I need continual access to the lab..."

"Of course..." She drug out the 's' as if she had intended to say something more but hesitated to. "...Severus. It will probably be a few weeks before I'm ready to move in. And to answer the question you asked before Miss Fletchly..." she smirked, and his own mouth twisted in amusement "...came by, Fridays will work fine for me."

"Then you are not disinclined to work Fridays due to having any other engagements, I presume?"

She scoffed. "Working Fridays will save me from having to endure socializing at the pub with everyone. And I'd just run out of good excuses. This will be perfect."

"All your friends go out on Fridays?" He grimaced as he thought about who her friends were. "I wouldn't want you distracted, wishing you were having a good time instead of doing tedious potion-work. Perhaps another..."

"No, trust me. It's fine. And it is the potion-work that will be fun and the social scene tedious." She shook her head. "The unpleasant company..." She trailed off, barely murmuring her last words.

Severus did not care to hear whatever drama was between Hermione and her young friends. This was summer break. His break from all that childish nonsense.

He almost said something snide instead. Something about how he had always known how unpleasant her friends were, and she was just now figuring this out? He kept himself in check, however, since their relationship must now hold to the standard of respect expected between colleagues.

Hermione stammered out a quick goodbye, walking hurriedly to the stairway that led down to the main floor. Severus watched her depart, then walked quickly to his office to get his notes before going to the lab. He was looking forward to his project. It would require a great deal of concentration and focus, just what he needed now.

Tuesday afternoon found Hermione sitting on her sofa, reading the brand new edition of *Arithmancy Today*. She found it rather unfortunate that this new edition had not become available until after she graduated Hogwarts. The new information it contained was revolutionary.

Her mind was lost in a swirl of numerical relations and calculations when she was interrupted by a Floo call.

"Hermione?" said Harry's voice.

Hermione turned towards her small fireplace and saw Harry's head amidst the green flames. She opened her mouth in surprise.

"Are you busy, Hermione? I was hoping we could talk."

"I'm not terribly busy. Come on in then."

Harry emerged through the pit, hunched over due to its miniscule size. He stood up, and the ashes flew helter-skelter to the floor.

"*Scourgify!*" said Hermione automatically.

Harry strode into the room and picked up the book Hermione had been reading. "Ugh, Arithmancy! That has to be the most boring book ever! I expect you haven't had much company without Ron, Ginny, or me around?"

Hermione snatched back her book and set it on the end table. "Company? Oh, I have ha**p**lenty of company to be going on with...Howlers are such**p**erfect company, highly entertaining, you know."

Harry smiled tentatively. "Hey, I was definitely out of it to send you that, and I'm sorry. Sit down with me so we can talk?"

Hermione nodded curtly as she sat down, her eyes blazing...belying the calmness of her demeanor. She would not throw a fit, but she still wanted Harry to see how angry she felt.

"Hermione, I need to know what's going on with you and Ron. Is this just another infamous row? Will you work this out?"

Incredulous. Hermione looked at him pointedly, her eyes blazing more infernally in answer.

Harry sighed. "Listen, you are both my best friends. I want you to be happy just as much as I want Ron to be happy. It was hard seeing how miserable he was when you broke things off."

"Didn't care to think that I might be feeling thoroughly miserable myself, did you?" Hermione could not help snapping at him.

Harry grimaced apologetically before continuing. "Remember when you and Ron fought for weeks back in our third year? And how you two ignored each other completely while he was dating Lavender in sixth year?"

"How could I forget?"

"Well, I hated having to go between you two all the time, being a friend to you both separately. I feared we'd never be right again. Then, when you and Ron started showing interest in each other, and you asked him to go to Slughorn's Christmas party with you, I just knew... knew... that it might eventually mean the end to what we all had together."

Hermione's expression softened a little, her curiosity piquing. "So you didn't even want us to get together?"

"Well, I always knew it'd happen. I wanted you two to be happy, and I was ready to support you. And now I'd rather you two had never taken the chance than to have it end like this. Hermione, isn't there anything you can do..."

"No, Harry." Hermione did not want to hear that. It was not up to her to fix this. "I will have to let Ron calm down for awhile. Believe me, I wish we hadn't taken our relationship there either, and I don't want to lose him, but we cannot continue it for the wrong reasons. You get that, don't you?"

Harry nodded. "I'll talk to Ron. I'm sure he'll come around. Everything will go back to normal."

Hermione noted the extra stress on his last words as if they needed to be convincing because she would not believe them. Or because he did not.

She gave Harry a grateful smile, which faltered quickly as she remembered Ginny. "What about Ginny, Harry?"

Er...Well, uh, she's still angry about what happened, Hermione. You'd do better to focus on reconciling with Ron first. He's still so miserable, and Ginny won't see past that."

"Harry, she's your girlfriend. Couldn't you..."

This time Harry interrupted, "No, Hermione. You know what a little spit-fire she is." His eyes reflected both his pride in his girlfriend and the sympathy which he hoped would assuage Hermione. "She thinks you used Ron as a crux to get through the end of the war and the aftermath. She doesn't understand."

Hermione bit down on her lip. "Right. She doesn't understand that I still love Ron. I've always loved him. He's closer than family. It's just not... not..." She trailed off, too exasperated to speak. Harry took her hand.

"Don't worry about her right now."

Hermione sighed in disappointment. At least Harry was her friend again.

Harry stayed a little while longer and managed to convince her to play a game of Exploding Snap with him. She listened with interest as he talked a lot about his Auror training. In turn, she told him a little bit about her Potions apprenticeship...leaving out the details of her accomplishment in making such a high-grade batch of the Draught of Living Death. Somehow, that felt too personal to share. She was sure Severus felt the same way, which was why he only taught the standard curriculum to his students.

Searching for something else to say, she told Harry about the new Azkaban security system. Since his job entailed catching dark wizards and escorting them to Azkaban, he had already heard about it. Hermione was able to fill him in on the details, explaining the characteristics of the flames and that she and Snape would be preparing the potions. Strange how this kept happening...normally she gushed out more details to Harry and Ron than they probably wanted to hear...but, she left out the whole story of their little jaunt to collect the old potion bottles. It made her flush to even think of that adventure.

Harry asked her several questions about the flames and the efficiency of the magic. His smile reflected how satisfied he was, but it was disconcerting when paired with the bitter anger in his eyes. "Scrimgeour has asked me to endorse their plan in the official press release. I'm attending the Wizengamot hearing tomorrow while they write up the legislation and then vote to sign it into law."

"Do you think any one will vote against it?" Hermione poured them each another cup of the tea she had served earlier in their conversations.

"No, I doubt it. Everyone is eager to see those bastards locked up for good and to never have to worry about them breaking free. If I had the chance, I'd cast the Black Flame myself."

Hermione grinned. "Then, you'd be helping Severus do it."

"Severus?" Harry's eyebrows shot up.

"Yes, what did you expect? That I'd still call him 'professor' when I am a teacher too?" She rolled her eyes when the look on his face told her he had never considered it.

"Well, have fun with that," Harry said. "I'll stick to calling him a 'fucking arse.'"

Hermione sighed heavily. She never bothered to lecture Harry anymore about what he thought of Severus Snape. Harry seemed to need someone to hate, someone to

blame. It hurt her that he felt that way. But how could she help Harry heal the wounds of his past?

"Just keep an eye out on Snape for me. Make sure he doesn't try anything funny with those potions."

And sometimes Harry was a bit extreme. "Harry! Honestly! He would never deliberately alter the potions, and you should very well know that he would take exquisite care in ensuring their perfection!"

Harry shrugged indifferently. "Snape is anything but *what you see is what you get* I'm sorry you have to work with him this year. You'll let me know if that git disrespects you at all? You're a teacher now too, and he had better not keep treating you like he did when we were at school."

Yes, Harry really loathed Severus and not entirely without good reason. But it was so wrong and unnecessary. She wished more people could see the side of him that she had seen lately.

Hermione smiled to herself. She had found a new project. Severus deserved to have Harry acknowledge the great things he did to help him over the years. Harry deserved to have Severus recognize his individuality and his own achievements. Besides, she wanted her friends to accept Severus Snape. Hopeless as it was for them to have any relationship other than one of business, it could not be helped. She could not abate the desire that coursed through her for that enigma of a man. Not now that she had seen it and felt it for what it was.

Perhaps she should make another project out of getting Severus Snape to take an equal interest in her. Inwardly laughing it off, Hermione knew she would not let the idea take hold. She would not get carried away by something so fanciful. But she suddenly imagined a scene that came to her like some long forgotten dream. Severus Snape, his eyes blazing with intensity, sweeping down to kiss her so passionately...

Thank you to my readers. I really appreciate your reviews.

And thanks go to my beta, Moon Revel and to EleanorRigby for her helpful feedback on this story.

Poor Planning and Precarious Procedures

Chapter 6 of 11

Hermione plans to arouse Snape's attention. Snape plans to keep his feelings hidden. Many things will go awry....

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It was Thursday morning, and Hermione was frantically shifting through her wardrobe, trying and failing to find something suitable for her needs. She hoped, somehow, to attire herself in garments that would make her appear more professional, more adult, and more womanly. Why did she still have all the same clothes she wore as a schoolgirl?

Tearing off a blue jumper that she suddenly realized had been part of her wardrobe for three years, Hermione turned to look in the simple, gold-framed mirror that adorned the wall above her bureau. Her hair had grown quite long and was still curly, but no longer immensely bushy since its heavy length helped to tame it. The auburn waves cascaded down her shoulders, caressing the creamy flesh of her neck and chest.

Hermione had been carried along unasked on nature's ride of ripening adolescence, watching with timid interest as her body changed over the years. The blue lace-covered breasts she saw reflected in the mirror were full, her hips curved. Standing nearly garmentless in front of the mirror, she looked every bit woman, yet there was something lingering of the child...an innocent quality, perhaps. It could not be from inexperience. She had gained some of *that* with Ron. Yet, with Ron, all of that *experience* felt like a part of her growing up. Those first, hesitant explorations belonged to a young girl...and she had not yet progressed beyond that point. Hermione was not quite sure how to be the woman she had grown into.

Turning from her mirror and eyeing the clothes hanging in her closet disapprovingly, Hermione thought that perhaps she needed to update her appearance for starters. She had never before taken much interest in all the girly things women did to enhance their beauty. She could try a Hair-Straightening Solution like she used for the Yule Ball, but that did not feel necessary now...she liked her hair long and wavy. She had never attempted to use makeup. Should she try it and see what difference it made? Too bad she could not ask Ginny for help...

Letting out an angered and frustrated sigh, Hermione turned from the closet and fell backwards upon her bed. Why had she never let Lavender Brown teach her any of these girly essentials? She had refused Lavender's offer to give her a makeover so many times that she had come to feel offended by Lavender's relentless insistence. Well, she would not be asking Lavender for help either. Hermione would rather learn to do her makeup from a circus clown than to ever see *Lav-Lav* again.

Perhaps she could hold off on the makeup for now... It really shouldn't be necessary anyway. She was letting herself get carried away. Hermione had time before her Potions lesson to go into Diagon Alley. She needed to invest in some good teaching robes for this year. She might as well pop over into Muggle London to pick up some new clothing while she was at it...clothing that she could feel good in, clothing that might help her feel more like the woman and less like the girl. Perhaps it would even help others (*not mentioning any names...* *'Miss' Fletchley..*) respect her as an adult and teacher. And maybe it would help others *again, not mentioning any names...* Severus) notice her as something more than a bright, but plain, witch.

It was all part of her plan. The plan that had begun to form itself before she even noticed that was what she was doing. Severus had at last acknowledged her status as a fellow staff member. Yet, if she were to hope that he would ever take an interest in her, she must convince him to perceive her as an adult...a responsible, intelligent, and beautiful adult. Beyond that, she was not sure what might impress a man as elusive and complex as Severus Snape. She knew he admired responsibility and intelligence, but what interested him romantically? Hermione had no idea, but she felt it could not hurt to look more womanly and a little more attractive. It would do until she could get to know him better.

Hermione continued to lay sprawled on her back atop black bedding embroidered with red and pink roses overlaying green vines. She became lost in her thoughts about Severus, inadvertently running her hands down along the sides of her waist and back up again in a caress. Suddenly feeling a chill and noticing the spreading goose bumps, Hermione stood up and pulled on the blue jumper once again. She pulled on a pair of jeans, slipped into her shoes, grabbed her knapsack, and headed for her fireplace.

"Diagon Alley!" she said clearly as she disappeared with the emerald flames.

Severus Snape was in the Potions lab, setting out the ingredients and tools needed for that day's lesson with Hermione. Satisfied that everything was in order, he left and passed through Hermione's office to his own quarters. After working with slimy and gritty potion ingredients all morning, he wanted to take a shower to freshen up before seeing...no, before *meeting* with Hermione for her lesson.

Upon entering his quarters, he carefully removed his robes and other vestments, vanishing them to the house-elves' washing room. The pale ivory skin of his lean, toned body stood out like a beacon in contrast to the dark shades of forest green, navy blue, and earthy brown which adorned his walls, bedding, and furniture.

Snape entered the loo and turned on the shower taps. He then stepped in under the satisfying spray of soothing, warm water, drenching the raven dark hair, which was an even starker contrast to the body which he had rarely allowed the sun to shine upon.

Unbidden, thoughts came to mind of his powerfully profound encounter with the Mirror of Erised. He felt the same emotions stirring within him once again. There had been such a pure feeling of love...tender, soothing, sweet. The passion between them could be felt, infusing him deeply, down into his very bones. The water pouring down over his face was suddenly mixed with a few salty trickles as he gasped aloud. The desire he felt for that experience to become real raged internally, but also manifested itself physically. Savagely, he yanked the tap to the right. He stood with his head and shoulders bent forward and one hand tensely braced against the shower wall, allowing the freezing deluge to move any wayward hardness back to the place where it belonged... in his heart.

Severus used a soft, black, cotton towel to roughly and vigorously dry his body. He could not pretend to himself that he did not truly desire love, but he would not allow himself to engage in this new fancy. Hoping for a romantic love of any sort was too far a stretch! Allowing Hermione to be the star of his own internal longings for love was simply ridiculous. It did not do to indulge in illusions. He remembered a famous Albus quip: "It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live."

He sneered as he pulled on fresh clothing, black...and identical to those he always wore. Now, if only he could figure out how it was possible to "live" when the dreams unceasingly demanded a piece of him in each and every moment.

Severus began the trek up from the dungeons towards his office, which was located near the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. He would have to be careful to hide these feelings from Hermione. He would not be deceived so much by his desires as to delude himself that she would be welcoming (or reciprocal) of said desires.

Drawing up around him like a bubble his recently neglected, but so oft employed, persona of cold, detached, unimpressed, and uncaring professor, he entered his office to await the arrival of his apprentice.

Hermione arrived on time, which was never surprising and always expected. However, when she opened the door at Severus' invitation, she looked surprisingly different than what he had come to expect.

She wore neither the school robes he had seen her in for the past seven years, nor the Muggle street clothes the kids wore during their breaks. A long, black, silk skirt with cascading tiers swirled and twirled with her as she strode into the room. She wore a white wraparound blouse, which accentuated her chest and clung to her waist. A thin layer of skin could be seen between the blouse and where the top of the skirt hugged her hips. She looked sensational. *So beautiful...*

Severus moved his eyes back to the papers on his desk so that she would not see his eyes widen. He swallowed heavily *Remember...*

She greeted him warmly. Not looking up, he simply said, "My gods, you are invariably punctual. Well, there is no reason to linger in my office today. I must finish something here, but go on down to the Potions lab. I will meet you there when I am finished."

