

# Being Hermione Granger

by Amphotera

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

## Prologue

Chapter 1 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine. Not a single one of them.

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Her parents, Hermione thought with chagrin, had never prepared her for this moment.

They'd admonished her about the importance of clean dress and impeccable manners. They'd instilled in their only daughter the highest admiration for the benefits of education—and an infinite regard for those who ascended to the top ranks of their field. Hermione would have known how to shake his hand and thank him warmly, sincerely—and deferentially—for his generosity. She would have known how to promise to work hard in an effort to distinguish herself in her chosen career.

She could, she thought brokenly, have dealt with refusal on other any other grounds. If he'd been reluctant to write her a recommendation letter without further proof her skills and determination, well, she could easily have handled that with equanimity. She'd have whipped up a proposal for the most advanced Potions project in Hogwarts history faster than his glittering black eyes could have blinked.

Nothing in her upbringing had prepared her *forthis*.

"May I ask why?" She barely managed to form the words. She was too consumed with thinking that Snape had eyes that could grow hard and dark enough to reflect like mirrors. They were... unfathomable, really. She feared she'd see the beginning of her own traitorous tears reflected in his eyes. She was his best student. She knew that, and if she'd called him on it, he could not possibly have denied it. Her marks, always stellar, spoke for themselves.

Why, then, would he refuse to recommend her for a Medicinal Potions apprenticeship at St. Mungo's?

"Your natural skills are not of the caliber required of St. Mungo's Potions Mistresses, Miss Granger," he said plainly, his voice entirely devoid of emotion. "Doubtless you considered your acceptance virtually guaranteed on the basis of your marks alone, but I can assure you from personal experience that your marks in my class will matter little, if at all, in the world of professional Potions."

She'd lost the power of speech. Staring was all she could manage to do. Pursuing a dual apprenticeship in Medicinal Potions and Mediwizardry had been her dream. Through such an amazing accomplishment she could have distinguished herself merely by *graduating*. She'd lain awake at night for months dreaming of the strides she'd make in her impressive career.

Yet Snape—living proof of the miracles of antivenin and the strongest restorative potions the magical community had ever seen—refused her.

"You lack real talent in Potions, Miss Granger. Clearly I am in no position to deny that you possess an almost limitless capacity for"—his voice dripped with disdain—"memorizing facts. However, book work will not gain you a mastery of Potions. You have no instinct, no innate understanding of the subject."

So that was it, wasn't it? She felt her shoulders slump and was uncomfortably aware of her own body. Tears were beginning to well in her eyes. She needed to make her escape—and quickly.

"Thank you for your time, sir." Turning on her heel and exiting the room, she tried not to register the harsh slap of her soles across the damp floor. Her footsteps had always echoed so harshly in the dungeons. Some small portion of her overwrought brain congratulated itself, amazed by the self-possession she'd mustered in refusing to allow him to see her cry.

# One

## Chapter 2 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

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It had been barely a week since the death of the Wizarding world's greatest threat when Ron Weasley had officially asked her to be his girlfriend. Another three days had passed before Hermione had realized that...far from being the bold, passionate kisser she'd imagined him to be during her moment of rash impulse...he was deplorably inattentive and eternally preoccupied with his own pleasure. The fact that he was endlessly driven to grope at her breasts had not further endeared Hermione to his particular romantic style.

Thus she'd spent her summer, the hottest and haziest in her memory, somewhat at a loss for company. She'd aided in the restoration of the Hogwarts grounds, but it couldn't be said that her heart was truly in the project. While part of her did long to see the most important and recognizable monument of her youth returned to its former glory, she couldn't bring herself to share in the enthusiasm bubbling amongst her coworkers. Having spent so many years dreaming of beginning her apprenticeship at this point in her life, even Hermione Granger had to admit...though only to herself...that she felt somewhat melancholy at the thought of returning to school.

Staring at the makeshift shelters they'd erected surrounding the crumbling castle, the grounds were almost indistinguishable to her. All she could picture of her future in her increasingly disillusioned mind's eye were long, dark winter days spent in dank classrooms and stuffy student quarters. This time, though, there would be so many missing, so many incredible people with whom she'd spent the formative years of her life and education.

Restoring her parents' memories, too, had failed to put the spark back in her outlook. Ron and Harry had hugged her warmly and sent her off to Australia expecting the best possible news, but upon her return Hermione had glossed over the truly critical aspect of her trip. In some strange way...some indefinable quality she still constantly sought to pinpoint...her parents were no longer themselves.

Oh, they'd remembered her instantly, of course, and they were thrilled to hear that the infamous Lord Voldemort had been defeated. They joined her wholeheartedly in mourning those lost, and they professed endless excitement when she told them that the Ministry of Magic had offered her the chance to complete her Hogwarts schooling. Her Order of Merit had even brought proud tears to her mother's eyes.

It was there that their enthusiasm seemed to end abruptly. They had no desire to return to their London home; Australia suited them beautifully well, they claimed. Hermione herself certainly couldn't deny that...both looked fit, tanned and exceptionally healthy...but the parents she'd known would never have voluntarily given up their beloved practice and, even more shockingly, their beloved London. She'd gushed obligingly over their new home, wished them the best, and promised to visit over the holidays if possible. The return journey had left her in an unshakable trance. She'd wandered around London for three or four hours before Apparating back to Grimmauld Place, feeling alarmingly at loose ends.

It hurt her, now, to recall that the one incident to drag her from her increasingly deep funk was Severus Snape himself. St. Mungo's Healers had been quick to confirm upon his arrival in the hands of the Aurors that he had, indeed, been taking potions intended to preempt any violence inflicted by his master's enormous serpent. Still, weeks of additional treatment by the most talented Healers in the country were required to restore him to some semblance of vitality. For weeks Grimmauld Place had teemed with tension as Ron, Hermione and Ginny struggled to reconcile their personal feelings for the man with the astonishing revelations Harry had confided in them. Hermione recalled long nights spent in desultory reflection, consumed with wondering if she would ever again see him stalk the halls of Hogwarts. The announcement of his official pardon by the Wizengamot and subsequent approval to return to work made her heart soar.

Her memories of lying on that dusty bed in the bedroom she shared with Ginny at Grimmauld Place were vivid indeed. After long days spent at the castle, she would eagerly open the *Prophet*, cracking a smile at the quotes and descriptions of Snape. He had shunned outright all possibility of public adoration and never for a moment sought to cultivate it. The fact that Harry had gone to the *Prophet* in a moment of panic, terrified and guilt-ridden as Snape had teetered dangerously on the precipice of death, and publicly admitted what he'd seen in the memories had only further enraged the man when he awoke and they were returned to him.

Harry had meant well, Hermione knew. His heart, sickened by the thought of how he'd treated the man who had loved Lily Evans so deeply, had undoubtedly been in the right place. Some had accused him of wanting to steal the spotlight for his mother and thus keep the public eye concentrated predominantly on his own family, but Hermione didn't for a moment believe that Snape had been one of them. Even Snape, if he'd been forced, would probably have...grudgingly...admitted as much. It was simply that no one could understand what they perceived as his bizarrely self-effacing and almost defiant behavior after decades of background heroism. Confronted with the image...and the *proof*...of him as a romantic martyr, driven for decades on little sustenance but the memory of a love of that magnitude.... That concept, paired in writing with Snape's name, was enough to make the collective public head ache.

Hermione had understood. She thought that she had, anyhow. It seemed a virtual guarantee that he had passed many years of his life fully expecting to die at the hands of his master. Given a second lease on life, he'd sought what wizards of his nature seemed to crave most...solitude. To her it appeared that what Snape had wanted above all else in the chaotic aftermath was peace and quiet.

She'd shared in the almost physical longing for solitude and escape. It was only two days before his release from St. Mungo's and subsequent struggle for anonymity that she'd discovered Ron and Lavender in Ron's bed. Lavender had been disingenuously apologetic; Ron had looked embarrassed more than anything, though he had apologized as well.

Hermione couldn't recall his apology or what she'd made of it then, the details clouded by the reddish haze of her fury. Mostly she recalled Lavender's airy, semi-

transparent shirt lying atop Ron's trousers on the dusty floor. If she'd gone around wearing lipstick in the hottest months of summer and flashing amounts of cleavage equal to Lavender, would he have been patient enough to eventually make his way into *her* bed? Would she really have wanted him to?

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It didn't take long for Headmistress McGonagall to find out about Snape's refusal to pen her a recommendation letter and come knocking. Hermione couldn't fathom how she'd managed to discover so quickly what had transpired; but then again, the woman was showing a remarkable ability to equal, and in some cases even best, Albus Dumbledore when it came to frightening omniscience.

Opening the door of the room she shared with Ginny, Hermione groaned internally as she caught sight of the older woman, exhausted by the thought of the discussion to follow. She knew she should feel grateful that Professor McGonagall cared so deeply about her, but she didn't think she could stomach giving explanations and accepting apologies. She wanted to be left alone.

"Miss Granger?" The Headmistress, every gray hair tucked and pinned immaculately in place, looked visibly startled. Hermione could only imagine the reddened, puffy-eyed countenance that was currently staring back at the poor woman, and she sympathized immediately. She knew she looked a fright. Forcing herself to stand up straighter, she nodded slightly.

"Goodness, Miss Granger, are you quite all right? I heard what happened this afternoon, and I assure you I shall be speaking with Professor Snape on your behalf..."

"No." Hermione was surprised by the force with which it came out. Her tongue, driven there by Snape's words, still felt adhered to the roof of her mouth.

"Excuse me?"

"I mean, no, thank you, ma'am. I would prefer that you didn't speak to Professor Snape."

"But surely, Miss Granger, you realize that I cannot stand for this kind of unjust treatment...especially not when the Ministry was kind enough to reinstate him despite his limitations."

Hermione cringed at that. There had been no question of exonerating Snape of the crimes he'd committed considering the critical nature of his work and suffering; the public, thinking not so much of him but of beautiful, luminous, innocent Lily Evans, surely wouldn't have stood for it.

Questions had been raised, however, as to his ability to control a classroom in his still-weakened condition. She'd tried very, very hard not to closely observe the way the Potions master limped about his own dungeon, his body visibly suffering the lingering toxicity of Nagini's venom. She'd tried very hard over the years not to allow herself to indulge in closely observing him physically in *any* way, but viewing his pain...and contending daily with the knowledge that the damage to his pride was unfathomably worse...had begun to bore a deep hole in her chest.

"He didn't say what he did unjustly and without reason, Professor," she found herself reciting almost mechanically. "He's absolutely right. My marks in Potions have only been that good because I follow his directions and memorize everything before class. I don't really *know* what I'm doing. Not on any instinctive level, anyway," she clarified softly.

McGonagall's eyes narrowed perceptibly, probably hunting for signs of verbal abuse by Hogwarts' least favorite instructor. Hermione hastened to add, "I don't mind, really. What he said has forced me to reevaluate what I want to do with my life, with my career, and I think there's something to be said for spending more time closely considering what I'm passionate about."

McGonagall shifted her slim weight, causing Hermione to start. She'd never seen the Headmistress look discomfited in such a way. "I am... glad to hear that you're handling this with such grace, my dear," she replied finally. Hermione, unused to such open affection from her former Head of House, smiled wanly despite herself. "Certainly, I shan't intercede if you don't expressly wish it, but really, I encourage you to speak with him again. The man has had a difficult time of it these past few months..."

*These past few decades*, Hermione's mind whispered.

"I'm sure that once we've all had time to adjust, he'll regain some perspective," McGonagall concluded with crisp finality. Hermione nodded numbly and gripped at her messy ponytail, tossing it over her shoulder. She'd entirely forgotten that she was wearing nothing but a thin tank top and sweats over her underthings, and while Ginny was accustomed to seeing her in such attire, Headmistress McGonagall was decidedly *not*.

Finally, she left with a parting murmur that she'd see Hermione at supper. Hermione, boneless and tired, let the door click shut and exhaled loudly. She allowed her head to thump back against the door's heavy, solid presence. Ginny was likely on her way to the Great Hall to eat supper with her friends. Hermione alone had accepted the Ministry's offer to continue her education, and with Harry and Ron in training to play professional Quidditch, she felt desperately alone. Recalling the enormous argument she'd had with them over the foolishness of forgoing their NEWTs altogether, she clenched her fists and gritted her teeth.

She didn't much miss Ron's presence, of course, she reflected, flopping down on her bed. Regardless how many times he'd apologized and agreed that they should strive to mend their friendship, he wasn't above parading Lavender in front of her, and Hermione remained disgusted by the thought of his thorough lack of self-control. Even Ginny had bluntly commented to her older brother that it was pathetic he'd cheated on his girlfriend simply to get sex as quickly and easily as possible, but coming from Ginny...whom Hermione knew to be sleeping with Harry at every possible opportunity...it hadn't done much to ease the ache of rejection in those first few weeks.

She refused to regret her decisions and give in to the belief that she had somehow owed Ron her virginity. She'd been distraught...they all had...and unlike Ron, she couldn't have relied on a few quick thrusts and an occasional orgasm in the cramped bedrooms of Grimmauld Place to alleviate the trauma. The thought that perhaps he had known more than she'd assumed about the deeper source of her pain had occasionally crossed her mind, but she'd never allowed herself to entertain it more than fleetingly.

She rose slowly and approached her trunk, pulling out a jumper and yanking it over her clammy skin. Outside, the growing wind howled against the stone walls of the ancient castle, making her shiver.

Her enthusiasm for rebuilding Hogwarts over the summer had increased considerably when everyone had suggested that she be allotted the library as her domain. The damage wrought by the previous year had been astounding, and much of Hogwarts' beautiful collection had been removed or permanently destroyed to make room for volumes more appropriate to the current political climate. Repairing the damaged texts and ordering replacements...for those volumes not so archaic that replacement was impossible...had put her wholly in her element, and she was happy there, away from the worried eyes of the other workers, whose curiosity about her falling out with Ron aggravated her.

Progressively, her anger and depression had taken her over, and she'd found herself doing far more reading than actual sorting and repairing. The house-elves, noticing with their usual perspicacity her listlessness, had ventured frequently from the kitchen to ply her with tea and sweets. Cloistered in the library, sipping and chewing alternately to occupy her shaky hands, she'd begun to dream about the day that she would be the most talented and respected Healer in residence at St. Mungo's. Hermione hadn't thought she was capable of gaining as much weight as she had over just those couple of months. She didn't think her Hogwarts uniform would be capable of handling it all that much longer either.

She was staring out the window, lost in reverie, when the door opened softly and Ginny returned. "Hey," the other girl murmured, her hair glinting like bronze in the faint light of the torch beside the door. She was still clothed in her school garb. "You okay? You're not hungry?"

"No." She was, but she'd grown to discover that what she thought of as hunger was little related to physical need. She could only hope Ginny would remain in the room for the rest of the evening, effectively preventing her from making her nightly trip to the Hogwarts kitchens.

"You're not dwelling on Ron again, are you?" Ginny had been ridiculously, achingly kind to her about Ron's asinine behavior, and her hand came to rest on Hermione's shoulder. "You need to stop thinking about him. He's not worth it. If that's his outlook on relationships, Merlin knows he and Lavender deserve one another."

Hermione barked an appreciative but hollow laugh, letting the window drapes fall out of her hands and collide softly together. "I know. That's not what I was thinking about."

"Then what?" She could hear the sounds of fabric rustling as Ginny changed out of her school uniform and into casual evening clothes. Before long static electricity crackled as she began to run a brush through her hair.

"I went to talk to Snape this afternoon." Hermione's weary body led her woodenly back to her bed, encouraging her to hide beneath the covers. The down comforter, which she'd Transfigured a calming midnight blue, beckoned her.

"About the Medicinal Potions apprenticeship?"

"Mm-hmm." She pulled the comforter across her chest and rubbed her feet together vigorously, regaining warmth.

"Do you have the letter?"

"No." She didn't know why she was dragging the confession out like this. Circumlocution wasn't going to delay the inevitable long enough for the letter to appear before her. It was unthinkable that Snape would change his mind regardless how much time she allotted him. Wishing it were otherwise would be foolish.

"He's not going to let you read it before he sends it off, then? I kind of figured the git would do something like that." The words were spoken teasingly, however...which Hermione found relieving. Criticism of Snape, considering what aspects of his past the recent months had brought to light, never failed to spark her ire.

"He's not going to write it at all."

Ginny's hand and brush stilled in her thick hair. "Wait... What? *Herefused?*"

"Yes."

"He can't refuse!" Her voice was genuinely critical now, and Hermione knew she ought to feel grateful for her friend's ardent defense. "You're his best student. Merlin, you're probably the best student that man's ever *had* in all his years of teaching! He can't just... refuse!"

"Oh, but he can," Hermione muttered darkly against her pillow.

"But... How?" Ginny looked dumbfounded.

"He did it quite straightforwardly, actually," Hermione mused. "Not that he had time to rehearse it, obviously, but he made it pretty clear he didn't even need to give me a second thought." Ginny's lovely lips were curling in evident disgust. "He told me no, and then he proceeded to explain to me that I lack any deeper Potions talent and can't get through my career by memorization alone."

"Rubbish," Ginny spat. "You've got just as much talent as he has."

Hermione remained silent and thoughtful. She really didn't; she realized that now. It was crystal clear, painfully obvious after years of slogging through dizzying recipes and Potions texts.

"I think you should tell McGonagall," Ginny continued, now at full steam. Her hair brush had long since been tossed aside and forgotten. "She'll have words with him, I'm sure. She'll set him straight."

"She knows," Hermione replied tonelessly. "She knows everything."

"That doesn't surprise me," Ginny conceded momentarily, but then she forged ahead again. "And what did she say? She's going to talk some sense into him, isn't she? You've got more talent than any of his other students."

"I don't want her talking to him. What's done is done."

"You're not just going to give up, are you? Hermione, you *deserve* this apprenticeship. You deserve it more than any of the other candidates, and besides, you can't seriously think you're not talented enough."

"But I'm not. He's absolutely right."

"Rubbish! You can do it without him and prove him *wrong*."

"Oh, come on, Ginny." She could feel the irritation rising in her chest. "You're sweet to defend me, but think about it...what *if*'ve been wrong all this time? All these years I've wanted *some* kind of acknowledgment from him that I was *great*, and he never gave it. He never praised me. I always figured it was because he couldn't afford *to* appear biased, especially in front of Draco Malfoy..."

"May he suffer eternally," Ginny interjected bitterly. Hermione fell silent. She couldn't bring herself to speak ill of the younger Malfoy, whose true loyalties would now never be elucidated. His suicide two weeks after the final battle had seen to that.

"I was wrong about it all." Her voice, when she spoke again, was airy, almost Luna-like in its tone of epiphany. "I was wrong about everything. I thought he *hated* me and couldn't bear to admit how smart I was. I was convinced he resented the fact that I was the bigger person and could bring myself to respect him as a professor and an Order member despite how he treated us. Sometimes I thought that he just figured I loathed and pitied him. He thought everyone hated him, after all."

"Everyone did hate him." The arch of Ginny's brow clearly conveyed that she believed she was stating the obvious.

"I didn't hate him," Hermione said lamely.

Silence fell over the room. Outside the sun had since set, and thick twilight was beginning to descend over the castle grounds. Hermione stared at the darkness and thought of oppression, of cold, of Dementors and the broken bodies of Nymphadora Tonks and Remus Lupin. How was their son? she found herself wondering. She'd never been especially comfortable around children, but in her most introspective moments she couldn't help but admit to herself that someday she wanted the depth of connection she so envied in mothers and their children. Would he be speaking his first words? Had he already? She knew so little about such things.

"I know you don't want me to say this again," Ginny's voice began gently from the other bed, "but really, Hermione, are you okay? Everyone's worried about you. I like being your roommate, but we both know why we're here. McGonagall's worried about you, and she's been worried since summer. You're depressed, you're even more neurotic about your grades than usual, and you look like you're about to cry all the time."

"Aren't you?" Hermione shot back defensively.

"I cry," Ginny admitted automatically, unreserved. "I cry at night. I cry in the shower. Every day I see Fred's face when we sit down to breakfast and I almost start crying in front of the entire table. And then I think about Teddy going to Hogwarts without Remus and Tonks to see him off at King's Cross, and I start to cry again. But it's different

with you. This apprenticeship was the only thing getting you through the day. Even I could see that, and McGonagall knew it too. Merlin knows she sees everything lately. She can see how embarrassed you are to be in school a year behind, and I don't resent being your roommate to give you some company, but Hermione...

"You've got to move on with your life. Ron's an imbecile; we all know that. He's my brother and I love him, but he treated you horribly. Snape's equally stupid, and I know you respect him, but he's not worth this either. Don't refrain from asking McGonagall to talk to him because you think it will destroy your last chance at ever earning his respect in return."

"I don't need to destroy it. I never had it in the first place."

"Then that's a testament to precisely what an imbecile the man is, and you're going to prove him wrong." Ginny rose smoothly to her feet, her petite, Quidditch-toned frame making Hermione's head spin briefly with envy. "I'm going to take a shower, okay? Think about what I said. Are you coming to watch practice tomorrow morning, by the way?"

"Yes. Maybe. I'll think about it."

The redhead smiled radiantly for the first time that evening. "That's more like it. If you don't want to give in and ask McGonagall to talk to him, fine...you'll think of another way to get that recommendation letter. Don't dwell on Snape."

*What else do I ever do?* Hermione wondered absently as Ginny left for the bathroom.

## Two

### Chapter 3 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

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"Being herself" was a commitment the Grangers' only daughter had been strongly encouraged to make from the beginning. She'd fretted about the other children at Hogwarts, and her mother had said consolingly, "Just be yourself," as she brushed a stray curl off of her daughter's forehead, kissing her goodbye at King's Cross. "All you have to do is be yourself, and everyone will love you for who you are. I promise."

Even at that age, Hermione had been sharp enough...and skeptical enough...to furrow her brows and wonder about the validity of that particular claim. Still, she'd been brought up with an unflagging devotion to her parents, and she always did as they instructed. She'd tried to be faithful to her mother's advice.

That had sure gone over well, she reflected wryly. Somehow, between leaving her Muggle school and entering Hogwarts, the rules had altered drastically. Her efforts, though noticed and applauded by many of her Hogwarts teachers, went largely unappreciated by the students. Those that did notice her only seemed to ridicule her. Some had despised her outright and made no secret of the fact. Ron's behavior, in retrospect, seemed downright civil compared to some of the treatment she'd endured at Hogwarts. She quickly discovered that her fellow students were more than willing to act kindly and obligingly when they desired something in return, but she'd found very few of them to be genuinely nice, and even fewer had sincerely liked her. She'd doled out hours of free tutoring and thousands of answers but received little heartfelt friendship in return.

Her father had also, like her mother, advocated the practice of "just being oneself." Simply being herself, if the adults in her life were as knowledgeable as they claimed, would confer mastery over her lifestyle and the unerring respect of everyone in it. Lying in bed the morning after her complete and wholesale humiliation at Snape's hands, staring dolefully at the burgundy canopy surrounding her, Hermione didn't feel in control of her life. She didn't feel remotely powerful in even a single aspect of it, damn it. What she *did* feel was angry, a hissing, spitting fury that had burgeoned overnight into a separate physical being squatting in her chest.

Most frustrating of all was the harsh reality facing her that day: she had no one at whom to direct this formidable feeling currently consuming her. Conceding that Snape was correct in his judgment of her Potions abilities was the most difficult thing she'd had to do, and coming from one of Voldemort's conquerors, she thought, that had to mean something. Still, she couldn't let herself be so immature as to indulge in self-pity. Bemoaning the injustice of his decision wasn't going to get her into St. Mungo's apprenticeship program. It wasn't going to pass her practical Medicinal Potions exams or heal anyone's injuries, small or grievous. Being herself in general wasn't destined to get her very far where Snape was concerned. It never had.

Ron hadn't seemed too impressed either, seeing as being Hermione Granger didn't result in the two of them fucking shamelessly in an ungainly tangle of legs and arms in his bed at Grimmauld Place. Only being Lavender Brown guaranteed that end. Hermione snorted. She didn't consider herself a hopeless romantic carting around extravagant illusions about sex, but still, she couldn't have imagined a more unpleasant way to lose her virginity than in the profoundly uncomfortable bedrooms of Grimmauld Place...and with his parents so closely nearby, nonetheless. If she hadn't entered the room when she had, Crookshanks would likely have beat her to it...and there was no telling what he'd have done when faced with the sight of Ron's pasty rear end jerking to and fro gracelessly. She envisioned angry red scratch marks and felt heartened.

After several hours of thoroughly unproductive seething while she counted the decorative stitches in the canopy, she began to feel a giggle rising in her cramped chest. Shocked at first, she coughed and buried her face in the pillow, not wanting to wake Ginny, who still slumbered soundly. It had suddenly occurred to her...a bizarre juxtaposition of the anger she still felt and the strange, hysterical humor taking her over...that she couldn't possibly hold herself culpable for Snape's rejection due to the practice of *being herself*. After all, she hadn't put any more *genuine* faith in her mother's soft murmurs that day than she had while listening to Ron's litany of excuses as Lavender posed provocatively on his bed. She hadn't tried to be herself. She tried endlessly to be what she thought her parents and her teachers wanted most.

No, there was no denying it...she'd never really given her own desires her full attention or effort. She hadn't been living a lie, but what real passions had she subjugated over the years, a willing sacrifice to remain at the top of her class and foremost in her professors' attentions? Hermione Granger devoted her time to marathon bouts of studying for exams scheduled months in the future. Hermione Granger sought to gain her teachers' unquestioning respect and admiration because she was addicted to the feeling of basking in her own accomplishments. Hermione Granger proved herself superior to all others attending Hogwarts for no other reason than she'd always thought she *should*. Wasn't it what one did, strive to be the best? She'd been handed the enormous privilege of a top-rate education at the hands of the most talented educators in the Wizarding world. It seemed only logical that she should long to be the best of the best.

It was what she should have done, she assured herself vehemently. She hadn't strayed from herself in that respect. She wanted to graduate at the top of her class and be

the best that she possibly could. To pursue St. Mungo's simply to prove Snape wrong, though...that she could not, with any amount of self-respect, allow herself to do. She'd wanted to become a Potions mistress and Healer because she knew perfectly well the prestige that came with each title and the awe with which she'd be viewed by the public. While Harry and Ron sought validation on the Quidditch field, she'd spent her life seeking accolades for her intellect.

She had no deep and abiding passion for Potions. She enjoyed it immensely, of course, but it was no greater an appreciation than she felt for any other academic subject, the logical feelings of someone who relished academia in general. It was the most difficult subject she'd faced in her time at Hogwarts, and thus she'd somehow arrived at the conclusion that it was necessary for her to embark upon further and more advanced studies to prove her abilities. Not once had she stared into her cauldron and openly confronted the fact that potion making was decidedly not the direction in which her strengths and desires lay. What was she trying to prove? Ginny was absolutely right...she had talent in abundance. The fact that it didn't lie in the Potions arena wasn't going to make her feel the need to debase herself before Snape. She wasn't going to desperately seek assistance that she could honestly admit, in all frankness and maturity, she didn't desire in the first place.

Did he think she would return? Did he think she would beg him?

