

Celebrating Victory

by selened

It's one year since Voldemort fell. Severus and Hermione aren't enjoying the party...

The Anniversary Ball

Chapter 1 of 3

It's one year since Voldemort fell. Severus and Hermione aren't enjoying the party...

Celebrating Victory

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Hermione stood, half leaning against the balcony rail, looking down into the Banqueting Hall at the Ministry Headquarters. She took some comfort in the dim light shielding her from the revellers below. Sighing, she wondered how long it would be before she could decently take her leave without appearing to snub her employers.

"Tired of the limelight, Miss Granger?" came the cold voice from directly behind her.

Hermione jumped, having been unaware of his presence. She turned to find Snape standing close behind her, a little too close actually, seeing as they were the only people standing on the gallery. She took a sideways step away from him in order to be able to look him in the eye.

"I can think of other ways I'd rather have spent this evening," she said calmly. "I see you managed to tear yourself away from your groupies."

"Fawning imbeciles," he growled. "I have no patience with them at all!"

"We all know patience was never your strong point, Professor," she observed. At least being a grown up gave her the right to try for the upper hand with him. Was that a smile? No surely not!

"On the contrary, Miss Granger, I am very patient indeed if I am hopeful that being so may serve my purpose. Impatience is not traditionally a Slytherin failing... It would be rather more in the Gryffindor line. Indeed they are usually too impatient to waste time on thinking before acting."

"I'm not a schoolgirl any more, Professor. I see very little point in house rivalry out of school. Of course I fully understand that you might be too petty to let it go."

"Ah yes, Miss Granger, I almost forgot! You've matured now into a.... what was your position again?"

"Lab Assistant," stated Hermione firmly. He had hit a nerve. The quality control job at the Ministry was boring and repetitive and her only chance of advancement would be if there was a fatal explosion on a day when she wasn't there.

"Ah the dizzying heights of cosmetics testing," purred Snape, the sarcasm so thick it was almost visible.

"How did you know that?" enquired Hermione sharply.

"I am not without connections in the Industry or indeed the Ministry. What better career for a young witch while she's waiting for the right young wizard to come along?"

"You're such a pig!"

"How eloquent."

"Have you forgotten that we are here to celebrate the first anniversary of the battle where my 'young wizard' and my best friend fell? We've got all dressed up and all the politicians who stuck their heads in the sand are making pretty bloody speeches. I'd much rather be spending the night sitting vigil over the place where we buried what was left of them."

"And why aren't you?" he enquired softly.

"Because the Ministry put pressure on me to come. Apparently this isn't a proper celebration unless they can put a few of us on show. If I hadn't shown up there would have been subtle signs of displeasure."

"You're in a hole, Miss Granger. You've had a year of it now and I think it's about time someone gave you a hand out. You faced Voldemort. Are you really going to tell me that you're going to stand for those self-important idiots controlling your life? Come with me!"

He took a firm hold of her wrist and made to move towards the staircase. She resisted.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Hogwarts. You came, you ate, you shook hands with men you would have preferred to spit on and were photographed doing so. Your work here is done. If you want to visit the graveyard I will escort you."

"Don't you want to stay?"

"I came, I forced everyone to remember that I hold the Order of Merlin, first class. You can't honestly imagine that I want to socialise any further. If anyone cares to stop us we will say that you are feeling unwell and I am seeing you home. I'm not abducting you. If you don't want to come then say so plainly."

"I'll come. You don't need to drag me."

"I would be grateful if you would at least allow me to hold your arm as we leave. If you do not I will be waylaid by half a dozen venerable matrons seeking to introduce me to their unwed charges, most of whom I have already met and would dearly like to forget."

For a moment Hermione was tempted to let him suffer, but seeing the look on his face, she relented. He had never been overly sociable, even with trusted colleagues and the mere idea of flirting with all those vapid little rich girls must be enough to make him ill.

"Certainly, Professor," she said quietly. "Let's see if we can escape unmolested."

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It was raining when they arrived at the school gates. Severus quickly cast a charm over them both to shield them from it as they made their way over to the graveyard and new war memorial. It was the first time Hermione had seen it and she walked over to stand directly in front of it.