He heard the taint of disappointment in her voice when she answered, "Yes, s...Severus," and turned to exit the room again.

Severus watched her go from between the locks of hair that fell in front of his face whenever he bent forward. He sat up straight, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply. Once again, he felt an upsurge of that intensity which did not relish being suppressed. *Too bad. You have no choice!* He reminded himself of the tragedy which was his hopelessness. He reminded himself that he had loved once, but lost her before his love herself was lost forever. He reminded himself that opening up to someone and letting them in was also opening himself to reckless danger and certain pain. He reminded himself of the impossibility of actually falling in love and being loved in return.

As he stood to begin his walk to the Potions lab, he did not need to draw up again the persona that had threatened to dissolve at Hermione's appearance. Remembering the cruel reality which was his had strengthened it sufficiently. He swept bat-like through the halls, throwing open the door to the Potions lab when he reached it and allowing it to slam behind him.

Hermione, startled, dropped a bag of beans she had been holding. The red and blue beans trickled all over the floor, moving together in pairs. As they rolled, they burst open and began to reach toward their mates with sinewy tendrils. The bean pairs then began reaching out to connect with the others, forming a swirling helix.

"Well done!" snarled Severus. "You have just ruined an expensive batch of painstakingly preserved and unsoiled Deinay beans! Whatever possessed you to begin before I arrived?"

She just stared at him opened-mouthed and then regarded the spilled beans with horror.

He continued his tirade, "Now, it is obvious you have deduced which potion I am having you make today." When Hermione still did not respond, he asked impatiently, "Well?"

"You would like me to make the Skele-Gro Potion, I believe."

"You believe?" He snorted. "Well, you were only partially correct, Miss Granger. You are not simply making Skele-Gro in the same manner you did in your N.E.W.T. class. The point of these lessons is, as you must surely remember, to learn the *art* of potion making. You know the science well enough. You do remember this, do you not?"

"Yes, *sir*, I remember clearly. I did not think you would mind if I started preparing the ingredients, you know, just to get them ready before actually making the potion."

The inadvertent, on his side anyway, return to a formal style of addressing each other did not escape him. It was bothersome, but it was also consoling. He rather hoped she was getting the intended impression.

"How ignorantly presumptuous of you. Preparing the ingredients is a vital part of the process...not to be overlooked. How do you know that you have not already missed an opportunity to improve the potion? Alterations might be made anywhere from the brewing, stirring, heating, or simmering of the potion to the addition or abandonment of certain ingredients."

Hermione frowned, pouring back into its jar a carefully measured cup containing something which resembled writhing earth worms. She then placed her hands in her lap, waiting for Severus to continue, but she did not look up at him.

"I shall trust you not to be so careless again. You are the apprentice of a Potions master, and I expect a great deal from you."

Hermione sighed, but said in a restrained voice, "I know it, sir. Please forgive my indiscretion. Will you tell me what you would like me to do with this potion?"

Since she was not looking his way, he indulged in a satisfied smile, but sternly said, "Very well then. Let us continue... As you are undoubtedly aware, drinking Skele-Gro is a very unpleasant and painful experience for the drinker. I would like you to see if you can keep all the necessary elements to ensure healthy and whole bone regrowth, while seeing if you can slightly alter either an element that will result in the reduction of the bitter taste, or in one that will nullify the burning the drinker feels as the potion rushes to do its work in the body. I assure you both can be done, but I will be satisfied enough at this time if you can figure out one of the two."

Hermione could not help but turn and stare at him wide-eyed. "How are such changes possible? Chapter twenty-two of *Advanced Potion-Making* states specifically that the Skele-Gro Potion's chemical composition was intricately calculated, and the slightest error in its make-up could cause rapid bone growth or even the deterioration of all adjoining bones!"

Severus sneered at her and said, "If I have to tell you one more time that you are not here to practice the scientific aspect of potion-making..."

"Alright, I *know* that, but I do not know how to figure this out!" she said with exasperation.

"Yes, you do." His impatience was apparent. "You have the necessary background knowledge. You did this last week. Relax. Connect. Sense. Listen. The potion *can* be changed and improved. Now have at it!"

Severus said the last line commandingly. He then leaned back against the black countertop behind the work area where Hermione sat, his arms crossed under his chest and a look of annoyance on his face.

Hermione was alarmed and very perplexed. Severus was standing there like a preying vulture, while she tried unsuccessfully to relax. She tried to breathe deeply and relax the muscles in her body, but his aggravated huffing only made her more tense.

She added the primary ingredients, letting them stew while she severed tangled lengths of coral into small pieces with her wand. She could just *feel* Severus rolling his eyes behind her. Well, how else was she supposed to break apart coral? Her knife would not suffice!

Hermione was trying to "sense" the potion, but its bitter fumes twisted her stomach. She felt revulsion, not connection. She added more ingredients to the bubbling cauldron. Then there was only one more ingredient to add, but she had to let the potion boil for four and a half minutes before doing so.

"Is it okay so far?" Hermione dared to ask.

Severus moved forward and hovered over her. He peered down into the cauldron. He shrugged and walked back to where he had been standing, saying, "I would not award it any House points."

Hermione fell silent. She felt her eyes watering. Perhaps it was due to the now-sparking potion emitting the necessary copious amounts of smoke... Some plan she had! Beauty? Strike one! He did not notice nor care. Responsibility? Strike two! She did not wait for her mentor's instructions and spilled a valuable selection of Deinay beans. Intelligence? Strike three. She could not figure out how to improve this potion, and it was very unlikely she would.

Finally, it was time to add the last ingredient. The potion was coming along exactly as *Advanced Potion-Making* said it should at this stage. However, she knew Severus was looking for something else... What? He stood in the back corner, his overbearing presence too close for Hermione to even think clearly. He had his arms folded and was watching her with a tiny smirk forming at the corners of his mouth and eyes. She lifted the ladle full of the twice-measured and -weighed, writhing worms. She heard Severus tut under his breath. She tensed even more and flung the worms into the potion unceremoniously. The potion turned bright white with faint squiggles of red trickling across the surface. Perfect.

Or not. "What a waste of my time this was," Severus said. "I suppose last week was a fluke?" He pointed his wand at the potion. *Evanesco!* A look of satisfaction was on his face as the potion vanished into the ethers.

That's it! "Excuse me, *sir*," Hermione began coolly, "but I do not think you are being very fair."

Severus raised an eyebrow, his lip curling...clearly gearing up to admonish her with great and unhindered menace.

Hermione spoke swiftly before Severus could interrupt her, "How could you expect me to relax with you in such a right state? Your adverse attitude was a real restraint on my ability to focus and connect to my work. It was so distracting and so... *different* from my other lessons with you. It was like we were back in my fifth-year Potions class! I do not know why your teaching style then was so different than the one you've been employing as my mentor. I would much prefer we continue to work in the fashion we did in last Thursday's lesson. It was so much more... congenial. I enjoyed the lesson, I was able to learn a great deal from you, and you seemed acquiescent enough to teaching me."

Hermione had begun cleaning and clearing the working area as she spoke, but now she stopped and looked directly into Severus' eyes. "Are you just in a bad mood today?"

Crack! Severus felt his carefully controlled demeanor slip away. He could laugh. She was right, of course. His plan to hide his feelings under *that* mask was not the best one. He should have known Hermione would not allow them to slip back into those roles of yesteryear. And truthfully, it did not feel very comfortable wearing that layer of himself anymore, even though it was easy enough to do.

Severus nodded and said, "You could say that."

"Do you want to tell me about it?" Hermione looked hopeful.

At that, Severus did laugh. Well, he snorted, anyway. *Ironically, the person who asks me to share my feelings with them is the last person I could share my particular dilemma with!*

"No, no, it need not concern you any longer. I must apologize, Hermione, for letting my temperament spoil your lesson."

Hermione beamed at him. "Can we try this potion again at next Thursday's lesson?"

"I say that would be advisable," Snape said with a polite nod. "Then I shall see you tomorrow to begin brewing the Fire-Immunity potions?"

Hermione nodded.

Severus moved toward the door, glancing back at her. "Have a good evening then."

"And you do the same."

A Literal Allure Between Him and Her

Hermione and Severus tried to take control, but it didn't work. What happens when you give into desire?

Disclaimer: This story's universe and characters were created by J.K. Rowling. I make no profit from it, and no copyright infringement is intended.

A head with lots of black, messy hair floated amidst the green flames of Hermione's fireplace, the flames enhancing the green of its eyes so that they shined like jewels. Harry greeted Hermione then asked, "Are you coming to the Barking Man with us tonight?"

"No, I won't be able to." *Thank goodness.*

"It's okay, Hermione," Harry said. "Ron said you could come."

Hermione rolled her eyes, unsurprised. "Oh, did he now? Remind me to thank him for being so kind."

Harry started to shake his head but choked on some ash. Coughing it out, he said, "Really, Hermione, Ron wants you to come. I talked to him, and he's willing to work things out."

Hermione stood up from her sofa, suspicions confirmed. "Work things out in what manner, exactly? He's not hoping we will get back together?"

The emerald flames did not completely hide the flush that crept up Harry's cheeks. "I don't know... Just come. We can still have fun...all of us together."

"Well, even if I did want to go, I cannot," she said. "I will be working tonight...and every Friday evening for the duration of the summer at least. Give everyone my regards."

Harry looked disappointed, but said, "Sure thing, Hermione. I guess we'll see you... later." The disembodied head vanished, and the magical flames disappeared.

Hermione entered Severus' office Friday evening, again donning flattering apparel. He noticed the smooth, black linen pants and the three-quarters sleeved, dark bergundy, button-up blouse she wore. The top button was left open, exposing a silver necklace with a silver charm that closely resembled the letter 'F' except its bars slanted downwards. It was *Ansuz*, the ancient runic symbol for inspiration, knowledge, and magical poetry.

She regarded him with a polite, kind smile on her face. "Hello, Severus. I hope you're doing well today?"

Severus nodded and smiled courteously. "Thank you, Hermione. I am doing well enough now that you have arrived."

Hermione had started to sink into a chair, but paused...in limbo somewhere between standing and sitting. She plopped down into the chair rather ungracefully.

"Now that you have arrived," Severus continued, "we can finally begin to get a good start on the Azkaban potions."

He heard Hermione sigh. She was looking down in her lap. He told himself to resist noticing, but it could not be helped. He wondered if he would have noticed how exquisite she looked if he had never seen what he did in the Mirror. How he loved to blame that damn Mirror!

Hermione raised her eyes to meet his, and so he busied himself rifling through the parchments, pretending to need one at the bottom of the stack. "Are you ready to go down to the lab?" she asked.

"Nearly." He thumbed through the parchment leafs distractedly.

"Shall I go on down then?"

"No, please excuse me. I only need a minute to collect something I left in the classroom." He pulled out one sheet at random, set it on top of the stack, then set the stack neatly in the center of his desk. "When I return, we can walk down together."

Severus swept out of the office, pausing once he had closed the door. He had no true need to go his classroom other than to compose himself. After taking a couple deep breaths, he leaned his head back and exhaled heavily. *Polite. Professional. Courteous. Calm.*

Running those words like a mantra through his mind, Severus returned to his office.

Hermione was startled by his sudden reappearance. She dropped the book she'd had open to a page in the middle, taken from his bookshelves.

"Stop dropping things whenever I walk into the room," he said amusedly.

"Oh sorry! I hope you do not mind that I was looking at your books?"

Severus reached down to pick up the book she had dropped, keeping his thumb on the page she had been looking at. "Not to worry, Hermione. How could I expect you to keep away from them? It is akin to a moth driven to flame. Or rather like a goblin to his treasure."

He looked down at the book. *Shakespeare!*

Hermione said, "I was not aware that you enjoyed Muggle literature."

"And why should I not? Witches and wizards cannot claim creativity as their own."

His eyes briefly scanned the page that Hermione had been reading, noting the page number, 472, before placing it back on the shelf.

Hermione took the liberty to scan the titles and authors represented on the shelves. Her eyes alight, she read off some names. "You read all my favorites... Austen, Eliot, Leroux, Ovid, Steinbeck, Tolstoy, Twain, Virgil, Wilde... Wow!"

Severus laughed softly at her exuberance. Keeping his tone light, he said, "So it would seem that you are a know-it-all about even Muggle literature. How charming!"

Hermione's eyes traveled back to Severus. "You know," she said, "despite how much awe and wonder the wizarding world holds for someone raised in the Muggle world like me, after a while, I find I wish I had someone who would understand and share interest in some of the things the Muggle world has to offer, like literature and the performing arts."

"Indeed," agreed Severus. "Though the superiority complex of the purebloods has been subdued since Voldemort's defeat, the wizarding world on the whole is still far too arrogant to consider that the Muggles have anything valuable to offer."

"Right, it's as if they cannot fathom having a good time without magic involved."

"Yes, and the wizarding world often underestimates their cleverness as well. They have technological devices that can do more for them than our magic can do for us likewise. I've experimented with some of them to see if they could run on magical currents instead of electric."

"That's really interesting, Severus. Were the experiments successful?"

"Some were." He gave her the smile of someone enjoying their own private joke. "Perhaps I will tell you about them sometime."

Hermione stepped away from the shelves and came over to him. "I'll hold you to that, you know. And perhaps we could get together on occasion to discuss our favorite works. How about it?"

Severus smirked and said wryly, "What? We already spend three evenings a week working together. Perhaps we should just make our meetings a daily occurrence?"

"If you say so, Severus," she jeered back.

Severus took in the playfulness of their conversation, surprised at how relaxed he felt talking to Hermione. He noticed he was not even relying on his usual carefully planned words and responses. But now that he had noticed it, he could not continue in ease. "Perhaps we can find time to talk about literature sometime," he said seriously. "Now, come. We need to get downstairs and begin brewing."

Hermione was watching the mixture simmer. She had to allow it to do so for eleven minutes and twenty-two seconds exactly before alerting Severus that it was time to add it into the rest of the potion.

Snape was busy preparing the potion himself. He had not allowed Hermione to do much of anything. She was not sure why he even needed her help if he was just going to do it by himself.

He had said, "This is a delicate procedure, Hermione. I am afraid that you may only do some of the simpler parts at this time. There are a few procedural portions that still need to be fleshed out. As your training and skill increase, and when I can make these potions with complete certainty of the process, then I will have you assist more."

So, she sat on the stool in the back corner of the lab, resting her arm on the counter. Hermione was bored watching the time, so she began watching Severus instead. She noticed how diligently he would handle each ingredient. His every movement was full of fluid grace. He appeared calm, confident, and in his own element. A true master at work... Hermione thought she might even be able to sense the strong connection Severus must have with the potion as he was making it, so intense with magical energy was the air surrounding him.

Every now and then, a strand of his dark hair would fall forward into his eyes. He would break from his flow to shove it back behind his ear with frustration. Hermione wished she could do that for him.

His eyes were glowing. How he loved his work! He had removed his robes beforehand, as they would be too hot and cumbersome, so she was able to admire the way his black trousers and black, button-up, high-collared shirt were fitted to his body, and she could clearly see the outline of his tall, slender frame. And along with hands that seemed to caress everything they touched, piercing black eyes, long raven hair, a smooth and silky voice, and an affecting smile that she thought rather few people had seen...well, she was attracted to him.

