

An Unwitting Romance

by notsosaintly

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: *I bow to JK Rowling, who has the most brilliant imagination and the most excellent talent with which to express it. Thank you, Jo, for offering up such beautiful characters and not forbidding us to play with them a bit. I return them to you used and, I hope, in fairly good condition, considering all the (rather dirty) places they have been. I'll make them take a bath before they come home.*

If there was one thing he could say with absolute certainty, it was to never~~ever~~ go strolling the halls at night when one was exhausted, frightened and feeling more than a bit angry about it. Being frightfully out of control, the obvious result of such a deadly combination, was usually the cause of some very bizarre behavior on his part and led to consequences he never could predict.

He had dozed off yet again, trying to grade essays. This afternoon he was grading those of the insufferable first years. Finally, Dumbledore had managed to corral an entire year of naïve little foals that had not one wit about them. Not even one bloody first-year Ravenclaw knew what gillyweed was, which was particularly shameful because the *Daily Prophet* had trumpeted Potter's use of it at the Triwizard Tournament for weeks as if it had been some bit of bloody genius. Intelligence, it appeared, was becoming severely overrated amongst the younger generation.

That in itself might have excused his unscheduled lack of consciousness, and if that had been the case, he would have been all too thankful, but Professor Snape knew differently. The true reason was that he was not sleeping at night. Well, in all fairness, falling asleep was not the problem. The real problem was a particular dream he kept having or, rather, was *not* having...or, bugger all, let's just say a particular ambiguous event that occurred repeatedly every single bloody time he fell asleep.

He had made brief mention of it to Poppy last week, not wanting to draw too much attention to himself and not wanting to let on how much he was troubled by it. Either he had not properly described the predicament he found himself in or she truly had never heard of this particular affliction. He had taken to scouring the few ancient books he had pilfered from the Snape family library years ago before his father had burnt half of it in a drunken rage just to spite his young bookworm of a son. When they offered not even a glimmer of explanation, he fell back on his school-age habit of perusing the Restricted Section after hours.

And so it was, with mind aflutter, that he rounded the corner to the school's library and, sad to say, neglected to pay particular attention to where he was going, a fault he found most prevalent in the students he loved to harass.

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Much too late to do anything about it, Hermione saw a disoriented flurry of black robes whip around the corner and knew she was in trouble. She had no leeway to avoid the man whose emotional state was so rawly imprinted on his face. She braced for the impact, which came sudden and hard as her nose met his breastbone and scratched on the few buttons that resided in the vicinity.

Hermione's hand flew to her face to check for damage as five strong digits pointedly dug themselves into her left shoulder.

"Ow," she groaned as she licked at the rivulet of blood that ran between her lips.

"Not only do you seem inept at watching where you are going, Miss Granger," the professor growled dangerously, "but you are also out past curfew."

Hermione felt a twinge of fear in her chest. First he came barreling around the corner like a bat out of hell, looking harried and out of control, devoid of his usual arrogance, and now he apparently had no idea what time it was. *At least he remembers who I am*, she thought in a desperate attempt to push away the feeling that something was dreadfully wrong.

"Erm...are you okay, Professor?" Hermione asked. Professor Snape's fingers dug deeper into her shoulder, making her wince slightly at the added pressure.

"Of course I'm okay, you foolish girl. Would you care to explain why you are gallivanting about the corridors at this time of night? I'm sure assigning the Head Girl detention would set an excellent example for your dimwitted classmates." His voice took on an even deeper quality than it usually held, and she trembled slightly at the thought that he may really be losing it.

"Professor, please," she urged as she tried to pry his fingers loose. "I am not out past curfew. It's only six o'clock. I was on my way to the Great Hall for dinner."

He grabbed both of her shoulders and looked down at her, his coal-black eyes seeming to bore into her soul. He was feral and wild with confusion. Electric power sparked from the ends of his hair, forming a halo about his head. Hermione gasped as everything went off kilter, as black spiraled with white, and everything seemed to spin out of control. And then...quite suddenly...everything went completely dark.

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At first she thought that perhaps she had passed out. She had no sense of time or space. She saw nothing and heard nothing. All she felt was an acute sense of being utterly alone. Her shoulders throbbed where her professor's fingers had been but were no longer. Earlier, all she wanted was for him to let go, and now she wished that she still felt the sting of his pointed fingertips.