"Will you be here for the dedication on Sunday?" asked Severus solemnly.

"Of course I will," she replied, running her hand over the plinth. It was much too dark to see any of the detail of the carving, but it seemed to be fairly tasteful as Wizarding monuments went. No statue, just pictures in relief and the names of the fallen. Ron's name.... Harry's name... Nev.... She clung to the unyielding stone as her sobs broke forth.

Severus stood and watched her outpouring of emotion. Twenty years of teaching hadn't made him any more patient with childish tears, but this was different. Hermione Granger was no child and she had survived the loss of her parents, her closest friends, her mentor and the Weasley boy, who had probably been her lover, for a short time at least. To cap it all, she had a dead end job and employers who were callous enough to expect her to celebrate the anniversary.

He stood and he watched and he waited.

Eventually she seemed to have cried herself out and fell to her knees on the sodden ground.

Enough was enough. He strode forward and lifted her bodily to her feet again. Not trusting her to stay upright unaided, he held her to him.

"You're soaked to the skin," he said calmly. "Why didn't you maintain the charm when you moved away? Those clothes are most impractical without a charm on a night like this."

"Does it look as though I'm bothered!" she cried incredulously. "I'm mourning the deaths of all the people who ever cared about me and you're criticising my dress sense."

"Nonsense! You have suffered great losses, but there are still many people who care about you. Your robe is most becoming and if we can get it to a house-elf in time we might yet save it. Come up to the castle with me and I'll get you sorted out."

"I want to stay here. I want to stay with my friends."

"Your friends are dead, Miss Granger and you are very much alive. It's an insult to the memory of all those who died in our fight that you don't live the life you were lucky enough to keep."

"What!"

"We can't talk here. Are you coming to the castle with me under your own steam, or am I going to have to Stupefy you?"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Do you honestly wish to try me?" he said harshly.

She stiffened in his arms and he regretted his tone.

"Come with me, Hermione," he said softly. "I'm not going to hurt you, I'm going to do everything in my power to aid you."

He felt her relax and he looked down at her. On impulse, he lowered his face to hers and kissed her on the mouth. As kisses go, it was fairly chaste and it lasted all of two seconds before he reconsidered his actions and tried to pull away. She held on and went up on her toes to keep her lips in contact with his. The second kiss was prolonged and intense, neither wanting to let go of this unexpected pleasure. Eventually Severus pulled away breathless.

"I'm sorry," he said, as formally as he could manage under the circumstances. "That was an unforgivable liberty to take. You didn't come here for that."

"I'm not sorry," said Hermione, resolutely. "I'd have come for that if I'd known how good it would feel."

Severus was shocked. Had the girl taken leave of her senses? Surely she hadn't really wanted that? It must be stress.

"Let me take you to my quarters. I promise I won't hurt you."

She raised her hand to stroke his cheek. "I trust you," she said.

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They reached Severus' dungeon quarters without interference. She averted her eyes as he disabled his wards. When she turned back he was already holding the door open for her.

"I've never been in here before," she said, in attempt to fill the silence.

"I don't entertain often," he said. "I generally regard my rooms as a refuge from company. Albus comes down on occasion. Minerva used to, but no one else."

"I must look a fright," she said, remembering the Muggle cosmetics she had applied earlier. There was no way they could have survived that downpour.

"Let me find you a robe," he said. "My bathroom's through that door. I meant what I said about the house-elves rescuing that gown of yours. Here, take this and go and sort yourself out, shower if you want to. If you throw your clothes out, I'll have them collected."

She took the dark green silk dressing gown from his outstretched hand and walked into the bathroom, leaving the door slightly ajar behind her. A moment or two later she put her hand round the door to throw out her wet clothing and closed it properly.