It was undeniable at this point, and Hermione was having a hard time trying to conjure up the image of him that she'd had in her youth, as if she had always seen him this way. But she hadn't. Her later years at Hogwarts had been full of distractions. Ron could count for one. She had been so sure of them, just knowing that Ron would have to figure out how right they were for each other eventually. Hermione snorted at the ignorance of her youth.

The postwar celebrations and mournings could count as another. Those had taken precedence over anything that had once mattered to her. The joy and sorrow of that time had filled her completely. And when she returned to school as a seventh-year, her focus and determination was still hard to hold onto. It was all she could do to revise for N.E.W.T.s and fulfill her Head Girl duties. Needless to say, her life had not left her very much time to think about what kind of person would actually be good for her to be in a relationship with.

And Severus had certainly never let her...nor anyone else from what she had seen...close enough to have the chance to know him. And now she was in a place in life where she could not only know him, she could know what she wanted.

Hermione watched Severus pour a congealed, violet substance into the cauldron and lean in to sniff it.

Suddenly, Hermione became aware she had not checked the time in way too long a period. She feared she may have ruined the whole project if she had let it sit too long... Hermione breathed deeply in relief to see that it had only been ten and a half minutes. She was just about to tell Severus it was nearly ready when he turned around and said, "Hermione, will you kindly bring that mixture over here?"

Hermione rose, lifted the small cauldron by the handles, and walked over to where he sat stirring the main potion. When she set it down next to him, he reached to take it, and her hand brushed against his. Hermione felt a warm tingling rush through her again. *Every time we touch...*

She returned to the opposite counter where she had been sitting and grabbed her stool, carrying it over and setting it down right next to Severus. She sat down. When he looked at her appraisingly, she said, "I'll just watch you then, shall I?"

He nodded and, using both hands, began pouring the mixture from the small cauldron into the larger. Once again, a lock of hair framing his face fell forward, and Severus let out a frustrated growl since his hands were occupied and he could not move it out of his way.

Without premeditated thought, Hermione moved her arm forward and softly brushed back the recalcitrant hair, tucking it behind his ear, her fingertips gently running across his face as she did so.

He set the cauldron down rather abruptly. He turned to look at her, his eyes wide with surprise and question. Their eyes locked on each other's. Hermione licked her lips and leaned forward. Confusion spread across his face. He started shaking as Hermione drew even closer to him. His hand lay on the table, and she covered it with hers. He gasped softly, glancing down at their hands and returning his eyes to hers, but he did not draw away. He was staring at her searchingly, his mouth open in surprise. He wanted her to do it; she was sure of it. He would have stopped her by now otherwise.... She closed her eyes when her face was just before his own. He was still shaking, but let out a soft gasp when only a thin layer of air separated them. Her lips found his to be pliant and accepting.

Wham! As their lips moved and met each other's, she felt as if a fire had lit deep inside her, spreading and growing without abandon. She would not stop to consider the consequences of this decision. Fear of rejection would not hold her back. She wanted to feel this finally. Feel this heated passion instead of that burning desire that had been driving her crazy lately.

She gently sucked in his lower lip, and their mouths opened to each other.

Severus let out a soft, anguished cry. Worried, she began to pull away, but he wrapped his arm around her back and pulled her in closer to him. Supple lips moved together softly as they tasted and savored each other.

"Mmmmm," Hermione moaned, lifting the hand that was resting on his and putting it around the back of Severus' neck, deepening the passion in their kiss. Suddenly, he pulled away from her completely. Hermione opened her eyes to see him staring at her, his eyes glassy.

"My apologies," he said sadly, rising from his stool and walking quickly towards the door. "That was a lovely kiss, Hermione, but I cannot..."

"Severus, wait! Why can't you?"

He stopped walking, but did not turn around. Facing the door, he said, "I should not have let that happen."

"Did you not enjoy it?"

"I... It does not matter. You... This doesn't make sense." He covered his eyes with a shaking hand. "You can not possibly..."

"Severus... I want this. I do! Please tell me you do too."

After a long moment, he turned around half-way and said quietly, "I do. But I do not think this it is quite right..."

"Nothing interesting ever is, Severus," she said, hoping her smile and words would dispel his unease.

Severus looked back at the door, then glanced at her again before seeming to come to a decision.

Hermione watched with wet eyes as he reached the door, overwhelmed by soaring heights of joy turned into terrifying heights of tension. He stood with his hand on the door handle. She heard a loud exhale and watched as he stood straighter, his shoulders relaxing.

He spun suddenly, his eyes locking on hers with a smoldering intensity. He strode swiftly to where she sat, now the one doing the shaking. He stopped just in front of her. His sparkling eyes looked down into hers, regarding her with tenderness.

Severus smiled indulgently and whispered, "Interesting is right. Why does wrong have to feel so good?" He quickly bent down and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her up to him and kissing her again with a passion that consumed them now that all hesitancy was abandoned.

They shared themselves with each other through the kiss until it slowed, their lips caressing as they moved them gently back and forth before coming to a stop. Hermione and Severus both took in a deep breath. The soft-spoken words in her ear made her shiver. "As interesting as this may be, you are wholly intriguing, Hermione."

She turned her head, breathing across his neck and planting a kiss there, just above his collar, before laying her head against his chest. "No, just wholly intrigued," she whispered back.

Danger and Affection Down Diagon Alley

Chapter 8 of 11

Severus and Hermione are enjoying the turn in their relationship, but both are in wonder of it. They have much exploring to do before they can feel confident. And when one explores unknown territory, one must remember that dangers may lurk around any corner... and not just figuratively.

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It was Monday, and Harry had just Floo-called Hermione again. He appeared upset and asked Hermione if she had time for a visit, but she could see that he really just wanted someone to talk to. Regrettably, but only for Harry's sake, she had to go meet Severus earlier than usual.

They were meeting in Diagon Alley to visit the Apothecary, as she would soon be frequenting the place for potion ingredients. She was excited to go, but Hermione was concerned by the dejected look on Harry's green fire-lit face, and she quickly assured him that she would be glad to meet him afterwards at the Barking Man.

The Barking Man was a special place for the trio...more than just a pub popular with young adult wizards. It had once been a store devoted to the sale of amulets and other charms questionably dark in nature, and it had belonged to the Black family for many generations. The shop had closed up, and their goods were sold to a shop in Knockturn Alley when Voldemort had fallen the first time. At that time, no person wanted to risk being in any way associated with anything remotely dark. It was worse now, after Voldemort's final defeat, since the Ministry had not a smidgeon of mercy for anyone suspected of serving the Dark Lord. The space was still owned, but had been neglected, by the Blacks for all these years.

Now that the war was finally over, the whole wizarding community had been working to bring pride back to their world. Cleanup was done everywhere: in Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and at Hogwarts. Everything was shined up and enhanced, as if by doing so people would feel they could start afresh in a thriving and beautiful wizarding world. A gilded splendor coating the ruins, trying in vain to make people forget the pain of grief and loss... A superficial shine hoping to dazzle the once-bright, but now dimmed light within them all...

And so Harry had been informed that the place was one of the many assets that had fallen into his ownership when his godfather, Sirius Black, died. He had been told to fix the place up...or sell it to someone who would.

Awash in emotional memories of Sirius once more, Harry had decided to do something with the space that would honor his godfather. He turned it into a friendly pub, a place where people could gather and have good times with their friends: eating, drinking, being merry...the whole lot. Then he had given it a special name and hired a general manager to run and staff it.

Hermione suggested to Harry a time she could meet him at the Barking Man, a time when she was sure she and Severus would be finished with their business. Harry had smiled, finally, and agreed, and Hermione wondered what could be bothering him. Well, she would find out later that day, and she would do all that she could to support him. But now... it was time to go see Severus.

"Ahh, yes. Yes, this one is even extra-strength. Perfect. So perfect. Just a swig will do, and no one will ever notice...."

Hermione approached Flourish and Blotts bookstore where she and Severus had arranged to meet. Oh, and there he was! He stood in the side alley between the bookstore and a store that specialized in divination tools. His feet were jutting out in front of him, supporting him as he leaned casually against the wall with his arms lightly

crossed. He watched her approach with an intense, beckoning look in his eyes.

She felt a grin appear on her face and watched as he gave her one of his rare smiles...a treasured gift seemingly only ever for her. The moment they embraced and pulled together in a tight hug, she felt the now-familiar, but still exhilarating, wave of heat flow through her. She felt the comforting joy of being with him again, of being held so close by him.

She felt something else too. It was as if some kind of wind, carrying with it a mist filled with tiny sparks of magical energy, had rushed about them in a great, swooping arc, making a complete circle about them. Hermione was about to ask Severus if he knew what it was when he gently guided her chin so that she was looking at him, and he bent down to brush his lips against hers. The unfamiliar magic forgotten, she soon found herself wrapped up in Severus, their kiss intensifying with all the raw passion that new lovers have...excitement and an eagerness to explore one another further. Finally, they pulled away, panting slightly and staring at each other with awe and a certain disbelief that this was real.

"What is that magic that is circling us?"

"Oh, that," he said, withdrawing from their embrace and leaning against the wall once more. She continued to gaze at him questioningly, and so with a gentle sigh, he continued, "It was for invisibility...so that the intimacy we just shared would go unseen."

"I see."

Hermione wondered if he was afraid of them going public about their relationship.*It would be wrong to hide it, as if it were a dirty secret, even if it is a relationship with a match as... unusual as Severus and I are.*

She felt the mist swirl back around in the opposite direction, undoing the spell.

"Miss Granger," Severus began, his eyebrow raised and his lips quirked to let her know he was teasing, "surely you should be capable of ascertaining why such a precaution is necessary? We are not aspiring to cause an uproar in the wizarding world, are we?"

Hermione was not going to make an issue of it now, so she shrugged. If they were going to have a real relationship, sooner or later people would have to learn of it, right? *No one, not even society, should make people feel pressured to keep parts of themselves hidden.*

"Now, look there," Severus said, pointing at the cobbled, twisting road that was bustling with people going about their shopping. "See how many heads are turning our way?"

Hermione looked, and sure enough, several passersby stopped to gawk at them. She was starting to get used to the excessive attention she had been receiving since being awarded an Order of Merlin, but she was not used to seeing Severus get so much attention...and he was definitely getting some looks. And Hermione noticed, with a certain disconcertment, that he was especially receiving looks of admiration from the witches who were passing by. Hermione knew Severus must have been dealing with his share of fame, too, since he was declared a War Hero, but it was still strange seeing it when people used to go out of their way to avoid the dark and enigmatic man. *It must be a pleasant change for him.*

She knew what Severus meant: the public seeing two of their beloved heroes in the same day? It was overwhelming for them, and no wonder. Everyone who passed looked their way, well... except for one dark-cloaked man walking quickly past with too much purpose to pay any mind to anyone.

Some witches had inexplicably arrested themselves on the corner, and she glared at them as they stole covetous looks at Severus, but these mindless witches took no notice of her jaded stare. Others stopped to look, smiling and waving in appreciation, then moved on with their business.

"And this display is only due to our part in the downfall of the Dark Lord. Imagine how much worse it would be if they saw the two of us *together*." Looking sternly at the women, he said, "How... delightful... Those two ladies are debating over whether or not to approach us. There is simply nothing more pleasurable than being forever encumbered by the presence of effervescent admirers." He pulled out his wand, holding it loosely in one hand, running a finger down its length as he smirked. "Heh, I need a bigger stick."

"There's no need to beat them off. I can take care of it," Hermione said. She saw they were taking the first steps to approach them...approach Severus, that was to say. She discretely aimed her wand at the corner, the wand being mostly covered by the sleeve of her robe, and muttered, "*Ne turbare!*"

"Well done, Hermione," Severus said approvingly. "The 'Do-Not-Disturb' Charm... That spell is not commonly known. Where, might I inquire, did you learn of it?"

"Er...well, some of the boys were throwing... er...Dungbombs at one of the dormitory doors..." she began reluctantly, knowing how Severus would be affected by hearing about this bout of rule breaking-gone-unpunished.

His eyes widened, and he managed to spit out, "Despicable!" before Hermione continued her explanation.

"Well, see, these other boys, uh..." she stuttered, not wanting to tell Severus they were Harry and Ron, "...yeah, well, they had started a food fight at one of the Gryffindor celebrations we had after winning a Quidditch match. It got carried away when they went into their dormitory to get a batch of spattergroit-inducing, exploding orbs and then chucked them down the stairs at people. They had to retreat so as not to get hit by the retaliatory Dungbombs."

"The maturity of youth these days simply astounds me..."

"So, the Dungbombs were so putrid that they peeled the top coat of paint right off the door. Underneath had been the words 'Ne turbare' written in everlasting ink."

Severus laughed, clearly finding amusement in something Hermione did not understand. He wore a proud smirk as he said, "She was always so brilliant."

"Who?"

His smirk became a slight frown. "The Muggle-born witch who created that spell...a very special spell it is, too. It never caught on, having a Muggle catch phrase and because a successful result was never guaranteed. People have an inordinate ability to walk past signs without seeing them, and there are others, remarkably rude sorts, who after reading a 'Do Not Disturb' sign subsequently disregard it. So casting the spell will work, depending on the level of awareness and respect that others have. She enhanced the spell, using a charm I taught her, making it one that works when read in written format. And that is *not* everlasting ink. They needn't have painted over it. There is a spell to vanish it."

"Wow!" Hermione was impressed. "What a creative way to tell people you do not wish to be bothered."

"Indeed." He was frowning again as he asked, "You said they found that on the door of a boys' dormitory. Which?"

"The seventh years..." Hermione said, speaking sheepishly again.

His face darkened, and Hermione thought it might be because she had just implicated the boys in her year...the same ones whom Severus severely despised for never having appropriate consequences for their rule-breaking.

Hermione had a sudden idea, and if she was right, Harry would be interested to know...

"Er...Severus? May I ask... er...was Lily Potter the Muggle-born witch who invented the spell?"

"Lily *Evans*," Severus corrected. She was not married until after Hogwarts, which is where she was when she put the spell on that door."

"I'm glad it worked on those witches over there." Hermione watched them walking slowly away, looking over their shoulders at them and giggling.

"Indeed," Severus said. "We have dallied long enough now. Let's go." He turned toward the cobbled road and took a few steps.

Hermione, not wanting to miss a possible opportunity to unravel the elusive Severus Snape, hoped he would answer just one thing. "Wait. Severus, about Lily..."

He turned back and looked at her still standing by the wall. He gave her a placating smile. "Come along, Hermione. We haven't the time to spare. It would not do to be tardy for a professional appointment. We have also to acquire more ingredients for the Azkaban potions whilst we are there."

She stepped up next to him, and for the briefest moment, he brushed his fingers along hers. The contact spoke volumes and provided assurance, but was not entirely appeasing. Hermione wished she and Severus could stroll along Diagon Alley with their hands clasped together, like any other couple would do. But she supposed it was rather far-fetched to expect such from a man as private as Severus was.

Yes! Very good. I have just the information I needed. Now, let's see...

Severus and Hermione finished their business at the Apothecary. The owner, Mr. Sliggrick, had widened his eyes at the list of ingredients she needed, scrutinizing her as he remarked that they were a very unusual combination of ingredients. Severus, who had been perusing barrels of odorous, slimy creature portions, had coolly reprimanded him and demanded that he show Hermione the same discretion and service that he had given to Severus over the years, as they were working together on potion projects and she was his apprentice. Hermione was sure she disliked the man, but felt him acquiesce to Severus' requisition and knew he could be relied upon to have in-stock all the very best of the ingredients she would need throughout the year.