If she was going to prove him wrong, Hermione decided fervently, it was destined to be in an entirely different manner than he was undoubtedly expecting.

Dawn was faintly touching the castle grounds when she turned onto her side and sank into the pillows with a genuinely happy sigh. There was no guarantee that after all these years her parents' advice would work, but it was worth a try, wasn't it? She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case.

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Being Hermione Granger, she later decided, involved not caring whether Ginny's hair always looked more artfully styled and her skin expertly made up. She'd battled her own unruly hair into submission after her shower and eventually forced it into a thick plait, whereupon her patience had entirely evaporated. It could frizz out on the top of her head for all she cared. Pulling on a long brown skirt and loose blue jumper, she regarded herself in the mirror with a pleasure she hadn't felt in months. It wasn't absolute self-acceptance, to be sure...but it was a start.

She followed Ginny down to the Great Hall for breakfast with an easy, casual spring in her step. Ginny, somehow sensing the inexplicable elevation in her mood, was chatting animatedly about how much she loved Saturdays and how well the Gryffindor team was performing that season. Hermione nodded and murmured her agreement every so often, but truthfully, her attention lay elsewhere. She was mentally steeling herself for the most difficult challenge she faced in being Hermione Granger.

Minutes later she chewed idly at her toast, forcing herself not to stare too interestedly at the staff table. Refraining from begging Snape for a letter of recommendation might be effortless, as it turned out, but refraining from staring at the oddly seductive way his fingers brushed against his goblet was considerably more difficult.

"Hermione!" Ginny was staring at her in amusement. She swallowed rather loudly.

"Yes?"

"I was just going to tell everyone that you decided to come watch us. Hermione's coming to watch practice today!" Ginny reiterated excitedly to the other members of the Gryffindor team. Hermione was touched by Ginny's exuberance. She was loath to consider just how deeply her behavior over the past few months had vexed her friends.

The surrounding Gryffindors ceased shoveling breakfast into their mouths and looked in her direction, visibly skeptical. She gave a nod and a reasonable facsimile of a smile and was pleased to see that a few smiled back before returning to their food. Perhaps she could coax them into believing she was slightly human after all.

Reaching for her goblet of pumpkin juice, Hermione gulped nervously. The morning's feeling of liberation and renewal still tingled through her, but facing the entire Great Hall was another situation entirely. She'd spent the eight weeks since the fall term had begun holed up in the library during every available moment, gorging herself on books, knowing with sickening certainty that she would later similarly gorge herself on the house-elves' sweets in the Hogwarts kitchen, her own brand of escapism. It was maddening how little control she'd had over her thoughts and actions, but the realization felt especially harsh when sitting amongst her peers.

Dutifully, she followed Ginny out to the Quidditch pitch when the meal had concluded and stood on the sidelines, admiring her friend fly. Ginny didn't quite possess Harry's crowd-pleasing flair, and her maneuvers didn't register at the level of the most phenomenal players in the sport, but Hermione found her a true marvel to watch. The shock of being outdoors, in the glare of the sun and the public eye, after so long made her shake lightly where she stood.

The team members, if they found her presence startling or unbelievable, didn't allow that fact to register in their expressions. They set about hollering orders at one another and executing flight plays with effortless familiarity, and Hermione relaxed under the obvious knowledge that no one was looking at her. Gradually, her initial shivering and second thoughts dissipated, and she was left with a novel feeling of contentment. It was a beautiful, crisp fall day, absolutely perfect for Quidditch. The Gryffindors were flying extraordinarily well, and many of the professors had turned out to admire that year's impressive team. The Headmistress had of course managed to find time in her busy schedule to watch her beloved Gryffindors, and Hermione was pleased to note that she spent an inordinate amount of time watching Ginny, who magnificently outshone all the others. Her friend's athleticism, far from sending Hermione into a fit of self-loathing that morning, began to make her feel almost giddily proud.

Professor Vector, Hermione's favorite instructor to date, stood solidly beside Professor McGonagall, casting an analytical eye on the players as they circled above. Best of all, Hermione soon decided, was the fact that Snape wasn't present to cloud her renewed mind with uncertainty and other, more terrifying emotions.

A flash of black at the opposite edge of the pitch caught her eye, and her breath hitched painfully. She'd been too complacent, it seemed. There he was, coming to a stop at the sidelines, standing upright independently but still visibly strained. His desire to be separated from his colleagues couldn't have been more readable, but that was nothing particularly shocking. His face and frame remained immobile, but Hermione knew that had she dared to approach him, his dark eyes would be flickering rapidly back and forth, following the movements of Slytherin's most promising rivals. Worriedly, she found herself wondering if McGonagall had managed to catch him alone to lecture him since the previous afternoon. Caught between admiring Ginny and her wild speculations, she hoped fervently that whatever was destined to pass between the two professors had already occurred.

Or maybe, her mind thought frantically, McGonagall wouldn't notice him at all.

Too late.

She'd spotted him.

Hermione watched with mounting dread as the Headmistress' head swiveled and took in the sight of her colleague. With a quickly murmured word to Professor Vector, she straightened her shoulders and marched smartly over to the Potions professor, proceeding to deliver a rant the likes of which Hermione had never witnessed. It was awe-inspiring, really. Power seemed to radiate from the Headmistress in tangible waves. Hermione couldn't hear their voices, of course, but she found that she didn't need to be privy to the words themselves to recognize the stony fury on the Potions master's thin face. Their gazes flicked across the pitch in tandem, alighting on her, and she felt her cheeks begin to blaze with mortification.

Instantly she redirected her own gaze to the sky and resumed watching the players. Peripherally, it was clear that McGonagall was still berating Snape, but there was no wiser option at her disposal than to simply ignore the two of them. McGonagall, she assured herself, was a woman of her word; if she'd felt the need to lecture Snape, it wouldn't be expressly on Hermione's behalf, so he had no reason to involve her in the exchange if she kept her mouth shut.

Dedicated wholly to that plan, Hermione clapped with genuine exuberance when Ginny performed a swift recapture of the Quaffle and took off smoothly. Straightening her House scarf and pulling it more snugly about her chilled throat, she dared a glance back at the professors. McGonagall had moved away from Snape physically, but their eyes were still locked onto one another, his expression mutinous. Her stomach flopped nervously and landed on the cold grass below her when she realized, sickened, that he was making his way deliberately towards her. The fleeting thought that it was his stiff limp, more than anything, that tore at her heart served only to discomfit Hermione further. She immediately feigned interest in the practice as he approached her, his cloak drifting in the strong autumn wind.

He stopped a few feet in front of her, imperious. "Miss Granger," he greeted her, his voice gravelly. She ignored the telltale flare of heat in her abdomen. It took her a moment to realize that while his pinched expression seemed the same as always, she hadn't heard that underlying tone in his voice since they'd watched him fall in the Shrieking Shack, coated in his own blood.

*He's in pain*, she realized forlornly, the previous emotions dissipating. He was in excruciating, debilitating pain, even if he refused to show it.

Hermione stifled the overwhelming urge to reach for him and try to alleviate some of his burden. Striving for nonchalance, she said simply, "Hello, Professor." Her voice was neutral, not too tremulous, she was satisfied to note. She then returned her gaze to Ginny, whose perch on her broom was growing increasingly tense. She was coiled, preparing to strike, and Hermione's hopeless ignorance of game strategy left her in complete suspense.

"I trust you are... well?" It took her a moment, caught up in observing Ginny, to recognize that Snape was still speaking to her. Startled, Hermione looked back to him and said rather bluntly,

"Excuse me?"

"I said, I trust you are well?"

Her eyes narrowed so obviously that she could feel her brows furrow. Her anxiety was being replaced by suspicion and a faint irritation. The Headmistress had clearly put him up to this. Was he leading up to an apology? She didn't want an apology, and certainly not from him. An apology from someone who'd only been honest with her...however unendurable his bluntness may have been at the time...would only have made her feel more like a child.

She settled for, "Yes. I'm fine, sir. Yourself?" Snape's implacable expression wavered just slightly. Hermione almost thought he looked surprised.

Ginny chose that moment to execute a truly spectacular maneuver, and Hermione let loose an appreciative yell that surprised even her with its volume. Snape literally jumped where he stood. Hermione laughed breathlessly as Ginny tossed her a smile and did a little victory dance on her broom and then turned back to him.

"Sorry, sir. I didn't mean to startle you. Did you see what Ginny Weasley did?"

"I did not."

She realized with chagrin that the shock of her outburst had probably further intensified his already considerable discomfort. Hermione didn't want to look at him. She couldn't take the chance that her eyes, which seemed to follow an agenda all their own in his presence, would linger on what ailed him...his thin, almost cadaverous face, the chapped lips and lank hair, and the stringy limbs that had never recovered from atrophy, losing what little muscle they'd previously held. These observations ailed her as well, more than she liked to admit...more than she could account for, even were she to accept the nagging signs of her body.

She shifted in her thick coat, aware as always that even a quick Transfiguration didn't fully accommodate the more generous proportions of her figure. Normally, it took all the discipline she could muster on a daily basis not to agonize over what he thought, if anything, of the changes; but that day, of all days, she simply wanted not to care about his, or anyone else's, opinion.

When she'd moved past the discomfort and looked back, Snape was shooting McGonagall an annoyed look as if to say, 'There, I told you she's fine.' McGonagall glared at him but nodded jerkily, and the Potions professor limped off in the direction of the castle, leaving Hermione to finally exhale.

## Three

### Chapter 4 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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"Hermione?"

Hermione chuckled at Madam Pince's hiss when Ginny's voice rang throughout the library. She was the only one studying at ten o'clock on a Saturday morning, but that didn't make any difference in the librarian's stringent rules.

"Over here," she called softly. Ginny rounded the corner of the nearest book stack and smiled brightly.

"There you are! I figured I'd find you here. Have you eaten breakfast?"

Hermione thought guiltily of the sweet buns she'd eaten in the Hogwarts kitchens several hours earlier and said simply, "Yes, I've eaten. What did you need?"

"Are you coming to Hogsmeade?" Ginny sat down across from her, and Hermione noticed that she was dressed awfully nicely for a simple trip into Hogsmeade. Her skirt had been magically hemmed to show a bit more thigh than usual, her soft brown boots lengthened to just brush the smooth skin of her pale knees. Even her hair seemed especially burnished. "Harry and Ron said they'd try to meet us if they can get out for lunch break early. Their captain's quite the taskmaster, I gather. You interested?"

"I really can't afford to take a break right now. I need to keep working on this," she replied apologetically, gesturing at the enormous stack of textbooks and parchments in front of her. Ginny nodded, peering curiously at the work load. Her hair brushed against the dusty cover of one of the larger tomes, loosing particles in a vast cloud, and she sneezed.

"Did you talk to Professor Vector yet?" she asked fuzzily, wrinkling her nose.

Hermione hesitated, embarrassed. It had been well over a month since she'd reached her decision regarding her future: she had always loved Arithmancy, and she couldn't understand why it hadn't before occurred to her to pursue her favorite subject professionally. She was never happier than when she was caught up in a series of equations that coalesced into something beautiful and simple, something that made *sense* to her. It had come to her in a dream, actually, in which she'd been vividly aware of every detail: her desk, smooth and solid and wooden, with the professional veneer of quality; the stacks of parchments strewn about it, glinting with equations that

beckoned her curiosity; the way the ink flowed from her pen, which she'd been able to truly *feel*, and the mingled scents of books and chalk as pungent and as heartrending as though she'd been in the presence of the Amortentia.

Waking to a feeling of unprecedented excitement, her heart beating rapidly, Hermione had received the revelatory flash every young scholar dreamed of...the moment she'd *known*, deeply and without any doubt, that she would become an Arithmancy Mistress. She could love it, she knew...revel in it...and she could excel. She could distinguish herself academically as she'd always wanted to do and suffer from no second thoughts. She could achieve a sense of balance in her life and give something back to the magical community that had fostered her own fascination, perhaps teaching at an institution like Hogwarts while pursuing her own research. She could apply her discipline to any number of other studies, pursuing a truly interdisciplinary career while performing a calling in which she knew herself to be tremendously gifted.

Her convictions in that moment had never felt stronger and more solidly defined. It was the awakening of her old self for which she'd longed seemingly forever. She now faced the need to convince Professor Vector to let her pursue an apprenticeship under her tutelage the following year, however. She needed and wanted...she *demand*ed...from herself a research proposal that was revolutionary, equal to the task of demonstrating her immense enthusiasm and dedication, one to blow all others out of the water. As it turned out, it hadn't taken long at all for her plans to take shape in the feverishly inspired state of her mind.

"I'm almost done," she replied, shaking herself from her recollections upon realizing that Ginny was beginning to regard her oddly. "I think I'll talk to her Monday afternoon. She's usually still in her office when we're done with Potions."

"What did you decide on for a project?" Ginny had risen and was glancing out the window longingly toward Hogsmeade. Hermione remembered that it had been some time since Ginny had had the chance to see her boyfriend and felt a sympathetic pang. She'd dressed herself up on the simple chance that he would be capable of making it into town.

"I'm not absolutely sure yet. I can't decide between applied and theoretical, and the project I'm most interested in has elements of both. I'd like to pursue both concurrently, to be honest."

"Then why not suggest it to Vector?" Ginny suggested. "She's pretty heavily involved in research for the Ministry during her spare time; I hear the other professors talking about her all the time. She edits journals, too. She'd probably love a new challenge."

Hermione had opened her mouth to launch into a detailed explanation of the hitch in her plan...the application of Arithmantic analysis to mediwizardry solutions...when Ginny interjected with, "Look, I'm sorry, but I really need to get going. I *am* sorry!" She was already partway to the door, shrugging helplessly. "I promise I'll let you explain *every boring detail* to me over supper, though!"

Hermione gave her a mock glare and shoed her out. "Fine. Have fun! I'll talk to you later, okay?"

Ginny waved goodbye and headed out happily, leaving Hermione to relish a moment of pure contentment. Ginny had been wonderfully supportive lately...invaluably so...and she was finally beginning to see the sunlight through the clouds, to use an old expression her mother favored.

Rising to stretch her stiff limbs, she stole a few moments from her research to pace back and forth before the window and do just that...admire the unusually vivid blue of the sky as it peeked through the cloud cover that day. The weather had been beautiful lately, as though it now felt the need to compensate for the overabundance of gray, hazy days that had dominated their lives...and moods...the previous year. Giving an appreciative sigh, she returned to the table and sorted idly through her parchments. She'd long since passed the mark of fifty and was still plowing steadily ahead. With every additional parchment added on to the already precariously balanced pile, she felt an increased thrill.

Hermione had undertaken some rather serious introspection over the course of the past month, largely of the variety her Muggle relatives would have jokingly termed soul searching. She knew that her greatest passion lay in Arithmancy and that she also loved Charms, and she couldn't help but feel incredibly energized by the thought of performing Arithmantic analyses at the professional level. What she required was a proposal of sufficient sophistication and depth to illustrate to Professor Vector that she had the skills, talent and tenacity required to study under her the following year. It was unusual for a Hogwarts professor to accept an apprentice, as it was understood that the apprentice had to possess the abilities to handle the lower-level classes and perform teaching duties in order to compensate for the additional drain on the already busy professor's time. There were alternative avenues for her to pursue, of course...others who would undoubtedly have jumped at the chance to take on one of Harry Potter's best friends as an apprentice...but just as she'd felt prior to approaching Snape, Hermione wanted no complications to come between herself and her teacher. Professor Vector would be honest with her, just as Snape had, and the fame and reputation she'd garnered since the final battle would be entirely irrelevant. If she was accepted, she could be totally confident that it was on the basis of her talents alone.

Research material, of course, she had in abundance. The Hogwarts library was fully stocked in that regard and with plenty of high-quality Arithmancy texts and journals, many of which she herself had ordered over the summer. What she wanted...what had occurred to her in one of her three o'clock morning revelations...was to apply her skill, the area in which she *did* have genuine talent, to helping others. She knew there was probably a deeper psychological reason for her fixation...some form of lingering survivor's guilt since the war...but there was no getting around it: these ruminations always led her inevitably to one area...healing.

More specifically, she thought with mounting excitement, healing charms and potions. It wasn't unheard of for Arithmancy experts to employ extremely difficult analyses in the development of new and improved healing methods, but the opportunities to find willing patients for clinical trials were slim. The most recent example she'd been able to dig up of such an event, a successfully revolutionized healing method...in this case, a potion...had taken place during Grindelwald's reign.

Hermione already clung desperately to an idea, but she wasn't sure she could possibly admit it to Professor Vector. She wanted to explore the possibility of Charming healing potions to intuitively sense and seek out areas of the body acting "unnaturally"...in other words, in pain. Such Charms already existed; they could be cast over the form of the sufferer in order to literally illuminate for the attending Healer the regions of the body affected by damage or injury. The difficulty lay in subsequently dosing the patient with the appropriate potions. Healing charms weren't effective over a prolonged enough period of time to treat chronic injuries, and potions, since they couldn't yet knowingly concentrate themselves in only the necessary regions, lost efficacy when spread out over the sheer volume of blood and tissue in the human body.

It was reckless, perhaps, but she didn't see why it wouldn't be possible to cast a Charm during the critical stages of potion making that would allow the potion to concentrate itself where it was most needed. There were ingredients that made potions more potent, more competent, more *susceptible* to the words their makers murmured as they stirred the cauldrons. There were potions so similar in their basic and most critical ingredients that only the subtlest differences in wording or enunciation prevented their dosage from killing rather than invigorating.

For Hermione, it was the ideal situation: it allowed her to immerse herself in the most challenging theoretical Arithmantic calculations of which she was capable at that point in her academic career, and it also provided if not the guarantee, then the *possibility* of future applied work if and when a willing subject entered the picture.

It also provided her with the means, at least in her rapidly whirring mind, to cure Severus Snape's lingering maladies. But that was the part she most decidedly *could* admit to Professor Vector.

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"It would be wise," Snape was murmuring silkily, "to follow the directions precisely as I have worded them. You will find the outcome unpleasant if you do not properly skin the shrivel figs."

Ginny made a face at Hermione when he'd finally turned his back, and Hermione shot back an annoyed look at her friend. Modification of Shrinking Solution at the advanced level was difficult enough without Ginny chancing Snape's ire. It certainly didn't improve matters that since delivering his unfortunate decision regarding her recommendation letter, he'd behaved no differently toward Hermione in Potions, but *she* was uncomfortably aware of him...even more so than usual.

She'd always had a habit of reacting to his proximity. From an alarmingly young age, in fact, she'd been abnormally sensitive to certain aspects of his presence. Ginny,



thank God, didn't seem to take much notice...yet. She seemed to remain oblivious even to the delicious way his voice would caress every ingredient, never failing to make Hermione shiver with its timbre.

Still, Hermione had lately begun to worry that Ginny might prove to be a dangerous lab partner. If she wasn't careful...if she couldn't learn to control the heat that suffused her cheeks whenever he passed nearby...Ginny was going to start taking notice. She may have been caught up in frequent daydreams of Harry, but she wasn't going to remain oblivious much longer...and Hermione, as adamant as ever that she didn't need cosmetics to court the attentions of irritating seventh-year boys, couldn't very well have blamed her reactions on the overeager application of blush.

"Think he stays up at night talking to a mirror, practicing what to say to scare us?" Ginny whispered, her hands clumsily skinning the shrivel fig. Hermione, terrified she might soon begin with an interpretation of Snape's nightly monologues, took it from her urgently. She may have lacked *innate* Potions talent, but she could still manage to properly...perfectly, in fact...skin a shrivel fig.

Not wanting Ginny to feel hurt or put out, she waited until Snape was safely across the room, occupied with terrorizing some student's unsatisfactory technique, before she spoke. "Why are you even in this class?" she teased. It had been a topic of ongoing joking debate between she and Ginny for some time. Ginny grinned and shrugged, setting about preparing the other ingredients. She'd expressed an interest in training to be an Auror, a choice of which her parents had seemed understandably wary. Hermione suspected it was still at the casual stage, but Ginny undeniably had the sense to perform at least decently well in all her classes in order to ensure that she would stand a fighting chance in the eventual profession of her choice. It was more than could ever be said for the boys, anyway. In fact, Ginny was an exceptional student when she wanted to be. She simply had Ron's capacity for allowing apathy to overcome her common sense at times.

Hermione was concentrating deeply on her shrivel fig, not really expecting Ginny to answer. Her whisper, complete with feigned longing, came as a complete shock.

"Because I just can't live without hearing Snape's sexy voice."

Hermione's knife veered wildly off course and sliced deeply into the pad of her right thumb.

Ginny, she was gratified to see, looked as shocked as she did by the sight of blooming blood. Uttering a small cry, Hermione quickly staunched the bleeding with her opposite thumb and stared at her friend. What had she meant by that? She removed her finger and stared at the wound, noting with consternation that the cut had penetrated far too deeply for a simple healing spell. Attempting one would only have poorly stitched the ragged edges of her tissue.

"What the hell did you mean...?" she hissed at Ginny.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Ginny whispered ominously, her suspicious eyes boring into Hermione's. Despite her evident concern, she had a look of pure, unadulterated triumph. Just then Snape landed before them, and Hermione tore her eyes from Ginny's, squeezing back a growl of pain and frustration.

"Miss Granger. Are you incapable of shredding a shrivel fig?" His hair had fallen forward, as usual, but she could see the slight curving of his lips through its curtain. His eyes, fortunately, were shadowed.

"Apparently, sir," she snapped back boldly, then clamped her lips tightly. He raised his head and his face came fully into view, expression darkened. He opened his mouth, presumably to deliver punishment, but she beat him to it.

"I apologize, sir. I allowed myself to get distracted and I'm in pain."

She expected a scathing lecture, but instead he closed his mouth and regarded her for some moments. Hermione resisted the urge to squirm under his unexpected scrutiny. Beside her, Ginny was holding her breath, as was the majority of the class. Finally, with a glance at her bloody finger, he said simply, "Your wound will require Madam Pomfrey's assistance. Miss Weasley, you may remain here and complete the assignment to the best of your abilities"...his trademark sneer overtook his lips again..."or you may accompany Miss Granger to the hospital wing, and the two of you will consequently accept a grade of zero on this assignment. Make your decision."

He stalked off, and Ginny grabbed Hermione's hand, dragging her towards the door. Hermione, feeling somewhat in shock...and not from loss of blood...let the mention of a failing grade slide into the back of her mind and followed dumbly.

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"What's the matter with you?" she cried as Ginny dragged her into the hospital wing while the other girl shouted simultaneously, "Madam Pomfrey!"

"Girls, girls!" The mediwitch appeared at the door to her office, flustered. "Really, all this noise is inappropriate. Now what is going on?"

"I sliced my thumb in Potions," Hermione bit out distractedly. "Professor Snape said..."

"Good heavens, girl! On the bed! Quickly!" Hermione realized as Madam Pomfrey set about observing her thumb that the damage was even greater than she'd first thought. She was fortunate the magically enhanced blade hadn't struck and damaged bone.

"Miss Weasley, fetch an analgesic potion," the mediwitch said peremptorily. Ginny, fully knowledgeable of the infirmary's layout after that summer, set off toward the gigantic cabinet stocked top to bottom with medicinal potions. Hermione found herself suppressing tears as Madam Pomfrey cleaned the wound and began murmuring spells.

"I'll knit it up, of course," she told Hermione, "but I suspect you're going to need a potion to counteract the blade. One of Severus' Charmed knives, I would imagine?"

Hermione nodded, her mind latching onto Madam Pomfrey's use of his first name. She so rarely heard his colleagues refer to him as Severus. It seemed to her such a sensual name.

Ginny was staring at her oddly. It was the same look of which Hermione had been on the receiving end frequently over the past couple of months. She returned to glaring at her friend and downed the proffered analgesic potion.

Once Madam Pomfrey had dealt with the wound fully, Hermione was encouraged to continue taking regular doses of both potions for the following 24 hours. Reassuring the mediwitch multiple times that she would comply with her instructions, she waited patiently as Ginny returned to the dungeons to fetch their belongings, trying not to fuss with the magically adhered gauze strapping her thumb. Having her dominant thumb incapacitated for several days was going to be bothersome.

Finally, Ginny returned, and Hermione could tell from the look in her eyes that the two girls were going to be in for a hell of a talk. Still desperate to speak with Professor Vector...and wanting to avoid explanations as long as she possibly could...Hermione thanked Ginny for her book bag and said, "Is everyone gone?"

Ginny nodded. "Class is over, and that's your last class, so now you get to explain to *mewhat in Merlin's name happened back there*." Her voice tapered off to a breathless, almost awed whisper. Hermione managed to hold back a groan.

"I have to go talk to Professor Vector first... No! I really do!" she protested. Ginny had opened her mouth to object and was gesticulating wildly, but Hermione was already heading out the door. "I'll talk to you after supper."

"You're not going to avoid me!" Ginny shouted as Hermione fled, causing Madam Pomfrey to once again shout, "Girls! The noise!"

# Four

## Chapter 5 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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Septima Vector had always been, in Hermione's opinion, a wonderful teacher and a very agreeable woman...but she was also a sharp and well-respected intellect among her peers in the academic world of Arithmancy, and Hermione was understandably daunted by the task of presenting her research proposal to her professor. She would have felt equally nervous in the face of such a task with Professors Flitwick, McGonagall or Snape.

Snape. *Stop thinking about it*, she told herself.

Thus it was to her immense relief that, upon the completion of her well-rehearsed speech and the presentation of the outline of her plan, Professor Vector actually clapped enthusiastically. "That's fantastic, Miss Granger! Truly, it is. I haven't heard a research proposal that original in Merlin knows *how* long. Outstanding job."

Hermione, her hand paused in mid-air while holding one of her many parchments, grew wide-eyed. Given the complexity and breadth of her proposed endeavor, she'd expected her professor to be reserved and mildly enthusiastic at best. "Really, Professor? You think it would be feasible as an honors project?"

"Absolutely," Professor Vector agreed, tucking a strand of graying hair behind one ear. "Granted, this is going to require a large time commitment from you. If you're serious about using this as a branching point for studies as my apprentice, you're going to have to keep a very busy schedule from this point forward." She smiled. "But I don't imagine that's much of a stretch for you, Miss Granger. If you assure me that you are capable of juggling your usual course load with the type of time commitment you've proposed, I'll believe you without a doubt."

"I'm fully committed, and I'll spend as much time as is necessary," Hermione agreed, impassioned. Internally, she felt like screaming with relief and happiness. "I would be honored to be able to study as your apprentice if you find my work on this project satisfactory..."

"I have no doubt of that either, Miss Granger, I assure you," the woman replied with her eyes sparkling, glancing up in the direction of the open doorway. "Severus! What brings you up to this floor?"

Hermione closed her eyes reflexively and prayed she'd misheard. She cracked open an eye and glanced to the side.

No such luck. There he was, standing in the doorway, his eyes trained deliberately on her. His hair, she was startled to note, had been pulled back and bound at the nape of his neck. His classes had concluded for the day, so perhaps he'd been spending some time in his own personal laboratory. She wondered if such work ever required him to divest himself of his frock coat as well.

"Forgive the interruption," he murmured. "Miss Granger had an... incident in Potions," and was injured by one of my Charmed knives. I merely meant to inquire whether Madam Pomfrey gave her proper treatment."