Severus let out a breath he hadn't even realised he was holding. Pulling himself together he rang the bell for an elf.

xx

Hermione looked at herself in the mirror. The supposedly waterproof mascara was streaked down her cheeks and the rest of her make-up seemed to have vanished entirely. She muttered a charm to get rid of it and filled the basin full of warm water. The shower was tempting, but it would really be rude to keep Prof... no, surely it had to be Severus after a kiss like that. Even he couldn't be that stuffy. Suppose he wanted to kiss her again or touch her? She took a sponge and began to pass it over her skin in an attempt to make herself feel fresher. At least the mirror was keeping its opinions to itself. If he did want to... do things... What on earth was she going to do? The kiss had been wonderful... better than Ron's kisses if she were completely honest. Not that she regretted Ron of course. That had been sweet at the time and an inevitable development after all they'd shared. She missed him terribly and she'd looked at no man since. Well not until tonight anyway. What on earth was she playing at? This was Professor Snape for heaven's sake! He'd despised her throughout her schooldays. Perhaps he was out there laughing at her right now! Well no, probably not laughing. Come to think of it she'd never seen him so much as smile properly. Suppose he didn't want to touch her again. If he could kiss like that, what else might he be able to do? He was a man after all. He was the same age as Harry's parents, no less. Perhaps they could come to some kind of arrangement. They were both intelligent people after all. Intelligent people should be able to figure out a way to deal with this kind of thing. If two grown-up, intelligent, unattached people wanted to... to... Perhaps if she'd paid more attention to girl talk when she lived in the dorm, she might have more of an idea about how to handle this. Having boys as best friends didn't help you to deal with them in this way.

She began to dry off with one of the towels. Keeping him hanging about wouldn't help matters. He'd already stood in the rain and watched her cry for ages. What must he have thought? He couldn't have minded that much because he kissed her straight after. What if he just felt sorry for her? Oh God! Was she so pitiful that even a man with no heart felt sorry for her? No, that wasn't fair! He must have a heart. He just kept what was in it to himself and perhaps only Professor Dumbledore knew what was in there. He was a good man. They might never have defeated Voldemort without him.

She reached for the dressing gown and wrapped it around her. It was beautiful silk, but way too big for her. She could alter it, but that would be bad manners. At least it didn't trail on the floor too much. She pulled her hair out from under the robe.

"Right," she murmured softly. "Let's see what he's got to say for himself."

In The Dungeons

Chapter 2 of 3

Hermione's out of the bathroom. Will they discuss her career prospects... or will they get distracted?

Celebrating Victory

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The bathroom door squeaked on its hinges as Hermione pushed it open. Severus looked up at the sound and his mouth went dry at the sight of her in his robe. Oversized as it was, it still appeared to cling and he would have known she wore nothing beneath it, even if he hadn't seen the clothing the elf had taken away. He realised he was staring and turned his attention to the heavily laden tea tray on the table.

"Please sit yourself down, Miss Granger," he said, vaguely gesturing in the direction of the leather sofa.

She took a seat at the end nearest to her.

"I took the liberty of ordering some tea. Would you like some?"

"I'll take a cup, thank you. You really shouldn't have put the house-elves to this much trouble for me," she said awkwardly.

"I didn't. I merely asked for a pot of tea. The rest came entirely on their own initiative," he said, as he began to pour.

"It looks like one of the Headmaster's specials," said Hermione with a smile.

"That was my first thought," he said, handing her the cup and beginning to pour his own. "I feared you might scold me if I rejected it outright. I know of your sentimentality for the creatures. If you don't want to give offence you'll have to consume more than just a cup of tea."

He took a slice of lemon from the tray and sat down, risking a glance at Hermione, as he did so.

"It's a little late in the day for eating cakes," she protested.

"Do you have an eating disorder, Miss Granger?"

"What? No, of course not! I know I'm bit thinner than I used to be, but I'm busier now. That's a really preposterous thing to say!"

"You ate very little at the dinner tonight. I could feel your frailness when I held you earlier. If I am not mistaken, you are smaller now than when you were a fourth year. I know that young Muggle women under stress are prone to these problems; therefore it was a logical question to ask. It was not my intention to give offence... if you can believe that of me."

"I just work long hours. I don't eat at work because the smells put me off and I'm a bit disorganised when it comes to buying groceries and cooking in the evenings. I don't seem to get hungry like I used to. Do I really look that bad?"

"You don't look as well as I would like. Your face hasn't suffered, but I was quite shocked when I felt how little you weigh. Your robes disguise your lack of bulk. I am concerned that you are neglecting yourself. There's no shame in it, Miss Granger, I've fallen into the trap myself. However, the war is over and you can't continue in this manner. It's not good for you."