"Severus, I agreed to meet Harry at the pub after our work was done today..." Hermione said as they stepped out into the fresh air, delivering them from the noxious, pungent odors of the Apothecary.

"Is that so?" he said with an air of disinterest. "Well then, I will certainly not keep you." He nodded to her. "I can take these ingredients to the potions lab. I will see you on Thursday for your lesson, I presume?"

Severus had stepped away, looking as if he were about to Apparate away. This was just too formal. Hermione yanked on his sleeve and pulled him into the side alley between the Apothecary and the shop front next to it.

He smiled at her, and she felt him send out the invisible magic, encompassing them once again in a mist of invisibility to outsiders.

"How do you do that?" She was in explicit awe of his magical creations.

He took a step back from where she stood in front of the stone wall, regarding her with uncertainty. After a moment, he said, shaking his head slightly, "No, I feel sure you would not understand. I am not even certain I do." Hermione raised her brows. "I would tell you, Hermione, but it is a complex magic that has evolved into something new...even to me. At a more opportune time, I shall endeavor to explain it to you."

She must have looked offended to him. "Hermione..." he trailed off. She could see he was uncomfortable and sincerely did not want to upset her.

Hermione let it go. "Severus, it doesn't matter. Come here. I want..." He moved towards her as she spoke. He wrapped his arms around her as she finished, "to be close to you."

He pressed a few chaste kisses to her lips. Hermione then rested her head on his shoulder, one arm reaching up to run her fingers through the strands of his hair. "I love your long hair," she whispered into his neck.

"Do you? I am growing it even longer," he said silkily.

"Really?" She pulled back to look at him. His eyes glittered at her delight.

"Really. Long enough to tie back when I am brewing." He raised his brows and smirked, and Hermione knew what they were both remembering.

"That was when this all began," said Hermione, staring into Severus' eyes.

"It was, and I do not even begin to comprehend it. You will tell me, will you not, if you decide that this is just a passing fancy for you?"

"Severus! It could never be that. There is something stronger than that here. Something so real."

"Surreal, maybe." He sighed. He did not seem able to believe her so easily. "You do realize you are still young, and you may have several ~~strong~~ relationships before finding one that is, in truth, *real* for you?"

"Please... I have already been through something like that with Ron," Hermione said. Severus grimaced. "This feels different. I mean, it was surprising, but I know the way I feel about you is very real. There are so many things about you that just... wow! And there are so many things that are you, but I barely glimpse them, and I want to know them...to know you."

Severus smiled softly again, which filled Hermione with pleasure. He placed his hands against the wall on either side of her head. He leaned in and whispered in her ear, "Strange as it is, your... feelings... for me... I suppose we will have to wait and see if you continue to like the man you see before you."

"I will," Hermione said adamantly. She found his eyes, gazed into their soft blackness, and asked, "What about you? What is this for you?"

His voice a smooth, rhythmic cadence, he said, "You simply cannot begin to know the effect you have on me, Hermione. I can barely believe this is no dream."

Hermione nearly melted with Severus leaning over her, his eyes smoldering, his voice so... caressing. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him to her. "A dream come true, maybe."

"I do not understand it," he murmured as Hermione brought her lips to meet his.

"I know. Me neither," she said in a whisper before their mouths came together once more. This time they allowed the raging passion boiling within to burst out into a frenetic, consuming kiss. As they held each other, kissing, their hands moved: up and down backs, running through each other's hair, cupping cheeks and sliding down necks and arms.

She gasped as he gently nibbled her lower lip. He pulled back, his eyes as dark as his raven hair, but shining. His mouth twisted in a wry grin. He was beautiful. "Minds such as ours strongly disfavor not understanding something...especially powerful feelings such as these. It feels wrong not knowing. However, like you said..."

"That's what makes it interesting," Hermione finished. "Oh, and you really are. I hope you will let me get to know you, Severus."

He smiled briefly and placed a quick kiss on her lips. "You had better go, or you will be late for your meeting with Potter," he reminded her.

"Oh, gods, you are right. I am going to be so late!" Hermione felt the whirlwind of retreating magic and knew she and Severus were no longer invisible to passersby. "Goodbye, Severus. Can we... er..."

"Just go," he said kindly. She smiled brilliantly at him and turned to rush down the cobbled road. When she was out of sight, Severus Disapparated.

Hermione turned down a side alley. If she could zig-zag through the back ways, she could get to the pub faster without having to push through the crowds on the main road. She walked at a brisk pace, which soon turned into a jog when she realized Harry had been waiting for her for ten minutes already.

Alone! She's all alone. The stars must favor me today.

Hermione was feeling uneasy. She was late, yes... and Hermione was never late! Yet, this uneasiness was something more. It was a similar discomfort to how she had felt every day for the several months it had taken to track down Horcruxes and to find and finish Voldemort. She quickened her pace, and as she did so, she heard the sound of footsteps behind her...footsteps that matched the pace of her own. She cast a nervous glance behind her but did not see anyone. She tightened her grip on her wand and ran. *Hopefully, it was not anything at all.*

She heard the footsteps again. They were pounding. They were gaining on her. She looked back again and saw a cloaked and hooded man right behind her.

"*Expelliarmus!*" a hoarse voice cried. She shrieked as her wand flew away from her. He grabbed her, and they tumbled forward from the momentum. She was pinned to the ground under his heavy weight. She could not see his face, but there was a real maliciousness in his voice as he sat back and said in a low tone, "*Silencio!*" and then, "*Incarcerous!*"

Hermione was bound with rope, with no wand, and unable to cry for help. She was in a dark, narrow alley with a dangerous man. Tears streamed down her face as her mind, in her panic, thought of all the horrible reasons this man would be doing this. Did he want to harm her? Kill her? Take her hostage? Any number of people could hate her for being the friend of the Chosen One and helping him to defeat the Dark Lord.

"You are a bright, young girl, aren't you?" The low, rumbling voice was speaking to her mockingly. "Head Girl last year? Then tell me, dear, how many possible ways are there for me to extract information from you against your will?"

Hermione blanked. What kind of information could she possibly have that someone else would know of and consider valuable? Hermione was still under the Silencing Spell, but her attacker did not even intend for her to answer.

"Let me help you with that one," he said with superiority. "Let's see... Yes, there are two ways. One is very simple: Veritaserum. I could have you spilling your guts about anything I wanted to know. However, the other way is certainly more efficient with its visual accompaniment. Painful, too, from what I've heard. It's much more satisfying and informative than the first way, and I will definitely, definitely get what I am looking for. I only wonder if a prodigious witch such as yourself can block it? We shall see..."

Hermione tried to cry out. Her mouth opened, but nothing audible came out. The man chuckled. "Have something to say?" He stuck the point of his wand in-between two of the layers of rope that wrapped around her chest. "Okay, let's hear it, but if you dare to scream you will be dead in an instant. Do you understand?"

Hermione's eyes widened in fear, and she nodded her head. She choked out, "Please, you don't have to invade my mind. Just let me tell you whatever you want to know!" Hermione had realized she was actually keeping quite a few secrets, many of them related to Harry and what the public did not need to know about him and Voldemort...the very fact that Voldemort had made Horcruxes was still unknown... There were the many Dark Magic spells she knew from her research into ways to destroy Horcruxes, and there were other things she ought not to reveal, her relationship with Severus, for one. And she also knew about...

"Azkaban." the man said succinctly. "You will tell me everything you know about the new security measures...specifically how to make the potion. Tell me now. Everything. Otherwise, I will delve deep into your mind and crudely take everything I need."

"I don't know anything more than you do!" Hermione declared.

"Yes, yes you do. Today's edition of the *Daily Prophet* informed the community about their use of Black Flame. The Ministry wants to make sure people feel safe in their beds, knowing they are secure from the Dark Lord's loyal followers. They are confident in their new security system, aren't they? Overconfident, because *you* are going to tell me how to get through the flames. It is a potion, isn't it? Isn't it?" Hermione whimpered. "Tell me how to make it."

"I really do not know! I have never made it! You are filthy scum, and I am going to make sure the Aurors find you and lock you up behind those flames as well!"

There was a low chuckle again. "Somehow, I don't think so. I know what your job is, girl, and I know you are lying. Very well then, since you will not tell me..." He moved the wand and pointed it at Hermione's head. "*Legilimens!*"

There was an invading push, a whoosh that moved forcefully through the front of her mind. She felt as if cold, stabbing claws were pushing and snaking their way through the many layers of her brain. She saw before her, in her mind, a picture of the past Friday when Severus was making the Azkaban potions, and she had hardly done anything but monitor the simmering cauldron. The knifelike prodding went further, looking for more...

And a voice in the distance was calling, "Hermione...? Hermione!"

The force withdrew from her mind. The man growled, cursing under his breath. He stood up and Disapparated.

Hermione cried out, "Here! I am here! Help me!"

A minute later, a tall, large-framed man burst into the alleyway where Hermione layed tightly encircled with the binding rope. It was Ron.

Tears of relief washed down Hermione's face as he gasped aloud and frantically asked if she was okay. Meekly, she affirmed that she was with a soft, "Yes."

"*Evanescio!*" Ron said, banishing the ropes. He knelt down and wrapped his arms around a shaking Hermione, and she fell easily into the familiar embrace.

"I've got you, 'Mione. You're okay. Try to relax, and tell me what happened."

She tried to take in a deep breath. It quivered, and she took a couple more, finally breathing easily enough to speak. "Someone... a man... I could not see his face... chased me down and used Legilimency on me. He wanted to find out how to make the potions needed to enter Azkaban. Somehow he knew that one needs a potion to get through the flames and that I am brewing it."

"Oh Hermione! Did he hurt you? Are you all right? Is your head hurting?"

"It was just... I'm okay. I think I have a building migraine. I can take a remedy for it when I get home."

"We need to act on this immediately. First, we need to tell Harry and then Kingsley. Can you stand? Here, take my hand..."

Hermione rose. She looked into Ron's concerned eyes. "Thanks, Ron."

"Of course," he said, staring back at her. He asked, "Where's your wand?"

"It flew over that way." Hermione pointed at where it landed several yards down the road. Ron retrieved it and handed it to her. They started walking back up the alley in the direction of the pub, which was a few blocks away.

Still shaken, Hermione asked, "Ron, what were you doing? How did you find me?"

He hesitated. "I... er... I was waiting for you actually. I've been wanting to talk to you..." He reached out to take her hand again.

"Ron..." began Hermione in a soft, but warning tone. She wanted his comfort, but she did not want to take it if it meant...

"It's not like you think, okay? I knew Harry was meeting you, so I kind of... Well, I was waiting outside the pub, hoping to intercept you."

"Did Harry set this up for you?" Hermione asked indignantly.

"No! No, Harry told me you weren't ready to talk to me. He doesn't even know I was there! You were so late, so I started to worry. You are ~~are~~ever late. I started walking down the roads, looking for you. I had a feeling something wasn't right."

"You have good instincts for an Auror," Hermione replied kindly. "Ron, I am so sorry about what happened between us. I know how angry you are..."

"Stop. It's okay, Hermione. You shouldn't be worrying about this right now. I'm not angry about it anymore. I know now that you were right. We thought the love we had for each other was more than the love that comes from years of friendship. We expected it to be more, but it wasn't. You just figured it out first... as usual!" He ended with an amused smirk.

"Wow, Ron! You know, I really have missed you. Is it too much to hope that we can be friends again without it being too strange?"

"Hermione, I miss you. I love you...as my friend if not as anything more. There's nothing that could break us apart for good. You know us. We're always having our fall-outs, but we come back each time."

Hermione smiled. She stopped walking and pulled Ron into a hug. "Ron, you are wonderful. Thank you. Thank you for saving me from that..." Her eyes welled with tears again. Fear... This was a feeling that had leapt out of the past to come and crush her when she had been feeling so content... when they were finally supposed to have peace...

Ron smiled at her reassuringly, and as they continued their walk, he said, "Don't worry, Hermione. We will track down that fucking prat and make sure he pays."

They had reached the entrance to the pub. There was a sign hanging overhead, which read "The Barking Man" and had a picture of a growling, huge, black dog baring its teeth. They opened the doors and went inside to find Harry.

Secure Yet Still Unsure

Chapter 9 of 11

Hermione meets with Ron, Harry, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Severus to discuss what must be done now that they know someone is trying to steal the secret of how to break into Azkaban. Hermione wonders just what Severus' involvement in the Ministry project entails.

Disclaimer: This story's universe and characters were created by J.K. Rowling. I make no profit from it, and no copyright infringement is intended.

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Ron and Hermione entered the Barking Man to see a distressed-looking Harry sitting in the back of the room waiving off a hovering server. They were greeted heartily by the manager, Mr. Salkis, who was invariably over-the-top friendly to them in order to mask his nervousness at having the owner or his best mates stop in.

Harry looked up when he heard Mr. Salkis bellow enthusiastically, "Ms. Granger! Mr. Weasley! Always a pleasure to see you both! Mr. Potter is right over..."

"Ron!" Harry said in disbelief as he rose and strode quickly to where they stood in front of the door. "You followed me here so you could see Hermione?" Harry noted Hermione's red, tear-streaked face. Turning on Ron, Harry exclaimed, "She's been crying! I told you to give her some time! What have you been saying to her?" Harry glared at the sweating manager who was pretending not to be listening to them. The man turned and quickly retreated to the kitchen area. "Hermione, are you all right? I swear, I didn't know Ron was going to come along!"

"Harry, it's okay. Ron just... he just... someone... Well, he stopped someone who just used Legilimency on me to learn how to make the... er...you know," Hermione said inarticulately.

"What! Are you okay, Hermione?" Harry asked as he silently cast a *Muffliato* about them. The slight buzzing noise that suddenly filled the air clued her in to the magic worked.

She nodded. Harry put an arm around her and guided her back to his table. Ron followed.

"I need you to tell me everything that happened," Harry began, now in full Auror mode. "Then we will need to report to Kingsley so he can get a team of Aurors working on this. Someone out there has learned to brew the potions, and we will need as many of us on the case as possible so we can stop him before..."

"Harry, hold on! He didn't learn anything. All he could get before Ron showed up was a memory that showed Professor Snape making the potion." She took a deep breath and continued, "He knows I do not know how to make it! So, no need to worry on that account. The secret is still safe."

Harry, despite her efforts to reassure him, looked more worried. "Hermione! You mean Snape hasn't taught you how to brew them yet? What's he playing at?"

"Nothing!" Hermione said indignantly. "He just had to be sure he could make them flawlessly before explaining the procedure to me. It is a really difficult recipe. Besides, why should you mind? If I had known, then someone who obviously wants to break into Azkaban would know as well."

Ron shook his head. "True, but Harry's right. The Ministry will be upset that Snape hasn't taught you yet. It's a matter of security."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked with a frown.

"Look, Snape was told that he had to teach you the potions as well," Harry explained. "For one thing, the secret can't be known to only one person! What if something happened to him?" He casually added, "Then... well, you know, the Ministry doesn't particularly trust Snape, so they want another..."

"What are you going on about?" Hermione countered. "Everyone knows now what he did! They awarded him an Order of Merlin, First Class, for goodness' sake! They honored him with the title 'War Hero!' If they didn't trust him, they wouldn't have him brewing potions for them that could be deadly if made wrong! *Of course* they can trust him!" she ended emphatically.

"Sure they can..." said Ron sarcastically, "Trust him as far as they could throw him in a dueling match!"

"Ron, be fair!" cautioned Hermione. She paused, smirked, then added sweetly, "And it's really all right of you to compliment Professor Snape's defensive skills!" She beamed at him mischievously.