The dense blackness took on a life of its own, almost as if it were a sentient being. Suddenly, Hermione did not feel so alone but more as though she were being watched from everywhere all at once. Just when the feeling was about to overwhelm her, a low-pitched keening erupted from a short distance in front of her.

Her heart leapt painfully in her chest, and for a moment she was certain she was going to be attacked by some unseen animal. Crouching down, she braced for the impact. Only when the attack never came, and the wailing had dissolved into half sobs and shuddering sighs, did she realize from whom the sound was coming. Standing on shaky legs and reaching her arms in the direction of the sound, she took one tentative step and then two. Her toe met something hard on the floor, and she reached down blindly to feel where exactly her professor was. He gave a sharp inhale and drew back.

"Professor," she whispered. "Don't pull away, please. Something is wrong. I can't see anything. Just stay still, and let me find you."

Hermione had to take a couple more steps, using his labored breathing as a guide, before she found him again, this time nearly falling right on top of him. Grabbing fistfuls of his teaching robes, she fell heavily to her knees and felt two hands cover her own, grasping them almost painfully.

"Miss Granger?" The incredulous voice echoed in the void. He seemed surprised she was there, which she thought odd. He was giving no indication of letting go of her either. Of that she was immensely thankful, seeing as she had absolutely no idea where they were.

"Professor, where are we? How did we get here?" She started asking the questions as quickly as they formed in her mind until a hand came up and covered her mouth. Surprise turned to astonishment when the expected admonishment from him never came.

Instead, all that emanated from his direction was a simple, low, and very drawn out "Shhhhhhhh."

Her heart beat hard and fast within her chest as she crouched on the ground with her ordinarily ill-tempered professor. When he could trust her not to speak, or rather not to speak so excessively, Professor Snape removed his hand slowly from her mouth and used it, instead, to draw her closer to him.

"Be very still, Miss Granger, and please see fit to contain your questions for once. You have no idea what is lurking in the darkness." He delivered his words on a breath into her ear as though speaking any louder would arouse the menacing, unseen force.

If he intended to dispel her questions, he failed miserably because all he succeeded in doing was to create a fresh onslaught and an even more intense need to know what was going on, where they were and, most importantly, what *indeed* was lurking in the darkness.

If she were in any other situation, she would have never even dreamed of doing what she did next. In fact, if someone would have told her that someday she would have done such a preposterous thing, she would have laughed herself into hysterics. However, strange circumstances sometimes are the parents of strange occurrences, and this most certainly was a strange circumstance.

Overwhelmed with unanswered questions and with no hope of ever getting them answered, Hermione did the only thing she could: she climbed into Professor Snape's lap, put her arms around his chest and rested her head on the string of buttons that trailed down his frock coat.

At first, he tensed at the intrusion of his personal space, his body unwilling to accept any sort of embrace, whether asking to be comforted or offering comfort. He appeared certain that she would soon realize her mistake and let him go, but she did not. Finally, he gave in, and with a great sigh he wrapped his arms tightly around her much smaller frame, encasing her in his dark robes and feeding off the comfort she brought him.

After a short while, she realized that she felt immensely better wrapped in her professor's arms. It was a perfect fit, like a nut in its shell. They drew energy and solace from each other until they both felt calmer and much more in control of their emotions. After a while, it became apparent that neither was going to...nor even wanted to...let go.

"To answer your first question, Miss Granger," Professor Snape's voice rumbled softly from deep within his chest, "I have no idea where we are. This place seems to find me quite often as of late, although I do not know why or how or even who may be responsible."

The darkness enveloped them so completely it was as though light existed only as a cruel memory. Vision was something she had once dreamed. She wasn't even sure her eyes were open until she brought her hand up to her face and felt her eyelashes fluttering against her cheek. She couldn't even see the man holding her tightly against his body. She assumed it was probably why she found it so easy to cling to him as she was doing. The darkness stripped him of his sardonic expression, made him less foreboding. In darkness, they were equal.

She chewed on her lower lip as her right hand played with one of the small bone buttons on the front of his coat. "So, I suppose I am along for the ride, you might say," she quipped lightly, trying to sound like she had a good sense of humor about the whole thing when, in fact, she saw no humor in it at all.