"Do you think you could bring yourself to call me Hermione? You managed it when we were outside. It would be much easier to take this lecture from a friend than from my former schoolmaster."

"I mean to be a friend to you. I'm making an effort to do for you what Minerva would have done, were she still with us."

"I don't think Professor McGonagall would have tried what you did when we were outside. Do you?"

"I will admit, Hermione, that my motivations are rather more complex than I would like. However, I promise I will not force my attentions on you," he said firmly. "There are practical steps I can take to assist you, both personally and professionally. I am capable of ignoring the charms of the dozens of adolescent witches I live and work with. You need have no fear of me."

He picked up his own tea-cup and took a mouthful of the warm liquid.

"I'm not afraid of you, sir." She took a deep breath and stepped of the edge. "In fact I would rather continue what we started in the graveyard than discuss my career prospects right now."

Severus spat his mouthful of tea back into the cup and wiped his chin with the back of his hand.

"You kissed me first... and it took you a long time to stop and let go when I kissed you back. It's logical to infer that you wanted to do it. Have you changed your mind now?" she finished hurriedly.

He shifted uncomfortably before replying.

"Miss... Hermione, I think my lack of control earlier has demonstrated that I find you attractive. Out of that entire parade of spoiled brats tonight you were the only one worthy of a moment's attention. I watched you throughout the meal and then spent a whole hour debating whether or not I should follow you onto the gallery. Now, be that as it may, I did not invite you here to seduce you or take advantage of you at a vulnerable time. You wanted to visit the graves of your friends and you have fully earned the right to have your wishes taken into consideration. Frankly I am at something of a loss. I can hardly sit here and discuss your career options as though nothing happened out there, but I cannot bring myself to take advantage of you. You're tired, you've been drinking, you're lonely and I imagine you're frustrated too. It would be unpardonable for me to pursue you now!"

"I drank apple juice all evening. I've no capacity for alcohol. I might be rather low at the moment, but I'm not incapable of making a choice. You aren't pursuing me, Severus, I'm sitting right here waiting for you. Kissing you and holding you out there is the first thing that's given me any pleasure since Godric's Hollow. Can't we just comfort each other tonight and think about all the other problems in the morning?"

"Hermione, I pulled away when I did because I was gripped by the desire to throw you on the ground and tumble you in the mud. I'm not a boy. Foreplay is not an end in itself as far as I'm concerned. Are you sure you know what you're getting into?"

"I'm not a virgin," she said quietly. "It wasn't easy, but Ron and I did manage to get some time on our own. I know we were breaking the rules, but we were eighteen by then and we knew that we might die soon. I haven't had any other experience though. I want to let you... You won't hurt me will you?"

"Let me hold you. We can't have this conversation from opposite ends of the sofa. We need to touch."

He set down his cup on the table and held out his hand. Hermione slid across the sofa towards him, taking care that her gown did not gape open. She nestled against him, and hid her face in his shoulder. He embraced her tenderly.

"I'll never hurt you if I can help it," he said. "I promise."

He dropped a kiss on the top of her head and they maintained their position momentarily, content with the progress they had made.

It was Hermione who took the initiative for the next step. She raised her head and gently pecked kisses on the skin where it emerged from his collar. When she reached his ear she whispered,

"Are you going to join in?"

He tightened his grasp on her and pulled her higher up his torso so he had access to her mouth. He kissed her passionately and she pressed herself against him. He used his hands to encourage her to straddle him as the kiss progressed. With one hand she began to unbutton the ornate buttons that ran down the front of his dress robe. He slid a hand inside the dressing gown and cupped her small breast in his palm. She broke the kiss and drew back, panting.

"Have I gone too fast?" he asked, concerned, but not taking his hand away.

"I've got a scar," she blurted. "It's really ugly."

"The one from the injury Bellatrix gave you? I saw the wound when you received it. It was bound to scar badly. Does it bother you?"

"I can't see it really, but you'll have me undressed in seconds and I thought I should warn you... I didn't want it to put you off..."

"I have a lot of scars of my own, Hermione. You couldn't put your hand on my chest without touching one. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No of course not... it's Never mind."