Ron looked indignant and was about to come back with a retort when Harry spoke first, "I see you two are back to your usual, bickering selves." He grinned, then continued, "That's great, but we need to go report to Kingsley now. It's up to him how to handle this, and I'm betting he won't want Scrimgeour aware of what happened."

Hermione suddenly had several more questions than the many that arose just a minute ago. She started to speak as Harry led them to the pub's fireplace, but he interrupted her, "Kingsley will explain it all to you. Let's just hurry."

The trio, who had not all been in one room at the same time for the past several weeks, now sat closely together on a short, upholstered bench in the office of the Head of the Auror department. Harry was relieved that they were together again, but felt the circumstances could certainly be better. Ron had an arm wrapped around Hermione's shoulder, which, Harry noted, seemed to make her slightly uncomfortable. He hadn't even asked them if they had resolved everything. Were they getting back together after all?

Kingsley Shacklebolt sat in a high-back, plush, leather chair behind his desk, his fingers idly stroking the jaw line under his chin while he considered what he had just been told. He leaned forward and spoke to Hermione, "Now, are you sure you told me everything you can remember about the man who attacked you? Is there anything else?"

"No, I think that must be it," she said more calmly than anything she had said since the attack. "I could not see his face. All we know is that he is fairly tall, large-framed, with a deep voice, and that he wants to break someone out of Azkaban. Oh, and that he knows how to perform Legilimency," she replied, summoning it up.

"That's not a lot, but we can start with that." Kingsley turned to Ron and said politely, but with authority, "Ron, go now and pass this description to everyone in the Department. Make sure they are all clear about this being an 'inside case,' please. Thank you."

Ron nodded and rose, leaving the room with an air of dignified duty.

"Inside case?" queried Hermione.

"Hermione," Kingsley began in conspiratorial tones, "there are some situations about which it would be... shall we say *unwise* to inform the Minister or his minions. In this case, Severus Snape does not need the grief they will surely give him for not beginning your training. Secondly, we need to protect you both, and Scrimgeour would certainly hinder our efforts by making a compromising spectacle of it all." Kingsley leaned back in his chair and let out a deep sigh.

"So, what are you going to do?" Hermione asked.

"First, we are going to get the Potions master over here so we can discuss this with him as well." Kingsley regarded Harry and asked, "Harry, would you be kind enough to draft him a letter requesting his presence here? Tell him what has occurred, but please be nondescript about the rest."

"Of course," was Harry's reply as he took parchment and quill from the desk. He found the idea of sending a letter to Snape a little disconcerting. What would his former professor think when he unrolled the scroll to see a letter in his nemesis' handwriting?

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,

My love as deep; the more I give to thee,

The more I have, for both are infinite.

Severus Snape sat on the deep brown, suede sofa in his chambers. He had just read the most affecting passage on page 472 of his collection of works written by the noted playwright, William Shakespeare. He paused to wonder why it was that Hermione had been reading from *Romeo and Juliet*. The story was about two lovers who loved one another despite the stark disapproval of everybody they knew. *It is nearly fitting, I suppose*, Severus thought, *except the love part was questionable!* Hermione might, for some unfathomable reason, *desire* him, but surely she would never *love* him!

What am I getting myself into? Severus shook his head. How long would it take, once her friends found out about him, for them to talk the sense back into her? Unlike Juliet, Hermione would never choose him over the friends she loved. And *they* would certainly never approve of Hermione's and his relationship!

That damn Potter still hated him despite having finally learned of everything Severus had ever done to help him! The brat had not even thanked him once. He even knew about Lily. Severus had been sure that Potter would have approached him to ask about his mother...

Severus frowned, remembering the past Saturday spent in Hell. There had been that hate-filled stare Potter had given him during those wretched circumstances they had been forced to share.

No, it seemed Potter would always hate him. It was not as if that were a big deal in and of itself... of course... but Severus Snape would never be tolerated by the *Chosen One* as the lover of his best friend. Severus snorted. Hermione was with Potter even now. Surely she will never actually...

Tap! Tap! Tap! There was suddenly the sound of an owl outside the one, lone window in his private rooms. It was a narrow window located way up near the ceiling, which equated to being just above ground level from the outside. There was no way for him to reach it. Severus pointed his wand at the window instead, and an owl came soaring through the opening, bearing a scroll embossed with the Ministry's seal.

Severus untied the letter from the owl's leg. He gave the bird a pat, and it flew out without further ado. He unfurled the scroll and nearly dropped it in surprise at the sight of the handwriting of the former student on whose papers Severus had delighted in drawing big, prickly, black D's. Speaking of the Potter brat, what the hell was he writing to him for?

Severus stood in the lift, pushing the button for level two over and over again. The damn lift was going entirely too slow. He let out a frustrated growl. *Finally*, it opened to the right floor, and Severus quickly made his way to the Head Auror's office. He was seething with rage and replete with worry as he opened the door without bothering to

knock. He needed to see...

Hermione. There she was. She was sitting at the far end of a bench. He quickly noted with his peripheral vision that Potter was seated next to her, and on the other side of him sat Weasley. She smiled softly at him when his eyes sought hers. He could see she had been crying earlier. He half-moved to wrap her in his arms, but the presence of Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, and Kingsley Shacklebolt stopped him. Instead he asked solemnly, "Are you well, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, Se...sir," she answered, her eyes still locked with his.

Severus walked over to her, pulling out a vial from a pocket in his robes. He offered it to her as he said, "I brought this for you. It will cure your headache. Drink it down promptly, please." She took it obediently with a word of thanks. Severus nodded and sat in a nearby chair that Shacklebolt offered him.

Severus looked around and saw Potter staring at him...not with hatred*this time...*but in a prying way, as if he wished he could perform Legilimency on him. He huffed*As if the boy could ever have the fortuity or discipline!* Severus glowered at him until Potter broke his gaze.

Shacklebolt began, "Now, Severus. Harry told you what has happened to Hermione. We are going to need to take some extra precautions..."

"We most certainly are," said Severus. "First, I no longer agree to teach Miss Granger how to brew the Fire-Immunity potions. Clearly, it is much too dangerous for her to..."

Undeterred, Shacklebolt interrupted him, taking back over the conversation. "Severus, you know why you must. If you do not teach her, Rufus will have your head! That is why we are prepared to ensure your protection so that no one will be able to get to either one of you."

"There is no need to remind me of my little *arrangement* with the Ministry, Shacklebolt," Severus said coldly. "However, surely Miss Granger's safety is more important than their political games? You know I hardly care for the so-called *benefits* I have been receiving from them! Let them take all that away! I..."

"Severus, listen to me. It's either all or nothing for you. If they take it away, then surely you must know where that will leave you?"

Severus glowered fiercely at him.

"You know I do not agree with the Ministry's decisions in their handling of the post-war trials, Severus. I want to help you. We will not tell Rufus anything of what has happened today. You only just cast the Black and Purple Flames this past weekend, and already someone is trying to break in. You don't want him to think that the secret is no longer safe in your hands, or he just might 'take it all away.'"

Severus sat with his arms crossed, his scowl deepening.

Shacklebolt continued, "Instead, I will tell him that I am instituting a new security plan as a simple precaution. We will station Aurors at Hogwarts again. No one will be allowed admittance without prior screening and approval. One of them will meet you or Hermione on the grounds and Apparate with you whenever one of you comes here to drop off a batch of potions. We will also mention as an aside in the *Daily Prophet* that only Aurors have the knowledge of how to enter Azkaban. That way we divert attention away from you. Few would be foolish enough to dare take on one of our well-trained Aurors. Not to mention, even if they would dare, they would still not learn a thing about getting through the Flames of Azkaban." Shacklebolt finished speaking and sat silently, allowing for Severus to give his thoughts about the security plan he had just detailed.

Severus sighed with exasperation. "That is all well and good, Shacklebolt, except you are overlooking one *significant* detail."

"Oh? And what would that be then?" Shacklebolt inquired while using all of his concentrated effort to ensure that it came out politely.

"Someone already knows that the way through the flames comes by means of a potion," Severus explained smoothly. "He already knows that she..." he gestured toward Hermione, "...is assisting me, even if he believes that she is not to actually make the potion herself. This person clearly knows that I am in possession of the knowledge he seeks."

"Rest assured, Severus, that we are doing all that we can to track this person down before he causes any more trouble. With the Aurors stationed at Hogwarts, you will be secure. Until the man is caught, we can have Aurors attend you when you must leave the Hogwarts grounds."

"How utterly delightful," Snape declared sarcastically. "And what about Miss Granger? Our illicit foe's inability to get helpful information from her does not assure her future safety. He could still use her to get through to me."

"We'll offer her the same security, of course," Shacklebolt replied smoothly.

Potter cleared his throat. "Er...might I suggest something?" he asked.

Shacklebolt said, "Certainly, Harry!" but Potter was looking at Severus when he asked.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Out with it then! Let's hear it."

"Well, sir. I think it might be a good idea for you to teach Hermione Occlumency," he answered.

"Excellent idea, Harry," Shacklebolt said as he acknowledged Potter with a smile.

Snape grimaced. Of course he would have to teach her Occlumency!*Way to state the obvious, Potter!*

"Mr. Potter, I intend to do as much," Severus answered in a tone just barely perceivable as scathing. "However, I am surprised that such a suggestion has come from *you*. I seem to recall you thought me to be rather remiss in teaching you Occlumency?"

"Er, I... well..." Potter began.

Hermione spoke up, "Please, let's not get off-track here. Professor, I am sure you will teach this well, just as you do everything else." Weasley raised his brows at Potter. It was obvious to Severus that these two galling boys definitely disagreed with Hermione on that point. They looked as though they were trying not to laugh. Severus sneered.

Shacklebolt spoke, "Yes, Hermione is right. Let's get this all settled then. Severus, you must immediately begin teaching Hermione Occlumency. You must also show her how to brew the Azkaban potions...the necessity of which is unquestionable."

Hermione caught Severus' darkening eyes. She frowned and asked, "Why must he...?" She trailed off when she saw Severus shake his head at her.

Shacklebolt answered the unfinished question. "Hermione, the Ministry thinks it unwise for only one person to know how to brew the potions. You are well-placed and uniquely qualified to be their second brewer. You are a Potions apprentice for one. Not to mention that they trust you implicitly as you are a friend of the 'Savior of the Wizarding World'..." Severus and Harry both rolled their eyes. "...and because of your effort in the war. It's not as if they could simply recruit any decent potion-maker to take on such a serious job. They might be entrusting their lives to someone dangerous for all they could know."

Hermione nodded and said, "Oh, I see. Okay." Yet, when she looked at Severus again, he could tell she knew there was more to it.*Hermione is way too curious sometimes! I really hope she does not pry...*

"Well, I believe we are finished here now." Shacklebolt stood and walked around his desk. "Hermione, take care, dear. Rest assured we will work tirelessly to find this man." She nodded in response.

"Harry, Ron, Severus," he acknowledged them all in farewell. "I must go and put that spin on the new article about Azkaban security. You all have a good evening." Shacklebolt left the room.

Potter stood up and said, "Hermione, I think it would be a good idea if I see you home safely. Unless you'd rather Ron..."

Weasley piped in, "Yeah! I'll do it..."

But Hermione shook her head, "Sorry, Ron, but I need to talk to Harry anyway."

The redhead whined, "I think we need to talk some more. I haven't been able to talk to you for..."

"Mr. Weasley," Severus cut in smoothly, "I think your friend deserves some rest after today's events, wouldn't you agree?"

Weasley glared at him but said, "Yes, she does, sir." He turned to Hermione and said, "Sleep well, and Floo-call me tomorrow so I can hear how you're doing, yeah?"

"Sure, Ron," she replied.

Weasley, now obviously uncomfortable, said shiftily, "Well, I'll just go then. Goodnight to you all." He turned and left the room.

Potter turned to Hermione, "Is he still hoping you two get back together or something?"

With a quick, wide-eyed glance at Severus, Hermione exclaimed, "No! We're just going to try being friends again!"

Severus felt an entire sequence of emotions wash through him in swift waves from when Potter had voiced his question. First was fear, and then came jealousy. Then there had been a fleeting, self-chastising thought about knowing this would all be too good to be true. With Hermione's reply came relief, joy, and as an afterthought... annoyance.

"Well, that's good! So, are you ready to go then?" Potter asked her.

Severus answered for her, "Mr. Potter, I must speak with Hermione for a moment before she leaves."

"Yes, Harry, will you give me just a minute?" Hermione chimed in. "We need to discuss how we are going to fit these lessons in on top of those for my apprenticeship."

"Sure. I'm going to catch up to Ron real quick before he Floos out... see what's got him tied up in a knot. Meet me down by the lifts when you're ready to go, okay?" Potter saw Hermione nod in affirmation, and he turned and exited the room after briefly nodding in Severus' general direction.

Finally, Severus could do that which he had been desperate to since he had arrived. He pulled Hermione into his arms. She buried into his chest, and he rested his cheek on the top of her head.

"Hermione," Severus breathed. His hand ran slow circles over her back. "Tell me truly, are you quite all right?" Somehow he should have been able to prevent this.

Hermione's arms encircled his waist, and she hugged him to her more tightly. After a few moments she said, "I did not realize when I signed on to become the new Potions professor that it would become such a dangerous job."

Severus brushed aside a loose strand of her hair that had been plastered to her cheek. He chuckled softly. "Well, it has always been a precarious position. Children blowing up cauldrons of potent and perilous potions being a daily hazard..."

She smiled up at him. "You never really enjoyed teaching Potions, did you?"

"I have enjoyed teaching you in these last weeks, but otherwise, no. Now, the art of potion-making will forever be an affection of mine, certainly. However, you are more than welcome to the teaching of it to unskilled and unappreciative children."

"It won't be as bad as all that," she said, her eyes glinting with humor.

Severus' throat tightened at the sight. "Hermione," he whispered, his voice rich with emotion, "you cannot know how relieved I am that you were not more seriously hurt today."

"Thank you, Severus," she said, clasping her hands to his and entwining their fingers. "So am I. Though, everything will be fine. It sounds as if we have a good plan for security. We can carry on as we were." She paused for a moment in thought, then asked, "Severus, what kind of arrangement do you have with the Ministry?"

He sighed deeply, releasing her hands and hugging her to him once again. He spoke softly into her ear, "I would prefer not delve into those matters right now. We can not afford the time with Potter awaiting you at the moment. And I must insist you go home and ensure you get sufficient rest tonight."

"I suppose you shall endeavor to explain it to me at a more opportune time?" teased Hermione dryly.

Severus sighed. "I suppose I am building up quite a number of matters in which I have acceded to elaborate on in later discourse." He smirked. "Then again, perhaps that is only due to your propensity to ask an inordinate amount of questions."

She huffed at him though he was smiling at her. Hermione was about to retort in kind, but Severus ran his thumb gently across her lips. She immediately quieted as he leaned down to kiss her.

Hermione never stayed silent for long, Severus noted with amusement as she let out a soft moan when their lips began to move together. He kissed her gently, savoring her, sharing with her his relief.

It is entirely regrettable that Hermione's next lesson is not until Thursday! Severus thought at they finished the kiss and gazed upon each other.

Hermione whined softly, "I do not want to wait three more days until I see you again!"

Severus let out a small laugh. "I do not intend to let that happen. I would suggest that you come up to the school tomorrow, and we can..."

"Start Occlumency lessons?" she provided. Then, with a smirk and sparkling eyes, she put forth, "Or perhaps discuss you and the Ministry?"