"She did," Hermione said hastily, aware that her voice sounded harassed and vaguely desperate. "I'm to continue taking a potion for the next twenty-four hours. I didn't even have to inform her that the knife was Charmed, actually. She anticipated that right away. She must have dealt with them so many times in the past..." Aggravated by her own tendency to ramble, she clamped her mouth shut.

Snape gave a short nod and turned to leave. It was bizarre, the lack of movement of his hair.

"Severus, you've got to hear Miss Granger's research proposal," Professor Vector called delightedly before his shoulders had been able to disappear from view. Both Hermione and Snape turned to look at her, Snape in vague surprise and Hermione in frank astonishment. She couldn't bring herself to believe the woman would be advertising that she was seeking an alternative apprenticeship so soon after what had transpired if she'd known about it. Was it possible the usual Hogwarts gossip chain hadn't reached her?

"Research proposal?" Snape echoed. His voice held a tone. She couldn't identify it precisely, but it was there. She feared that it was clear he was mentally preparing to deride her yet again.

"Oh, yes. She's come up with quite a brilliant layout. Really, Miss Granger, you must have put hours of effort into this." Professor Vector was paging through appreciatively, her eyes lingering over particularly difficult equations and hypotheses. "And so thorough, too. You'd be proud of her, Severus, and such terrific research into healing potions and charms... Look at this!"

To Hermione's horror, Snape voluntarily stepped forward and held out a hand, smoothly accepting the abstract of her research proposal from Vector. She swallowed, afraid of choking, and forced herself to stare straight ahead rather than hang her head.

"She's come up with such an original idea," Professor Vector was rattling on. Damn the woman for being so kind with her praise. Could she legitimately damn someone for kindness? "Truly inventive," she continued, "and she's already laid some terrific theoretical groundwork, don't you agree?" Not waiting for a response from the silent Potions master, she beamed at Hermione and said, "I think with careful planning you could get into casting some initial charms on healing potions when we return to school after the holiday. Would you like that, Miss Granger?"

"Very much," Hermione croaked helplessly. She was still waiting for Snape's pronouncement of her complete inability to brew said healing potions. She hadn't anticipated getting into such depth during the course of her seventh year, and she would require extensive help...help she strongly doubted Snape would be amenable to providing.

"Mind you, I suspect it will be next to impossible to find a test subject," Vector continued. "Not willing, at least, and temporary illnesses won't do. Legal issues aside, every one of the potions you've suggested are intended for chronic conditions only, and these types of pain-reducing charms might actually be detrimental to anyone with an acute illness. I'm not quite sure...I'd have to consult with Filius...but it's a shame we couldn't find someone..."

"I shall volunteer."

Hermione stifled a cough and stared at Snape. He was holding her paper in his hands quite calmly, and his dark eyes locked on hers. For a terrifying moment their gazes remained locked, and she tried desperately to read his face. Was he mocking her? Hoping to prove her incompetence? It took Professor Vector's slightly shrill interruption to put time back into motion.

"Really, Severus? You're sure? I have every confidence in Miss Granger's abilities, of course, but this is your body we're talking about..."

Hermione, uncomfortably aware of just whose body they were talking about, gave in to temptation and hung her head in embarrassment. Snape continued on smoothly and quietly, however.

"I am well aware of that. Miss Granger's theoretical work appears sound with regard to the potions." Hermione lifted her head tentatively, waiting for the other shoe to drop. She interlaced her fingers across her lap and forced herself to look at him unblinkingly.

"She will require assistance with the brewing process, in any case." There it was: one corner of his mouth, curling up perceptibly. "Her research is... thorough, but it is beyond the scope of her abilities to prepare these potions... in particular."

She tried not to choke again. *Was that a double-edged compliment, Professor?*

"Well, I think that sounds excellent." Professor Vector shot into a whirl of plans, declaring that Snape would have to sign an affidavit waiving any rights to litigation if a research project under her control turned foul. She then assigned Hermione the endeavor of preparing a feasible timetable and explained that she would also have to flesh out the remainder of her equations by the time they returned from the holiday break. "Once you've done that," she concluded, "we'll consult with Filius about the charms, and then you're going to have to get down to the truly difficult analysis...determining which of these will work best in Professor Snape's particular condition."

"Condition?" Hermione knew it was a stupid thing to say...Snape would be infuriated by feigned ignorance of his limping...but Professor Vector, at least, didn't seem fazed.

"I'm sure you know he's been suffering from the after-effects of the snake venom since this summer. Have the muscle spasms stopped, by the way, Severus?" Snape gave a jerky shake of his head from where he stood, and Hermione found herself surprised that he was willing to share this...any of this...with her present. She noticed for the first time that the longer he stood, the more his complexion began to look sickly and even more sallow, the yellow tinge spreading across his temples and down what little she could see of his throat. The mere effort of standing was taxing on his body.

"Unfortunately, Professor Snape's injuries are exactly of the long-term, debilitating nature you've tackled here. However, it does make him an ideal test subject for this type of experimental treatment...theoretically," she qualified, giving Hermione a serious look. "There's no guarantee it will work, of course, but you are gifted enough in Arithmancy to understand that not every equation that can be drawn out on the board necessarily translates to physical practice. You'll have to do a full physical examination and ensure that all possible details are taken into the equation."

"I meant it when I said I have faith in you, Miss Granger," she assured Hermione, "but it will be Professor Snape's life on the line if any equations are performed grossly incorrectly. I certainly believe you have the talent and conscientiousness to perform this properly, but I would be negligent if I didn't still impress upon you how critically important it is to take every precaution when working with a live test subject."

"Of course," Hermione replied softly, falling silent. She wanted an apprenticeship, wanted a career in Arithmancy, so badly. She just hadn't counted on Snape...every single inch of him...standing in the way.

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"And how thorough an exam are you required to give him?" Ginny asked with a traitorous grin, standing at the foot of Hermione's bed. Hermione blushed furiously, instantly regretting that she'd disclosed every detail in her description of what had passed in Professor Vector's office.

Ginny, upon entering their room with her eyes ablaze, had wasted no time in demanding to know what precisely had caused her *accident* in Potions. It was all over the castle, she informed Hermione...everyone was shocked that brilliant, unbeatable Hermione Granger had been the one to screw up for once. They also couldn't imagine why she hadn't forced her lab partner to remain behind and ensure them at least a passing grade on the assignment. The exact contents of the two girls' whispered conversation just prior to the accident were currently a hot topic of debate amongst the NEWT-level students.

Hermione abhorred gossip in all its forms, and she certainly didn't feel the need to justify her reactions to her other classmates. The delicious feeling of liberation she'd carried with her for the past month remained as strong as ever. She owed them no explanations. Let their theories ferment and come up with rumors that were utter tripe; she didn't care.

With Ginny, however, she had grudgingly admitted defeat. She respected and loved Ginny, and she hadn't seen any real reason in prolonging the admission. As it turned out, there hadn't been all that much admission required of her thus far. Ginny had immediately asked outright if she was attracted to Snape, and she'd said yes, launching into an explanation of the full requirements of her research project and the delicate situation in which she now found herself. It felt marvelous to discuss her reservations so freely with another person.

"Am I that obvious?" she asked aloud, munching thoughtfully on the sandwich Ginny had brought her for supper. She'd been holed up in their room since her meeting with Vector, terrified of facing Ginny's reaction. Her anxiety had effectively trapped her for the past few hours, but at least that had prevented her from consoling herself with cake and hot cocoa in the kitchens.

"Do you think he knows?" She addressed the question directly to Ginny this time.

"Snape? I doubt it. But he's going to know if you can't keep yourself from staring at particular body parts when they're revealed." Ginny was giggling freely, and Hermione resisted the childish urge to chuck a pillow or two at her perfect red hair. She'd spent more than enough of the past few hours wondering about such things herself. It couldn't be healthy to allow this preoccupation to continue.

"I can be professional and detached about it," she reflected, and she was relieved to find that the words rang true and genuine. "There's nothing sexually arousing about the fact that the man is in serious pain every minute of every day. When I'm examining him, I'm going to be thinking about how unfair it is that he's still suffering because of that dreadful snake."

"It's just that I'm also going to require assistance with brewing the potions once I've singled out the best one to use, and he has every right to be present during each step of the process. After all, it's his body." She echoed Professor Vector's words resignedly.

"So what are you worried about?" Ginny called from near her trunk, in which she was rummaging vigorously, searching for her pajamas. "That you'll do fine during the examination but give yourself away if you have to work with him one-on-one?" she surmised, pulling out the clothes.

"That pretty much sums it up," Hermione conceded.

"Well, if it's any consolation, I meant it when I said I doubt he notices." Ginny changed swiftly and sat across from Hermione on the bed, holding a bottle of bright green nail polish. She began to apply it with scrupulous precision to her toenails, her slender fingers deft and well-practiced. Hermione was reminded of Lavender and Parvati, her old roommates, enjoying their preening sessions, and she couldn't help but crack a smile. She missed the other pupils in her year so badly that she was almost regretting *Lavender's* absence. Almost.

"Do you mind if I ask exactly what it is you see in him? And how much you think you like him?" There was hesitation in Ginny's tone, and Hermione realized with astonishment that, despite everything she'd shared with the other girl over the years, straightforward talk about boys and men had never entered into their relationship. It had always been tacitly accepted and understood that Ginny liked Harry despite his almost oafish obliviousness in their earlier years. Once he'd seen sense and they'd got together, Hermione hadn't felt that it was necessary to verbally express her blessings to them. She loved them both unconditionally and had felt confident that they realized as much.

Ginny, in her turn, had never asked her much about Ron during the brief time they'd been together. She'd looked almost surprised to find that Hermione and her brother

had apparently declared their mutual romantic intentions, a fact that had not been lost on Hermione at the time. Since the summer's painful circumstances, Hermione had often found herself contemplating whether Ginny had recognized the warning signs but been too uncomfortable discussing such matters with Hermione to broach the subject. It grieved her to think that perhaps she'd always been too brusque or too impersonal with Ginny for her to be comfortable beginning that kind of discussion.

The dynamics of their relationship had altered drastically since they'd become roommates at Hogwarts, for which Hermione was intensely grateful. She'd found both an ally and a confidante in Ginny, a feeling that seemed to intensify with each passing day, but she was nonetheless surprised to find how easily the words had poured forth once she'd allowed herself to speak them.

"I thought it was just physical at first, as incredible as that might sound to you," she began, her fingers twining through the frizzy mess of her ponytail. Ginny nodded solemnly, looking intently interested. She'd even set aside her lurid green nail polish to gift Hermione with her absolute attention. "I never wanted to admit it to anybody because we've all made fun of him for being ugly at one point or another over the years, but to be honest, I never really thought he was."

Ginny further shocked her by interjecting with, "I don't find him all that ugly."

Hermione nodded gratefully, feeling almost tearful. "You can't imagine how ashamed I was when I realized summer before fifth year that I was too embarrassed to acknowledge being physically attracted to him. But at that time, I'd never had a boyfriend, and we were friends with Remus and Sirius, but with Snape there was always so much distance. I knew...I know...he's the same age, but it felt different somehow. After the Order started meeting regularly and Harry told us what Dumbledore had said, I just found myself... looking at him a lot."

Hermione lost herself momentarily in the recollection of sultry summer evenings holed up in Grimmauld Place, the children standing eagerly on the landing while the adults consulted in hushed whispers in the kitchen. When the meetings had adjourned, the others had always bounded back up the stairs to discuss eagerly the morsels they'd picked up during their eavesdropping. She'd dallied, trying somehow to appear to follow her friends while lingering, longing to remain until they had all exited the kitchen.

It was the only time she'd found to study him fully and unabashedly without the need to be surreptitious. Typically, he would exit with his usual fierce stride and be out the door in moments, leaving her precious little time to trace the shape of his body beneath his clothes. Occasionally, he would linger, talking with terse civility to Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, and she would revel in the opportunity to really watch him. She recalled with perfect vividness the first time she'd been able to identify his facial expressions and gestures, normally so subtle. He was such an intensely private man, truly reclusive, and what little she'd gleaned of his deeper personality had theretofore been restricted to covert moments in the Potions classroom.

She'd grown accustomed, too, to watching him hold conversations with Dumbledore and McGonagall, usually simultaneously; and while she knew all three to be intellectual equals, she'd never been able to tamp down the knowledge that they were generations apart, Dumbledore and McGonagall his elders and mentors. He was as comfortable with them as she'd ever witnessed him in the presence of other human beings, though certainly not relaxed by any standard definition of the term.

Those moments at Grimmauld Place had fully awakened in her admirations of a decidedly sexual nature because the sight and sounds of him speaking to Remus and Sirius, to other men of his own generation, were almost headily different. It wasn't just the low tone of his voice and the often overwhelming power of his presence around the other Order members that had gotten to her. It brought out in him a self-assured and uncompromising stance that was purely, achingly masculine. She'd often wondered if he had perceived some continued threat from Sirius Black and had been perpetually on edge in Grimmauld Place. Whatever the reason, whether his behavior or her vantage point, she'd watched him for the first time walking, speaking, and dominating the room not as her instructor but solely and entirely as a man. It had only taken one look at the set and breadth of his shoulders. Hermione had been floored.

"It was just observation, really," she murmured to Ginny. "I was worried about him, wondering what Voldemort might do to him physically to punish him."

Ginny's words were deadly quiet. "I know what Voldemort did to him to punish him, Hermione. My mum and dad talked about it when they thought no one could hear them. I suppose Madam Pomfrey must have let it slip... She would Floo my mum sometimes, crying, trying to figure out how to heal him. You don't want to know what that man's had done to him."

Hermione felt bile rising in her throat as though she'd just been punched in the gut. "No," she agreed sadly. "I suppose I don't need to know. But I would find myself watching him, and after a while, I started to think that everyone was doing him an enormous disservice by describing him as so unattractive considering what he went through on a regular basis...what I imagined he went through," she amended, sickened. "You... What Madam Pomfrey said happened to him before the snake venom... Does it explain...?"

"Explain what?"

Hermione felt that any response would be inadequate. How did one quantify the emotional and physical manifestations of years of unabated exposure to Dark evil and abuse? "Not just his personality, I mean. I was referring to his physical problems. Does it explain why he always looks tense, why he never seems to relax? Why he's so thin?"

Ginny's eyes had never looked so grave. Her mouth opened a moment, and Hermione both desired and dreaded the full details of Snape's treatment at the hands of Lord Voldemort.

Moments passed. Seeming to think better of it, Ginny asked instead, "Do you think you love him?"

Hermione exhaled a long, drawn-out breath. "No. I don't know. I don't *think* so, anyway. But I always assumed I'd have to be with a man first to know if I loved him..." Ginny's understanding nod emboldened her. "Sometimes I feel like I could, if by some miracle it turned out he was at all attracted to me. Mostly, I used to avoid thinking about him that way because I knew it would only end badly. Eventually, I couldn't help it, but I tried for the sake of my marks. I've thought a lot about him in other ways, though," she confessed. "In fifth year, I found his Master's project in the Hogwarts library... Did I tell you that? No? There's a wonderful anthology of Master's-level theses that are bound together and put out in a periodical semiannually, and I found his. He's brilliant, Ginny. There are no words."

"No," Ginny agreed, leaning back against her forearms. "I suppose there aren't. Even I can see that. And I can't say I'm surprised that you're more turned on by the size of the man's brain than by the potential size of other features you'll be seeing soon." She gave a coquettish grin, and Hermione chuckled in embarrassment.

"I can get through this, though...the project with him," she said in all seriousness. "Even if I do succeed, it's not likely that I'll see him all that much in the future, if at all. I realize there's no chance of anything happening. I've come to terms with that, especially after what happened last month."

"You still think he doesn't respect you?" Ginny's brows furrowed. "I tend to agree with McGonagall on that: I think he was just being unusually harsh. He might respect you. He might even react differently if you asked him again in the future."

"He might," Hermione agreed neutrally. "Or he might not. I've moved past that now, although I'd certainly like his respect. I've wanted it since the first day of Potions, God knows. But even if I don't get it, at least there's a chance that I can still help him."

Ginny sighed heavily. "Fixing the problems from the snake bite isn't going to solve everything. Don't get me wrong...it'll be pretty amazing if you *do* manage it, and I'm pretty sure you'll be set as far as an apprenticeship with Vector goes...but don't go into this thinking that it's going to end up with the two of you together. Years of treatment can't make up for what he's been through."

# Five

## Chapter 6 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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Less than a week of school days remained before the holiday break when Hermione found herself approaching Madam Pomfrey. The mediwitch listened attentively as Hermione explained the project on which she would be embarking the following term, placing particular emphasis on the importance of a thorough, professional examination to protect Professor Snape.

"I understand your concern, of course," Madam Pomfrey agreed. "But you must realize, Miss Granger, that clinical trials of this nature require regular, consistent physical examination of the subject's health."

Hermione nodded promptly. "I assumed as much. I wouldn't have presumed to ask you to do all of them...I know you're far too busy...but I was hoping that you could help me with the first and explain to me the format to follow. I'm sure Professor Snape would be more at ease knowing that you were overseeing the first."

Madam Pomfrey laughed freely at that, pouring Hermione another cup of tea. They'd seated themselves comfortably in her office, which Hermione was pleased to note had finally begun to regain some of its tranquility since Voldemort had been vanquished. Over the summer, she'd found it the most oppressive place in the castle, bogged down with medical reports detailing the most gruesome injuries incurred in the course of the battle. With the warmth and comfort of tea in her stomach and Madam Pomfrey in such a visibly good mood, however, she could feel herself becoming deliciously relaxed. The cream-colored walls and simple furniture seemed almost welcoming.

"I'm sure Professor Snape trusts you," she assured Hermione, "but naturally, it would be best for a professional to perform the initial examination. Now, I must remind you, Miss Granger, that I'm not a Healer, nor have I ever been qualified as one."

Hermione just nodded.

"That being said, I'd be happy to help you with the first exam provided it can be performed at my convenience. It will have to be an evening...I'm afraid this is nonnegotiable...since I'm typically so busy during the day. And with Quidditch season!" She shook her head with a matronly air. "Really, the things those children get themselves into... Anyhow, what is your deadline, my dear?"

"I have to have the initial examination done to complete the equation parameters before I can choose a potion," Hermione began, falling effortlessly into academic mode. She lay the parchments detailing the final four potions she'd chosen on the desk, and Madam Pomfrey obligingly slipped on her spectacles and began looking them over critically. "Once I have Professor Snape's initial health status, I can complete the equations and determine which potion is most appropriate for his individual condition. After that, he'll have to help me with the brewing. I'm afraid they're rather beyond even NEWT-level."

"Oh, absolutely," the mediwitch replied, her spectacles sliding partially down her nose. She glanced at Hermione seriously over their gold rims. "And to tell you the truth, my dear, I doubt he would have allowed you to brew even were you a certified Potions mistress. If Severus Snape has volunteered to take part in this, he's quite serious about pursuing quality results. He wouldn't bother with it otherwise. Don't take it personally."

Hermione took a deep, reassuring breath. She'd known as much, logically, but it was difficult to snap out of old habits. The Hermione Granger who had sought ever and only to please would have railed endlessly against the suggestion that she couldn't handle such potions, but there was no sense in putting on a front of obstinacy and stupidity. If she couldn't see to the matter herself...a thought that still required some getting used to, she realized wryly...then she would be sure to offer Snape as much assistance as he could possibly need and then a bit more for good measure.

"Well," Madam Pomfrey told her gently with a friendly pat on her forearm, "I'm afraid I shall have to get back to stocking. I've been dealing with Professor Snape for years now; I'll arrange for him to be here Friday evening. I presume you're leaving the castle Saturday?"

"Yes." Her stomach flip-flopped with coiled anxiety. She had promised Harry and Ginny that she would spend the holidays with them at Grimmauld Place, and she knew beyond a doubt that Ron and Lavender would be there. She wanted to devote every waking moment to the completion and polishing of her equations, and it would take considerable self-control to do so with the two of them parading around.

Still, she had to let it go, she reminded herself. She had nothing to regret; the rejection was in the past. It was the first time she would spend any significant amount of time in Ron's presence, however, and she didn't want to ruin Harry and Ginny's chances of passing a pleasant holiday together. It would be their first without clouds on the horizon, and Hermione knew that Ginny had lately thought of nothing else.

"I'm leaving early Saturday morning," Hermione elaborated, rising to her feet. Madam Pomfrey took in this information, glancing at the calendar on her desk.

"I see no reason why Friday evening shouldn't be acceptable to all of us. I'll speak to him. You'll want to be sure you bring some bound parchments; keeping a record of a subject's health is as important as recording results in any other discipline. I'll add a copy to my own records, as well, and I'll be sure to get his signature so that his other records can be released to you. They may assist you with the Arithmancy portion."

Hermione was amazed to find that even her anxiety over Snape couldn't overcome her absolute pleasure in the fact that her plans were officially taking flight. Thanking Madam Pomfrey warmly, she left with a genuine smile, heart fluttering.

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"Can you *believe* that test?" Ginny demanded through a mouthful of pudding. Hermione cringed, feeling her appetite, usually boundless, flagging somewhat. Ginny wasn't normally so uncivilized at the table, but she couldn't really hold it against her on that occasion.

It was Friday evening, and in a few short hours, the pupils would begin leaving Hogwarts according to their own schedules. Ginny had decided to depart that very evening after sitting their latest Potions test and having supper with her friends. Hermione had expected the conversation to consist of grumblings over the injustice of the latest tally of House points, but among the seventh-year Potions students, Snape's test was currently foremost on the agenda.

"Difficult," Hermione agreed blandly, gulping her pumpkin juice. She calmed herself by momentarily watching the liquid as it swirled in her goblet. The Potions test had been exceedingly challenging...even she, though she'd prepared for hours, could readily admit that...but it hardly compared to the anxiety she felt over her imminent eight o'clock appointment with Snape and Madam Pomfrey. She was to witness and assist in his initial physical examination, and she'd found herself struggling not to observe his every movement that day.

He was currently at the head table and looked to be in a profoundly foul mood. She watched him stab forcefully at shreds of food, destroying plenty but somehow never seeming to eat. She wondered how he felt sitting at that table every day in full view not only of his colleagues but of every student in the school, his eating habits constantly

scrutinized. It was odd, she thought, that stress could affect two people so very differently. She sought desperately to prevent her classmates from noticing her struggles to normalize her view of her daily meals; it was a battle more difficult than she'd ever imagined, reducing her to a mindset in which she consumed without truly tasting. She'd begun to improve over the past couple of weeks, finding that her self-control grew as her mood rose and her plans for her honors project coalesced, but it was far from a complete recovery.

Ginny was now wrapping up her conversation, hugging the other Gryffindors with enthusiastic squeals and promises to exchange letters over the holiday. Hermione choked back a snort. Ginny, social butterfly though she was, would never keep such assurances...she would be too busy holed up in Harry's bedroom, if past experiences were any indication. When Ginny had finally made the rounds and concluded by standing before her, Hermione hugged her with intense affection.

"You're coming tomorrow morning, right?" Ginny was grinning breathlessly, and Hermione smiled and nodded.

"Yes. Tell Harry and Ron not to worry. I'll be there."

The barest perceptible flicker of surprise crossed Ginny's face at the mention of Ron's name in a friendly, almost normal tone. Her smile grew, if possible, even brighter.

"I will. See you tomorrow!"

Hermione waved goodbye and then let her hand fall heavily, staring at the stone floor. She had half an hour before her meeting with Snape and Madam Pomfrey, which allowed her plenty of time to return to her room. Once there, she stripped out of her school uniform and donned the plainest, most comfortable clothes she could find...loose trousers and a black jumper...and gathered the bound sheaf of parchments in which she intended to keep a written record of Snape's physical status. She pulled her hair back into a severe French twist, determined to avoid any of her usual triggers of fidgeting and anxiety.

When she arrived at the infirmary, it was to find Madam Pomfrey bustling about by candlelight, the sun having long since set, and the castle grounds darkened. She was preparing methodically, and Hermione perched on one of the hospital beds and watched, fascinated, the elaborate and well-rehearsed ritual that played out. She was vaguely surprised, as she'd always imagined that Muggle physicians had far more implements and substances at their disposal that needed to be cleaned, maintained and inventoried. After all, Madam Pomfrey had only to wave her wand to accomplish many of the skills of her trade.

She appeared to be anticipating a very, very thorough examination by the look of it. A large array of potions already lay on the table beside the bed that she'd clearly chosen for Snape. She had her own stack of parchments awaiting her clinical observations, and Hermione spotted an embellished quill of uncertain identity atop the stack. Madam Pomfrey had just begun uncapping the potions and mixing them vigorously when Snape walked in.

Hermione jumped at the sound of him releasing a low groan. Her cheeks burned lightly.

"Yes, Severus, the full work up," the mediwitch said brusquely, not breaking her concentration to look at him. "If you want to participate in this, you've got to provide Miss Granger as much information as possible, I'm afraid. This is your final opportunity to decline."

Snape, a muscle in his lower jaw twitching rhythmically, said nothing. Hermione thought his shoulders looked stiffer and higher than usual.

"Very well." Madam Pomfrey surveyed him once, quickly, and then turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger, step into my office and count to thirty, please."

Hermione cursed herself silently, already feeling her cheeks flaming. She'd been so certain that the gravity of her project would supersede any sexual tension, but perhaps she was destined to be proven wrong on that count. Passing by Snape, she met his eyes briefly as he shot her a disinterested glance before lifting a hand, which she knew would eventually land on the buttons of his frock coat. She was relieved by the temporary sanctuary of the office and began pacing relentlessly, mentally counting.

*One, two, three...* He surely had to have removed his frock coat by now, she thought restlessly, resisting the urge to rake back her already bound hair.

*Seventeen, eighteen....* The seconds crawled by. His shirt was probably off by now. Or would he remove his shirt at all?

*Twenty-four, twenty-five....* There was nothing else to be done; she couldn't shake the image of him removing his shirt, baring skin she'd only allowed herself to speculate about in her dreams. Fumbling about in her pocket, withdrawing her wand, she held it in a slightly slippery grip and hastily cast a Cooling Charm over herself. Breathing a sigh of relief as icy fingers caressed her face, throat and breasts, she replaced her wand and smoothed down her jumper.

"You may come out, Miss Granger," Madam Pomfrey called, a slight undertone of amusement in her voice. Hermione emerged to the sound of Snape's deep muttering as he attempted to stare down the mediwitch.

"The girl can count, surely?" Even his scornful words had a silky quality.

"Hush, Severus."

He glowered, but she brushed it off. Hermione stifled a giggle. They functioned like a mother and her irrepressible child; she could see that already. It was amusing superficially, but the knowledge of how many hours he'd been forced to spend in Madam Pomfrey's care over the years was still heartrending.

She faced him fully and felt the sexual awareness drain away, leaving her entire frame suddenly cold. He was so painfully thin. His collarbones protruded drastically, and the bones of his shoulders and elbows were equally visible, covered by dehydrated skin stretched practically to its limit. She'd never before realized how dreadfully underweight he was for a man whose frame was clearly not so small by nature.