"Mmm," he agreed, resting his cheek on top of her head. "I suppose you could say that."

"So then, how do we get out?" she asked nervously, expecting that at any moment he might admonish her again for asking too many questions.

"That, I'm afraid, I do not have the answer to," he answered resignedly. A great depression settled over him, and it should have been impossible, but the darkness seemed to deepen around them and grow more oppressive.

"Do you feel that?" Hermione whispered fearfully as the darkness weighed down upon her like a giant weight. "I ... I don't think I can breathe."

"It is always this way," he responded. The disconsolation in his voice was palpable. She could feel it emanating from his body, feel it surrounding her, pushing down on her, constricting her.

"What is out there, Professor? Is it going to hurt us?" She had to ask. The question was burning a hole straight through her, eating her up from the inside. He had been here before; he *must* know something about this place, more than he had already offered. Perhaps he was hiding something?

"I do not know, Hermione. I do not know," he whispered so softly she almost did not hear him through her anxiously whirling thoughts. She burrowed deeper into his arms, hoping against hope that the blackness of his robes might shield both of them from the malevolent darkness.

He clung to her as she clung to him, and this comforted her. Feeling his strong arms, the firmness of a body much larger than hers, made her feel protected. He might be uncertain of what was happening around them, but they would weather it together, and she knew he wouldn't allow anything terrible to happen to her.

This realization had her shifting on his lap and in his arms so that they fit together more snugly, each taking what comfort they could from the other. After what seemed an eternity...or no time at all; it seemed time had disappeared along with the light...Hermione realized that the weight had lifted. It had happened so gradually, and she had been so lost in her thoughts, that she had not noticed it happening.

Slowly, she lifted her head from his chest, straightening her back, and let her ears reach out for any hint of sound other than the combined susurrations of their breath. Professor Snape adjusted to her movement but held onto her just as tightly, as if she were his only link to reality.

She suddenly had the urge to do *something*. They couldn't just sit there indefinitely, could they? It didn't seem likely anyone would come to their rescue. For all she knew, no one even knew they'd gone. And how long had they been gone, come to think of it?

Her stomach growled.

"Well, it seems this little joyride has made you miss dinner." Familiar sarcasm without the familiar bite. She chuckled a little in response, though her empty stomach was getting increasingly uncomfortable.

"Professor, if you don't mind, we have to move. Perhaps if we walk around a bit? I would rather be a moving target than a sitting one," Hermione ventured. She was almost positive he would dismiss her idea as being silly, that it was much wiser to stay put, but there was no harm in trying. And anyway, her left foot was falling asleep.

"That is actually the most intelligent idea I have heard all day ... and that is saying a lot since I was stuck in an infernal faculty meeting during lunch," he murmured as an afterthought.

It was incredibly good luck that he could not see her face at the moment because her shock, not only at his admittance that she had a brilliant idea but also at his easy humor, would have been very apparent. She was pretty sure a gaping mouth wasn't very attractive on her.

"Cat got your tongue?" he drawled. "Very well then, let's go for this walk before your jaw becomes permanently affixed in that position, shall we?"

Her jaw snapped shut none too silently, which only affirmed how correctly he had guessed, and she could feel soft, low vibrations beneath her hands upon his chest as he chuckled. If she hadn't felt the need to keep him in such close proximity, she probably would have gone running, wondering what creature had possessed her professor. She had never seen him smile (well, except perhaps in glee at someone's misfortune) much less laugh before. This whole experience was getting more bizarre by the minute.

Professor Snape lifted her off his lap and stood. They didn't move for a while, both of them listening intently to their surroundings, yet hearing nothing but silence. Then, without saying a word, Hermione removed one of his hands from her upper arm and folded herself against his side, slipping one arm into the crook of his.

Pressing up tightly against his side, she turned her face up to where she estimated his should be and said, "All right, Professor? Let's go, then."

They began walking, a tremendous relief to the muscles that had cramped up while they had been sitting on the hard ground. They were slow, unsure steps at first, but gradually they gained more confidence.

"How long have we been here, do you think?" Hermione asked. She fingered the watch on her arm, chagrined at its uselessness.