Severus responded with a hard stare that was supposed to be reproachful but was somewhat undermined by the amusement in his eyes. "Yes to Occlumency. However, I thought perhaps we could finally have that literature discussion..." he said with mirth, raising his brows suggestively.

"You, Severus, are devious!" she exclaimed in playful reprimand. He laughed, and Hermione kissed him briefly to shush him. She added, "You are not able to deceive me. I know you are just trying to divert my attention from asking you questions by offering me instead what you know I find inescapably appealing!"

Hermione kissed his smirking lips again. "Okay, I'll play your game, but in all seriousness, I hope you know that you can talk to me about anything."

"You are exceptional, Hermione," Severus offered, giving her a kiss of his own. He led her to the door, saying, "Let's get you down to the lifts before Potter wonders what has been keeping you."

Hermione and Harry Flooed from the Ministry to her flat. She would now hear what Harry had needed to talk about. And tomorrow, she would get Severus to talk to her!

A/N: Sorry to make you wait yet another chapter to find out what's bothering Harry. It just didn't quite fit at the end of this one. More soon!

The passage Severus reads from his book is, indeed, attributed to William Shakespeare.

In Defeating Darkness I Do Dwell

Chapter 10 of 11

Something is causing a dangerous rift in the romance between Hermione and Severus. In order to bring understanding to light, one of them will have to journey into the other's experience with darkness.

Disclaimer: This story's universe and characters were created by J.K. Rowling. I make no profit from it, and no copyright infringement is intended.

A/N: This chapter comes with a major angst warning. Hermione and Severus cannot sustain a lovey-dovey romance without working out a few kinks first! I decided to be on the safe side with the warnings for this chapter. There is an allusion to the suicide and death of a very minor character.

"Do not touch me!" Severus said in a dangerous voice. The Auror swiftly released his arm while huffing indignantly. Severus tugged at the end of his reclaimed sleeve and then smoothed out his robes. He glared at his so-called "security" and sternly said, "I cannot stop you from following along, but do not presume I am incapable of Apparating myself to the gates of Hogwarts."

Pop! Pop! There was the sudden appearance of Hermione and Potter just as the young Auror was rising with a response, completely unfazed by Severus' haughtiness. "Oh, I'm not presuming anything! You are likely quite capable of many extraordinary things, but surely you must know that I am just doing my job...ensuring the safety of a War Hero?" She patted his arm and turned, smiling at the newcomers.

Severus grumbled something menacing under his breath, but the Auror did not take notice since she was otherwise engaged in saying hello to Potter, congratulating him for getting such an important assignment so early in his career. Hermione did not seem to notice either. She had not greeted him yet. She was much too occupied watching that annoying leech converse with her 'Harry.'

He cleared his throat loudly. When he had three sets of eyes on him, he said, "While I am sure the discussion of Potter's Auror training must be vastly... entertaining... Miss Granger and I must leave you both to the... effectual... spending of your time."

They did not see him cast the unwarding spell, but at that moment, the gates clicked and swung inward. He swept through them after a single glance at Hermione to compel her to follow.

"Bye, Harry!" she called back. "I'll Floo you later so we can talk some more. All right?"

Severus was already too far away to know if Potter responded. He was now approaching the stone steps, walking briskly, with Hermione hurrying behind to catch up.

They walked quickly and in silence to his office near the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. When they had entered and closed the door, he turned to Hermione to see if she was going to wrap her arms around him and kiss him like she had so many times yesterday.

She did not.

Nuances not so subtle, it was obvious that something was amiss. Hermione sat in a chair in front of his desk looking anxious and cautious. Was she having regrets already? He had known that she would. Still, it was discomfiting...being such a sudden and drastic deviation from the way she certainly seemed to feel yesterday.

Hermione looked unnerved as he continued observing her. Hesitantly, she said, "Severus?" She fell silent. He raised a brow in inquiry. Finally, she appended, "Er...how are you?"

"Splendid," he said shortly. "And yourself? Do I find you doing well today? Did you manage to get any rest?" His sarcasm infused every word, but it was subdued...not apparent enough for her to call him on it.

After all, she could not know how anxious he had been to see her that day and how he had worried all night about whether she was getting any rest. He had thought perhaps that he should have given her some Dreamless Sleep. And now, today, other than being distant with him, she seemed perfectly...

Hermione frowned. "I'm fine. Er...thanks."

"Shakespeare or Occlumency?"

"Er...I get to choose?" Hermione asked, surprised. He did not acknowledge her question but waited for her answer. "Occlumency then," she decided. He glared at her, which made her say, "Well, don't you agree that we ought to start working on it right away? I mean, it took Harry..."

"Obviously we should," Severus interrupted. "I simply deemed to ensure you are taking this as seriously as is warranted," he added, effectively misdirecting his intention to discover if she was more inclined to spend time as a couple or as professional acquaintances. *Professional it is. Very well.*

"Your hands," he stated.

Hermione looked down at her hands, bringing them up from where they had been bunching up the ends of the sleeves on her robe. "What about them?"

"Stop fidgeting."

"I'm not fidgeting!"

"You were. Or did you not take any notice of how thoroughly you were wrinkling your sleeves?"

Hermione's annoyance was apparent from the lowering of her eyes and the thinning of her lips. *Fine. Hopefully, she would get the point.*

Severus asked another question. "What do you do with your mouth when you get angry?"

"What?" Hermione said, thrown by the odd question.

Without pausing, he continued, "What sort of people are you likely to stereotype without realizing you may be doing so?"

"None!" was her quick reply.

Severus did not acknowledge her answer. "What do you fear? What physical signs denote your embarrassment? What ignites your passion? How often do you discover that your mind has wandered while going about your normal routines? Of what do you daydream? What makes you feel angry?" He finally ceased the firing off of rhetorical questions in order to take a deep breath.

Hermione's eyes were narrowed, and her brow was creased as she answered the last question. "You! Why all these questions? If you are trying to get to know me, at least attempt to do so by not making me feel like a victim of the Inquisition!"

Severus calmly replied, "That is not the point here, Hermione. Although," he paused, then said seriously, "I do wish to get to know you better, yes." His insides writhed when he saw Hermione squirm and avert her eyes to the bookshelves.

"The point is," he continued, using his classroom tone, "control." He finally took a seat in his own chair behind the desk. "To become adept at controlling your mind, you must have a strong measure of control over yourself in general."

Hermione turned an inquisitive face to him. *Ah, that insatiable interest in learning returns!*

"Good, I am blessed with the gift of your attention now," he said dryly. Inquisitive morphed into indignant, but Severus pretended not to notice. "The witch or wizard who rushes blindly through life without awareness or introspection has little hope of attaining mastery over anything."

He regarded her with a smirk as her hand rose slightly to indicate she had something to say. "Look what you are doing right now. Why are you raising your hand? You have a question, undoubtedly yes. However, do you raise your hand in automatic, robotic fashion after nurturing such an incessant habit for seven years? Or do you not yet feel comfortable enough in my presence to behave as two adults should when having a discussion? In other words, does my role as your mentor make you forget our adult *relationship*, or is your regression into student behavior the result of untended-to-tendency?"

"Well, it must be due to habit, I suppose," she answered, clearly skeptical about where this was going.

She supposes! Severus snorted.

"It would behoove you to be certain of that, Hermione. The key here is, as the Oracle of Delphi once said *know thyself*. Self-awareness and control comprise the essential base for developing confidence in your ability to protect your mind, and it will aid you in doing so in a more facile manner. Blocking someone from invading your mind is simple enough if they first push you to emotional extremes. However, it risks giving them information they can use before you are finally able to drive them away. It is an exhaustive waste of your magical energy, leaving you entirely too weak to maintain your control over the block for very long."

"Did you explain all this to Harry?" Hermione suddenly asked.

"Potter? You are asking about Potter! Well, while I do not doubt that he has told tales to you and Weasley of how I tortured him ruthlessly and relentlessly..." He broke off, giving her a severe look as he suddenly remembered one thing he knew Potter would have told them. It made him very uneasy to know that Hermione, of all people, knew the pathetic story of his worst childhood experience. She might have laughed, or worse, *pitied* him!

Hermione glared right back at him, which deepened his unease. He retained his stoic stance and calm mannerisms, however...an ability honed over years of paying close attention to his physical reactions to outside influences. He continued, "However, I assure you that, as you will find when term begins, you simply cannot teach those who are unwilling to learn." Severus made a supplicating gesture with his arm and spoke in an artificially courteous tone, "Now, are you finally finished being sidetracked by Potter? May we now continue our lesson?"

"Actually, no," Hermione said, matching his supercilious inflection with defiance in her eyes. "Not yet. I want to know why you are so cruel to Harry. Why do you have to hate him so much?"

Severus stared at her, giving her the look he always used to warn people to back off when they dared to question him or were brave enough to ask him something personal. *I knew it. Her friends will come before me. We only just began this... relationship... and already there are problems portentous of a premature conclusion!* It took Severus quite a bit of concentration not to show his disappointment and fear. After a long breath, he said, "Hermione, I do not hate..."

"Don't lie!" Hermione rose from her chair and pointed her finger at him. She released the anger that had been building up since she had arrived and suffused her words with it. "I know what you did to Harry over the weekend! He fought for you at the trials, remember? He fought for *him*, too, you know. How could you do that to him? Making Harry imprison his own classmate behind the fires of Hell you created!"

At that, Severus turned around quickly, knowing he had a look of revulsion and anger on his face. He strode over towards a large cabinet to excuse the action. Hermione would not see his sudden sneer, but she ought to hear it in his voice. "Ah, so Mister Potter begins his distinguished career by believing that others should take up his slack." He snorted derisively. "Well, Hermione, your unwavering loyalty to your friend is meritable, and your decision to default automatically to agreement with said friend's opinions of other people is... staggering. Be that as it may," he paused, then spat, "it was his job!"

"Harry said he should not have had to..."

"Of course he had to! You think that they would so voraciously oppose my being the sole bearer of the knowledge of how the Fire-Immunity potions are made, but they would smile swimmingly upon my being the only one who knows how to summon the fires?"

"No! I was saying that Harry told me you were not letting him perform the magic on any of the prisoner cells up until you got ~~that~~ *that* one! He was so broken up about it, and I bet that you couldn't care less!"

Hermione was saying this to the open cupboard door, which was blocking the top half of Severus' body. He emerged holding a large, rune-encircled, stone basin, staring at her intently.

"Perhaps you will be able to justify your anger... or not... after reviewing the scene for yourself," Severus said tonelessly. He withdrew the memory of the past Saturday and flung it into the basin with his wand. It coalesced into a cloud-like texture but with a milky-white color that glinted with opalescent sparkles.

Hermione stood to peer into the Pensieve before her on the desk. "I do not think I want to see this," she said quietly. "In some ways, I think that solitary confinement in darkness may actually be worse than having Dementors for guards."

Severus coolly replied, "Very well. *Snog me senseless*, as your generation is so fond of saying, all day yesterday, and despise me unduly today. The inevitable has arrived earlier than even I would have thought, but it brings with it such a liberating relief." He turned to stare out the window at the empty grounds.

"All right, let's go in," Hermione said, not unkindly.

"I, for one, never care to relive that experience ever again." Severus walked out from behind his desk until he was standing beside Hermione. "Look in if you must, or don't. It is of rather little consequence, for I shall return shortly to recommence your Occlumency lesson, which is, apparently, the most befitting use of our time together."

Severus swept out of the room very quickly. *It was a mistake to hope for so much...*

It was not so bad at first. There was just a slightly heated conversation between Harry and Severus. Harry was assuring him that he could remember and recite correctly the unfamiliar Latin inherent in the spell. Severus, with seeming indifference, informed him that, like the Avada Kedavra, you had to really desire that the spell work. He coolly remarked that Harry was "too Gryffindor" to be able to ordain that anyone should have to suffer a life guarded by these deadly flames. Harry, used to Severus' disregard, informed him that, he, perhaps more than anybody, wanted to see justice served to Voldemort's evil minions. A, "We shall see," was the response Harry received.

They walked down the first hallway, surrounded by cells on both sides. Immediately, there arose a chorus of jeers, insults, pleas, cries, and one inmate obviously feigning ill with a poorly contrived "pity me" story. Without skipping a beat, Severus walked up the hallway, aiming his wand at the cells on one side, repeatedly muttering the spell as he went along.

Black Flame rose, deafening the prisoners' screams only after the fire had climbed high enough to flicker against the ceiling. Hermione found herself shaking where she stood next to Harry, who was doing the same thing, a fair distance from where Black Flame consumed the view into the last cell.

Harry stayed where he was while Severus swung around and marched back down the hallway, sealing the terrified prisoners on the other side into defeating darkness. When he turned around again, he strode quickly and angrily back up to where Harry waited.

"For someone who thinks they are capable of performing such advanced and *dark* magic, you are remarkably remiss in taking the opportunity to watch and learn."

"I told you, sir, that I know I can cast the spell," Harry breathily retorted, albeit lacking the luster of his previous attempts to convince Severus of his readiness. Severus rolled his eyes and swept past to go through an inquiry/visiting room in order to reach a second hallway full of the same solitary prisoner cells.

They were met with high-pitched, wild, maniacal laughter. When they took in the deranged countenance of Bellatrix Lestrange, she started to scathingly insult them, sycophantic laughter breaking out unexpectedly and intermittently.

"What was that you said about the Killing Curse, Professor?" Harry said lightly.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, unheard by any of them, of course.

Severus actually smirked at that. Then he told Harry to go ahead and cast Black Flame in front of her cell.

Harry swished his wand across the base from one side to the other while chanting, *Flamma ater surge! Flagra! Consume ominis corpus tanges! Flamma ater surge! Flagra! Consume nemo non! Flamma ater surge! Flagra! Versari in annum!* He was now drawing his wand up in long arcs, higher and higher, making it look as though the wand was making the fire rise. *"Flamma ater surge! Flagra! Flamma ater resurge! Fla..."*

"Shite!" Severus yelled, grabbing Harry's arm and running down the hall. The flames grew to tremendous proportions, flickering across the hall and licking the bars of the unoccupied cells on the other side. Despite the roaring of the massive fire, Bellatrix's screams were loud enough to penetrate through.

"Is she dying?" Harry shouted, panicked.

"No, idiot boy. Black Flame provides the gift of instant death." He took small steps forward until he was just out of range of the most far-reaching tendrils of flame. *"Lumen ad granum ex obscuritas, lumen intempesta nocte, claresce!"* The fire still raged menacingly, but from its center, a brightness started to glow and then grow. It became roughly the size of a small window, which, Hermione realized, was exactly what it was.

Bellatrix was sitting, violently shaking, against the back wall of her cell, the flames coming perilously close to her. As long as she stayed against the back wall all the time, the fire would not touch her.

The window closed as quickly as it had appeared. Severus smirked again. "Well, it's not quite the same as Avada Kedavra..." He turned so suddenly, fixing an intensely angry glare on Harry, which caused the glint in Harry's eyes to fade rapidly.

Severus spoke aggressively. "You said 'ater resurge' instead of 'ater surge!' You are an overly self-confident fool. You know that, Potter, do you not? How many times, exactly, did you assure me you knew the words?"

"I'm sorry! I do know them! I just slipped! It's fine. I can be careful..."

Severus sneered at Harry. "You are lucky that the Aurors were kind enough to the other prisoners not to force them to endure living next to or across from the madwoman. This is not a classroom. You are not allowed to make such grievous mistakes!"

He then turned and Vanished the first two cells' doors across from Bellatrix's...from where the flames were still spitting out across the hallway.