"Very well, Miss Granger." Madam Pomfrey's lips were set in a businesslike line. "Professor Snape here has a limited attention span for *mymedding*, so I think you and I had best get started." She raised her eyebrows, as if daring him to respond, but he only raised an elegant eyebrow in return. Hermione squared her shoulders and withdrew her quill, placing it expectantly on her parchment. He was clothed in a pair of light gray cotton trousers, a sickly hue that only served to emphasize the unfortunate sallowness of his skin. Every time her gaze strayed to his ribs, large and bony, visible in truly shocking detail, her heart constricted sharply.

"Now," Madam Pomfrey began, slipping on her gold spectacles and indicating her own parchments with a brief wave of her wand, "a Healer would normally employ this particular model of quill that I have here. It's a variation of a Quick-Quotes Quill. You've seen Rita Skeeter's, I suspect?"

Hermione pursed her lips in distaste and simply nodded. Madam Pomfrey, she noticed, was now very nearly grinning. Perhaps she'd heard through the usual Hogwarts channels precisely what Hermione had done to the loathsome woman years before. She dared the most fleeting glance at her professor's face and found his expression implacable. If he'd understood the reference, he hadn't reacted to it. She felt a brief pang of disappointment, certain that he, of all people, would have found humor in the tale.

"This particular model does not indulge in any ridiculous embellishments, of course." Madam Pomfrey's voice took on a steeliness reminiscent of Professor McGonagall's. "It writes precisely what I say, word for word, and then it groups the observations appropriately into organ systems. It's similar to what a Muggle physician would do, I believe, in reviewing the systems of the body. I'm sure you're somewhat familiar with this procedure."

Again, Hermione nodded wordlessly.

"Excellent. So as I was saying, the quill is intended to leave both of my hands unencumbered so that I can proceed with the exam more efficiently. Now, since it will be necessary for you to mimic my movements, I'd like you to take your own observations as I perform the diagnostic spells, and then I will assist you in repeating those movements. Do your best to organize the observations as logically as you can, and always, *always* be concise but descriptive. No unnecessary words or flowery descriptions here. I cannot emphasize that enough. You want clean, precise descriptions to assist you in research or further diagnosis in the future. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Now, we'll begin with basic diagnostic spells." She explained how to precisely wave the wand and did so before Snape's chest, leaving Hermione to marvel as his entire abdomen suddenly lit up a bright, sickly green shade. "This particular color indicates lingering muscular damage across the ribs and through his lungs and stomach down to the hips," she recited, pointing to the areas as she listed them. "You'll want to start with this spell, as it most clearly illustrates the areas that are still suffering from poor circulation due to the damage the snake venom caused. Severus, take a deep breath and hold it, please."

Snape did as instructed, chest inflating. Hermione watched the shades of green shift alarmingly and released an involuntary gasp; she could see, through the minutest fluctuations of color gradient, the agonized movement of muscles performing at decreased capacity. That he was still suffering greatly could not have been more visible.

Madam Pomfrey instructed Snape to raise the gray trousers to his knees, which he did wordlessly, and Hermione cast the muscle damage spell herself. She resisted the urge to place a fingertip lightly on his calves, which were stringy and pale, dusted with fine black hairs that failed to disguise the malnourished state of his muscles. His extremities appeared to be have been even more devastated by the venom, the color of the spell deepening to a deep forest-green that was almost indistinguishable from necrotic black. Hermione jotted down her observations, including careful instructions for repetition of the spell, as Madam Pomfrey dictated to her quill. "His extremities received the least benefit from the antivenin and healing potions administered shortly after his rescue, so they're still having the most trouble, as you can see for yourself. We shall see whether or not your modifications can better distribute potions to his extremities. Now for nerve damage."

Snape, apparently familiar with the proceedings, shifted with slightly jerky movements and lay prone on his back. Hermione felt a jolt and inhaled, recalling his body on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. She couldn't shake the recollection of the astonishing amount of blood pouring from his neck. Approaching the bedside with trepidation, she realized he was shooting her a probing look.

"Are you feeling quite well, Miss Granger?" Madam Pomfrey asked with a frown, voicing the question that seemed to be in his gaze as well.

"Fine. I'm just remembering.... I'm fine." She studiously avoided his gaze and pulled out a fresh parchment, placing it on the top of her stack and readying her quill. Snape continued to regard her for a few moments, though not with any kind of obvious menace. The neutrality in his expression was almost more disconcerting than the sight of him on his back, lying still.

Madam Pomfrey proceeded with the spells for nerve damage and pain. During the latter, when his entire body lit up in bloody red luminescence, Hermione had to stifle back tears. She felt sickened by the thought of her conversation with Ginny that Monday. The thought that she'd even briefly attributed sexual connotations to this examination, with the debilitating amount of pain he was suffering, now disgusted her thoroughly.

Ultimately, the entire process concluded much more quickly than she'd anticipated. Madam Pomfrey administered analgesic potions and lit them with a tracing spell, leaving Hermione to observe how quickly they dissipated in his bloodstream. It was precisely the problem she hoped to solve with her charm-based modifications.

The rejuvenating potions, intended to revive his atrophied muscles, also did little, and Hermione found herself wondering if his body had begun to accumulate a kind of immunity to such oft-taken remedies. Inquiring of Madam Pomfrey whether such a situation was possible, the mediwitch replied in a somber tone, "I've given him everything in my arsenal, Miss Granger. Every potion, every spell, every charm that could possibly help him...if you can name it, I've employed it. It's very possible that he's progressively developing a resistance to the few means that we've found to alleviate the pain. I sincerely hope you and Professor Vector have an apt solution for these problems because I've tried so many times..."

She trailed off, lost, and an expression of mutual regret and understanding passed between her and Professor Snape. Hermione found herself looking away, feeling as though she'd intruded during an intensely private moment. She'd underestimated Madam Pomfrey, she decided; the mediwitch had always seemed compassionate in a firm, almost dictatorial way, but Snape was special to her. She'd begun to soak up his ongoing pain as her own.

Snape cleared his throat, shattering the contemplative silence. His eyes sought hers. Hermione longed to find something appropriate to say, something that communicated her feelings, but they were inexpressible. She couldn't speak condolences that now extended beyond words.

Madam Pomfrey saved them all, pocketing her wand with a businesslike flourish of finality and informing Snape kindly that he could leave. Having been dismissed, Snape rose stiffly. Hermione watched the awkward movements of his arms, almost comically drawn out, and realized that he was striving to disguise his pain and faltering. He gathered his clothing from where he'd placed it on a nearby chair and disappeared immediately into Madam Pomfrey's office to dress.

Hermione stood still, her stomach heavy, and watched his emaciated shoulders retreating. She knew with deep-seated certainty that the image of his shoulder blades threatening to break through the skin would be permanently etched in her brain during the weeks to come. She felt numb, waiting while Madam Pomfrey perused her notes, highly praising their conciseness but urging her to group them more specifically.

Hermione forced herself to regain her focus and began reorganizing her notes industriously. Snape emerged from the office moments later, clad in his usual black armor. "Miss Granger, I shall expect a message from you over the holidays detailing your choice of potion and explanations." He'd left not even a single button undone, and the sight of her imposing Potions professor, restored to his usual fierceness, jolted her.

"Yes, sir." She nodded briskly. "Would you like a copy of my current notes? I could grab them from my room..."

"That will not be necessary. Professor Vector has provided me with copies. I simply ask that you keep me up to date with your progress over the holidays so that I will be able to acquire the ingredients necessary."

"Yes, sir." Her eyes wanted to linger on his shoulders, now knowing the precise contours of muscle and bone. "Have a happy holiday, sir," she finished, her voice fading lamely when he stalked from the room without so much as a backward glance.

Hermione paused with her quill in midair, blinking back a fresh wave of tears. Madam Pomfrey's hand descended tenderly onto her right shoulder. "You mustn't take it personally, my dear. I'm sure you've heard that before. Even those spells can't give you...or me, for that matter...an accurate idea of just how much pain he has had to tolerate. I'd give anything to have been able to see that creature's death..." Her eyes filled with a murderous expression that alarmed Hermione, but then the storminess quietened. "At least it's over. Now we can only hope that you'll be able to help him."

She proffered a stack of parchments, magically shrunk to a more convenient size. Fighting back a sigh, Hermione accepted the thick sheaf of Snape's past medical records, hoping the other woman's faith wouldn't turn out to be unfounded.

## Six

### Chapter 7 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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Roused groggily from sleep, Hermione spent a moment staring in confusion at her hands. They were crossed over the haphazard array of parchments in front of her, stained deeply. Her knuckles looked as though they'd been etched into her skin, their furrows marked with black ink.

She heard a sigh and cracked her eyes open a bit more widely, pushing bunches of her hair out of her face. Ron stood before her, his mop of red hair disheveled, shaking his head with a mixture of fondness and irritation. By the light streaming through the windows of the small room, she judged it to be nearing noon.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to fall asleep doing homework?" he demanded, arms crossed belligerently. She opened her mouth, finding it fuzzy. As the daughter of dentists, the shock of finding that she'd fallen asleep and neglected her nightly brushing was the most alarming thing of all. "Didn't you get enough of that third year?"

Hermione cringed, recalling that hellish third-year schedule and the damned Time Turner. The sight of her collapsed over her homework had become unremarkable to all of Gryffindor Tower. "How many times do I have to remind *you* that it's never my intention to fall asleep on my parchments?" she shot back. "Besides which, this isn't homework. This is..."

"We know, we know!" Ron wailed. "We're all sick of hearing about your project with Snape. Yes, yes, we want him to get better,"...Hermione suspected he'd taken note of the murderous expression entering her eyes..."but really, Hermione, you've got to enjoy *some* of your holiday. Merlin knows you'll have enough time to worry about schoolwork once you're back at Hogwarts.

"Come play Quidditch with us today!" he concluded exuberantly.

Hermione gave a muffled, noncommittal groan and let her head return to the table with a thunk.

"Oh, come on," Ron wheedled. She could hear the rustle of parchment against his jumper as he began to scoop up her notes and pull them away from her. "You're *not* that bad, you know."

"Yes I am." She glanced up dolefully. Ron didn't appear to be heeding her.

"You just need practice! And you've been cooped up in here *for three days* now. That's inhuman, Hermione. Just spend the day at The Burrow with us. Please?"

Sparing a moment for her still-foggy brain to process his request, Hermione yawned and stretched lightly. He was right: she'd spent far too much time sequestered indoors, even for her. The frustrating thing was that despite the innumerable hours she'd spent in the same cramped position, poring industriously over her equations, she'd only managed to incorporate the first portion of Snape's most recent physical status examination. She hadn't even had the chance to so much as glance at his past records yet.

There were simply so many variables to be taken into account, she thought dizzily. She adored the complexity of it...and she certainly thrived on the challenge of it...but since the afternoon of the previous day, Hermione had been contending with the inexplicable but deep-seated knowledge that the worst lay ahead. She'd barely scratched the surface of Snape's physical injuries, and the painful records of years' worth of abuse and torment still had to be processed.

She knew she couldn't spare the entire day apart from her equations, but the prospect of a bit of a break definitely appealed to her. Grudgingly, she nodded and said to Ron, "Yes, I'll come with you for a little while. It would do me good to get outside."

Ron's face broke into an excited grin, and he proceeded to grasp her right hand and drag her bodily from the room. Lavender wasn't due until the following day, thankfully, and her conversations with Ron had thus far been civil but limited. Nevertheless, his skin against hers made her give an involuntary grimace. She extricated her hand from his, and he turned to her with a pained look in his eyes.

"I was just joking around," he said softly. They had paused in the narrow hallway, and she knew that he didn't want Harry and Ginny, wherever they were, to overhear. "Too soon?" he surmised.

She simply nodded at him, allowing her arm to fall to her side. Ron murmured his acknowledgment and remained several steps ahead of her until they'd entered the kitchen. He moved to the other side of the room, looking chastised. She thought guiltily that perhaps she'd overreacted. For the past three days, she had longed to say something to him that would put the two of them both at ease, finally, but Hermione didn't think there were words enough to liberate them from the awkwardness that remained.

Ron wasn't a bad young man by any means, when it came down to it; but there was no denying that he couldn't seem to comprehend, even after so many months, what his actions over the summer had done to her emotionally. Even Ginny had seemed aware that he was still struggling to identify with Hermione, and she'd been watching him intently for some time, scrutinizing his behavior and language in Hermione's presence.

Still, Hermione appreciated the efforts he'd put forth over the past few days. He'd avoided anything other than a cursory mention of Lavender and the fact that she would be visiting, which was a far cry from the rhapsodizing he'd once indulged in despite Hermione's anger and discomfort. He'd even tolerated her perpetual chatter about her project and sought to soothe her anxieties over its completion in the only way he knew: offering to play Quidditch with her. Hermione knew her waistline would appreciate the use of sports in lieu of food as her primary method of catharsis, but she'd been loath to abandon her equations for more than a few moments at a time.

Taking a seat, Hermione glanced around her. Ginny and Harry were already seated at the table...or, more accurately *Harry* was seated at the table; Ginny was seated in his lap. They'd already commenced the daily process of melding themselves together. Hermione often wondered if there was a set minimum of square inches of skin that had to be in direct contact between the two of them in order for them to get through the day.

"Look who decided to join us," Ginny teased. Hermione shot her a mock glower and gratefully accepted a cup of tea from Ron. "What do you say to coming home with us and playing some Quidditch this afternoon?"

"She already agreed," Ron interjected. "And now I'm not going to allow her to take it back!"

"I'll go, I'll go." Hermione sipped contentedly and leaned back against her chair. She could feel her hair waking up and taking on an agenda of its own, but she'd become more proficient at simply not caring. "I can't stay all day, though, like I told Ron. I need to get back to those equations."

"I don't suppose you'd care to share anything about your progress with us today." Harry's tone made it seem more of a statement, and Hermione shook her head. He knew by now what answer to expect. She'd been touched when he had shown such genuine interest in her project and its implications; he wanted nothing more than to see Snape recovered and back to his usual, if intolerable, self. Hermione could see daily the lingering guilt in Harry's eyes whenever Snape's name was mentioned.

"I really don't think that would be appropriate," she said quietly in the same neutral tone she'd offered him the past three days. "It's not that I don't appreciate your interest. I really do. I just don't think it would be ethical or respectful of me to discuss Snape's private medical information with any of you. He's doing a very selfless thing in volunteering as my subject."

"I hardly think it's selfless," Ron called from the vicinity of the stove. "He's hoping you can cure his pain. He's not doing it for your sake."



Hermione opened her mouth, but Ginny, surprisingly adamant, beat her to it. "But he's also placing himself at great personal risk. Hermione's talented, but there's still a definite risk for him. He's doing her a big favor."

"I'd say that it indicates he has a lot of confidence in you," Harry mused thoughtfully, his mouth half full of scrambled eggs.

"Though I do have Professors Vector, Pomfrey and even Flitwick to lend expertise," Hermione cautioned, "and he's well aware of that. I wouldn't put too much stock in assuming that his faith is in *me*, necessarily."

"You sell yourself short," Ginny argued. "I doubt he'd have done it for any other student."

Hermione found herself chuckling. "It's doubtful that he's thrilled about doing it for *astudent* at all. Besides, how would you know whether or not he'd have agreed to identical experimental conditions under the work of another student?"

Ginny's features could be startlingly elfin when she was in a mischievous mood. "Because I overheard him talking to Vector the day I left," she replied smoothly with curved lips, "and he told her he thinks you're the brightest student Hogwarts has had in a century." Her eyes glowed as she searched Hermione's face for a reaction.

Hermione flushed and returned to sipping her tea, having no idea how to respond.

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Eight hours later, bruised, beaten and even slightly bloody, Hermione resumed her methodical calculations. Quidditch had been breathless and exhilarating fun, but it had never been more frightfully clear to her that she was out of shape both physically and socially. She'd found it tremendously difficult to bear Ron's joking and criticism, even if it was intended in a good-natured and friendly manner. It was going to be a long time, she reflected, before the two of them could expect a resurgence of their affection of years past, especially with Lavender's appearance imminent.

Hermione rubbed at her eyes and yawned. Winter evenings made the shadows that filled Grimmauld Place soft and soporific, but she was determined to spend more time on her equations. She gathered her disagreeable hair into a knot at the nape of her neck and fastened it. Pulling out the second portion of the notes from Snape's most recent exam, she gazed at them thoughtfully. She'd already completely cataloged and incorporated her own; these were Madam Pomfrey's. As they were quite similar to her own and differed mostly in professional versus amateur terminology, few modifications were needed. Hermione was grateful, for when dealing with Arithmantic equations of such breadth and complexity as those required for her endeavor, the polishing of only one equation could consume literally a sheaf of parchment.

Half an hour later, she'd finished with Madam Pomfrey's notes, effectively incorporating the first of Snape's many exams into her predictions. *Okay*, she thought, *next up*. Madam Pomfrey was a fastidious woman, and all the old reports were arranged chronologically, dating in order from the most recent to the most distant. The more recent reports were marked by the fresher, crisper ink and pages that slicked satisfyingly past one another with the delicious sound she'd always associated with a textbook. The older pages were yellowed, some shockingly so, and Hermione had to forcefully remind herself that she would be essentially covering Severus Snape's life with her observations. It was a heady and daunting thought.

Again she paused and assessed her own state of mind, feeling the bizarre but instinctive pang that the difficult material was likely to be approaching. She spared a quick moment to fetch a large cup of tea from the deserted kitchen and then dove in without allowing herself the luxury of hesitation.

It was worse than she'd ever imagined. Despite all her feelings of nervousness and foreboding, the injuries...and the tragedies...that marked Snape's adolescence and adulthood piled up more quickly than she would have thought possible. That he was still alive could be deemed a medical miracle unto itself, and not solely on the basis of Nagini's attack. She was almost proud that she managed to make it to the reports pertaining to the end of her fourth year...when he'd returned to the fold of the Death Eaters...before putting aside her tea, having lost her appetite entirely.

Ginny was right. She hadn't wanted to know any of this. How could she possibly have wanted to discover this?

Hermione stood bolt upright and began pacing back and forth, astonished by her own selfishness and the violent thudding of her heart. Her ribs and her own breaths felt painful, constricting. She calmed herself by inhaling deeply and rhythmically, drinking in the sight of the many books lining the walls, trying to convince herself to savor it. Even the familiarity of faded covers, wrinkled bindings and the faint taste of parchment and dust in the air couldn't serve to ground her mind.

She was beginning to picture his face throughout the years, the awkward, ostracized teenager and the reclusive, deeply troubled man he'd become. The sheer size of the social stigma he'd accrued over his lifetime was astonishing, yet it didn't even begin to probe the depths of what had happened to him privately. She thought of the dark, terrifying nights of the Death Eaters' conclaves and read and reread Madam Pomfrey's descriptions of his Dark Mark compulsively, wondering perversely what it had felt like on his skin when he was summoned. Hermione was amazed...downright flabbergasted, in fact...that Snape had agreed to take part at all. Madam Pomfrey was likely the only person who knew the true extent of his injuries, and now that she'd been made privy to them, she didn't know how she could possibly continue.

Harry had once remarked to her that the Death Eaters dehumanized their own just as they did their enemies, even if their methods weren't the same. Hermione hadn't known, at that time, just what to make of his statement, but she'd pondered it for what felt like ages. Now, circumscribing the same path in a state of illness and slight panic, she understood his meaning all too well. She was willing to bet, too, that in Snape's case, the treatments dealt him had passed the point of merely *dehumanizing* years ago.

Hermione tried to imagine Harry living through the same experience, or Ron, and had to fight back the urge to retch. They wouldn't be able to look themselves in the mirror anymore. They wouldn't be able to see themselves as human, let alone as people, as men. What did Snape see?

She was crying thickly enough at that point to obscure her vision. When Ginny entered the room silently a few minutes later, Hermione blinked and struggled to discern her friend's silhouette in the faint light.

"Hi," Ginny murmured, taking in the sight before her with a slight enlarging of her eyes. She visibly forced a smile. "I thought maybe you could use some company. You said earlier that you thought you were getting to the difficult part."

Hermione snorted and wiped at her cheeks. "I can't believe you were able to hear that. I said that two milliseconds before Ron nearly killed me with the Bludger."

Grinning fondly, Ginny placed a tray with some biscuits and another, larger cup of tea on the desk, neatly brushing aside several parchments to free some space. "Mum was disappointed you wouldn't stay for supper. She thinks we're starving you."

Hermione snorted again. "One look at me should dispel that worry."

All hint of the smile disappeared from Ginny's face, and she sank into a nearby chair with sudden and obvious weariness. Her gray pajama pants and the silky matching shirt glowed eerily against her pale skin. "You're getting better, Hermione," she insisted with soft urgency. "We know you're depressed. None of us can honestly imagine what it was like going through that with Ron on top of everything else that's happened. You think we hold everything against you and expect you to be perfect, but we really don't."

Hermione smiled despite herself. Somehow, her weight gain had become the large, imposing elephant in the center of the room to which everyone could vaguely allude but never bring themselves to address directly. The words Ginny had just uttered were the closest her friend had come to acknowledging Hermione's problem, and Hermione was surprised to find that she was no longer so afraid of that possibility.

"I think it will get easier for you," Ginny continued almost tenderly. "But that's not why I'm here. I was worried about you. Harry was looking at the map trying to find Kreacher, and he said you've been pacing like mad for nearly an hour."

Hermione gulped, tasting saltiness, and glanced at the clock. Had she really been pacing so long? Thoughts of Snape...images of him lacerated and bloodied, naked, in

situations she didn't dare consider...had been flitting through her mind in a sickening montage. She hadn't realized how much time had passed, but the leaden feeling in her stomach had failed to dissipate.

"You got to the bad stuff, then, didn't you?" Ginny cocked her head to the side and offered a sympathetic smile that suggested she realized she was stating the obvious. Hermione nodded and wiped at her cheeks once again.

"Do you see now why I didn't want to tell you what that man has had done to him? It used to make it difficult ~~for~~ to sleep at night, and that was before we had reason to really trust or like him."

Mentally damming a fresh flow of tears, Hermione nodded. "I can't imagine Madam Pomfrey having to deal with him after... after all these ~~things~~ they did to him. My God, Ginny, do you know how many times he's had to suffer through *Crucio*?" She grabbed viciously at the parchments, riffling through them in haste. "How many times he's been tortured...cut, stabbed, burned? Left for dead? Do you know he's been raped?" she finished lamely, her voice cracking.

Ginny nodded, her eyes glistening. "I know about it all," she admitted. "It was hard for Mum when Madam Pomfrey told her, but Madam Pomfrey had to tell someone. She couldn't keep it inside any more than you or I could. She could never stop thinking about Snape. No one really... That is, I don't know how a person could move past those things, Hermione, but *especially* Snape.

"You know how proud he is." Ginny hadn't needed to state it outright; it was all the two girls could think about.

Hermione raked back the tendrils of hair that had sprung loose during her furious pacing, sniffing. Ginny watched her in contemplative silence for a moment, seeming to debate whether or not it was safe to continue with any kind of discourse.

"That's what I meant when I told you that I don't think simply curing him of his pain is going to be enough," she finally concluded in a heartbroken tone. "It would be an amazing achievement, and it would definitely improve his quality of life. No one's arguing that. It's just... Hermione, you *really* like this man...I can see it."

Hermione arched her neck and stared at the ceiling. She'd adjusted to the fact that Ginny knew something of the extent of her feelings for Severus Snape, but hearing the words spoken aloud made her heart beat even faster. It had been like that for years. Every thought of him, every idle mention of his name, and even the most trivial references to him had set every nerve in her body on edge.

"You're letting this get to you so much. I just don't want you to think that if you can take away his pain, it's also going to take away everything else."

Hermione sank heavily into her chair and brushed a fingertip against the report she'd tossed aside when her emotions had overtaken her. It fluttered idly and then settled, still real and unavoidable. To say that Snape would have difficulty forming a relationship with anyone... Well, that was the understatement of the century. She'd already told Ginny enough, she insisted to herself. She'd already revealed more than she should have, even considering that Ginny had overheard the grotesque details in various conversations between her mother and Madam Pomfrey.

She needed to stop before she told Ginny the entire extent of it. She needed to control herself before telling Ginny that Snape was an insomniac who regularly harmed himself when he did fall asleep, desperately trying to elude the tormentors who followed him in his dreams; that the beatings he'd survived had left him able to withstand little food or comfort; and that he was impotent, having suffered through years of sexual and physical abuse. If the damage to his body was incredible, then the damage to his mind had to be insurmountable.

"I should get to bed," Hermione choked out. She half expected Ginny to rise and comfort her, perhaps hug her, but the other girl only nodded solemnly and left the room. Hermione remained sitting, staring at the parchments and wondering how many of those torture sessions at the hands of his supposed comrades Snape had endured only by clinging to the image of beautiful, sweet, innocent Lily Evans. She could cling to images too, she thought stubbornly, wiping at her eyes and closing them. She could hold tight to the image she'd envisioned from the very beginning, her own portrait of the moment her spell work and her potion alleviated his pain. The expression on his face would be one of a relief so wide and so deep that no one could hope to fathom it. She could give him that, at least.

Some time after two o'clock in the morning, her tears expended themselves. Dry and numb, Hermione dipped her quill and once again began refining her equations.

## Seven

### Chapter 8 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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For what felt like the fourteen millionth time that afternoon, Hermione crushed a piece of ruined parchment in her fist and tossed it over her shoulder. It wasn't *really* ruined, certainly, but it was unsatisfactory. Every letter she'd attempted to begin thus far had been unsatisfactory.

She was profoundly grateful for the fact that the others were spending the day at the Burrow. Lavender's arrival had been as uncomfortable and stressful as she'd feared, with the other girl sashaying into Grimmauld Place as though she owned it and everyone in residence. She'd wasted no time in establishing her position beside Ron, and the two had instantly become as inseparable as Harry and Ginny were wont to appear.

With the holiday rapidly drawing to a close, Hermione had set about busily finishing with Snape's medical reports, completing her equations and, as a result, spending as little time with Lavender as possible. All in all, it was as close to an ideal situation as Grimmauld Place could possibly have offered her.

Now if only she could manage to write Professor Snape with her results.

*You're acting like a pathetic little girl*, she snapped at herself. She was being too self-conscious...she knew it perfectly well...but she wanted to ensure that her missive was professional and adult. In short, she wanted it to reflect more maturity than she currently felt she possessed.

Tossing the stack of blank parchments to the floor beside the couch, Hermione flipped over onto her back and released a low groan. Tiredly, she rubbed her fingertips across her closed eyes. The entire situation was becoming ridiculous. She'd spent the past hour dismissing attempt after attempt for stupid, superficial reasons that were

doubtful to even cross the man's mind. She knew from past experience that she tended to invest too much time and thought into analyzing the subtleties of language, and, Slytherin though he was, Snape wasn't likely to do the same.

He didn't have the time, she told herself firmly. He had class curricula to prepare, papers and exams to grade, and personal research to conduct. He had staff meetings to attend and dinners in the Great Hall to endure with his usual saturnine stiffness. The very last thing he would be tempted to do was thoroughly dissect the simplistic letter of a seventh-year and question her motivation in helping him. After all, it was *he* who had volunteered. She hadn't approached him to solicit his involvement.