"Hermione, if we are to go further I need to make sure you are comfortable. I think you might feel more secure if you got into my bed now. I'll give you a moment to get settled and then I'll join you. I'll allow you to control the brightness of the light and how much of our... our activity takes place beneath the sheets. Would that arrangement suit you?"

She nodded in obvious relief. Severus shifted his hand and teased her nipple with his thumb, keeping his eyes locked on hers as he did so. She quivered and he smiled at her. It was the first genuine smile she'd ever seen from him. Leaning forward she pecked him on the lips and slid off his lap. He watched as she walked over to the bedroom door. He leant back on the sofa and breathed in and out deeply as he slowly counted to a hundred. When he was finished, he walked over to the door and knocked.

He heard her call, "Come in," and he opened the door to find her sitting in his bed. He had expected her to cover herself with the sheet, but to his amazement, she had only pulled them to her waist and her top half was bare, concealed only by the odd tendril of hair straying over her shoulder.

She blushed under his gaze and he moved towards her as though in a trance. He settled himself on the bed beside her.

"I think you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in all my life," he confessed, running a hand down her bare arm.

"You don't have to say that," she said quietly. "I'm under no illusions."

"Neither do you know how beautiful I find you. I couldn't help noticing you last year. I'd see you laughing at the meal table, I'd watch you poring over books in the Library, I'd see your face when you knew your potion was perfect and I couldn't help but desire you. I never dared dream I'd see you like this. I am in awe."

"I never knew."

"How could I have said? It hardly reflects well on me, even now. A schoolmaster is not supposed to have that kind of awareness of his female students."

"I was eighteen and I'm not far off twenty now. I'm not your student any more, I'm a full grown witch."

"So I see," he said, smiling as he trailed his hand back up her arm and then walked his fingers over her small breasts. Bending forward he kissed each breast in turn before standing up to remove his robe. His Order of Merlin medal clinked as the robe hit the floor. Sitting down again he removed his shoes and socks, leaving him clad only in a long shirt type garment that reached past his knees. She opened her arms to him and they resumed their kissing.

At first he was careful to support her seated position but, as the kissing intensified, he realised he had pushed her down onto the bed without being aware of it. He straddled her, being careful not to pin her down too securely or make her bear too much of his weight. The kissing continued, mouths, faces and necks. She ran her hand under the hem of his shirt and up the outer side of his thigh. He pulled back for air.

"I think the shirt needs to come off," said Hermione, her mouth swollen with kisses and her hand rubbing the hairs at the top of his leg.

"As you command," he said lightly. He began to undo the neckpieces, which held it closed at the top. Hermione meanwhile insinuated her other hand under his hem on the other side to touch that thigh also. His arousal was evident, even with the shirt in place, but she was a little shy about Severus seeing her interest in that area and so kept her eyes on his face.

When the shirt was undone he rolled off the bed and stood facing away from her as he pulled it over his head. She saw the long line of his back marked with faded scars and the rounded shape of his buttocks before he slid quickly under the covers to lie beside her.

The feel of his skin against hers was incredible. She laid her hand on his chest. There were scars there, many of them still fairly new looking, which must have come from the skirmishes of the recent war. His skin was very pale otherwise and he was much hairier than she had expected. Not that she had given the matter much consideration before. He seemed bigger too without clothing although he seemed bigger anyway. Eight years ago she would have called him skinny, but he was broader and heavier than Ron, despite being a good three inches shorter.

"Do you want this, Hermione?" he asked hesitantly. "I'm not a nineteen year old boy."

"I want it. I want you." She lowered her face to his chest and began to pepper it with wet little kisses. He wrapped his arms around her and hefted her so she was on top of him. She squeaked and he chuckled briefly, caressing her prominent shoulder blades.

"If you weren't so flimsy I wouldn't be able to do that so easily," he said. "I think it's your turn to direct events for a moment. I know how bossy you can be."

"You can talk!" she spluttered, raising herself up to straddle his waist. She could feel his hardness against her buttock. "Still I'm glad to see you have some idea of how to share. Now what shall I do with you? Decisions...decisions..."