"You ask questions I cannot answer," he said. "Sometimes it feels like hours, and it has only been minutes."

She fell silent at his side. She was unused to this sort of answer from her professor. He was usually so sure of himself, seemed to know all the answers ... he was her teacher, for Merlin's sake! He wasn't supposed to admit that he hadn't an answer for her. The darkness had a most disorienting sort of effect, it turned out, for when her mind started churning with even more questions, she actually felt as though she was losing her equilibrium.

She felt an insane compulsion to ask even more questions. Maybe it would help calm the nervousness she felt inside, quell the uncertainty. But she was searching for answers, unfortunately, that he did not have. He was as much in the dark as she, except for the fact that this had happened to him on numerous previous occasions. Never before, however, had he the fortune to be granted a companion. He had always been utterly alone and completely immersed in his misery. She wondered how it must have felt to be stranded like this and be so utterly isolated.

He stopped walking suddenly, bringing the next question on Hermione's lips to a similar halt. He grasped her arm with both hands and clutched her closely, desperately to his side. The feeling that he did not want to be alone pervaded her senses. It was as though she could feel everything he was feeling, and right now she felt ... overwhelmed. Yes, that was it: overwhelmed with the feeling that if he let go, she would be gone from him forever, and he would once again be alone. She felt the sadness begin welling up inside of him at the mere thought.

Hermione held onto him tightly in return as she felt his feelings as her own. Though she couldn't help worrying that at any moment he would suddenly remember whom he was holding on to and how fiercely she annoyed him. She couldn't feel any recognition or comprehension through the sadness that engulfed him, then her. She held her breath as he pulled her even closer, turning her in toward his body and enfolding her in his arms, while the darkness became more oppressive. A sadness she had never felt before originated in the center of her chest and radiated outward, seeming to swallow her entire being.

The feeling was so profound, she could only wonder where it was coming from. What could possibly be making him feel this way? She hadn't felt this sorrowful since her grandmother had died, and even then it was not this intense. After all, Gram had been 80 years old and had been sick for months. Hermione had no other experiences that traumatic to relate this to.

The man at her side took a long, deep, shuddering breath. He had to be feeling it more intensely than she was; they were his feelings, and she was only feeling them secondhand. Then her mind, which some people called overactive and never quite appreciated, brought things into crystal clarity. The effect his emotions were having on hers released its hold, and she wondered why she hadn't seen it before.

Hermione twisted herself from her professor's iron embrace, meaning to distance herself as she explained why she thought this was happening, but his hands grabbed for her, not wanting to lose contact. In attempt to ease his mind, she stepped into his body and entwined her arms about his waist, pulling him into a tight hug. One of his hands absentmindedly played with the curls of her hair as she massaged tiny circles with her thumb in the small of his back.

When she felt the oppressiveness diminish, she knew her hunch was right. *He* was causing this. If this had been happening to him on a regular basis, then it was no wonder he was in a frightful state when she had ran into him outside of the library. What inner turmoil resided inside this man to cause such a terrible state of loneliness, she could not even begin to fathom.

Keeping full body contact so as not to disturb his tentative emotional state, she tilted her face up in his general direction.

"Professor Snape," she said gently. "You don't *have* to be alone, you know that? I know I am young and have not experienced everything you have been through, but I know you are a good man. There is no reason for you to be alone."

"Your naivety is blatantly apparent, Miss Granger," he answered stiffly. "I *choose* to be alone. You are correct: You have not seen the things I have seen. Very few people have. You would be appalled if I were to tell you everything I have done in my thirty-seven years."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," she replied defensively. "You haven't given me a chance. In fact, you do not give anyone a chance. I believe you would be surprised at how open-minded and understanding people can be, especially when you have proven your loyalty to Professor Dumbledore a thousand times over. We all make mistakes in life, Professor. It takes someone of greatness to overcome those mistakes and make up for them."

"And what mistakes, pray tell, could *you* have possibly made in your life, Miss Granger, that make you such an expert on the subject?" he challenged.

His question was met with silence. He was about to voice a biting retort when she finally spoke up.

"Maybe it won't sound important to you, but I believe it is the greatest mistake I have made in my eighteen short years." She hesitated. She was about to tell her professor something she had never even admitted to her best friends.