Despite these assurances, Hermione couldn't seem to calm herself. She felt confident that she'd moved past placing too much stock in his opinion of her academically, but this was a different matter. Her worst fear was the possibility that, upon picking up her letter and reading it, he would just *know*. Something in her diction, something about the way in which she communicated her choices and concerns, would betray her true feelings. She had to seem interested and compassionate but still sufficiently clinical.

It was the realization that she was once again allowing herself to fall prey to inconsequential opinions that finally bolstered Hermione into moving. He could believe what he wanted, and it wouldn't alter the fact that she was committed to the project. She was committed to helping him and to securing an apprenticeship with Professor Vector, and if along the way she revealed the deeper nuances of her interest, then there was nothing to be done about it.

Besides, could she *really* imagine him confronting her about the fact? Was he really the type of man who, if he suspected ulterior feelings, would force her into a confession she wouldn't have willingly given? Hermione had suffered cruel treatment at his hand in the past, but she didn't want to believe that he would do such a thing. As bizarre as it was to imagine, he, above all others, would have been likely to empathize with the suffering inherent in unrequited admiration.

She picked up her quill and a fresh piece of parchment and forced herself to write out her thoughts in a professional but considerate tone. She'd initially wanted to aim for utterly detached, but that just didn't seem like *her*.

**Professor Snape,**

***Enclosed you will find my choice of potion and a detailed list of my reasons for the choice, along with the completed equations pertaining to the spell work I have planned. I hope everything is satisfactory to you. If you have any concerns or wish me to alter my outline in any way, please let me know and I will revise it immediately.***

Hermione grimaced. She'd wanted to express some degree of personal concern, but embellishing the letter further seemed inappropriate somehow. She shook away the notion and added her signature with a tightly controlled flourish. Overall, it wasn't quite as professional and adult as she had hoped, but it also clearly illustrated her respect for and consideration of his expertise.

Sighing and sealing the letter, Hermione grudgingly left the comforting four walls of her sanctuary and went in search of Hedwig.

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If Ginny, Harry, Ron or Lavender noted her discomfiture at supper that evening, none initially chose to show it. They all sat down to a delicious and surprisingly civilized meal by candlelight to enjoy Ginny's cooking, one of many talents she had undeniably picked up from Molly Weasley. They gave Ginny well-deserved admiring murmurs, and she smiled and served them their food.

Hermione, though she despised being in Lavender's presence as a general rule, had to admit that the other girl was keeping herself under better control than in months past. She had become accustomed to a Lavender even more vain and coquettish than she'd witnessed when they had shared Gryffindor tower, but thankfully, Lavender seemed to have mellowed somewhat.

She was still Lavender, of course, Hermione thought wryly. She was perfectly coiffed and far too made up. She ate little and clung possessively to Ron, mothering and smothering him, but that had become a fairly commonplace sight. For the first time since finding the two of them in bed together, Hermione found their behavior predictable, bordering on the normal state of affairs. It was almost effortless to simply be herself in Ron and Lavender's presence, and the others didn't seem to be verbally treading on careful ground for her benefit.

The conversation vacillated between Lavender's tales about working at Madam Malkin's...heavily emphasizing her employee discount, naturally...and the boys' self-aggrandizing accounts of their Quidditch progress. For nearly half an hour, Hermione remained quiet and thoughtful, enjoying her food. What internal fretting she found herself doing was concentrated wholly on the lack of response from Snape.

She'd believed she was concealing her impatience well, if only because it seemed unlikely that any of the others knew she'd sent Hedwig off to Hogwarts hours earlier; but eventually she began to suspect that Ginny *did* know about the letter, for the redhead kept darting assessing glances in her direction. Finally, she broke down and asked Ginny whether there was something on her mind.

Ginny dove right in. "Did you send Snape the letter about your potion choice?"

Lavender ceased nuzzling Ron's left earlobe and looked up sharply, perhaps scenting possible gossip.

"Yes. He hasn't responded yet." Hermione kept her eyes trained on her soup bowl.

"He's probably just busy," Ginny assured her, kindly but a little too casually. "I'm sure you'll get a reply by tomorrow. Merlin knows McGonagall's not as Christmas-obsessed as Dumbledore always was. Maybe he actually went on a vacation."

Hermione attempted to envision this possibility and failed.

"What's this about Snape and a potion?" Lavender inquired sweetly. Ginny ground her jaw shut. She had an infamously low level of tolerance for Lavender.

Hermione said simply, "I'm doing an honors Arithmancy project with Professor Vector, and Professor Snape volunteered to be the subject. Someone has to ingest the potion I'm attempting to modify with charms and spell work so I can study any changes in its effectiveness."

Lavender nodded, and Hermione found herself wondering if her apparent interest was merely feigned. "Sounds fascinating." Beside her, Ron snorted. She elbowed him roughly in his side, and he yowled. "What? You don't believe I find it interesting?"

"Lav, you *hated* Snape," Ron exclaimed, rubbing gingerly at his ribs through his most recent Weasley Christmas sweater. "Weren't you the one who told me after he was released from St. Mungo's that you wished he'd died in the battle just so you wouldn't have to see his ugly face in the papers every day?"

Hermione regarded her fingers as they clutched her soup spoon, willing them not to turn too white. Harry shot her a probing look, and she put down the spoon instantly.

"Just because I don't like the man doesn't mean I'm not happy for Hermione. Vector's probably thrilled to have her." She shot Ron a dismissive look and then turned back to Hermione, her tone more sincere. "Are you thinking of going into Arithmancy, then?"

Hermione nodded and inhaled. Lavender's interest was unexpected, but if there was any type of discussion she could handle with equanimity, it was an explanation of her project. She lifted her spoon to her lips and sent a light stream of air across the hot soup. "Yes. I'm hoping that if my honors project goes satisfactorily, Professor Vector will agree to take me on as her apprentice next year." She sipped at the soup, watching Lavender's understanding nod.

"And you'd get to live at Hogwarts full time while you're an apprentice, too, right? That would be nice. I can't tell you how ridiculously expensive it's been for me and Parvati

to keep up our flat..."

"Yes, it would be nice," Hermione said abruptly. They didn't need to be treated to Lavender's complaints about her financial situation for the umpteenth time that evening.

Silence reigned once again.

"You know," Lavender began hesitantly, tracing patterns in her bowl of uneaten soup while Ginny watched venomously, "one of Parvati's ex-boyfriends works in Arithmancy at the Ministry of Magic. I think he went to Durmstrang or something, but he was an exchange student. I met him once. I'm fairly certain he's originally from London. If you want, I could perhaps arrange something..."

Ron groaned. "Lav, stop."

"What? I'm just offering..."

"Hermione doesn't want a date, Lav. She's too busy with school work. You know her. And besides, what do you really know about this bloke? How do you know they'd even get along, let alone like one another?"

"He's worth a chance, isn't he?" Lavender replied defensively, her spoon clattering back into the bowl and splashing soup on the tablecloth. Hermione thought she could now see the irate tendrils of steam exiting Ginny's ears. "Hermione, have you ever even been on a blind date? He's *really* smart, and Parvati said he was very attractive. You two might really hit it off."

Ginny rose and began to collect their dishes in preparation for the next course, carrying them to the sink. "I think Ron's probably right, Lavender. Hermione's been very busy with her project the past couple weeks, and once she returns to Hogwarts, she's not going to have much time to devote to dating."

"But we should let her decide, obviously. Hermione?"

Hermione certainly didn't want to be set up on a blind date, but a part of her was trying to appear receptive to Lavender's suggestion. She found Lavender as flighty and irritating...and, Hermione thought, tasteless...as ever; but, like Ron, she was at least making a concerted effort to release some of the mutual strain between the three of them by maintaining a friendly conversation.

"I appreciate the offer," Hermione finally told her in as sincere a tone as she could manage, "but Ron and Ginny are exactly right: I simply haven't got the time. Maybe after school wraps up and my schedule opens up a bit more I could consider it, but right now it's out of the question, I'm afraid."

"Oh." Lavender nodded, forcing a smile. "Okay. I understand. Well, I just thought I'd offer. If you ever change your mind..."

"You'll be the first to know," Hermione assured her.

"Well, good luck with your project and Snape and all that, anyway."

"Thank you."

Ginny returned to the table, dishes piled high with the boys' favorite meat course. Hermione dug in, relishing the silence.

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Lying in bed that night, her brain having exhausted its supply of vitriolic thoughts about Lavender, Hermione turned her attention toward pondering Snape's schedule. She knew from his medical records that he had an unrelenting history of insomnia and chronic nightmares, which led one to infer that he spent as little time sleeping as physically possible. It made the cause of his hollow cheeks, frail frame and perennially foul temper that much clearer, in any case. In what manner did he spend his evenings? She'd always envisioned his personal rooms as dark and warm, a sanctuary to which he gratefully fled every evening to escape his students. She wondered if it was in those mysterious quarters that he did the majority of his grading and organizing of lesson plans. Perhaps grading student papers occupied him at that very moment.

She'd spent a fair amount of time that night pacing back and forth before her bed, finally giving in to the desire to rest around midnight. Consequently, she found herself lying in a frustrating and interminable state, mentally alert but physically exhausted. Her brain's ability to overrule her body's demand for the escape of sleep was maddening.

Evenings for Hermione had always been the most difficult periods. She was by nature a productive and busy person during the earlier hours, passing her days by moving from one task to the next, largely preoccupied with her lessons. Even the early evenings were considerably more bearable as she spent them revising, reading, or chatting with friends, varying her routine but always managing to keep her mental faculties focused on the outside world.

The rules altered once she retired to bed. Inevitably, she would find herself facing an uncontrollable need, unable to contemplate anything but him. Whereas during the daylight hours her violent resistance was upheld by the need to be productive, she found herself surrendering in the darkness. She always did.

Though she would never have admitted as much to Ginny, Hermione had developed somewhat of a routine where her bouts of Snape contemplation were concerned, and she'd grown to find it oddly comforting. It was as much a form of relaxation for her as meditation, as escapism. It was a means to exchange her daily reality for a universe in which she controlled each and every aspect, action and reaction. The Severus Snape who stalked the corridors of her mind remained every inch the nasty and demanding instructor she'd come to admire over the years, however,...Hermione wouldn't have had it any other way...and thus it had taken her some time to become comfortable considering him in a different light.

She still had momentary twinges of inexplicable embarrassment, times in which she would find herself flushing furiously in the privacy of her bed as though expecting him to appear before her and employ his considerable skills as a Legilimens to catch her in the act. The Muggle in her longed for a picture of him, something to secret away and cherish for herself, but Hermione honestly doubted that she could have handled it. The thought of looking at an image of him...confronting without distraction or protection his dark, steady gaze, focused unwaveringly on her...made a flash of heat course through her entire body.

If he came to know what she thought of him, Hermione often wondered, what would he feel? Would he be enraged? Mortified? Or was there some chance, however infinitesimal, that he would find the vision of the two of them together as breathtakingly addictive as she did? It wasn't simply that her fantasies stole her breath away. The degree to which she'd begun to rely upon them as a regular indulgence was positively dangerous.

It had begun years ago, innocently, with the idea of a simple kiss. She'd wanted to be objective and consider with impartiality what kind of kisser he might be. Within seconds, she'd totally abandoned any hope of impartiality and found herself uncomfortable beyond description. It had taken her months to move past the conviction that imagining her professor in such a manner was nothing short of unethical.

Gradually, her mind as well as her body had matured, and she'd found that suddenly her thoughts, the same visions that had once confused and frightened her, grew to arouse her. She loved to picture in her mind from a third-party perspective the way he would bend slowly before her, his frame being so much taller, and firmly capture her lips. She'd kissed Ron and Victor, both of whom were taller than her, but she felt in her gut that he would be different. The way in which he would touch her, the friction of his lips passing across hers, would be an entirely new sensation. The sheer physicality of his presence would render her incapable of thought. It always had.

She shifted in her bed, staring forlornly out the window. She knew with the ease of second nature the direction in which her fantasies would progress. Her bolder alter ego would grasp roughly at his shoulders, dragging her hands down his arms to the sleeves of his frock coat, pushing back the heavy fabric to reach his fingers. He would in turn press his body fully against hers, placing his palms on her shoulders and caressing her with infuriating slowness, his hands tracing her body to settle at the exquisitely sensitive small of her back. His kisses, always mutable, governed by his mood and by the atmosphere of her dreams, would progress from persuasive to demanding,

driving her crazy with the need to both rival and please him.

Something tore her from her reverie. Hermione sucked in a sharp breath and exhaled painfully, cringing at the light sheen of perspiration slicking her limbs. As her eyes adjusted to the shadowy surroundings, the rest of her body was reluctant to part with its delightful fantasy. Rhythmic breaths slowly forced the image of his lips on her throat, his voice warm and resonant in her ear, to fade away. At times, it shocked her to find how deeply she could lose herself in that other reality.

Glancing up, she was thrilled to note that Hedwig had returned. Leaping from her bed and fairly flying to the window, she let the owl in and thanked her profusely, accepting the letter she carried. Hermione slammed shut the window against the cold gusts and gave Hedwig a biscuit, one she'd brought up from the kitchen expressly for that purpose. As nervous as she'd been, it was a minor miracle that she'd managed to keep from eating it herself.

She tore eagerly into the letter while Hedwig looked skeptically at the biscuit and shot her an annoyed glance, probably wishing instead for meat.

**Miss Granger,**

***I have found your reasoning to be sound and your equations satisfactory. I trust you have also provided Professor Vector with a copy of the completed equations for her approval.***

Hermione mentally slapped herself upside the head. How could she have forgotten to send her equations to Vector? She'd been expending far, far too much energy concentrating on Snape.

***The necessary ingredients will be waiting and properly stored for you upon your return. Professor Vector has informed me that she and Professor Flitwick will assist you with the necessary spell work. I shall likewise assist you with the base of the potion and will expect to see you in my office at eight o'clock sharp the evening after classes resume.***

**Professor S. Snape**

Exhaling after what felt like a period of hours, Hermione sank onto the mattress with satisfaction. Her theoretical reasoning had been deemed sound, and the potion ingredients would be waiting for her. She was suddenly and immensely proud of herself for the short time in which everything had come together so neatly, and the desire to return to Hogwarts without further delay was unbearable.

## Eight

### Chapter 9 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

"Damn it," Hermione muttered, her sweaty palm slipping once again from the slick surface of her wand. She prayed fervently that Snape, who had disappeared some time earlier, hadn't heard her.

Muttering more curses, she switched hands, took it up with her left, striving to maintain a steady cadence with her strokes. The base of the potion was coming along nicely, but as it was the fourth time she'd prepared it that evening, Hermione's concentration was flagging. Perspiration had matted her hair to her forehead, and her school blouse was adhered damply to her chest. She'd pushed up her sleeves as far as they could extend without impairing her arm movement, but she didn't dare to use a Cooling Charm in the vicinity of such a temperamental healing potion.

Once again confident with her rhythm, she ruminated on the man who'd disappeared. Snape had surprised her greatly upon her return to Hogwarts, providing her the use of his private laboratory. Hermione had been deeply thrilled at first, but the pride and novelty had quickly worn away as she'd grown to understand what a tremendous responsibility had been placed upon her shoulders. His equipment, from the tiniest, most sensitive implement to the cavernous cauldrons intended to produce vast amounts of potion, was of absolutely the finest quality. Hermione had never encountered anything of such caliber, and she couldn't imagine how many hours...and Galleons...it had taken him to amass his collection of pieces. Their combined value was, to her, incalculable, and utilizing crude scouring charms for cleansing purposes was strictly forbidden. She had to ensure that everything was kept in perfect condition.

Hermione had long since progressed beyond exhaustion. Still, she couldn't afford to lose her grip on the potion. She was within five minutes of completing the base, the fourth such sample for his inspection. Each batch of the potion had been prepared with slight variations, all according to his detailed instructions, and the samples were to be stored under scrupulously controlled conditions until Saturday evening, whereupon she would return to his laboratory to receive his final opinions and criticism.

A part of her still burned at the recollection of his words only a couple of months earlier as he'd sent her practically stumbling from his presence on the verge of despondent tears. Yet Hermione could see now, as she watched the sharply defined limit of her skills as a potion maker flash into view, just how accurately he'd had her pegged: she was no natural Potions Mistress in the making, and she was profoundly grateful for his assistance every step of the way.

Any latent disappointment over her Potions performance had been wholly overshadowed by her burgeoning skills in Arithmancy. Her already warm skin reddening with pride, Hermione recalled showing him the equations she'd begun to draw up for the next step of the process, casting the spell work over the matured potion. Professor Vector had spent a few hours with her the previous evening, and while Snape hadn't said anything to her directly, he'd graciously allowed her to fully explain the sophisticated Arithmantic operators, listening intently as she'd elaborated on the equations predicting the response of the potion and then incorporated the information into the descriptors governing his physical health. Professor Vector had declared herself thoroughly impressed; coming from Snape, agreeable, if stiff, silence seemed even more encouraging.

"It's coming along nicely, I see."

Hermione jumped, cursing again.

"Shit! One, two, three..." Having reestablished her counterclockwise rhythm, she glanced up furtively. The voice had not been Snape's. In fact, it had sounded oddly like...

"Headmaster?"

It was indeed Dumbledore, inhabiting a portrait hanging upon the opposite wall. There was no telling definitively what its original subject had been, though something related to potions or alchemy was likely, judging by the dreary background of cauldrons and cobwebs stacked along dusty brick walls.

The new tenant, who currently held her rapt attention, was perched with sprightly grace upon the edge of a well-depicted work bench, blue eyes twinkling. "Headmaster!" she exclaimed, unabashed this time.

"Good evening, Miss Granger." He was beaming at her, his spectacles slipping down his generous nose. "I must say, I was surprised to see you here, my dear. It's not every day Professor Snape can be convinced to make his private facilities available for student use."

Hermione was treacherously close to losing count of her strokes again. She began to tap her right foot softly, the worn sole of the shoe scuffing against the stone ground, in an effort to maintain her rhythm. "I had no idea you had a portrait down here, Headmaster. It's wonderful to see you!"

"Well, my portrait...my most recent portrait, that is; and it was finished only two days before my death, which I consider fortunate luck indeed!...is in Professor Snape's...Severus'...living room, you see." He smiled, adding, "But I do enjoy traveling around and getting out a bit. Severus does need someone to provide him with some company now and then."

Dumbledore's grin was almost mischievous. Hermione glanced around the room, suddenly nervous. Chatting with Dumbledore, as fantastic as it felt, was a terribly unwise idea when she was supposed to be working assiduously on the potion.

"I... Yes, I'm sure," she said distractedly. Snape had a habit of appearing as though a smoke-like apparition, and she fully expected him to materialize beside her at any moment, livid with her for her moment of inattention.

Dumbledore, watching her closely, suddenly let forth a hearty laugh. "Don't worry so much, Miss Granger. He will not mind us talking...provided you're keeping close track of your progress, that is. Are you nearly finished?"

"Yes, I'm just about done." She completed the final bout of stirring with the proper hand movement, effective but considerably more clumsy than Snape's demonstration had been a few hours earlier. *I'll never be able to do this as well as him*, she thought, holding the vision of his dexterous fingers in her mind. His fluid control over his hands was a combination of years' worth of practice and the innate talent of which he'd spoken.

It took her a horrifying several seconds to realize that she'd voiced her thought aloud. Dumbledore chuckled. "Nor should you feel it necessary to do as well as Severus, my dear. He has had years of practice. Speak of the devil..."

"You have finished." It was not a question. Snape strode into the room, his movements graceful as ever, but she could see the tension he held, predominantly in his shoulders and jawline. An hour earlier, he'd disappeared behind an ornate tapestry hanging on one of the walls, which she felt certain separated his private rooms from the laboratory. As they'd entered the laboratory through another door, she couldn't be certain as to the room's location in the castle or the identity of its neighboring spaces. Truthfully, Hermione had been so shocked by her unexpected admittance to his private work space that she hadn't yet managed to expend much thought on what lay beyond the tapestry.

Now, indulging herself fleetingly, she found that her speculations ran toward the old-fashioned. The tapestry itself was a strikingly intricate work of deep greens and golds, so thoroughly decadent that she'd initially had trouble imagining the ascetic Potions master brushing past it on a regular basis. Contact between his forbidding dark uniform and the almost sensuous array of color and texture the tapestry presented seemed staggering. Beyond it, she decided, his rooms would be equally surprising, perhaps equally sensuous.

It was not a thought she could afford to dwell upon much longer. Snape had wasted no time in approaching the large cauldron and examining the final result for himself. She watched, fascinated, as he leaned forward, the stiffness in his features only just perceptible through the few loose strands of hair brushing his face. His brows were knitted together tightly, and she carefully avoided eye contact, choosing instead to examine his hands where they lay supplely at his sides. He'd seemed more relaxed after her return from the holiday, and she found herself hoping that with the absence of the students and the blissful peace and quiet, he'd finally managed to acquire what verged on a decent night's sleep. He certainly needed it, if his records even managed to brush the surface of his years of insomnia.

Hermione studiously banished all thought of his medical records, returning her gaze to his face. Finished with his cursory examination, he straightened, and their eyes met with an almost audible click. She felt a shiver of what might have been anxiety or excitement.

"It appears acceptable." His tone was quieter than that of his usual classroom manner but no less peremptory. "Decant it and place it with the others. I will attend to the cauldron."

"Really, Severus, I'm sure Miss Granger can handle the cauldron," Dumbledore called with a bemused expression. "You fret too much over those things."

"They are irreplaceable, Albus." Snape's voice deepened, verging on a growl.

"I am well aware of that, dear boy, and we both know that no one will take more diligent care of them than Miss Granger. How is your school year coming along, my dear?" he continued, this directed at Hermione, who had followed Snape's command and was headed toward the nearest work bench with a small vial of the decanted potion.

"Very well, uh, sir. Thank you." She'd suddenly realized that it was rather inappropriate to refer to him as being a headmaster when he was no longer in possession of the position. She hardly thought Headmistress McGonagall would have been affronted, but it felt wrong nevertheless.

Snape, seemingly sensing her discomfort, gave the portrait Dumbledore a meaningful look.

"You may call me Albus, my dear. I do suppose I should be calling you Hermione. We are past the formalities by now, surely?"

Snape was concentrating on his cauldron, scowling. Hermione stood motionless by the work bench for a scant moment, marveling at the progress they'd made that evening. Under his careful direction, she'd managed to successfully brew...four consecutive times, nonetheless...the most sophisticated potion of her academic career; and while she knew now that the delicate art of potion making was not where her talents lay, it had still proven to be a tremendously thrilling experience. All exhaustion had vanished. She felt elated, impelled to move forward.

Her momentary excitement vanished abruptly when she took note of Snape's apparent struggle to move the cauldron. Trying not to be too obvious, she returned to his side and said in a measured tone, "May I help, sir?"

For what felt like eons, he remained silent. Then he spoke abruptly. "Yes, though I warn you that it is quite..."

Hermione staggered under the sheer mass of her half of the the cauldron and gasped.

"...weighty. I did warn you, Miss Granger."

"I'm sorry, sir." She was fighting not to pant.

"Begin moving toward that bench." He nodded toward the expansive work bench containing her vials, and she did so, their progress across the floor steady but painstaking. When she felt the firm pressure of the work bench against her left leg, she mumbled, "All right," and Snape said in a tense voice, "On the count of three. One, two, three..."

They hefted the enormous cauldron and set it upon the bench. It made a satisfying thunk that reverberated throughout the small room. Hermione noticed for the first time that the woolen sleeves of his frock coat had been pushed up, baring the ropy veins and painfully deteriorated muscles of his arms. The bones of his wrist jutted, and she

mentally filled in the parched skin with strength and sinew, imagining the texture of the fine black hairs against her fingertips.

She forced herself to look away, and he stiffened, his gaze fixed almost malevolently on the cauldron. At his full strength, he would not have needed help, she thought. Of that, she was certain.

"I'll put away the ingredients, shall I?" Her tone came out gentler than she'd intended, and she hoped he wouldn't find it downright motherly. Their eyes met, and he nodded. He'd restrained his hair at the nape of his neck in the same style he'd worn the day of his unanticipated visit to Vector's office, and in the shadows of the laboratory, the planes and angles of his face seemed especially strong. She caught her breath.

"I will have to accompany you." He moved away incrementally, and she exhaled, praying he hadn't heard it. "These particular ingredients belong in my private store room."

She nodded and began gathering the small, precious packages stacked neatly upon the table, glancing over at Dumbledore's portrait. He smiled at her and pointed a finger in the direction of the tapestry wall, disappearing at a casual stride out of the frame. Slightly confused, Hermione returned her attention to Snape, who had gathered the remainder of the jars and packages and was heading toward the tapestry as well.

He stood aside and lifted a long finger, motioning for her to precede him. She murmured a thank you, wondering if her nervousness had strangled it beyond recognition, and walked ahead. The tapestry was impossibly soft and silky, a torturous experience against the flushed skin of her cheeks and forearms. She was headed, she thought with finality, toward his private rooms. Not for the first time, Hermione cursed her complexion, just as fair as Ginny's and even more traitorously expressive. She hoped that he would be unable to see the anticipatory blush suffusing her face in the faint light.

She found herself at a small junction of sorts. To her right, a dark stone hallway receded beyond visibility; in all likelihood, it led toward the main corridors of the Hogwarts dungeons. Directly ahead, a low stone archway served to accentuate the dancing shadows and firelight cast by the few torches lining the walls. Her view was unimpeded by door or curtain: it was Snape's sitting room, as elegant as she'd imagined and even more decadent. Hermione caught a fleeting glimpse of expensively bound texts stacked on several end tables and rich cherrywood furniture, warm and masculine. The thrum of magical energy...powerful defensive and alarm spells recognizing their master's presence...was palpable in the air.

Snape remained directly behind her, and she turned questioningly to her left. He nodded, and she heard him mutter a soft string of unidentifiable words. They were close enough for his breath to warm the nape of her neck, setting her nerves instantly on edge.

The imposing metal door she'd been regarding slid aside to reveal his private store room. Hermione walked in and placed her armful of ingredients on the simple table in the center of the room, careful not to disturb the sheaf of parchments already upon it, lined with ingredients and numbers. Looking up, she gasped delightedly. In the small, circular room, its shape reminiscent of Gryffindor Tower, the shelves seemed to extend to mountainous heights. The ceiling had been enchanted similarly to that of the Great Hall. Accurately reflecting the current time and weather conditions, the smoky black sky was streaked with pale cream-colored beams of moonlight. They lit up the room with just the right amount of brilliance, rendering the small, precise labels on each and every jar easily readable.

Hermione chanced a glance at her instructor. The fabric of his frock coat rustled hypnotically as he strode forward and set his burden on the table as well. "There is no further need for you to stay, Miss Granger. My organizational system is unique, and I prefer to see to it myself." A brief flash of disappointment surged through her. Learning his filing system would have been nearly as fascinating as having the opportunity to examine the many exotic specimens lining the walls.

"Yes, sir. Thank you." She felt dazed. Somehow, she'd survived the evening intact and managed to produce the first stages of an unimaginably potent healing potion. Basking in the charmed moonlight, suppressing the urge to close her eyes in bliss, Hermione thought with sudden, sharp clarity that his relief and her apprenticeship were drawing deliciously within her reach.