She looked down at him, making him wait and wonder. He lay with his long black hair fanned on the white pillow behind him, his lips parted. He returned her gaze, his eyes flickering in response to every tiny movement she made. Making her mind up, she shuffled forwards and kissed him hard, leaning down into it. He allowed her to control the kiss and she pinned him to the pillow by his hair. He rested his hand on her hip and she ground her moist centre against him. Then he brought his other hand into play. She jumped and broke the kiss as he stroked her labia.

"Am I permitted to continue?" he asked, raising his brow slightly.

"Yes," she replied, planting her hands on his chest and kneeling up slightly so he could have easier access. "In fact I demand that you do."

"I shall pleasure you and then I shall take you as I wish. Do you consent?"

"How do you wish?"

"I want you on your back and spread for me... and I want you to embrace me! Is that acceptable?"

"Yes... I was worried you wanted something... unusual."

"Not on this occasion... My tastes can run to the exotic, but that's how I want you tonight, just simple consent and simple pleasure. Shall I continue?"

"I insist that you do."

He traced her swollen sensitive flesh, spreading around the wetness leaking from her. He circled her clit, just not quite giving her what she wanted until she began to move against his fingers. Carefully he ran his middle finger into her opening and placed the heel of his hand against her clit, beginning to grind it slowly in a circular motion. He kept his eyes trained on her face as he did so. As she increased the speed of her movements, he matched her, looking for clues on her ever expressive face. He added another finger and then another. Her movements sped up and her breathing grew harsher until finally she cried out and he felt the quivering of her muscles around his fingers. He withdrew his hand and held her as she calmed.

"You're very good with your hands," she said, when she had recovered.

"Wait until you experience what I can do with my tongue," he purred. So saying, he smeared some of her moisture from his fingers onto her nipple and rolled her over so he could lick it off. Her breasts almost disappeared when she lay on her back, but her nipples stood proud.

She lifted his hair away to get a clearer view. How odd that this should be so erotic! It wouldn't have occurred to her that it could be so. There was something so overwhelming about intimacy with this man. He raised his head to meet her gaze. She saw the question in his eyes.

"It's your turn," she said.

"May I throw off the covers," he asked. "I'm getting very warm. I promise not to look at your back until you're comfortable with being naked for me."

"Throw them off. We do seem to have created some heat. Can we dim the light? Not pitch black just a candle."

"Easily," he said, accomplishing it with a wave of his hand. "Are you ready for me?"

"More than," she said, reaching for him.

What Now?

Chapter 3 of 3

Severus and Hermione continue to celebrate.

Celebrating Victory

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What Now?

The light of the single candle illuminated the two naked bodies on the bed. Hermione stretched out her arms submissively and allowed Severus to spread her knees apart. She felt the coolness of the air strike her centre, but the dimness alleviated the shyness that usually plagued her at this point. She was still awash with moisture after her orgasm and she could smell her scent on the air.

Severus knelt between her legs and suckled her other breast, as he brushed his knuckles up and down the soft smooth skin of her thighs. He was large and solid and Hermione could feel the heat radiating from him. He relinquished her nipple and blew on it, making her shiver. He shifted himself so they were face to face and began to kiss her mouth. She remembered his request that she hold him and moved her hands to cup his shoulder blades with her palms. She drummed her fingers lightly on his back.

"Guide me in," he hissed softly.

She moved her right hand down and found his erection. He was big there too. She chewed her lip lightly as she helped him find her centre. He raised himself up and watched her face carefully as he worked his way into her with a series of gentle thrusts. He filled her and it was good... so good!

She couldn't reach his lips in this position. She contented herself with kissing his collarbone repeatedly and kneading his back with both hands. His movements were exquisite and she couldn't help but grind herself against him as he continued to thrust.

"So good..." she groaned.

He increased the speed and force of his thrusts, delighted at the sounds she was making. She felt incredible. Her skin was so soft and she was more responsive for him than he had dared hope she might be. He could feel her fingers on his back. Her clutching and clawing gradually building as he thrust longer and harder and deeper. She could scrape to her heart's content. Knowing her, she'd be falling all over herself to mend him later. As he well knew, a small amount of pain would serve to make his pleasure even sweeter.

"Harder," she muttered. "Please... Harder... I won't break."