His arms gentled around her body, encouraging her to share what it was, even though it was incredibly difficult. She knew that it might seem inconsequential to him, but he had to remember what it felt like to be eighteen and not be taken seriously by those older than him with more life experience. At least she hoped so.

"Go on," he urged quietly.

Emboldened by his softer demeanor, she continued: "When my parents discovered I had magical abilities, they did not understand at all. I have always felt like an outsider at home ... ever since I can remember, actually. I have always been different. When my Hogwarts letter arrived, they let me attend only on one condition: that when I graduated I would come back home, go to University, pursue a Muggle education and career, and live in the Muggle world. I agreed because I felt such a strong desire to be with people who were like me. I could see no other way. I was too young to truly understand what that promise meant. When I finally *did* understand, I did not have the courage to confront them. I still do not. Now I am graduating in a couple weeks, and I know for certain that I will not make good on that promise. I think my greatest mistake so far in life was not trying hard enough to make my own parents understand me. They fear the magical world, and it is my fault. I will have severe consequences to deal with after graduation. Most likely, they will disown me. I won't have a family anymore, and it will be all my fault."

Maybe she shocked him into silence, for they stood there a long while just holding each other, rocking slightly.

"It seems I have underestimated you, Hermione," Professor Snape confessed. "I am sorry about your parents, but you must not place the blame on yourself. You were a child, and they asked something of you that was outside of your comprehension. It was extremely unfair of them."

"Yes, but I am not a child anymore. I no longer have that excuse." Her voice fell flat against his robes.

"No. You most certainly are not a child," he drawled and drew back slightly, and she felt as though he was looking down at her. "But old habits die hard, as the saying goes. Their fear is so ingrained in them that it is probably certain that they will always feel that way, no matter what you try to do or say."

Hermione sighed. "You are undoubtedly right."

She felt his hand against the side of her face, and she rested against it, her eyes closing at the gentleness of the gesture. How strange to be standing here, sharing such an intimate moment with a man who knew boundless ways to irritate her and she, him.

He laughed softly down at her. "And you are undoubtedly right as well."

"About what?" she asked, a little confused. First he praises one of her ideas, and then he admits she is right about something. The day was certainly getting stranger.

"That I do not have to be alone," he answered quietly. "Understand, I do *not want* to be alone, Hermione, but who would want a cantankerous, battle-worn old bat like me?"

She couldn't help but giggle a little at his self-description. His sense of humor was intriguing, and she found herself wishing she could find out just how deep it went. It was the only excuse she could think of for what she said next.

"Well, I, for one, would not describe you as an *old bat*. Cantankerous, maybe. Old bat, I think not," she said boldly. "Furthermore, I cannot see why a wizard in his prime would think himself old in the least."

"I *feel* old, Hermione. Deep in my soul, I feel old. I have seen too much destruction, too much pain.... Nothing can take that away." His voice tapered away to a whisper.

His raw response shook her to the core. How was it that they came to this place, that they were able to share such deep feelings, thoughts that neither had shared with another soul before now? Perhaps it was easier to reveal secrets in darkness, when you needn't look upon the other's face. Perhaps it was some form of magic. Whatever it was, it seemed to also have the effect of severely loosening her tongue and inhibitions.

"You are too young to feel old, Professor. I wish there was something I could do to make you feel young again." As soon as the words left her mouth, she realized how true they actually were.

Something strange and new burned vaguely between her heart and her stomach. Unsure what this feeling was, she distracted herself by trailing a hand up his frock coat, following the trail of buttons to his face where she cupped his cheek...much the same way he had done a few moments before. She felt warm inside. The vague burning coalesced into a slow tingling deep in the pit of her stomach and traveled outwards to all of her limbs. She would never have pictured herself the type of girl to be found in her professor's arms, in this position, but at this particular moment, she could not care less what type of girl she appeared to be in anyone else's eyes except for those of the man standing in front of her.

She felt one of his fingers trail down her cheek until it rested under her chin and angled her face upward. His other arm encircled her shoulders and pulled her closer. Her stomach exploded into fluttering madness, and instinct held her in anticipation of what was going to happen next. As her heart's beats tripped over each other, suddenly she wanted nothing more than to kiss this man and do her best to help him feel young again.