"There is one more issue that must be addressed, Miss Granger," he said quietly as she turned to leave. She'd never heard that particular tone in his voice before. For Snape, it was almost apprehensive. She felt both excited and frightened.

"Yes, sir?"

"I trust that Professor Vector has already spoken with you about the necessary modifications of the potion in order to accommodate your upcoming spell work. There are certain ingredients I simply cannot procure in this climate, during this season, while ensuring adequate freshness and potency." His voice resonated, echoing above their heads.

"Yes, sir. She mentioned that you were looking for possible substitutes. I'd be happy to help if you think further research is necessary..."

"I have found but one," Snape interjected smoothly, "and I cannot obtain it for you." His fingers deftly maneuvered jars and vials, and Hermione watched him as he scrawled on the parchments upon the table. His inventory, she could see, was flawlessly kept and always updated.

"You will find the necessary papers on the desk in the sitting room. I will expect you here Saturday evening at eight o'clock with someone suitable."

"Someone suitable, sir?" He'd turned his back toward her, but she still strove to remain expressionless while wondering if her ability to collect potions ingredients did not meet with his exacting standards. She couldn't recall having ever done so in his presence. Did he want her to bring another student? Someone whose natural talents for Potions exceeded her own?

He turned briefly back to the parchments and took in her confused expression. His eyes were darker than the walls around them, impossible to read. "The papers, Miss Granger," he said simply.

Perplexed, Hermione turned on her heel and walked toward his sitting room. Though she'd seen him mount the steps of the ladder he used to reach the upper shelves, no sounds issued from the store room. He was silent, as usual.

She followed the flickering torchlight through the stone archway. The room was generously sized but seemed smaller due to the abundance of furniture, books and parchments. Several wooden doors, all closed, were set into the wall on her right, probably the bedroom and bathroom. Past the large fireplace and comfortable sofa, a desk rested snugly in the corner. It was totally surrounded by shelves of books.

Hermione was distracted for a moment by the sight of Dumbledore, whose large, magnificent portrait hung just above the mantel of the fireplace, indisputably the centerpiece of the room. Depicted in the Headmaster's office suite, he looked comfortable and eminently in control. Smiling kindly, he offered her a small salute with a lemon drop. "Come to collect your wages, my dear?"

Hermione laughed, her gaze alighting on the desk. It was impeccably kept, and a small envelope, unmarked, lay at the very edge. "Professor Snape has done me an enormous favor by volunteering for this project, sir. He hardly owes *me* anything."

She opened the envelope and scanned the contents of the top page as Dumbledore observed. Potions calculations met her eyes. Book work had always been her forte where Potions class was concerned, and it took only a moment for her to recognize the significance of the words before her. The only suitable alternative for her healing potion was the blood of a unicorn, willingly given, mutually consented upon, nonviolently collected.

Her face grew hot. A suitable person, indeed. Snape wasn't concerned about her ability to identify and collect potions ingredients; he wanted her to report to his office that Saturday with someone who could commune with the unicorns living in the Forbidden Forest and accept the gift of blood, someone who was female and a virgin.

She had a painful flash of Ron and Lavender entangled in Ron's bed, followed by the recollection of Harry and Ginny molded together over the supper table at Grimmauld Place, lips meeting, Ginny's hair brushing his cheek. She was, to the best of her knowledge, the only virgin remaining among her female friends. It wasn't as though she'd ever had many in the first place.

She walked out of the room with an unidentifiable feeling in her stomach. It wasn't embarrassment, precisely, but when she exited into the foyer and sought to escape, Snape was right there beside her. She caught the slightest scent of the potion ingredients lingering about him, and her abdomen constricted almost painfully.

"Eight o'clock Saturday, Miss Granger." She refused to let him see her natural reaction to his voice, but it was suddenly difficult to convince her feet to move her body farther from his. There was no escaping it: the idea of what he would feel like, pressed against her and into her, dogged her thoughts.

"Good night, sir." She turned left and headed into the darkness, praying that it would lead her toward an exit and the safety of the labyrinthine dungeons. It did.

## Nine

### Chapter 10 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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It was as though he'd been able to see the indecency of her thoughts. For the few days following their brewing session in the dungeon, Snape seemed determined to set a new record for himself with his snide comments and searing indifference to her concerns. In Potions class that Friday, he pronounced their attempt dreadful and turned aside before either Hermione or Ginny could ask a question or get a word in edgewise.

"He's reaching for a new low, isn't he?" Ginny hissed angrily, slamming down her knife. Hermione grimaced and set her shoulders, preparing to start the potion anew. They hadn't sufficient time to get through the entire process before Snape would declare the end of the period, but she refused to simply accept his words and give up. Most infuriating of all, Ginny had continually glanced at her whenever Snape passed by their table, her looks a combination of confusion, pity and bemusement. Hermione appreciated her concern, but it only served to remind her just how brittle and vulnerable she'd felt of late in Snape's presence, and she was determined not to allow it to alter her classroom performance.

Finally, after a bout of particularly vicious invective from Snape that roused the rest of the class to cruel laughter, Hermione turned to Ginny and muttered, "I'm not going to burst into tears, you know. I can handle it just as well as you can."

"You look like you might," the other girl countered.

Hermione felt her eyebrows draw together, and she glowered. Ginny's face broke into a grin. "There we go," she whispered. "Much better. Let him see that expression and maybe you'll terrify him into giving us a passing grade."

"No one's getting a passing grade," Hermione shot back, glancing around at her classmates appraisingly. Sure enough, once the laughter at the two girls' expense had died down, the other students had returned dolefully to their attempts at the potion, all of which appeared to be outright failures.

"He knew we weren't ready for this. He just likes to watch us squirm." Ginny tossed her quill and textbook back into her book bag. "Sadist." She rose stiffly to her feet. Snape looked up from his desk, and their gazes met with the resounding crash of dueling swords. Hermione searched for any sign in Ginny's countenance that she was feeling threatened by their forbidding instructor, but she seemed unaffected.

"Miss Weasley, Miss Granger, you have two minutes to turn in your final product." The others had already turned in their various conglomerations of ingredients, none of which seemed to have melded seamlessly into the consistency of an actual potion. Hermione, joining Ginny, rose as well, and the two girls moved out from behind their work table and glumly regarded the array of vials spanning his desk.

"Why not?" Ginny said with an indolent shrug, grabbing their vial and plunking it down at the very end of the desk. Snape's lip curled into a sneer. Ginny met his eyes defiantly, and Hermione was forcibly reminded of the expression the youngest Weasley frequently got when she was preparing to let fly with a hex.

Seeming to wise up, Ginny turned on her heel and flounced out of the room. Hermione followed, though reluctantly. Loath as she was to remain in his presence...he'd been in an exceptionally foul mood that day, a truly spectacular sight to behold...she couldn't help but suspect that the drastic downturns in Snape's already taciturn personality corresponded to occurrences of strong breakthrough pain, perhaps flare ups of his old injuries. All through the class period, he'd seemed to be hunched over his desk with a rigidity that was unusual even for him, and she'd had to bite back the urge to offer him something, *anything*, to help.

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"Sometimes," Ginny informed Hermione as they sat down to supper later that day, "I think I'm just like everyone else, and I can't get past how Snape behaves towards us in the classroom. He's an ugly, unbearable prat, and I can't imagine what you see in him.

"But he's probably just having a really bad day," she continued with a resigned sigh, filling her plate with shepherd's pie, "and I really *don't* think he's *that* ugly. Besides, if I said he was, you'd probably curse me."

Hermione smiled gratefully. Though she'd been through quite a bit in the past few months after having declared herself liberated from dependence on others' opinions, it still felt like an immense relief to have someone with whom she could discuss her Snape predicament. The novelty had yet to wear off; the first few words of their conversations always set her heart hammering, and she would have to remind herself that baring her thoughts to Ginny was acceptable, even wonderful.

She had longed for days to admit to Ginny the full details of her upcoming Saturday meeting with him, but Ginny had been preoccupied. Harry and Ron had obtained permission from McGonagall to visit the school later that evening, and they'd already secured Ginny's promise to play Quidditch with them despite the freezing weather.

Ginny was chewing thoughtfully and regarding Hermione with searching eyes. "You seem jumpy."

"Jumpy?" Hermione thought the question had come across as natural enough. After all, she'd been expecting a remark more along the lines of, 'You seem nervous,' or, 'You seem embarrassed.' *Jumpy* was hardly the term she herself would have used to describe her current state.

"Yes. Jumpy. You've been jumpy all day, like you're nervous about something."



There it was. Hermione resisted the urge to thunk her head down against her plate and bury it in her shepherd's pie.

"You *are* nervous. I can tell. What's going on?"

"I told you I have to meet with Snape again tomorrow, right?"

"Yes, you mentioned it. I'm sure he'll be in a better mood by then, if that's what you're fretting about." Ginny buttered a roll and shook her coppery head. "It's honestly such a shame that the two of you can't get together, isn't it? He'd probably be in a much better mood if..."

"*Gin!*" she exclaimed in an undertone.

"Well, he would," Ginny whispered back obstinately. "But what's going on with you if it's not about his mood? You're still nervous about being alone with him? You met with him Wednesday and you said it went fine. You said you didn't lose concentration or anything. Were you lying?" she asked bluntly, her voice rising.

"No." Hermione glanced around worriedly, then said softly, "I was honest with you when I summarized everything before. *Will* go well. It's more difficult to concentrate around him when it's only the two of us in the room, but he left me alone much of the time, so I adjusted to it eventually. Tomorrow will be a completely different situation: we have to go out and collect a particular ingredient from the Forbidden Forest."

Ginny lifted her eyebrows inquiringly, too busy chewing to respond, so Hermione forged ahead. "Unicorn blood."

The brown eyes across from her widened, and Hermione could feel herself starting to blush. "Really?" Ginny asked once she'd swallowed. "You're going to go with Snape?"

"I haven't any other choice. He explicitly told me to show up at eight o'clock Saturday with 'someone suitable,' and I don't know of anyone I could ask to go in my place. "

Ginny snorted. "Someone suitable. Well, you *are* suitable, right? You and Ron never...?"

"No."

"And you and Viktor never...?"

"I was *fifteen!*" Hermione cried in outrage. Too late, she realized that half the Great Hall was staring at her interestedly, including the majority of the teachers. Irrationally, her first thought was that she was relieved Snape didn't happen to be present. Chastising herself and ducking her head, she hissed at Ginny, "*No*. To answer your question, Viktor and I didn't..."

Ginny was grinning widely, shaking her head. "You've still got a lot to learn about the differences between Muggles and wizards, Hermione. Fifteen isn't an unheard-of age for... Well, moving on: you have to collect it yourself because there's no one else you can ask. That sums it up?"

"Yes."

"Well, maybe I overreacted." Ginny put down her fork and examined her fingernails pensively. "After all, why would Snape care if you're a virgin? I can see where it might be embarrassing for *you* to have anything regarding sex brought up in a conversation with him, but it's not as though you should be ashamed of it."

"I don't feel ashamed, exactly," Hermione said with a sigh, putting aside her fork as well. The Great Hall was beginning to empty, satiated students wandering out to enjoy their Friday evening, making it easier to hold their candid conversation at a reasonable volume. She straightened her back and shoulders, facing Ginny fully. "It's more than that. Although I realize there's no way that anything will happen between us, I've worked my entire life to be *mature*. I've come to terms with the fact that I can't be what everyone else wants me to be all at once, but this is also, unfortunately, the single most effective way for me to demonstrate...in front of him, nonetheless...that I'm still immature in many ways."

Ginny shrugged and reached for a frosted cupcake. Hermione's fingers itched to do the same. "I guess that depends on how you perceive virginity. It seems to me that in many ways, Muggles have it all wrong. I wouldn't say it's a matter of maturity, for instance. After all, look at Ron: he lost it to Lavender, and neither of them are especially mature compared to you."

"True," Hermione conceded. "And Snape has certainly caught enough students in various corners over the years to realize that the mature ones aren't the only ones breaking the rules, I suppose. I'm just not keen to have one more reason to feel like nothing more than his student."

"Is that all, though? I would think that if you were to feel embarrassed for any reason, it would be because it's broadcasting the fact that none of your past relationships have really gone all that far or gotten that serious."

Hermione cocked her head. "Yes. I think that's an apt way to put it, now that you've said that. None of my relationships...~~my~~ *two* relationships...have amounted to much, and he's..."

"An adult."

"Yes." She blushed.

"Who's had adult relationships."

"Very probably."

"Of course, we don't know that for a fact. He had that thing for Harry's mum, and it never went anywhere, did it? So he may have spent all these years pining for her and never become involved with another woman."

The two girls pondered the possibility for a few moments. Ginny frowned. "But that would be a long, long time without..."

"Yes."

"Even Snape can't be *that* antisocial."

Hermione, still blushing, was inclined to agree.

Ginny visibly shook off the deep consideration and gulped down pumpkin juice, crinkling her eyes sympathetically. "I don't really know what else to tell you, Hermione. I don't think there's any kind of sound advice for what to do when the person you're infatuated with is twenty years older and has probably been sexually active since before you were born. Who knows how many women he's been with, even as... unpleasantly as he acts most of the time. And on top of that, he *is* your professor."

Hermione stared at her. "Thanks, Gin. I really needed to be reminded of that."

Perhaps, she thought, glancing at the mostly empty teachers' table, she really did.

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Quidditch, Hermione was beginning to see, had a good many benefits for the body as well as the mind. She was nearly frozen solid as a result of having spent the past four hours flying around the Hogwarts grounds with Ginny and the boys, but she was pleasantly achy in muscles that she hadn't used in far too long.

The combination of a busier school schedule and making an effort to resurrect her social relations with Ginny, Ron and Harry had begun to have distinctly positive effects for her. She awoke in the mornings feeling pressed to do something. Rarely did she feel a resurgence of that particular brand of heaviness, pensiveness, that had plagued her for so many months.

The benefits didn't stop there, she was happy to note. Ginny had quietly but efficiently forged for herself a role as Hermione's confidante and activity partner, willing her way into Hermione's confidences and encouraging her to become more physically active around the castle grounds. As Hermione stripped off her sopping wet clothes and pulled on her pajamas that evening, she was pleased to note that she looked healthier and happier than she had in recent memory. She was still eating too much, she admitted...seeking solace in the kitchens when her anxieties became too prominent to handle...but there was a pink glow in her cheeks that had been absent before, and she felt as though she'd regained some equanimity and perspective.

She was too excited and too nervous about the next evening to sleep. She'd hoped that she and Ginny could spend the evening talking, but Ginny had been squired off to some romantic rendezvous with Harry. She and Ron had exchanged a few slightly awkward words, and then he'd taken off soon thereafter to return to London, presumably to spend the night with Lavender. Hermione was beginning to recognize the anticipatory glow that entered his eyes when he was savoring the prospect of seeing her. It no longer stung, but it wrought in her chest a vague ache. She wanted to be happy for them, and she'd wished him well.

Lying on her stomach, tracing her fingers idly across the patterned comforter, Hermione stared out the window of the room. Darkness rendered the Forbidden Forest a mass of indistinct, sprawling wilds, and she rose and walked to the window to observe it more closely. She was fascinated by the way solids and shadows seemed to swirl in and out of existence, moving and merging with no rational pattern.

Its reputation was well deserved, as she knew from experience, but she couldn't help but feel that walking into its depths the next evening beside Snape would add an even more thrilling dimension. The castle had always been rife with rumors about Snape's activities, and it was said that his intimate knowledge of the Forbidden Forest was second only to Hagrid's in its vastness. He'd probably spent years learning its geography and its secrets while collecting potions ingredients.

It should have reassured her that she could be confident in his knowledge, that there was no reason to fear that he would lead them astray, but somehow it only served to speed her heartbeat even more.

Resolving that she had to find a task to which she could apply all her nervous energy, Hermione donned her school robe over her pajamas and crept softly out the door. Hogwarts' curfew had long since fallen, but there had been several instances during that school year when she'd wandered the halls illicitly, and Hermione couldn't help but suspect that the teachers knew of her propensity and tolerated her. There had never been any conclusive evidence, of course, but small sounds and movements, as though feet and fabric were rushing in the opposite direction or ducking down a hallway, had often suggested to her that the nightly patrolman or -woman was making an effort not to directly sight and punish her. Perhaps McGonagall, concerned as the woman was about the state of her mental health, had spoken with the other instructors. Perhaps they'd all hoped that walking would become her catharsis.

Invariably, her aimlessly wandering steps would become purposeful, and Hermione would find herself heading in the direction of the library. She dropped most of the wards, rendering ineffective all but the basic alarms that would alert Madam Pince of her intrusion. There had to be a conspiracy amongst the teachers to allow her to indulge in her nightly excursions, she thought to herself, for the spells guarding the library were too simple to deter most seventh-year students.

Creeping through the book stacks, it took her mere minutes to find what she sought. Grasping several texts pertaining to magical creatures and their behavior, Hermione retired to a chair and began paging through. A cursory examination revealed that most of the information about unicorns was very basic: their classification, thoughts about their origins, their diet and mating behavior. A brief mention was made about their complicated reactions to witches and wizards, and Hermione was reminded of Hagrid's lessons years ago as he'd encouraged the boys to approach only the youngest of the unicorns. They don't mind boys so much at that age, he'd told them gently. Hermione had watched the flashes of hurt crossing her male classmates' faces and found herself wondering, with the impassioned nature of her twelve-year-old self, why unicorns of any age should mind boys so much. Boys weren't so bad, she'd thought then. They could be a bit reckless and ill-behaved at times, but they weren't *bad*.

Only time, she thought wryly, could serve to demonstrate how deeply ran the divide between the natures of men and women. Unicorns, the books all stated, would willingly submit themselves only to virgin maidens. Hermione had known this perfectly well, but she yearned for more information.

Returning to the stacks, she replaced the first set of texts she'd retrieved and went in search of another. This time, her deliberation led her gradually to the Potions section, where she began grabbing volumes about rare and exotic potions ingredients. It was a shame, she decided, that no one had ever penned a volume specifically about the best way to *collect* potions ingredients. If Snape was to be believed, it was a separate art in its own right.

Paging through her new finds, Hermione felt her heart swell with excitement. Therein was some of the depth and detail she'd craved: specifics about the behavior of unicorn blood in potions and its effects on magical beings as well as step-by-step instructions about its acquisition. The virgin maiden was to seat herself under a tree...*seat*, the text stated explicitly...and always appear as nonthreatening as possible. Drawn to the lightness and purity of her, the unicorn would emerge from the surroundings in its own time. There was nothing to be done to hasten the process; it was known to take hours, sometimes even days, and its eventual success was determined almost solely by the perseverance of the maiden in question.

Amused at the thought of herself as a maiden, Hermione continued reading. Beyond the mechanics of the act...using a special knife to gently cut the thin skin over its leg and placing the blood in an equally special vessel...there was little else to be gleaned. Hermione grew disappointed again. She'd hoped for even more guidelines. What else could possibly determine whether or not the unicorn cooperated? If she wore certain clothes or bathed in certain oils, would it make her repugnant or more attractive? Did it make any difference to the unicorn how she appeared or smelled outwardly or was it solely the creature's sense of her sex...and her purity...that impelled it to approach her?

Caught in her contemplations, Hermione jumped at the sound of a slight rustling. Her eyes roved around the room, becoming alarmed, but she caught sight of nothing. Yet again, as when wandering the halls late at night, she felt the fine hairs along the nape of her neck and her arms stand at attention. She saw nothing, but her body *felt* that someone was there.

She rose and forced herself to explore. "*Lumos*," she whispered, stalking through aisle after aisle, finding nothing. Her nerves didn't relent, but she found the presence of mind to recall that she needed to return the potions textbooks to their proper place.

Gathering them up in her arms, Hermione returned to the Potions aisle. Placed at the very back of the library, it was the darkest and least popular of the subject aisles...not unlike its instructor, she reflected, oddly warmed by the thought of the forbidding Potions master. As she lifted the first text from the stack in her arms and placed it back on the shelf, her nerves went into overdrive. On the shelf directly above the area from which she'd taken the books, a volume had been pulled outward.

It jutted forward very obviously, as though daring her to take it.

Hermione nearly dropped the remaining books in her arms. She looked around wildly, heart truly racing this time, but again there was no one to be seen. *Someone was here*, she thought. And that someone had to have heard and seen her present. If it had been a student, why would they have wanted her to read that particular volume? If it had been a teacher, why would they not have punished her for her infraction?

In either case, why hadn't they simply made themselves known?

Simultaneously very curious and very suspicious, Hermione placed the other texts back on the shelf and crossed her arms, staring apprehensively at the mystery volume. It was clearly ancient: its spine was bent and slightly bowed, and its cover, or what she could see of it, was aged many years. It looked as though Madam Pince hadn't been able to summon the motivation to keep it as immaculately and unerringly perfect as her usual standards dictated. It had to be an unpopular book indeed.

Hermione cast a quick spell intended to detect Dark activity. No threats appeared present; the book did not radiate a signature or an aura of magical influence. She had no way to determine whether or not it had been sprinkled with an offensive or toxic substance.

*You're just going to have to be brave,* she told herself, gritting her teeth and wrapping her fingers around its spine. Yanking it from its place, she was surprised by its lightness; it was quite small, barely several hundred pages, and the parchments were yellowed to the point of antiquity. Upon closer inspection, the binding and jacket revealed nothing of its title or contents.

Gingerly pulling open the cover of the volume, Hermione glanced down and took in the title. ***Ingredients and Adventures for the Exotic Potion Brewer: A Reference.*** Flipping through the pages, she was pleased to find a wealth of information pertaining to the collection of potions ingredients from magical plants and other specimens. Skipping ahead to the section marked simply *Unicorns*, she was thrilled with the detail included, far more than that of all the other books combined.

Someone *had* had the intelligence to commit to paper such invaluable information, she thought with satisfaction.

And with the exception of Ginny, whom Hermione knew to be elsewhere, only one person in the castle knew that she would have need of such information, but he'd allowed no other traces of his entrance to linger in the library. Sparing another glance around the room, Hermione felt a sharp pang of arousal and disappointment.

## Ten

### Chapter 11 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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There were only so many ways a girl could seek to calm herself, and Hermione was fairly certain that she'd exhausted them all. By seven-thirty Saturday evening, she'd dragged Ginny out to walk around the castle grounds...twice; she'd studied ahead in every one of her classes; she'd written letters to both of the boys and to her parents; she'd consulted with Vector over the equations regarding the addition of the unicorn blood; and she'd showered away any potentially offensive odors. Dressing simply and sleekly in black slacks and a black jumper, Hermione was forced to concede defeat. She had half an hour before her meeting with Snape and no idea how to keep her mind from whirring anxiously.

Truly the child of dentists, Hermione settled for brushing her teeth. She'd been too nervous to eat supper...a shock and a miracle unto itself...but it didn't stop her from finding an almost meditative joy in the gentle *rush, rush, rush* of the bristles across the surface of her teeth. After vigorously brushing and rinsing, she gave a slightly more relaxed sigh and regarded herself in the mirror. She cracked a wry smile at the image before her: Hermione Granger, virgin maiden.

It felt no different than simply being herself. She'd pulled back the top half of her combative mass of hair and secured it with a large clip, baring her forehead and face. The rest of the curls were already matting themselves into impressive knots down her back. She hadn't dared to use any kind of taming product for fear that even the faintest of scents would bother the unicorn, so her hair was left in all its natural glory. It strongly resembled a predatory tropical vine.

She was bare-faced, and the stress of the past few weeks had begun to wreak havoc on her skin. Staring despondently at a few angry red blemishes, she blew out a heavy sigh. Snape was already going to be faced with conclusive evidence that she was yet a girl. What did a few complexion woes matter? She flirted briefly with the idea of stealing Ginny's cosmetics but decided against it. Aside from the possibility of scent, she'd always hated cosmetics with a passion, and she wasn't about to alter that intolerance just for Snape. After months of consciously, forcefully choosing what she knew best reflected *her*, succumbing to that kind of insecurity would only have felt pathetic and counterproductive afterward. Let him see her for what she was. He could deal with it.

Hopefully the unicorn could as well.

Though she had ten minutes remaining, Hermione gathered up her warm outdoor cloak, draping it over her arm, and her thick red hat and gloves, exiting the room. She didn't carry a purse while in residence at Hogwarts...it was exclusively an accessory she used in the Muggle community...but she had her wallet, complete with Wizarding and Muggle currency and her identification, tucked snugly into her pocket, as readily available as her wand. She'd tried to assure herself countless times that, provided she was with him, she had nothing to fear; but in the end, her natural apprehension where the Forbidden Forest was concerned had overtaken her.

She passed few people in the hallway on the way to the dungeons, and most of those she did see merely shot her pitying looks. Undoubtedly, they thought she'd been assigned a detention with Snape. Two second-year Slytherins did smirk at her slightly, and a tiny first year grinned outright, but the others seemed to genuinely feel badly for her. There was a time when such an occurrence, given that she was Hermione Granger, would have shocked them utterly; but for weeks now, the other students had seemed to become more and more understanding of the changes she'd undergone.

After her little debacle in Potions class with the charmed knife, most appeared unperturbed by the thought that Hermione Granger would be serving detention, she thought with satisfaction. Being Hermione Granger no longer meant being the goody-two-shoes Brain of Gryffindor with no opinions to espouse other than those of her textbooks, and she found she rather appreciated the alteration.

As she approached the dungeons, Hermione quickly halted her train of thought and began to focus on her steps. When exiting his private rooms earlier that week, she'd found herself in a section of the dungeons with which she was only passingly familiar, and studious concentration was required for her to ensure that she retraced her steps properly. Breathing a sigh of relief upon catching sight of the correct door, Hermione stood still for a moment, completely motionless, and collected herself and her thoughts. She could feel the seemingly permanent pink tinge in her cheeks. The moment she stepped through the door unaccompanied, Snape would know.

*It's nothing to be ashamed of,* she repeat adamantly to herself.

Then she knocked three times, softly, and waited.

A moment later, the door swung open. She'd heard no words spoken aloud, and so she assumed that Snape had somehow charmed the door to admit her. Alternatively, perhaps he was lurking just beyond audible range, waiting in the faint light of the corridor and observing her entrance.

Feeling sick to her stomach and decidedly spooked, Hermione shut the door behind her and peered around tentatively. The door to his private laboratory was open, and she could hear faint sounds issuing from within. Creeping forward, she peered around the doorway. He was bent over one of the work benches, deftly slicing some kind of

unidentifiable root. She leaned forward and sniffed experimentally in the direction of the bubbling cauldron to her right. Though she couldn't be sure, the particular amalgamation of scents, both calming and cloying, was suggestive of a pain-relieving potion.

Stomach clenching, she prepared to knock again and clear her throat, but there was no need. Snape turned slowly and regarded her. His hair hung loose, and she took in its noticeably shorter length with surprise. Obviously, he'd had it cut some time earlier that day. His hands were stained with root juices, a knife still clutched agilely in one hand, and he'd left the first few buttons of his dress shirt undone. The sight of his chest began to make her sweat.

"Good evening, sir," she said in a somewhat squeaky tone, entering the room stiffly. His eyes flickered to her heavy outdoor cloak, which she had yet to don, and her simple but warm clothing. When his gaze once again moved upward, she saw him glance directly behind her at the obvious emptiness of the foyer beyond.