"Cool, at least we can still get around the fire when we need to pass through," remarked Harry in a somewhat pathetic attempt to focus on the positive.

"Obviously," Severus sneered. "Now, come along. You will *watch*, and you will *learn*."

Hermione followed behind Harry, who followed Severus. They approached the next occupied cell...a few down from Bellatrix, the wallflower. Inside was a thin man with shadows under his hollow eyes. "Don't let that boy cast it!" he rasped. The man then stared blankly at them. He spoke again with a voice as hollow as his eyes, resigned to emptiness, darkness, death. "I've done too many terrible things." Severus lowered his wand, pointing it at the floor in front of the cell. However, the man spoke once more, "On second thought, it might be better to let the boy cast it, and I'll just sit here, close to the bars."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears, although she knew she was not supposed to feel sorry for someone evil enough to earn a one-way ticket to Azkaban. Severus ordered him to back up and quickly said the incantation, summoning up the Black Flame that obscured their view of the entire cell and obscured the prisoner inside from the luscious gift of light. He continued down the hallway, muttering incessantly, the mighty stream of flame, black as midnight, growing ever longer.

Hermione watched Harry whisper the spell Severus had used to create a window to see through to the cell. The decrepit man was nowhere in sight. He must have. *Oh gods!* She noticed that Harry quickly rubbed at his eyes before Severus could turn around and see them glistening. She, herself, had tears free-falling. No one would be able to see.

They entered a second inquiry/visiting room. There was a stone chair rising out of the floor, replete with shackles waiting to restrain anyone who was made to sit in it. It reminded Hermione of seeing Severus locked in one that was remarkably similar at the postwar trials...up until he was cleared of all charges. The chair faced a wide table

where a pair of upholstered folding chairs were placed facing it. On the other side of the room was another shackle-adorned stone chair facing a long and lumpy sofa.

Hermione was just as surprised as Severus was to see Harry stride right over to the couch and plop down on it.

"Just what do you think you are doing, Potter?" Severus inquired, his brows raised in consternation.

"Need a break."

Severus laughed, not kindly. "Your little Gryffindor heart is just not up to this, is it?"

"Excuse me if my heart isn't as icy as yours," Harry fired back.

"Well then, have it your way, the way it always goes, no doubt. However, I shall, of course, inform your department Head of your inability to rise to the task given to you." With an expression of utter disgust, Severus left the room for what must be another hall of cells. Hall of Darkness.

Hermione watched Harry rise from the sofa as if he meant to follow after all. He sat back down, frowning. He stood again only to plop down immediately with a heavy sigh. Hermione wished she could comfort him but went to follow Severus instead.

Immediately upon entering the hallway, she was shocked to find Severus with a hand over his eyes, shaking. He was standing in front of a cell, his wand loose in his hand. He was talking to someone.

As Hermione stepped closer, she heard a desperate voice plead, "...another way, Godfather!" Severus brought himself to stillness and lowered his hand to stare with despair at the owner of that pitiful voice.

"Get me out, Severus! I know you can! I can...cannot survive like this!"

"I do not think there is anything more I can do, Draco," Severus answered very quietly.

Just then, Harry emerged in the doorway. When Severus saw him, Harry announced solemnly, "I am more than up to the task, sir."

Severus' mouth twisted into a wicked smirk that Hermione had not seen on his face since the night they finished Voldemort...when Severus had been able to delight in telling Voldemort exactly how well he double-crossed him.

Smoothly, he said, "Fine, Potter! Get over here, and try again!" When Harry drew near, Severus added, "And if you fuck up the words, Potter, I swear I will rip out your throat and use it in a potion."

Harry stared back aghast, his mouth agape. He narrowed his eyes. "Haven't I ever told you how fantastic a teacher you are, *Professor*? Truly inspiring, confidence-building..."

"Save it, Potter!" Severus said shortly. "We both know that you can only do anything if you are first goaded into it."

"That's not true!"

"Care to provide an example?"

"Er, I...You are infuriating!"

"Heh!" Severus made a dramatic, showcasing gesture towards the cell Malfoy was in. Harry finally turned to look at it. "Very well then, prove it is not true."

Draco Malfoy was watching him without the least bit of fervor in his gray eyes. "Ah, it's the Chosen One," he said with a halfhearted attempt at his classic, sarcastic drawl as if it might bring a bit of humor into a situation none of them could find at all amusing.

Harry stood frozen, watching the young man whom he had testified on behalf of at the trials. Hermione could not help but to stare at Malfoy as well. He was sitting with his back to a corner, ankles crossed, elbows resting on his knees, and his chin resting on his interlaced fingers. His pale skin seemed tinged with gray. Even his hair lacked the white-gold sheen it once had.

"Get on with it, Potter," Malfoy said in a bored voice. His apathy and resignation further painted the sorrowful picture of a desolate young man devoid of life, looking defeated...as if the darkness had already sucked out all his life force.

Soul suckers, the both of them! Hermione thought. *Dementors and the darkness.* But Hermione knew she had heard Malfoy pleading with his *godfather* just a moment ago. Malfoy had retained some measure of hope. However small, it still existed. How long could it last? Especially once his world went black?

She looked at Severus, who was moving eyes that were reminiscent of endless tunnels back and forth between Harry and the other end of the hallway...looking anywhere but at Malfoy.

Harry looked down at the limp arm holding his wand. He didn't move.

"Potter! Some Auror you are! Do it! Now!" Severus commanded.

Harry gave him a glare colored by fright. Severus' eyes bored into Harry's, daring him to back down, and as Hermione watched, the fright and anger drained from Harry's eyes until they looked nearly as hollow and lifeless as Malfoy's did.

Harry turned back to Malfoy. He aimed the wand, two sets of despairing eyes now locked on each other. His voice soft and clearly overlaid with sorrow, he chanted slowly. His enunciation was careful and controlled. "*Flamma ater surge. Flagra. Consume ominis corpus tanges. Flamma ater surge. Flagra. Consume nemo non. Flamma ater surge. Flagra. Versari in annum. Flamma ater surge. Flagra. Flamma ater surge. Flagra.*"

A blanket of deadly darkness now covered Malfoy's cell. Harry angrily stuffed his wand into his robes and shouted, "I need that break!" He turned and exited the hall.

Apparently, Severus needed one too. He slunk down right where he stood. He crouched low in the middle of the hallway, his arms wrapped around his knees and his face buried in them. Hermione wrapped her arms around him but touched only cool air. He mumbled something about "finding a solution," then took a long, steadying breath.

Whether it was Severus' impeccable intuition again or a random instance of really good timing, Hermione was unsure, but Severus rose, looking calm and collected, just as Harry returned. Harry gave Severus a look of pure hatred. Hermione wondered if the hate was directed solely at Severus or if it was the entirety of the depressing situation that etched itself into such an expression.

From that point on, Harry cast Black Flame on one side of a hall while Severus darkened the other. They never spoke to each other. The only sounds were the barely audible incantations, muffled by jeers, pleas, and wails of prisoners and the mighty roar of the growing fire.

One such jeer came in the form of, "Two-faced bastard!"

This actually brought an amused smirk to Severus' face as he retorted to a likewise smirking prisoner, "Takes one to know one, Lucius!"

"You have not forgotten your promise to me?" asked Lucius.

"Of course not. I am working on it." Severus said calmly. Hermione looked at him askance. Harry was nearing the end of the hallway, methodically casting the black fire over each cell. Lucius nodded once, and Severus proceeded to obliterate all his light. He then moved along quickly to catch up with Harry at the end.

Hermione followed and watched them stamp each prisoner with the seal of Death. A fair portion of the prisoners were people she did not know. Yet, most she had recognized as Death Eaters whom she had fought the night Harry defeated Voldemort. The sickly turning in her stomach was soothed somewhat by knowing that she and all her loved ones were much safer now. It was strange to feel so rotten, yet also relieved.

Then, with a pang, she saw a cell that contained another of her former classmates. Goyle. Crabbe was in the one right after that. Luckily, Severus was spelling this side, and Harry did not notice. It did not matter anymore that they had been in Slytherin... Hermione gasped aloud as Severus approached the next cell. Zacharias Smith, who had been the D.A.'s snarly skeptic, was its inhabitant. *Not him, too!* Hermione shook her head. So many of her own age had been corrupted or coerced by Voldemort and his agenda for power. They could all have been friends with each other in another place, in another time, if his evil, divisive ideology had never been passed down to their generation. She wondered if there could ever be acceptance and forgiveness between those who made the wrong choices and those who fought against them. She cringed, not out of animosity, when she saw a quiet and frightened looking Pansy Parkinson in another cell.

Next to Hermione, Severus' face was impassive and inscrutable, but Hermione's would become the host of a flood if she continued to watch this. So, at that point, Hermione slowed down to walk with Harry, who was working the other side at a steady pace. *As it has always been, the Dark divides us from each other. Darkness roaring, roaring at your cellar door. Darkness there and nothing more.*

Hermione paid little attention to the details of her surroundings now. She was distantly aware of walking down yet another deathly hall. It was a dreary dream from which she could not awaken.

Each hallway angled slightly to the right from the one before it. In all there were eight such hallways, the last three being unoccupied. Hermione sighed heavily when they exited the last hall and were once again in the entry room they had started in. There were three Aurors stationed there as Azkaban's temporary guards until that day's takeover by Black Flame. Severus informed them that it would only be a few more minutes.

Harry and Severus walked the perimeter of the island, casting a ring of Purple Flame just a few paces away from where water lapped at the shore, effectively keeping out anyone who did not drink the potion first.

They returned to the Aurors inside, who pulled out five small vials of the potion Severus had altered slightly to work only for Purple Flame. They had brought them along from the first batch of potions Severus had delivered to the Ministry. The group walked outside and stopped just before the purple fire. They all drank their potions, shivering with the icy feeling that flooded through them. Hermione watched as they walked through Purple Flame to the shore on the other side, from whence they Apparated away. Darkness flew in from all sides, making her think for a moment that she was now one of Azkaban's prisoners, but then she was being pulled up and outward until she felt herself sitting in a chair. She opened her eyes to the well-lit office.

"Welcome back," Severus said blandly.

Hermione stopped shivering and rubbed her eyes. She looked up to notice him leaning against the back wall, arms crossed, staring out the window.

Severus turned to look at Hermione but averted his eyes to the window again. Speaking to the glass panes, he said, "The lesson is over. I have an appointment at the Ministry."

"But we didn't even..."

"Homework!" Snape called out, effectively cutting her off. "Your homework is to sit down every day on a cushion, eyes closed, spine erect. Relax and listen. Note any thoughts that arise, but let them go. Keep your focus with you in the present."

If Hermione thought that seemed strange, she did not say so. Instead she said, "Severus, the anger... it wasn't justified. Thank you for letting me see how you..."

"I am not discussing that," Severus declared, interrupting her again. "Do try to arrive an hour early to Thursday's potion lesson for Occlumency practice. In the meantime, be sure you do that exercise everyday for at least fifteen minutes."

"Okay. Just sit? Not doing anything?" she asked for clarification.

"Just sit, and spend time with yourself," he answered. "Now come along. There are Aurors waiting to escort you home and to escort me to my appointment." He opened the door to go out.

Hermione, still sitting, said, "Actually, I was planning to set up my office after our lesson today."

Severus appeared annoyed, but he just nodded and said, "Of course. I shall inform your troll."

He swept out of the room, and Hermione panicked. She should not have been so angry with him earlier without having talked to him about it first. Talked to him like an *adult*.

She rushed after him. He was already down the hall.

"Hold on!" she called to him. He stopped and turned, and she moved quickly to him. "I'll still walk down with you," she said somewhat nervously.

"As you wish," he responded with a nod, recommencing his walk, albeit more slowly.

They made their way through halls and down flights of stairs. Suddenly, Hermione grabbed Severus' hand and held it. She saw him hide his relief by turning a glare on her. He raised his brows and asked, "Just how do you think it would look, if students were to see the Head of Slytherin traipsing down the hall *holding hands* with someone?"

Hermione shrugged and smiled. "All couples hold hands."

Severus felt her hand slip into his. His breath hitched, and the pounding of his heart alleviated somewhat. He was not sure what to say to her after all this, so he berated her for holding his hand in the school hallways.

"All couples hold hands," she said while grinning.

Couples! Severus' mind repeated.

"Besides," she added, "do you see any students anywhere?"

"Hmm, no indeed."

They were almost to the first floor when Hermione asked in a whisper, "Severus? Don't you think it is a bit inhumane to keep those prisoners in darkness for the rest of their

lives? I mean, even if they are Voldemort's... Still!"

"I thought I had conveyed to you the fact that I do not wish to discuss that," Severus said grimly.

"Well, why not? I have some questions, and I think..."

"Naturally," he remarked as they headed down the staircase.

Hermione continued on in exasperation, "Well, don't human beings need light to survive? I saw the despair in their eyes when you summoned the fires. No one could last long living, if you could call it that, in those conditions!"

Severus withdrew his hand from Hermione's as they stood now on a landing, waiting for the stairs to swivel back from their journey to another staircase. He brought the hand to her chin to guide her face to look at him. Staring at her intently, he said, "Oh, and I suppose you think me cold and uncaring for being the one to damn them into eternal Hellfire?"

Severus noted vaguely that she hurriedly answered, "No! I don't think that!" Yet, his own focus zoomed forward through the open windows of her soul to hear, 'did say you have to want the spell to work,' and 'not Draco Malfoy, but for the rest he didn't care, or did he?' and then, 'Stop!' followed immediately by the same word coming out of her mouth.

He crossed his arms and considered her. The temper he had seen earlier in the evening flared up once again. Hermione's voice conveyed her anger and incredulity as she said, "I cannot believe you just did that!"

"Consider it a lesson in Occlumency."

"What exactly am I to learn from it, sir? Except that, in addition to the ease in which you can cast Black Flame, you have no qualms about invading my privacy?"

"The fact I know you were not being honest just now aside, I did not delve into your mind with great force like that man did to you yesterday. You were not even aware at first. You must pay attention to how it felt, remember it, and watch for it."

"Why thanks for bringing it up, allowing me to recall that lovely experience," Hermione said while trying to sound angry but coming across as obviously sad instead.

The staircase rejoined their landing. Severus did not respond. He started down the steps before they moved away again. *What was there to say? 'So sorry, I had presumed that the sharing of the memory would make you aware that the situation was not only difficult for Potter!' Or, how about, 'You have my most sincere apologies, but I must comply with the Minister's outrageous demands of me or join the rest of my fellow cold-hearted criminals in their dark fate!' No, she would not understand.*

Instead, he said, "I hate that you had to go through that, Hermione. I will not again infiltrate your thoughts without warning. Does that appease you?"

Hermione sighed. "No, but I don't like *this*," she said as she gestured between them. They entered the Entrance Hall and stopped at the top of the steps that led down to the dungeons.

"If you could have just talked to me about what happened at Azkaban," Hermione continued, "if you would talk to me at all, I would understand you better."

Severus closed his eyes and sighed softly. He looked at her and shook his head. He said, "There are a multitude of reasons why this will not work between us and only one reason there is anything between us at all. I want it, and you want it...for some unfathomable reason that even you do not quite understand."

"Wanting it to work is enough," Hermione said. She suddenly stepped in closer to him, which surprised him. He lowered his head to look down at her, the movement causing her lips to brush awkwardly over the tip of his nose. She stepped back, embarrassed.