"Bossy," he scolded, even as he obliged.

She brought her knees up and wrapped her legs around him. This shift tightened her muscles around his shaft and proved to be his undoing. The restraint he was so justifiably proud of, melted away in an instant and he spilled himself inside her. His arms gave way and he sprawled inelegantly over her as he tried to recover his breath.

She groaned and relaxed under him as her own breathing slowed.

"That was marvellous," she said ruefully. "I've never been that close before. I was always too worried about getting caught to get really into it."

"Let me finish you."

"It's all right. You gave me my turn earlier. You can rest."

"I hope you weren't thinking that that was all you would get," he said teasingly, rolling to the side and reaching down between her thighs. He plunged three fingers inside her and began to rub her clit in small circular motions with his thumb. "I may be an old man in your eyes, but I have a little more stamina than you seem willing to give me credit for. Let the pleasure build again and move with me."

"Now who's being bossy?"

"Quiet, wench! Do as you are bid and I promise you won't regret it."

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He was right. By the time they were both thoroughly sated and lying in a boneless tangle on the messy sheets, regret was the farthest thing from her mind. The whole experience had completely confounded her expectations. Sex had never been like that before. Even more startling than that had been the sight of the austere professor at play. She'd known the man since childhood, but this was something she had never expected. Perhaps everyone had this capacity. They were one thing for the world to see and in the intimacy of the bedroom they were something else entirely. Come to that; she hadn't known herself either, but he hadn't seemed in the least disgusted at her eagerness. In fact he seemed to glory in it. She kissed his chest softly and he answered with a peck to her forehead.

"Show me your scar," he said suddenly.

She froze.

"Hermione, I've had my hands all over you. I've had my fingers and cock deep inside you and I've tasted you and watched your face as you came. Why are you so hung up

about it?"

"It's ugly. The people at St Mungo's... were full of apologies. They couldn't do anything for me and they said I was going to have to keep it covered."

"I'm saying you should let me see it. It's not going to be that big a shock, Hermione. I saw the wound. I thought for a moment that you'd die before the fighting was over and the medics could get out to you. I just want to see how it healed. I promise it will not affect my regard for you."

"Very well... if you must," she said and wriggled over to lie face down.

He sat up and waved a hand to bring the lights up a little more.

The scar was situated just to the right of the small of her back. The centre of it was purple and dark red with some white lines radiating out from it. In truth it was smaller than he had expected. The original wound had been the size of his fist. Now it was barely the size of one of hers.

"It's not that bad," he said, touching it gently. "They didn't do too bad a job of it under the circumstances. Wounds caused by Dark Magic can't be healed as well as those caused by a simple hex. It might fade more in time."

"It's hardly pretty though," she said.

"No, it's not, but should you decide to parade around naked in the morning, I would be sufficiently distracted by your scrawny little arse to pay it no mind."

"Hey!" she protested. "My arse is not scrawny and there will be no naked parading!"

"Pity. Perhaps, if I ask nicely?"

"No!"

"If I don't return your clothes?"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"No clothes... no wand? You'll have to rely on my good nature, Miss Granger. Do you trust me?"

"I think I do," she said smugly, turning over to lie on her back again.

"I'm very pleased to hear it."

"You're so different," she said. "I never would have guessed you'd be so nice."

"I am capable of being nice. I rarely see the need to bother. Most people don't interest me and many of them get underfoot in the most appalling way."

"Do I interest you?"

"I can hardly have left you in much doubt of that. I miss Minerva's friendship a great deal and you have always reminded me of her. You are definitely worthy of my interest. I hadn't quite planned on exhibiting this kind of interest at this stage, but it's done now and I'm not going to obliviate you. When I approached you at the Ball, I was merely going to inform you of a couple of good career opportunities I would be prepared to recommend you for. I've been asked by two eminent brewers to nominate candidates for Apprenticeships. Obviously you would be my first and foremost recommendation to both of them. You're the most competent student I've ever taught. Were you male, I would have been tempted to make you an offer myself."

"Why does that make a difference?"