"I specifically told you, Miss Granger, to bring someone suitable with you this evening. Are you incapable of following the simplest of directions?" He held his hands at a distance, fingers pointed downward, to avoid staining his clothing, but somehow the tone was as chastising as if he'd reprimanded her with a pointed finger.

"Yes, sir. I understood you perfectly well, and I followed your directions." Snape continued to stare. He was going to make it painful, wasn't he?

The man appeared to suffer no physical need to blink. Hermione cleared her throat and said, "I am suitable, sir. There was no need to ask anyone else."

Silence stretched between them, and an unidentifiable expression flickered through what little she could discern of her professor's eyes. It may have been surprise, or perhaps scorn. She didn't care to dwell on it. "Very well," he said neutrally after what felt like hours, putting down the knife he'd held and murmuring a stasis spell at the bubbling cauldron. She briefly considered pulling on her cloak until hearing the way his voice caressed the soft Latin. Her body temperature rocketed instantly.

"You have brought the parchment, then, I trust?"

Hermione nodded and drew the document in question from her pocket, casting the necessary spell to enlarge it to its usual size. Of the parchments he'd placed on his desk for her retrieval earlier that week, the only one that hadn't contained potions equations was currently clutched in her sweaty palm. It was an official agreement, standard issue from the Ministry of Magic, stating that she, as the party able to commune with the unicorns, would only to accept blood if it was willingly given. Intended to act as a concrete form of legal liability should she abuse or murder an innocent magical creature, it required both her signature and that of the witness who had agreed beforehand to be present during the encounter.

She proffered it. His fingertips brushed hers for the barest moment, and she watched the crossing of their hands and skin tones. He'd always looked so pale to the students, and they'd never hesitated to announce that fact, but his skin looked darker than hers. It had a sallowness to it as though it had been denied light and nourishment for far too long to flourish in its natural state. Beside his calloused fingertips and dark, potion-stained fingernails, her hand looked feminine and almost porcelain.

He glanced it over, pursing his lips, and nodded brusquely. Pocketing the parchment, he took off at a startlingly fast clip in the direction of his living area. Hermione followed hastily, struggling to match his impressive pace.

Upon entering his living room, one hand snaked out from beneath his frock coat and snatched up the cloak lying across the back of his sofa. He headed toward the desk in the corner, presumably to sign the agreement as the witness. She kept her gaze focused on him but couldn't staunch the desire to glance quickly at the rest of the room. Dumbledore was absent from his portrait, probably wandering about the castle, unwisely startling other students. One of the two doors to the right side of the room was open, the darkness beyond calling to her. The room, or what little she could distinguish through the shadows, looked to be too great in depth to be a normally sized bathroom. It must have been his bedroom.

She looked back at him...quickly enough, fortunately. The expression on his face suggested he'd been preparing to reproach her for woolgathering or gazing inappropriately at his private belongings. Delivering a harsh nod in the direction of the exit, he pulled on his cloak with a slow deliberateness, the knuckles of both his hands straining to white. As usual, Hermione deduced that he had to be in nearly debilitating pain. She wondered if he was ever free anymore.

Taking his gesture as a cue, she preceded him yet again, retracing her path and leading the way back to the main dungeon corridor, whereupon Snape increased his lengthy strides and matched her pace. It took him barely three hastened steps to catch up to her, and Hermione had the irrational desire to mutter something uncharitable. At five feet five inches, she'd always considered herself respectably average for a female, but he made her feel impossibly tiny...and inconveniently slow...at times.

As they passed the Potions classroom, Snape wordlessly held up his left palm as if to signal her. Taking it as an indication to stop, Hermione waited while he ducked in. Surmising that he was checking for any illicit visitors, she waited patiently until he'd double-checked the locks and the warding spells. The difference between the meager hindrances she'd faced in entering the library and the immense impediments he'd just placed on his classroom was staggering. Frowning, she became fully convinced that someone had been lessening the library's wards to accommodate her.

He'd been there the previous night; of that, Hermione no longer had any doubts, though she didn't see how it would be possible to determine whether his visit had predated hers or if he'd walked in to find her already there. In either case, he'd observed her closely enough to take note of her reading material and make his own furtive contribution.

A cold thought seized her. Had he known, watching her as she eagerly devoured the books, that she was a virgin herself and hadn't had need of anyone's assistance? Would he have assumed that, had she asked for another's involvement, the suitable party would have accompanied her?

His expression when she'd revealed that she had deliberately come alone suggested otherwise, Hermione thought firmly. There had been a flicker of *something* across his features; she simply didn't know him well enough to interpret it. Perhaps it had been triumph; he might have assumed that no boy would want her and merely been pleased to have his suspicions proved correct.

Watching his broad back as she followed him out of the castle, Hermione was forced to compartmentalize her emotions regarding her professor. One portion of her brain, fully convinced that he *had* assumed her a virgin and actively considered her immature and unattractive, felt dangerously close to crushed. The way in which he carried himself, unflappably self-assured despite the constant pain, only added to her glumness. The other girls at Hogwarts could protest all they wanted, but Hermione wasn't blind: she'd seen the way they would glance at him, surreptitiously, as he stalked past. She wasn't the only one who drank in the sight of him, his imperiousness, with considerable pleasure. What woman *wouldn't* want him?

The other part of her brain, in which she cherished her admiration and passion for him as a blossoming entity, brushed aside her thoughts and reminded her that his opinion of her did not matter. He might deem her a chubby know-it-all Gryffindor, unattractive and intolerably annoying, but it wouldn't stop her from admiring him still.

For the next hour, Hermione did just that as they traveled in absolute silence. She followed the Potions master across the cold grounds, floundering through snow drifts and hissing at the icy wind penetrating her cloak, and into the Forbidden Forest. As their steps progressed across the varying terrain and led them deeper into the wilderness, she found that her trepidation gave way to a sense of awe. His pace was rapid and virtually silent, the set of his shoulders consistently confident. He clearly knew his way, and she was not so frightened by her surroundings that she couldn't continue to admire his form as they walked.

Finally, just when Hermione was becoming convinced he'd secretly Apparated them to an endless Siberia, Snape ground to a halt and turned to face her. Her breaths came rapidly due to the laborious process of trampling through snow, and exhaling clouded the air between them with vast puffs of condensation. The rise and fall of his chest was impossible for her to discern, but two elegant lines, as haughty-looking as the man himself, issued from his nostrils as he breathed, and his cheeks were visibly flushed even in the faint moonlight. At least she wasn't the only one finding the going difficult.

"The unicorns tend to return to spend the night," he began, lecturing in his smooth classroom monotone. "I have already consulted with Hagrid; he deemed this the most promising area."

Their steps had ceased in the middle of a clearing of considerable size given the usual density of the Forbidden Forest; the perimeter of trees surrounding them circumscribed an area of perhaps sixty or seventy feet in diameter. Peering curiously at the trees, Hermione could distinguish neither color nor shape through the darkness

strung between them. The effect was one of being snugly hemmed in, and she didn't find it altogether that unpleasant. She could understand why the unicorn population might find it a comfortable and reassuring location in which to spend the night.

Her attention was drawn back to her professor as he lifted a hand, pointing toward a particularly thick copse of conifers to their right. "I shall wait in there," he said simply. "The unicorns will not approach if I am visible nearby."

She felt her throat grow tight and a brief, uncomfortable silence fell. The unspoken thought remained between them: the unicorns wouldn't show themselves if any man were visible nearby.

"You cannot cast a warming spell," Snape continued, his tone sharper. "They will feel least threatened if you sit down and remain quiet. If and when one enters the area, do not make any sudden movements, and never draw your wand."

He was repeating virtually word for word the text of the book he'd left for her in the library. Hermione searched his eyes, but there was no embarrassment or recognition to suggest that his actions the previous night remained on his mind. He was as skillful and impenetrable an actor as he was a spy.

"When the unicorn approaches you, it will pause momentarily. You need to beckon it forward. The best way to do so is to nod or move your leg. They are most comfortable lying against you and will likely head toward your legs." The legs in question were currently freezing and nearly numb; Hermione absently hoped she'd be capable of bending them to sit in the first place. "Once it has made itself comfortable, it will give you a sign that it is willing for you to draw blood. Every one is different; I cannot tell you definitively what it will do.

"Use these to extract the blood." Reaching into his pocket with hands clothed supplely in black leather, he withdrew and handed to her a small knife, his forefinger gently touching her gloved hand. At the moment of contact, his touch seemed to burn through both layers of thick material and into her skin.

The knife was a striking piece of workmanship, exquisitely carved and positively glowing in the moonlight. The combination of its own natural luminescence and the soft reflection of the pristine snow surrounding them made it mesmerizing in its beauty. He also placed into her hands a small glass vial, its base and stopper made of the same radiant material. Hermione became breathless as he transferred it to her, his finger remaining in contact with her palm.

"Take only a small amount; the potion will not require much in order to stabilize it. The creatures heal quickly, but they are unfortunately fragile by nature, and we have precious few of them left."

Hermione stared at him in amazement, thinking that it was the most compassionately expressive remark she'd ever heard the man utter. His irises were their usual unfathomable black, but there was a sadness to the curve of his lips that suggested he felt deeply for the animals.

As though realizing he'd stepped widely out of character, Snape drew his hands away sharply, leaving hers suddenly bereft and cold despite her gloves and the implements. "I will wait," he said brusquely, "in the trees across the way. I cannot say how long it will be. I sincerely hope you have more patience than the majority of your insufferable Housemates."

She sighed, steam gusting from her mouth, and resisted the urge to roll her eyes as he stalked away. His natural grace was somewhat impeded by the snow, and she could see his shoulders tighten reflexively. He'd probably realized belatedly how ridiculous he'd looked.

Shaking her head, Hermione moved to the other side of the clearing and seated herself beneath a small tree. Snape was insinuating himself between the trees directly across from her, and before long his face and cloak had blended flawlessly with the environment. Tucking the two implements into the pocket of her cloak, she arranged herself in a cross-legged position and rubbed her palms against her upper arms with powerful strokes, seeking to warm herself. She was in for a long, cold wait.

Time seemed to take on a trailing quality in the silence of the forest. Perhaps only thirty minutes had passed; perhaps it had been hours. Whatever the duration, Hermione had little comprehension of it. She lay comfortably against the tree, her shivering having long since ceased and become an all-consuming numbness. She felt oddly detached from the cold of her body, however, preoccupied as she was with regarding the trees around her and wondering about Snape.

The knowledge that he was likely staring directly at her was beyond unnerving. At first, the urge to fidget had nearly driven her mad. She'd compulsively rearranged her legs and cloak, rubbed her hands together, bitten her lip, adjusted her hair, and sought to identify constellations in the shockingly clear sky above her. When she realized how much her knowledge from Astronomy had lagged in the years since she'd had the class, Hermione grew frustrated with herself and fidgeted even more.

With every movement, she was increasingly aware of his presence. He was stony, patient, and frustratingly observant, she knew. He would be sitting there solidly...or perhaps standing...just as he always had at Grimmauld Place, unmoving and immovable. He would be watching and cataloging each and every act of her childish fidgeting.

She was torn. The only source of contemplation that had ever allowed her to truly retreat within her own mind was him, yet waiting for the purest and fairest of magical creatures while indulging in distinctly impure thoughts about her teacher felt somehow blasphemous. Inevitably, fidgeting gave way to fretting. Hermione fretted, scolded herself, and fretted some more, completely caught up in berating herself mentally.

When it first emerged into the clearing approximately twenty feet to her left, Hermione was struck dumb by the creature's majesty. All thoughts of Snape evaporated instantly. She could feel the cold air rushing into her mouth, agape as it was, but it took her a few moments to regain the powers of thought necessary to close it. She couldn't tell if it was a male or a female, but it looked large enough to be a young adult, based on the pictures she'd encountered during her research. It walked with the lightest of steps, seeming almost to float across the ground. Its soft coat and magnificent horn were more effulgent than the snow around them.

Her heart began to race; her palms perspired. She was suddenly aware of her bulkiness, her humanness, in comparison to the delicate creature. Hermione forced herself to maintain eye contact with it, hoping her expression was serene and inviting. In truth, she felt anything but. Her brain had become muddled by insecurity and self-doubt; she felt certain that she would somehow repel the beautiful animal and send it into terrified flight.

When it came within six feet of her, the sudden reversal of her mindset was extraordinary. Instantaneously, Hermione felt beautiful and tranquil. She felt wonderfully, completely free of hatred, fear, anxiety, and jealousy. There was nothing to the world but her body and the unicorn's, and they shared a mutual flow of energy that her Muggle brain could only compare to an electrical circuit. She could actually feel the magic flowing from the creature and entering her. Her body reveled in it, complemented it, radiated it back toward its partner. When the creature paused before her, Hermione exhaled a contented breath she hadn't even realized she'd been holding. Fuzzily recalling Snape's words, she gave a gentle nod and moved her left leg forward slightly. It was no longer numb and stiff; the warmth suffusing her body was amazing.

If the creature could have smiled, she felt sure, it would have; it nearly bounded forward, seating itself happily against her crossed legs, its head resting against her left thigh. She was struck abruptly by its youthful sprightliness and wondered if it was younger than she'd initially judged it to be. Whatever its age, the contact between its body and hers brought tears to her eyes. Hermione wondered if the feeling in her heart was the sensation new mothers felt upon first touching their newborns. The love and purity of the moment were indescribable.

At first, she thought she might have imagined it, but she hadn't: it was tenderly prodding her with its left leg. As slowly and cautiously as possible, Hermione reached into the pocket of her cloak and withdrew the vial and knife. She feared that the creature would bolt at the first sight of the blade, but it remained calm and steadily held forward its leg. She wondered if she ought to say something to begin the ritual, but the silence and understanding between them felt sacrosanct.

Forcing herself to recollect in full the directions of the texts she'd read, Hermione recited to herself as she placed the knife against the unicorn's lovely coat. She placed only the barest amount of pressure, drawing it slowly across the minutest possible distance. The creature did not flinch. Liquid silver sprang into sight, seeping from the wound. Though she'd been fully expecting it, Hermione could not suppress a gasp. She placed the vial beneath it, poised to catch the precious drips.

When a third of the vial had been filled, she realized with terror that she had no idea how to staunch the bleeding of the wound. "I'm sorry, I..." she began to whisper, but the

moment she withdrew the vial, the wound began to miraculously knit itself closed. She stared in astonishment. Where seconds earlier there had been a divide in the supple flank, there was now an unblemished expanse of virgin white.

"Thank you," she murmured, tears still brimming in her eyes. The creature rose effortlessly to its feet and made a small sound, something like a horse's nicker, gentle and inviting. She lifted her right hand and drew it tenderly across its beautifully arched neck and back, marveling at the impossible softness. The creature's eyes were a deep, limpid black, regarding her with obvious pleasure.

They remained connected for a moment, and then it nuzzled her hand briefly and drew away. She watched it exit the clearing in the direction from which it had come, moving with untroubled steps that gave no indication she'd shed its blood. Relieved and overcome, Hermione gave in to her needs, and the tears rolled freely down her face.

She hadn't noticed Snape approaching, but suddenly, he was before her. His lips were set in a strained line, and his fingers were twitching lightly as though he longed to take the vial from her but didn't know how she would react. Hermione knew she had to look a complete, and possibly hormonal, mess. She could feel her hair frizzing about her head, and the salty tears left tracks across her flushed skin.

"Miss Granger?" he said finally. She felt a brief urge to laugh. The uncertainty in his voice was somehow so completely and utterly *male*, as though he was baffled by the violence of her emotional reaction.

Hermione was still enraptured, her mind flowing unchecked in all sorts of crazy directions. She saw herself as Snape must have, sitting beneath the gray trees, the virgin maiden, young and beaming and filled with a new understanding of the world. "It must be what having a baby feels like," she heard herself say aloud in frank wonderment. She hadn't expected him to flinch so openly.

"I'm sorry," she said, searching his face. "Did I say something that offended you?"

He didn't reply, but he reached out a hand and helped her to her feet. She'd shed her gloves prior to the unicorn's arrival, not wanting the feel of unfamiliar fabric to spook the animal. At some point, Snape had done the same. The result of the contact between their skin was immediate and electricifying.

*He felt it too*, she thought, watching his eyes dilate until they became orbs of the deepest uninterrupted black. She had no idea how to describe what had passed between them, but her body thrummed at his proximity.

She was the first to break eye contact, and just as soon as she had, he dropped her hand and turned. "It is late," he said simply. His voice had regained its superiority and detachment. "We shall return to the castle immediately. You need rest."

"No, I don't," she assured him, sighing contentedly. "I've never felt better, Professor, honestly. I'm not at all tired."

"The magical exchange that just occurred will fatigue you," he replied evenly. "It is only a matter of time."

Hermione walked behind him with vigor in her steps, no longer feeling the cold. She recalled that one of the older texts in the library had mentioned several ancient magical cultures for whom the acquisition of unicorn's blood was considered a rite of passage undertaken by young women before their marriages. It was essentially a gift, given by the young woman to her new lover, who would then gift her in return, though the text had not specified in what manner.

In any case, the book had been correct in its assessment of one thing: emotions she'd never known she held had been roused and brought to the surface. She was aware of her body in a way that seemed, ironically, to be decidedly sexual. She felt emboldened, alluring, feminine. Throughout the entire trek back to the castle, Hermione's thoughts remained sublime.

## Eleven

### Chapter 12 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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The third time Professor Flitwick swore, Hermione gave in to her amusement and giggled. The tiny Charms instructor was flailing his arms about almost comically, shrilly repeating the incantation that was supposed to alter the magical properties of the healing potion sitting unperturbed in the cauldron before him. His forehead bathed with sweat, he seethed and hissed, but the potion remained unresponsive.

"Wasn't it supposed to change color?" Madam Pomfrey called idly from the corner of the room. She'd stationed herself just inside the door nearly an hour ago and hadn't seemed at all compelled to move forward despite her interest in the proceedings. Hermione realized suddenly that she'd probably witnessed before the exasperating spectacle that was a Snape-Flitwick collaboration.

"You are speaking too rapidly," Snape reiterated for what felt like the eightieth time that evening, effectively cutting off whatever derisive remark Flitwick had been about to make, uncharacteristically, in the mediwitch's direction. Hermione stifled a groan and glanced up at the portrait on the wall in desperation. Albus grinned at her, shaking his head fondly, but said nothing. They both knew better than to intercede when the two professors standing over the cauldron were in the process of expending so much energy and frustration in causing such a complex and highly unpredictable potion to respond.

"Really, this is becoming ridiculous," Madam Pomfrey insisted, pulling off her spectacles to polish them impatiently on her robes. "Miss Granger still has your examination to get through, Severus, and it's eleven o'clock. I'm sure I needn't remind you that Miss Granger should be in bed..."

"She is eighteen years old, Poppy," Snape retorted sharply. Hermione repressed a flush of pleasure at the fact that he'd even thought to defend her. "Surely you can extend her curfew to midnight on a Friday."

"I can't extend my *own* that long! Please, for the love of Merlin, wrap this up!"

Snape, rather than continue to argue with the mediwitch, turned a considerable glower in Professor Flitwick's direction. Flitwick swore again, though *sotto voce*, and threw

up his tiny hands in disgust.

"I'm simply at my wits' end, Severus. I've nothing else to try, much as I'd like to help you. Are you *sure* you modified the potion properly? If you substituted anything else for the unicorn blood, its instability would be such that..."

"I did precisely as I have stated. Would you like Miss Granger to demonstrate on your own leg how she obtained the blood?" Snape growled at the smaller man.

"Severus, please," Albus said firmly, speaking up for the first time. "It's been a long evening. We've all...with the exception of Poppy...been here for over six hours, and if I'm not mistaken, the three of you have neither eaten nor rested in that duration."

Snape opened his mouth, likely to retort that he didn't require sustenance, and Hermione closed her eyes in brief pain. She was famished...genuinely so, not merely with the illusive needs of her appetite...and longed for a break. She'd spent every evening that week slaving over the final touches to her equations so that they could begin the incantations that evening, and between the loss of sleep and her desperate need for food, she didn't know how much longer she could tolerate her professors' arguments.

"I cannot condone the starvation of my best Gryffindor," Albus continued, more pleasantly. "Really, Severus, Filius, let's put a stop to this. We all know Miss Granger's calculations are unimpeachable; it is simply the lateness of the hour and the natural exhaustion of a long week. Get a good night's sleep and try again tomorrow."

Gradually, the good sense of his proposal sank in all around. Professor Flitwick, returning suddenly to his jovial and courtly self, apologized profusely to Hermione and Madam Pomfrey for his use of inappropriate language in front of ladies and excused himself for the evening. With the gathering officially adjourned, Hermione sank back against the nearest work bench, so relieved to indulge her exhaustion that she was oblivious to its sharp edge biting into her lower back. She was pleased to find that she could still feel her feet after eight hours of standing upright and theorized that it was due to Ginny's increasingly strenuous demands on her physically during their morning walks.

"It's been less than a month," Madam Pomfrey murmured gently, removing herself from the doorway and striding to the center of the room. Her gaze was fixed on Snape as he commenced dealing with the remaining potion. She had dark circles under her eyes and the pinched, overworked look Hermione had always associated with Muggle nurses. Suddenly, she felt terrible for requesting that the mediwitch stop by to look over the details of Snape's physical state that she'd included in the Arithmantic calculations for the charm and potion.

Not that it mattered all that much, she reflected with a sigh. The mediwitch had been too busy to stop by earlier in the evening, and now they'd brought their attempts to a close with little success. Apart from decreased viscosity and an increased heat tolerance...both Snape's achievements over the course of the week...the potion remained unchanged. She dreaded the moment when Madam Pomfrey revealed the elementary mistake she'd made that had cost them all their evening.

Hermione snapped back to attention, realizing that Madam Pomfrey was still talking desultorily as she yawned. "You shouldn't be so hard on yourselves," she continued with yet another yawn. "And furthermore, none of us can handle this schedule. I've got to return to the infirmary. I just wanted to stop by to tell you both that Septima sent me the calculations earlier today, and I can see only one difficulty."

Hermione's heart plummeted to her feet. Snape's hands, she was relieved to see, continued the process of placing very delicate, very advanced stasis charms on the precious healing potion. She didn't doubt that he was actively taking in every word the mediwitch spoke and their implications, but as he hadn't yet turned the full force of his disapproval and frustration in her direction, Hermione managed to continue breathing.

"This is nothing for which you ought to blame yourself, Miss Granger," Madam Pomfrey continued, removing a small stack of parchments from her pocket and returning them to their proper size with a wave of her wand. "It's a well-established but little-discussed theory in Wizarding medicine. Certainly it's nothing I would expect you to have encountered at your level of education, and as it's outside the realm of Severus' area of expertise, neither of you could have hoped to catch on to it.

"You've forgotten to include," she explained matter-of-factly, pointing out the relevant equations, "that Severus is impotent."

Hermione was amazed to find that she could choke on her own saliva considering how dry her mouth had become. Snape, whose back was toward her, stiffened perceptibly, and the movements of his hands stopped. She saw Albus, still sitting quietly in his portrait, grimace lightly.

"I realize that this probably seems of little importance compared to his other problems," Madam Pomfrey said, "but even a Muggle physician could extol for you the benefits of sexual health and the drastic complications of its loss. After all, Muggle researchers have been claiming for years in their journals that the release of chemicals like oxytocin and endorphins can have a tremendously positive effect on pain thresholds and healing..."

"What would you suggest, madam?" Snape's voice had never, to Hermione's ears, sounded softer or silkier. He was utterly and completely furious, and she watched with fascination the way he gripped the cauldron, white-knuckled. Hermione wished quite suddenly that she could melt into the very floor and join with the ubiquitous dark mold that inhabited its many crevices.

"I would suggest," Madam Pomfrey said in her most commanding voice, "that the two of you stop dancing around the uncomfortable aspects of his venture. I gather from my brief talk with Miss Granger yesterday that she has yet to perform a second physical examination. She said she mentioned it to you once and you brushed her off."

Hermione wanted to hang her head. She hadn't meant to complain to Madam Pomfrey in the manner of a whiny insubordinate criticizing her superior, but that was, in retrospect, what she'd done...and it was how Snape would undoubtedly deem her behavior. He would make her pay for that, she was sure. But she'd been unable to hold back her frustration when he had, yet again, resisted her suggestion. He'd thus far ingested three batches of modified healing potions, all of which had seemingly failed; but without a clinical comparison using the diagnostic spells Madam Pomfrey had taught her, Hermione felt at loose ends, unable to quantify their progress, or lack thereof, for Professor Vector.

"You must give careful consideration to every aspect of this, Severus. I realize that this has the potential to be very awkward for the two of you, but Miss Granger is very nearly graduated, and we all know she's far more mature than her peers. If you really wish to obtain the maximum benefit from this process, you need to consider all variables. Wizarding medicine holds that sexual energies are the most potent form of both pathology and of healing. It's a promising avenue and a critically important part of being a human being. Don't dismiss it so quickly."

She handed the papers over to Hermione and gave the two of them a reproving look with fatigued eyes. "I want a revised version no later than five o'clock tomorrow afternoon, and I want to know precisely how you intend to address this with modifications to your potion base. I know your past few attempts have been less than successful. If you yourself report that you felt no improved efficacy as compared to the control batch, then Merlin knows you've nothing to lose but a few more hours of your time. I'm sure Miss Granger won't put up a fuss. If you need any suggestions for ingredients known to stimulate sexual health and the activities of the male reproductive system, I'm sure Pomona would be more than happy to..."

"Enough." Snape spoke with deadly finality. "You shall have your resolution by tomorrow; I shall see to it personally. If you have finished humiliating me in front of my student, kindly remove yourself from my laboratory."

"Don't be unkind, Severus." She folded her arms across her ample chest and looked at him sadly. "We're none of us idiots, least of all you. The pains and regrets you carry psychologically can have a more profound effect on the healing process than you realize. I don't want you to reach the point where you've only your own obstinate repression holding you back."

Having spoken her last, she exited the room slowly, leaving Hermione and Albus to glance at the Potions master with utmost trepidation.

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It was hardly the manner in which she'd envisioned becoming better acquainted with her professor, but Hermione soon found herself...at eleven-thirty in the evening, nonetheless...traipsing down to the kitchens to fetch him some food. In the aftermath of Madam Pomfrey's horrendously uncomfortable declarations, it was only Albus

Dumbledore who'd possessed the calm and forethought to say aloud, "Hermione, be a dear and run to the kitchens to fetch some supper. You and Severus have a great deal of work to do, and I'm sure you're both very hungry. I shall pop over there briefly and instruct the house-elves to prepare you both an adequate meal."

Still reeling from the mediwitch's demands, Hermione had nodded dumbly and set off for the kitchens. The moment she'd stepped out of Snape's sight, she had pulled her thick, unruly hair off her flushed neck, leaned desperately against the cool walls of the dungeon, and exhaled a deep sigh of relief. Discussing matters sexual in Snape's presence was difficult enough, but she'd convinced herself that she would have the advantage considerably more time before it became necessary to address his issues of his erectile difficulties.