Hermione's attempted kiss had been with the vain hope of dispelling the discomfort between them. Yet, she now stood there eyeing the bottom of the stairs, looking every bit as if she simply could not wait to flee down them and into the dungeons. The unease lingered between them like a wall, so he did not try to pull her closer again to share a proper kiss. "Is it enough?" Severus inquired quietly.

"I hope so," she answered softly.

Severus sighed. "I must be leaving, Hermione. My appointment..."

She nodded and turned, walking down the first steps, saying, "See you Thursday then."

Severus made his way outdoors and headed towards the two figures stationed at the gates in the distance. However important repairing the rift between him and Hermione was to him, right now, he must go see about upholding his promise to Lucius. It was a promise he wanted so badly to keep...

A/N: The Latin used in the story:

flamma = flame

ater = used in the context of "black as death"

surgere = arise

flagrare = burn, flame, blaze

consumere = consume

omnis = every single

corpus = body

tangere = touch

nemo non = all men without exception

Versari = imperative to command existence

In annum = to last for a year

resurgere = rise again

Flame, black as death, arise! Blaze! Consume all whom you touch! Flame, black as death, arise! Blaze! Consume all men without exception. Flame, black as death, arise! Blaze! Come into being, here for a year. Flame, black as death, arise! Blaze! Flame, black as death, arise! Blaze!

lumen = light

intempesta nocte = in the dead of night

ad = at

granum = core

ex = of

obscuritas = darkness

clarescere = to grow bright

Light in the dead of night, light at the core of darkness, grow bright!

Unexpected Encounters

Chapter 11 of 11

Hermione delights in her station in life, while Severus has aims of his own.

Disclaimer: This story's universe and characters were created by J.K. Rowling. I make no profit from it, and no copyright infringement is intended.

A:N: No deceptions, no lies. I desire to finish this story, and regular updates shall commence. =)

The Auror looked around approvingly at the buzzing main lobby of the Ministry of Magic. She nodded to Severus Snape, released his arm, and made her way to the lifts to head back to her department. When the lift doors closed, Severus Disapparated.

Severus reappeared in the Ministry's lobby one hour later.

Hermione glanced around her new office, feeling satisfied. All signs of Slughorn's pouffy extravagance were gone, vanished *Evanesco'd*. There remained nothing antique or Victorian-esque. Nothing fluffy, lacy, velvety, or frilly in all of the room. The only plush piece to be found was Crookshanks' large, red and gold sham-covered pillow with trills.

The room's sparse furnishings consisted of her desk, her chair, two guest chairs, and a small desk and seat in the corner that would serve well when she had a student in Detention. Simple, neat, and uncluttered.

A few indoor plants whose leaves would lend ingredients usable in certain potions hung on hooks in the ceiling. And unlike frills, fluff, and old ladies' aromatic balm, these would be appealing to both the ocular and the olfactory senses.

One side wall that had previously housed pictures of various members of the Slug-Club was now shelved and held her collection of books. A last bundle of magically shrunken books lay upon her desk, waiting to be put away. These, the books she was currently studying, on the subjects of invisibility and understanding the magical energy of inanimate objects, she would keep in her living quarters.

Hermione continued to survey her set-up. At the back, behind her desk, was the entrance to the Potions lab where she and Severus had been working each week. Through that door and adjacent to the lab was a storage and supply room. Moving her eyes to the other side of the office, there was what she had already discovered to be a heavily warded door, which Hermione was certain led to the Potion professor's living quarters. Her quarters. Sure it had been an oversight, Hermione decided to ask Minerva about having it unwarded before returning home.

Hermione smiled and sat down behind her new desk, running her fingers along the length of a quill set next to a stack of fresh parchment atop the huge slab of cherry wood. She felt accomplished. She was pleased by this opportunity to develop her skills as a potions-maker. The mastery Severus had was incomparable. She had now successfully employed Severus' technique to improve three different potions: the Draught of Living Death, the Skele-Gro potion remake, and the Polyjuice potion she had begun working on at home for the past two weeks. It was not finished yet, but Severus had assured her there was a way to enhance it to make it stronger...strong enough for just a small drink to go a long way. And though he would not verify it until her potion was complete, she was hopeful she would find a way to strengthen it significantly.

Severus had taught her to never be careless. Any new idea to enhance or create a potion must be considered objectively and compared to her knowledge of known ingredient interactions along with all possible variables. A master should always be able to predict the consequences of any action taken while brewing. Severus had told her. Her Monday lessons were now being spent compounding, reviewing, practicing and fully integrating her potions knowledge. Brilliance could not simply be discovered by accident; one must intuit brilliance by integration.

Hermione smiled again. She loved the challenge. The quest for excellence. If she could master this, she could master anything. How fortunate she was to have the opportunity. If the circumstances hadn't necessitated it, would Severus have refused her request for an apprenticeship had she thought one even possible? Would she ever have had the chance to realize her feelings for him? Have had the opportunity to act on them?

No, she would definitely have noticed her surfacing feelings for Severus eventually, even without the help of the Mirror of Erised. She smiled. The desire she felt for him *definitely* meant something. The intensity of it simply required that it mean something. In her mind, feeling such immense desire was associated with what she thought love should feel like. Did she love him? Could she be in love with a well so deep that plunging down into its depths would take forever for the fall? If she could not but skim the top, seeing only the waters that reflected nothing of him at all? Seeing the reflection of her own perceptions and tasting what few offerings might rise to the surface? Could she love the mystery while hugging only the well wall?

After the unease and anger between them earlier, Hermione admitted to herself that she had perhaps been pushing Severus too hard. She wanted to know him. Wanted to know what it was that caused these feelings she had. What it was that could bring her the love like what she had experienced in the Mirror of Erised. She should not let a taste of what was possible for them stop her from savoring their budding relationship just as it was.

She should be patient, and maybe he would let her in without her having to knock (okay, pound) so much. Slowly let her draw up some of his deepest waters. Maybe their mutual desire really was the first stirrings of love. It was love she had seen in the mirror. A fine mixture of the carnal and the spiritual, of lust and devotion that all spoke of one thing: love. But, what did Severus desire of her?

Hermione pocketed in her robes the bundle of books and set the excess, precautionary wards she and Severus had designed together for the Potions lab. She headed out into the dungeon corridor, running her fingers along the stone wall, fingers dipping into a groove, which she realized was the latch to a door. She had found the corridor entrance to her chambers. Hermione lifted her wand to cast the first unwarding spell.

"Harry! You're early." Rufus Scrimgeour said with the effected politeness of a seasoned politician.

Severus glared at the source of the meeting's interruption (not that the meeting had been going at all well) while inwardly appreciating the manner in which Potter had just burst into the Minister of Magic's office without knocking, successfully annoying Scrimgeour, always a delight.

"Er...we finished earlier than expected...." Potter looked at Severus questioningly.

"And I had moved Professor Snape's appointment up to four o'clock just for you," Scrimgeour said, motioning at the other chair with an embellished gesture. "Well, do sit, Harry. It so happens that your Black Flame-casting partner-in-crime is here to make the same entreaty you said you wished to discuss with me in person."

Potter's eyes met his own. While it did not surprise Severus to learn this, it clearly was astonishing to Potter. The boy nodded and returned to look at Scrimgeour with a strong, steady gaze.

"I won't allow this," Potter said simply.

"Now, that's enough, Harry. No, let me make this very clear right now so I won't have to repeat myself to both of you," Scrimgeour said roughly. Potter seemed to have a gift for shattering the Minister's diplomatic persona whenever he spoke with him, Severus noted.

Scrimgeour leaned forward, his hands curled in fists atop his desk. "As I was just beginning to explain to Mr. Snape, the Wizengamot voted unanimously on the new security plan and signed it into law. You also gave the bill your public endorsement, I would remind you. It cannot be changed."

"Yes, I did, and I don't endorse new laws without reading them," Potter countered.

Severus thought bemusedly about how abhorrent he would normally find a situation such as this...being trapped in a room with two people he disliked profusely...one that he actually hated. He certainly had never thought that if such a repugnant situation were to actually occur, he would find himself... mildly... entertained by Potter.

"And I do remember clearly that the bill specified that the new system wouldn't be official until after a trial run, and that if..."

"A simple disclaimer," Scrimgeour interjected.

"That is of rather little consequence," Severus said. "It still allows for the law to be reevaluated if information comes to light about its ineffectiveness."

"I would hardly say the system is *ineffective*," Scrimgeour glared at Severus and then at Potter.

"Semantics," Severus said. "The purpose of the security is to hold prisoners hostage. To keep them from their lives. Not to literally take life."

"If a prisoner elects to take his life, that's hardly..."

"Listen, Scrimgeour," Potter said in a low, serious voice. "You need to honor my request to have Auror teams take prisoners out into the courtyard, in small groups, at least once a week. I insist."

Severus wondered where Harry had got the gall to be so frank with the Minister of Magic. It must be an irrepressible natural tendency of his as countless detentions had certainly never dampened Potter's contrary attitude.

"Don't speak to me that way, Harry. I'm the Minister. I could..."

"You wouldn't do a thing, Minister, if you don't mind my saying so. You'd never allow anything to mar the public's perceptions of the Ministry and the Chosen One being in such good graces. You wouldn't want to risk upsetting me enough that I'd let information slip out about certain... Ministry doings... of the past..."

Rufus Scrimgeour schooled his frown and regarded each of them calmly. "Severus Snape, Harry Potter, you each hold a unique relationship with this Ministry. You are both of great value to us. Therefore, if it is your professional opinion that the new Azkaban security plan needs tweaking, then we shall present it before the Wizengamot this very week."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said with affected grace. "I knew that I could count on you to see that justice is always a priority."

"Justice would be seeing dead everybody who had served He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named *in any way*," Scrimgeour growled, pretenses flung far out the window.

Potter narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to speak, but Severus spoke up first. "There ~~are~~*innocent* people inside Azkaban, Minister. You value glory, not justice."

"You may have escaped Azkaban's fate yourself, Snape, but if you knew what was good for you, you wouldn't still be attempting to excuse the crimes of your Death Eater pals."

Potter watched the exchange, frowning. He said, "Minister, whether innocent or guilty of the worst crimes, no prisoner at Azkaban is going to crumble away in that solitary, deadly darkness. Until Friday's Wizengamot gathering, then." He nodded sharply to Scrimgeour, caught Severus' eye, and moved to the door.

"Until Friday," Severus also said to Scrimgeour, rising and moving to the door behind Potter.

"Take... care," he heard Scrimgeour say as he closed the Minister's door behind him.

Their brief alliance in Scrimgeour's office just before had been a singularly random event. It did not mean that Severus Snape would accede to having *Harry Potter* be the Auror to *protect* him while he returned to Hogwarts. He refused Potter's offer with a disdainful sneer, but walked with him to the Aurors' Headquarters to find the woman who had been assigned to him that day.

"Potter," he said in farewell before she whisked him away.

Leaving the Auror at the gates, Severus headed into the castle. It had been a long and stressful day. He wanted to quickly make his way down to his chambers, take a Headache Cure, and lie down. When he arrived at the bottom of the steps, however, he saw a figure casting spells at his door near the far end of the corridor.

"Just what are you doing?" he bellowed, making his way down the hall swiftly.

The figure jumped and dropped her wand. As soon as he got closer, he saw it was Hermione.

"Oh, it's you. Hermione... what are you doing trying to get into my rooms?" he asked, perplexed.

"Oh!" she said. "Sorry, Severus. I thought they were mine." She frowned. "Er...why are your rooms still down here if your office and classroom are now upstairs?"

"Because," he answered, "these rooms had been my home for seventeen years before Slughorn came along. I was comfortable there and not at all inclined to move everything for the simple convenience of having my office right next door." Severus smirked slightly. "Besides," he added, "I thought I might actually be doing a favor for old Slughorn, providing for him daily exercise."

Hermione smiled. "So, that's where my rooms are. I have my belongings packed and ready to move-in tomorrow."

"Good," Severus said. "The sooner you are residing here at Hogwarts, the safer you will be. Why don't you come with me now? I will show you the entrance to your chambers."

"All right," Hermione smiled brightly. Severus had not expected to see Hermione again today. After their unpleasant exchange earlier, this felt awkward, but they were managing to converse as if it had not even occurred.

They headed up the first flight of stairs. "I hope you do not mind having to travel the five floors between your office and bedroom," Severus said to Hermione, too conscientious of the fact that he was now thinking of Hermione and bedrooms in the same sentence.

"No, not at all actually. I wasn't looking forward to trying to stay warm down there in those dungeons. Too drafty."

"I could..." He trailed off, having just realized he had started thinking of Hermione in *his* bedroom. He coughed. "I could show you some shortcuts," he said to redirect the conversation.

"That would be appreciated."

They walked in silence up the last flight of stairs. They seemed to have exhausted all relevant mundane topics, and he certainly would not allow himself to engage in small talk just so something was being said.

Still, the silence weighted heavily given the lingering unease from their heated exchanges earlier. "I should apologize," Severus decided to say, "for ending your lesson early. The Ministry had sent me a note while you were in the Pensieve, requesting that I arrive at three for my appointment instead of the five o'clock appointment I had planned around."

Hermione shrugged. "Well, it's not your fault they changed it. Uh, the lesson wasn't going well anyway."

Severus huffed quietly.

After they reached their destination, and Hermione had found her chamber door behind a tapestry, she leaned against the wall next to it, sighed, and said, "Severus? When was it that you first... took an interest in me?"

Severus watched her.

She continued, "I mean, did you have any idea of it before I first kissed you?"

"Y...yes." Severus hesitated. "Yes, it was before."

Hermione smiled slightly.

"And might I pose to same question to you?"

Her eyes sparkled. "Yes, I had already realized I desired you."

"Hmm, I see we have returned to that word. Desire."

"So when was it, then, that you knew?"

Severus sighed. Hermione was intently awaiting his answer. "In truth, I cannot pinpoint when it began exactly, but it has been building since we started working together."

"It's the same way for me," Hermione said. "Then I knew it completely when I saw..." she trailed off. She looked suddenly shy and shifted her weight to her other foot.

"The Mirror?" Severus offered.

"Yes," she whispered. "Us. In the Mirror."

Looking at her carefully, Severus brushed his hand through her hair and brought it to rest on her shoulder. "What if it was a trick?"

Hermione stepped closer to him, carefully, as if unsure he'd allow it, and wrapped her arms around his waist. Wrapped up in how good it felt when he held her in return, she said distantly, "Mmm, what do you mean?"

"Well, I don't know exactly what you saw, Hermione. But the desire you saw fulfilled in the Mirror satisfied some emotional need or another, and perhaps you simply drew in the added details to fill it in. Conjured me up, so to speak, since we had been working together."

Hermione unwrapped her arms from around him and slid her hands into his. "You are not an added detail, Severus. Besides, the Mirror doesn't work that way. It shows you what you truly do desire even if you did not know it consciously. Harry once saw all his extended family. He couldn't have 'conjured them up.' That's the magic of the Mirror. That it knows exactly."

She took a breath and said softly, "I desire... I want... I want us to try this out. Let's not worry about if we can make it work or if we have enough to go on. Let's just do it."

Severus released her hands and moved his own up her arms and around her shoulders, drawing her close.

"Sounds... interesting."

Hermione laughed. "Are we okay, then?"

His eyes glowed, and he dipped his head, kissing her softly.

It was a successful day after all, Severus noted to himself. Potter would ensure more leniency in Azkaban's security, he had hope of keeping his promise, and he could better understand Hermione. He was taking a lot of risk, but when was there ever anything gained without risk?