When his lips met hers, it was with an electrifying confidence she had never felt before. She could feel the power move around and out of both of their bodies, surrounding them with light. She felt the static electricity straighten her hair. Sparks of light flew in all directions, and it seemed as though their feet just barely touched the floor.

And then the darkness dissipated. Whatever magic had existed, if it had existed at all, had been broken.

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His mouth was hard against hers and insistent, full of passion, lighting a fire within her that had never before attained such brightness. He stoked the fire with his tongue, playing about her slightly parted lips, dipping in between briefly, caressing the barest edge, then delving into the depths to seek out its partner. She unwittingly found her hands wound in his silky hair as she allowed him to deepen their kiss, opening up to him fully. He tasted wonderful: a little salty as if he had been crying for a long time, and a little sweet, sort of like nutmeg and brandy. He twisted his tongue around hers and brought her closer as they spiraled tighter into their deepening desire. His body was long and hard against hers, and heat poured off him, melting any resolve she could have held on to if she had even wanted to.

But she did not want to hold onto any girlish façade of moral resolve. This was a man who had her in his arms, a man who had always held her intrigue, a man who had always held her deepest respect. Granted, he had an inane talent for inciting her fury, but she had never shied away from fiery relationships in the past. She was sure any relationship with him would never be dull.

It was a single kiss. A kiss that took minutes but felt like hours. With great effort, they pulled away from each other, he holding onto her shoulders, she holding onto his hips, their eyes wild with emotion, and neither one too concerned about the consequences a heated kiss between a prominent professor and the Head Girl could bring. It was then that they realized the darkness had gone, and they could see each other and their surroundings.

Professor Snape reached into his robe for a handkerchief, wetted it slightly and cleaned the blood that had dried above her lip. As punctuation, he leaned down and planted a soft, lingering kiss on the tip of her nose.

"I hope our little encounter did not affect you too adversely," he drawled. He kissed her nose again and then her lips, to which she responded most heartily, feeling greedy and wanting desperately to feel more of what he had already made her feel. He dropped the handkerchief and let his hands roam over the curves of her body. He loosened her student robes and swept a hand slowly, confidently across her breast. The fabric of her uniform peaked at the attention. It caused her to moan and lean into him, trying to prolong the contact, and upon contact felt the natural reaction of his body. She could have undressed for him on the spot and not cared if Professor Dumbledore himself had been there to witness.

Breaking the kiss once more, she looked up into his dark eyes, seeing her reflection and that of several torchlights as well. It was then that she realized exactly where they were.

"How did we get here?" she asked, her head whipping around and coming to rest on a broad tapestry of silver, black, and forest green. They were nowhere near the corridor to the library where they had most fortuitously collided; instead, they were in front of the entrance to the Head of Slytherin's quarters.

"Apparently, our little walk has taken us away from our starting point," he mused, looking down at her, not looking at all surprised that he had a student in his arms.

It was most fortunate indeed that they had ended up in front of his quarters where they would not be seen by the remainder of the student body. She wanted to get to know him better without the usual gossip flitting about the castle. She disliked being the topic of base rumors.

She smiled up at him. "Well then, Professor, I believe the Head of Slytherin should do something about the Gryffindor loitering about the entrance to his quarters. What would you suggest, sir? Perhaps a detention?"

"I can see that we are going to get along famously," he said dryly as he tried unsuccessfully to deliver an admonishing glance. He just barely bit back a smile. "Hermione, what I really want to do, other than continue what we have been doing," he added as he caught her lips once again in a brief kiss, "is have a real conversation with you. I want to *be* with you, and I want the opportunity to *enjoy* being with you. But, most of all, I want you to be sure that you want to keep company with an ill-tempered, slightly older man such as myself before we let this go too much further."

"Ah," she replied saucily, "with age comes wisdom, I see." There would be no immature, teenage fumbblings that led to avoidance and regret with Severus Snape. "Very well, dear Professor, lead the way."

"You *are* insufferable, you know that?" he shot back at her retort.

"So I've been told on *numerous* occasions," she replied. "At least you know up front what you are in for."

"Indeed," he answered as he led her into the doorway that had materialized at the utterance of a single word. "Indeed."

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