"Establishing a successful career as a contract brewer is about establishing a reputation. I am too young and too single myself to take on a female Apprentice. There would be too much speculation on the nature of your duties for you to be taken seriously. Both the brewers I have in mind are rounding the century mark and they're both solidly married. One works almost exclusively for St Mungo's and the other sells products through Apothecaries all over Europe. If I were you, I'd think seriously about whether or not you want to do purely medicinal work or a more general range. When you've made up your mind, I'll arrange a meeting for you."

"I hadn't really thought about contract brewing."

"In other circumstances, we would have given you more guidance during your final year. The Ministry is a dead end as far as brewing goes. When the Ministry needs a skilled brewer they contract an established one. They keep a few potions people on their staff for drone work, but the interesting stuff is done by contractors and probably by Unspeakables, although I can't state that for certain. Promotion at the Ministry is done through family connections and favours owed. It's not for a Muggleborn of your degree of talent. You'll sit there year after year, going no further and you'll meet no one to inspire you. The value of your contribution to the defeat of the Dark Lord will be glossed over entirely and you'll slide headlong into obscurity without a family or patron to promote you."

"It shouldn't be that way."

"Perhaps it shouldn't, but we're a small closed society and you will find it a great deal easier to effect change from the top than from the bottom. At least say you'll think over what I've said. You can't be happy as you are; I know it."

"I'm not... I thought that if I just ploughed on... things would fall into place... if I could just work hard enough. I did work hard, but it was so tedious and I felt so low all the time. I just hate going in and I could strangle my bloody boss, even on a good day. He's such an idiot!"

"He's a complete and utter dunderhead. Don't go back."

"I have to. Can you imagine the fuss they'll make if I just walk out? Anyway I need the money. My parents' insurance paid off their mortgage, but it didn't leave much for running the house. The Order of Merlin pension is useful, but it won't meet all my expenses."

"If you take up one of the Apprenticeships you'll be required to live in for three years anyway. You could render your house suitable to be rented by Muggles until you're ready to set up on your own. You're virtually guaranteed to be offered at least one of these positions because I won't be putting any other names forward initially. You'd start in October and I'd be pleased to accommodate you over the summer. You can have the use of a guest room and all your meals will be provided. You can work with me on re-stocking the Infirmary and such to get your hand in again. I've got to do Diagon Alley visits with the new Muggleborns as well. You might like that. If you wanted to... we might spend some... personal time together. Unless, of course, you would prefer to chalk this encounter up to a moment of madness. I would quite understand if you did. You are under no obligation to me. I will assist you without expectation of reward."

"Please don't go back in your shell, Severus. You were unbelievable tonight. I'd be a fool not to take a chance on you. You are the most eligible bachelor in Wizarding Britain after all. Perhaps a regular companion might deter some of your followers. If you're prepared to be publicly associated with a Mudblood that is."

"Don't call yourself that. I never was very fond of that aspect of the Dark Lord's philosophy. I was purely there for the chance to advance myself out of the mire my father created for us. Your competence at the Magical Arts makes you a Witch and that is good enough for me. Blood is the fallback of those who have nothing else. I have a selection of eminent long dead ancestors followed by a full century worth of relatives who were a waste of the very air they breathed. I would be honoured to have my name linked with yours if you will allow it. It might be a tad premature at this juncture. I'm thinking it might be inappropriate to appear at the dedication ceremony as such. I take it you were planning to go with the Weasleys?"

"I thought I would. I don't go to the Burrow much. It's bad enough that Ron isn't there, but seeing George without Fred is painful. Molly makes a big fuss of me, but it's all... raw somehow."

"Go with the Weasleys and I will offer consolation privately afterwards."

"This kind of consolation?" she queried, running her hand over his hip.

"If that's what you want."

"I think I can safely say that I will. If you don't mind, that is. I don't want you to feel that I'm just using you."

"You might feel differently about that if you realised how strongly I am tempted to confine you to this bed for the entire summer and keep you well fed and well fucked until I'm happy with your state of health."

"Oh! Gosh! Erm... well we might try some of that occasionally. I'm not opposed to short periods of bedrest... under the right circumstances."

"Hermione, you are a minx. Do you intend to rise to all my challenges?"

She looked him straight in the eye. "If you'll rise to mine," she said quietly.

"Somehow I don't think that will be a problem," he said, bringing his mouth down on hers.