Madam Pomfrey definitely had not been lukewarm on the matter. Hermione released a nervous sigh, recalling the venom with which the Potions master had stared at her. She had a valid point...it could very well have been the most important avenue for them to explore, and they'd ignored it outright...but she could have pursued a less confrontational way of voicing her concerns.

Hastening her steps once her stomach began to growl its demands anew, Hermione made the round trip to the kitchens and back in what she proudly believed was record time. She knocked tentatively on the door of Snape's private laboratory, but it was instead a door farther down the hall that swung open to oblige her. She stepped inside hesitantly and found herself in the dimly lit hallway leading to his private rooms and storage area. Farther along, to her left, the beautiful tapestry beckoned her to run her fingers across its luxurious surface.

She forced herself to put aside her thoughts of all things sensuous and walked as purposefully as possible into Snape's quarters. He remained in his formal attire, but he'd pulled back the sleeves of his frock coat to reveal the white dress shirt he wore underneath. He was seated in an armchair and appeared exhausted, cradling a small crystal goblet filled with a shimmering liquid Hermione suspected to be some sort of spirit. She spared a momentary prayer to whatever deity happened to be listening that it would revive him somewhat, for she'd never seen him so open and willing to reveal his vulnerability in her presence. It boded ill indeed, and it stunned her deeply.

"I've brought your supper, Professor," she began. "If the Headmaster's order isn't to your liking, I'd be happy to fetch something else..." She had barely an instant to step forward and hold the plate out before her when he spoke.

"It's fine." His voice was short and brusque. "Have a seat, Miss Granger. I shan't take up much more of your time this evening, I assure you."

The fatalistic tone of his voice set alarm bells clanging in Hermione's head, but she did as she'd been bidden, placing the magically warmed plate heaped with roast beef and vegetables in front of him on the dark, burnished coffee table. His glance moved only briefly and dismissively over the nutrients he so desperately needed; she wanted to pick up his fork and force feed him as a mother would a sick and recalcitrant child.

"Madam Pomfrey's highly inappropriate outburst has illuminated for me a point which I sought to overlook," he began, his fathomless eyes fixed on some point above her head as he swirled the liquid in his goblet, "namely, that the position in which I have placed you by volunteering for this trial is both undesirable and highly unethical. For that I must apologize."

Hermione, having completely forgotten about her own supper, realized with mounting horror that she could predict precisely the direction in which his words were headed. Even the shock of having received an apology from Severus Snape could not override her need to speak up urgently. "Really, Professor, I want to help..."

"I shall withdraw my participation and allow you to find a more suitable subject," he concluded, his voice rising. She watched the tension in his jaw as his Adam's apple slid slowly up and down while he swallowed, hard, and met her eyes. Leaning forward, he set his goblet on the table before him with a jarring thud.

"Please don't, sir. Not because of Madam Pomfrey, anyway. She was accurate in her statement that we have to address all possible avenues of concern, and I'm perfectly capable of being professional..."

"It is unthinkable, Miss Granger." He leaned back in his chair and regarded her with such dispassion that she felt as though he'd delivered her an actual physical blow. "Surely you didn't believe that even the greasy bat of the dungeons would stoop so low as to force you to endure discussions of his sexual difficulties. One must assume you couldn't manage to do so without seeking relief in vilifying my private matters with your reprehensible friends," he finished menacingly. His eyes were a matte, dead black.

"That's unfair, sir!" she burst out, nearly knocking over her plate as she slammed her right hand on the table, outraged. She thought guiltily of her fevered discussion with Ginny over the holidays, but she didn't for a moment believe that Ginny was capable of compromising Snape's medical history. "With all due respect, I believe I've behaved nothing but professionally since we began this study. I was well aware of these facts from the beginning, and my primary objectives remain the same: to help you and to complete my project to secure an apprenticeship." Hermione sat back, frightfully conscious of her sweaty hands and heavy, increasingly labored breathing. Surely he wouldn't withdraw now, when there was a chance that Madam Pomfrey had clarified for them the proper focus for their research to assume...

"Do you expect me to believe, Miss Granger, that you will be able to withstand the temptation to compromise my privacy? That you can continue to behave properly in my classroom with the added complication of wholly and insupportably inappropriate knowledge..."

"I do, sir," she interrupted boldly, staring him directly in the face. A stray curl flew before her face, but she told herself forcefully to ignore it. Inhaling deeply to further master her reactions, she continued assertively, "And what's more, I insist on having the opportunity to prove to you that I can do it. I want nothing more than to be a professional."

Snape's lips curled condescendingly. "I believe we passed the point of merely professional interaction some time ago, Miss Granger, and I've no one but myself to blame. Find yourself a new subject, and get out of my rooms."

Leaving his plate untouched, he rose from his chair and disappeared into the bedroom. The large wooden door closed behind him with an ominous silence as Albus looked down on her with sad eyes.

## Twelve

*Chapter 13 of 29*

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

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Hermione awoke the following morning to the rumbling of her own stomach and the slightly scratchy feeling of someone's hair on her face.

Mumbling, she tried to sit up and smacked her forehead against Ginny, who was crouched over her with a pillow, poised to strike. The redhead swore and flew back abruptly. "What is *wrong* with you?" she screeched, clutching at her head.

"What's wrong with *you*?" Hermione fired back, dizzy from sitting up too quickly. "What were you going to do, attack me?"

"I've been trying to wake you up!" Ginny bellowed, tossing the pillow aside. "Hermione, you were scaring me, literally *scaring* me. We agreed to be up almost an hour ago to go walking, and you slept through your alarm, through me yelling and shaking you—all of it!"

"Oh." Hermione winced. "I'm sorry, Gin. I took some Dreamless Sleep, perhaps a bit more than I should have. I guess it really laid me flat."

"No kidding." Swearing under her breath, Ginny stood gingerly and tottered from Hermione's bed in the direction of the door. "I'm going to go shower. I'll meet you downstairs in half an hour to go walking. But we have to be done by noon; Harry's taking me to lunch in Hogsmeade."

"Sure." Hermione rose as well, feeling as though a minor earthquake had taken place in the front of her skull. Not at all desirous of the chance to be alone with her thoughts, she hastened to pick out a pair of clothes, simple jeans and a warm jumper, and hurried after Ginny to the girls' showers. The hot water and rough spray revived her somewhat, but she couldn't seem to stop dwelling on the pain in her forehead and the headache with which she'd returned to her bedroom the previous evening, of a very different type but equally painful.

She wanted to respect Snape's desire for privacy, but the child in her railed at the injustice of his refusal to trust her. She knew she couldn't expect him to handle Madam Pomfrey's open declaration of such a sensitive and personal problem with any greater equanimity than he'd shown. After all, who could? Still, it didn't stop her from wanting to scream and beat her fists against the nearest wall, for of course she couldn't very well have beat them against his chest. He'd have sunk like a leaf.

He needed help. She knew it, and he had to know that she knew it. No one deserved even a fraction of the lingering physical and mental pain he carried on his shoulders each day, but she didn't know if she had the courage to return to his chambers and tell him that. She feared for her own emotional state, for her potential apprenticeship, and for her Potions grade. Despite her tremendous respect and admiration for him as a person, Hermione had no idea what measures he would take to ensure that she kept his secrets just that, and with graduation only a few months away, she dreaded the thought of finding out.

Forcefully pushing aside her thoughts of Snape, she dressed alongside Ginny in their room, relieved when Ginny filled what would otherwise have been an overbearing silence with enthusiastic chatter about her lunch with Harry. "I think he's going to tell me his Valentine's Day plans," she finished, nearly bouncing where she stood. "I'm so excited. I heard him talking to Ron over the holidays about getting time off, and I'm *really* hoping he's planning to take me away somewhere. Italy!" she gasped, her eyes lighting up. "Or maybe Spain. Somewhere warm."

"For Valentine's?" Hermione asked skeptically. "Harry? I'm happy for you and all, but that takes an awful lot of forethought for... well, Harry."

"Want to talk about forethought? I think he's going to ask me to marry him soon."

Hermione's brush ground to an almost audible halt in her unmanageable hair. "Gin! Are you certain?"

"Well, no." The other girl was blushing prettily as she applied a light layer of tint to her lips. "Of course I can't be one hundred percent sure. I haven't stumbled across the ring or anything like that." Capping her small cosmetic pot, she shrank it, tucked it in the pocket of her coat, and gave herself a cursory once-over in the mirror. "It's just a feeling I get. He keeps making references to the future and married stuff. The other day he started asking me whether I thought he should make some renovations to Grimmauld Place or sell it and buy a place somewhere quieter."

Hermione felt stunned, but not unpleasantly so. Harry and Ginny, for all their natural spats, were close enough and devoted enough to one another that she could envision them happily married. She rather regretted, for Ginny's sake, that they might undertake the commitment so soon, but it wasn't her place to say as much.

Instead, she mildly inquired, "Will you want a longer engagement?"

Ginny frowned at her reflection and turned toward Hermione. "I don't know. I thought about it yesterday, but then I figured I was getting ahead of myself. What do you think?"

Having finished battling her hair, Hermione followed Ginny out of their room and out of the castle into the surprisingly mild winter day. Turning to take their usual route around the perimeter of the grounds, she hedged, "I think you should at least wait until you've started Auror training, if that's what you really want to do."

"I do. I've already applied, actually." Ginny grinned and drew her Gryffindor scarf more snugly against her slim neck.

"Congratulations!" Hermione gasped. "When did you apply?"

Ginny shrugged. "About a month ago. I didn't want to tell you because you were so busy with the planning for your project, and then this Snape situation began, and you were really involved..."

"Gin, I'm so sorry." Hermione felt terrible. The cold began to sting at her watering eyes. "I should have asked you how you were doing and kept up with you. I've been awfully self-centered this year."

"That's all right. It's hardly a big event—yet, anyway. But if the results do turn out positively, I'm going to have to insist that you come with me to break the news to my mum. She's going to have a few things to say about it, I'm sure."

Hermione barked a laugh. "Yes, she may be the most difficult one to convince. But you've got the grades, the skills and the power for it, so I'm sure she'll come around."

"Speaking of Snape," Ginny said as they kicked up snow under their boots, "did something happen last night? Something that made you need Dreamless Sleep?"

Hermione pursed her lips. She wasn't sure she could describe her frustration without turning her explanation into a unilateral denunciation of Snape. "I had what you might call an enormous setback," she began.

Ginny frowned. "I figured as much. You were already asleep when I got back to the room, but you hadn't bothered to put on your pajamas, and you looked very tense in your sleep."

Hermione allowed herself a loud sigh. "Do you remember that I mentioned to you he was sexually assaulted?"

Ginny cringed delicately. "Yes."

"Well, as a result of years of physical and sexual abuse, he has erectile dysfunction."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm sorry; I keep forgetting that it's largely a Muggle medical term. He's impotent."

"Ohhhhhh." Ginny's eyes widened. "Well, Merlin, that explains a *lot*."

Hermione's brows knitted together. "Such as?"

"Such as his constant foul mood and tension, the fact that we've never once seen him with a woman in an attempt to get over Harry's mum..."

"Maybe he doesn't want to get over her. Maybe he views it as some sort of punishment that he should remain faithful to her."

"Hermione, I love you dearly, but I think you'll have to sleep with a man before you understand fully what I mean when I say that that simply isn't possible. I'm sure he'll continue to pine for her—he's done it for nearly twenty years now, so why shouldn't he continue?—but I would be willing to bet all the Galleons to my name that if he were physically capable, he'd have moved past her by now."

"Slept with someone else, you mean?"

"Slept with many other women, I mean."

Hermione didn't want to consider this possibility. She knew it was immature, but her chest grew hot and tight at the thought of him lusting after and pursuing any other woman. "I thought you were convinced he'd already done that. You told me before I went to collect the unicorn blood that he probably had plenty of experience—"

"He probably *has* plenty, but it may have been years ago. I don't know. How detailed were his medical records?"

Hermione shivered involuntarily, recalling the gruesome detail with which Poppy Pomfrey had chronicled his many tortures. "Very detailed, though when it comes down to it, there's not much more to be stated as the diagnosis than the fact that he's now impotent. The trouble is, I didn't include that in my equations for the past three potions because I didn't think it was among the higher priorities. Foremost in my mind was relieving the pain and muscle spasms and helping him to be able to walk and breathe normally..."

Ginny had never been fond of Snape, but even her eyes crinkled in sympathy. "I had no idea he's doing so poorly."

"It's a wonder he can make it through the day," Hermione murmured. "Madam Pomfrey rapidly ran out of treatment options. She said she's not certain of it, but there's a chance that his body is quickly desensitized after administration of potions and charms. I was desperate to get my new equations to work last night, but Professor Flitwick just couldn't get the potion to respond. And then Madam Pomfrey came in and announced to the whole room that I shouldn't have neglected to incorporate the fact that he's impotent."

Ginny's eyes widened. "The whole room being who, exactly?"

"Well, Professor Flitwick had left by then, but I was there to hear it, and so was Dumbledore—in his portrait, that is."

"Dumbledore has a portrait?" Ginny cried delightedly. "Is it a fairly recent one?"

"Yes." Hermione frowned. "Only a couple of days prior to his death, if I recall correctly."

"That's fantastic! Oh, I really want to see him! Do you think you could convince him to come visit the common room sometime?"

Hermione laughed. "A bit of begging wouldn't hurt. I don't know that the Fat Lady would appreciate it, though. She might get suspicious that we're trying to threaten her celebrity."

Ginny waved off this statement with a dismissive hand. "Never mind her. She's a snotty old hag anyhow. I'm *dying* to see Dumbledore. But tell me the rest. How did Snape react?"

Hermione paused, trying to find the words to articulate the soft, stoic fury with which he'd dismissed Madam Pomfrey and herself. "About as well as anyone could be expected to react in his situation, I suppose. He got very quiet, very still."

"Ugh. That's when he's scariest."

Hermione nodded vigorously. "Yes," she concurred, "and he told Madam Pomfrey to leave the laboratory straightaway. I didn't think about it much at the time, but he told her that she'd 'have her resolution' by the following day. I figured he meant that we—or he—would revise the equations; I had no idea he intended to retract his involvement altogether."

"He withdrew from the study?" Ginny cried, her hand over her mouth. "Oh, no! Well, not that you can't find another subject, I suppose. Or if you can't, surely Vector won't deny you the chance at an apprenticeship over his stubbornness?"

"No, I don't think she would. But it's not so much stubbornness as embarrassment, I think. And who can blame him? He was mortified to have *student* hear about his problems. I've no doubt he knew that I'd read about it—he had to sign the release of his medical records over to me, after all—but I doubt he thought he'd ever have to face discussing it in front of me."

Ginny seemed to have latched on to the bitterness in Hermione's voice. "I'm sure it has nothing to do with the fact that you're a student," she said consolingly. "I can understand why you're a little too fixated on that, given your crush on him, but I mean... I'm sure it's just that he felt humiliated in general. What would it have mattered to him if it was you or Professor McGonagall or any of his other colleagues?"

Hermione conceded the point. "I'm sure you're right. I'm being too self-conscious about it because I spend most of my time obsessing over how he views me. It's disgusting, really, how egocentric I've been when he's in such tremendous pain. And now I don't know how to go about convincing him that I can be trusted to keep his private information safe. He made no secret of the fact that he figured I'd blab to Harry and Ron."

Ginny made a slight grimace. "I love Harry dearly, but I can't promise he wouldn't say something. He doesn't want Snape to suffer, I'm sure, but men get oddly competitive where sex is concerned, and Snape doesn't need to feel like Harry's got anything to lord over him. And Ron!" She snorted.

"He has no discretion," Hermione supplied with an exasperated nod. "I know. I would never have revealed it to anyone but you. He'll never believe me when I tell him that, though."

Ginny stopped to glance at her watch. "Half an hour," she crowed. "I barely even noticed. What do you want to do today? An hour? Hour and a half?"

"Hour and a half," Hermione said gratefully. "I could use the distraction."

Ginny nodded. "Let's start heading to the lake. So what are you going to do?"

Shrugging, Hermione regarded the lake in the distance. She hadn't been ice skating since she'd been eleven years old, and she found herself suddenly longing for the isolation of cold air in her face and the crisp sound of blades beneath her feet.

"I'm going to revise the equations," she said firmly. "I'll include the fact that he's impotent. I think I might do some research on potions ingredients that stimulate sexual health; Madam Pomfrey mentioned it, but I'd forgotten about it entirely. I was so focused on being angry with him for backing out."

"You should ask Professor Sprout," Ginny suggested. "Find a way to camouflage it so she doesn't know who the ingredients are actually for."

Hermione considered this proposition. "Make it up, you mean?"

"Sure. Tell her you're trying to put your new boyfriend in the mood, and he's being a bit resistant."

Hermione chuckled. "I suppose. Maybe I could tell her I've been struck with an entrepreneurial spirit and want to market my own line of aphrodisiacs."

Ginny's eyes lit up. "Now *that* is a conversation I'd like to hear."

"I don't think so!"

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In the end, though she'd spent plenty of time contriving scenarios to present to Professor Sprout, Hermione simply found herself in the library. Her senses tingled upon first walking in as she recalled the last time she'd ventured in after hours and been joined by the mysterious guest who'd indicated for her the book on unicorns. It was thoroughly empty, however, and gradually her heart rate returned to normal. She spent a few minutes in the Potions and Herbology sections gathering up every tome whose title appeared relevant and then tottered to the nearest comfortable chair with her findings.

Hours passed. She yawned her way through one text after another, jotting down on a spare piece of parchment the ingredients that might be worthwhile. She'd originally intended to dispatch to Madam Pomfrey a note asking about the one or two most promising ingredients, but given the plethora of plants and herbs purported to stimulate the sex drive and relieve sexual dysfunction, she was beginning to sincerely doubt her expertise. Perhaps it would be best to bring the entire list to the mediwitch in person so they could discuss it.

Over tea, she thought dully, rubbing at her fatigued eyes. Tea and biscuits. It was approaching two o'clock in the morning, and as she'd been so absorbed in her task, she hadn't eaten anything since seven o'clock. It was simultaneously very relieving and very exhausting to feel the pangs of true hunger. Frustrated though she was, Hermione could see the virtue in keeping herself so thoroughly busy with school work: it forced her to turn her focus to academics and away from the kitchens.

At the moment, however, she was incapable of doing so. Her stomach was becoming positively raucous, and she admitted to herself that she was incapable of doing any more reading. Rising stiffly to a standing position, she pocketed the parchment—now covered on both sides with her small cursive—and began to reshelve the many books she'd pored over.

Again her heart fluttered as she approached the Potions section, daring herself not to want him, not to imagine him lurking in the shadows to observe her. He wouldn't observe much, she admitted wryly as she began to put the books away. She'd begun to find it easier of late to accept her own limitations; she was never going to be as glamorous as most of the other girls and women in residence at Hogwarts, though she didn't think femininity and glamour were necessarily the same. But she had no way of knowing what he would have liked, if he even noticed women at all, and she rather doubted that his—or any man's—tastes ran toward the dusty, ink-splattered, bookworm end of the spectrum.

It was a mark of her naïveté, she decided, that she'd ever thought it possible to predict his tastes. After all, she'd been as surprised as the rest of the Wizarding community by the fact that he'd once lusted after and worshiped Lily Evans. And as she knew perfectly well, she was no Lily Evans.

Exiting the library, Hermione turned her steps toward the kitchen, her yawns growing fewer and far between. The air in the lower floors of the castle grew considerably cooler, drawing out gooseflesh on her arms and legs and rendering her more alert. Somehow the shadows and dankness of the subterranean floors never failed to spark in her the conviction that she was being watched, but it was a sensation entirely different from the frisson of sexual thrill that had run through her in the library. It was a wariness that naturally erupted from her proximity to Slytherin House, and it always seemed to convince her that she was dogged by footsteps.

She shook her head, hair flying. There was no sense in indulging her imagination. No one was following her.

Another muted scuffle emerged from behind her. Fully startled, Hermione turned in her tracks but saw nothing. She'd just begun to get her breathing under control when he emerged from the shadows, faintly outlined in his dark cloak but imperious as ever.

"Miss Granger. Out wandering the halls after hours, I see," he purred. Hermione stifled a gasp and placed her hand reflexively over the pocket of her robes, which held the parchment on which she'd scribbled potions ingredients. "Would you care to explain to me what you're doing walking past my quarters at two o'clock in the morning?"

Hermione blinked, baffled. She hadn't even realized that in her maudlin Snape-musings she'd wandered past his rooms. She opened her mouth to respond when she noticed his sharp eyes alight on her hand, which still lay, flat and clammy, against her robes.

"Or perhaps you'd prefer to first explain what you're so eager to conceal?" he murmured. "Turn out your pockets. Now."

Her throat tightened reflexively. "I'm not concealing anything, sir. I was just heading to the kitchens for a cup of cocoa." Her face flamed. She wished she could see his eyes more clearly, to know if they were tracing their way along her figure, thinking disparaging thoughts. Of course she would be too plump in his eyes. Her lack of resemblance to Lily Evans didn't stop with the wild, ratty hair, unfashionable clothes, and flushed skin.

She wished desperately for any other excuse, but, caught in front of his rooms utterly unawares, she could think of nothing else to say.

"Indeed? Then you've nothing to hide, I'm sure. Turn out your pockets nonetheless."

He drew nearer, and Hermione instinctively sought to back away. Somehow, in the confusion of rotating to take in her surroundings, she'd managed to place herself at an angle; her back hit the cold stone wall, and she swallowed hard. He took a step forward, menacing but not inappropriate, and she cursed herself for her lack of control. Her palm had dipped into her pocket and was very nearly smearing the parchment with perspiration, but all she could think about was the shape of his shoulders as he stood over her and what his skin would feel like if she drew apart the buttons of his frock coat.

"I will not give you another warning, Miss Granger. You will turn out your pockets or spend the next week in detention."

Sighing audibly, Hermione drew out the parchment and held it up. She waved it back and forth for good measure. Then she drew her wand out of her other pocket and performed the same movement. "I'm not concealing any kind of contraband, Professor. I just want to go to the kitchens. That's all."

Snape said nothing, but his thin lips drew together in a sneer as he snatched the parchment out of her hand and unfolded it with a soft rustle. She saw his gaze dart back and forth across the page several times before the significance of what he'd read fully integrated.

"You appear to have done quite a bit of research, Miss Granger." There was no hint of condescension in his tone, simply pure loathing. "To what end, exactly?"

"You know to what end, Professor. I'm just trying to help you—"

"I believe I've spoken my final word on the matter. You will serve three evenings' detention with me for your blatant defiance of curfew and return to your room at once."

"Fine. Sir. I'll leave." She paused, holding out her hand. Snape stared at her, unmoving.

"May I have my parchment back, sir?"

"I hardly see why you should need it, Miss Granger."

"Well, you see, sir," she said icily, beginning to lose her composure, "I'm engaged in some very interesting research at the moment, and I'm hoping that one of those

ingredients, or a combination thereof, may improve the efficacy of a certain potion."

"Do not mock me, Miss Granger." She let out a strangled cry as he stepped forward and pinned her against the wall with one arm. "I have withdrawn my participation in your little study, and I am in no mood to be toyed with."

"You needn't be involved, *sir*. I intend to finish the study with or without your participation. Though I would prefer to help you, if I can," she finished, the words catching in her throat.

Something in Snape seemed to draw to its breaking tension and then soften, as though the elastic of his anger had released and recoiled. He drew away, brows knitted, looking almost shocked to find how closely he'd approached a student. She watched as he flexed his fingers stiffly and returned his hand to his side, glowering at her.

"I believe I made my reasoning clear last night. I will not repeat myself."

"I'm not trying to mock you, *sir*." She stared longingly at the parchment, willing herself not to stare at his body instead. "Truly, I want to help you. I admit that I became involved for my own selfish reasons and that I hope to profit from any success we might have, but I *want* to work with you. If these ingredients can help us modify the potion to gain even the slightest improvement, isn't that worth it? Isn't it worthwhile to lessen your pain?"

She feared she'd gone too far in openly addressing his physical state, but Snape said nothing. Wordlessly, he handed back the parchment, his nostrils flaring in barely restrained anger. He turned on his heel and began to walk away.

Hermione stifled a moan of frustration. "Sir, please." He didn't turn around, but he stopped in his tracks, silent and untouchable. "Would you... Would you like to come to the kitchens with me? I know I've been handed detention, and I promise I'll serve all three nights and even more in addition if that's what you order, but I thought... Maybe we could have some hot cocoa, and I could explain to you what I thought might be the next step in Charming the potion..."

Snape pivoted slowly and stared at her. Hermione hadn't realized until then the true effect of his shorter hair: his cheekbones and brows were more prominent, and his jaw as well, making it clear to her just how much weight he'd lost. She wondered suddenly if he'd been forced to cut his hair rather than have it fall out from malnourishment, and her heart ached.

She was almost too caught up in her speculations to catch the low rumble of his voice. "Lead the way, Miss Granger."

Too stunned to speak, Hermione resumed walking.

## Thirteen

### *Chapter 14 of 29*

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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She had no idea why he'd insisted on escorting her back to her room, but Hermione wasn't going to complain. Their footfalls pounded out a gentle rhythm against the stones of the castle floor, her soft slippers whispering against the insistent but graceful click of his boots. His proximity, to her right and slightly behind, held her constantly on the edge of her nerves, but in a delicious and slightly addictive way.

She was profoundly relieved to be sharing a room with only Ginny, separate from the other seventh-years. Somehow the act of having him escort her back to the Gryffindor common room would have felt unbearably childish, but they were able to walk past that area to the more secluded location of her room. She fretted that he was privy to everything: the way she buried her hands in her pockets and dug her fingernails into her thighs, hoping to distract herself from her attraction; the ridiculously increased rate of her breath; and the way she kept swallowing compulsively, desperate to begin a conversation and hear his voice but unsure how to make herself physically capable of listening to it.

If he noticed any of these physical indicators, he offered no visible sign himself. His own breathing was inaudible, but if she turned her head just slightly, she could catch in her peripheral vision the tension in his body. Finally, he drew to a stop and faced her directly. His eyes were pools in the dark, but the faint light cast by nearby torches lent his skin a softer, healthier glow, bringing out the warm undertones she'd never before noticed.

"I should not have kept you up so late, Miss Granger," he intoned formally. "Please accept my apologies."

Hermione smiled. Her lips, dry with nervousness, felt unnaturally stretched across her teeth. "It's hardly your fault, Professor. I need to stop staying up so late in the library. Your detention sentence is pretty lenient compared to what I deserve."

Snape inclined his head minimally in agreement. "I am willing to overlook your indiscretions for the sake of your research." He paused. "But I trust that you will be punctual in attending your single detention sentence tomorrow evening."

"Absolutely, *sir*," she said with warmth and sincerity. "I won't keep you waiting."

He nodded again, more slowly this time, drawing out the motion as though reluctant to conclude the conversation. Or perhaps that impression was only the result of her fevered and desperate imagination.

"Thank you, *sir*, for listening to my proposal," she found herself saying suddenly. Her tone was rushed with her anxiety to have the words out in the open between them. "I'll do my best to ensure that you don't regret it."

Snape remained silent and implacable, and Hermione began to fidget uncomfortably. Did he expect something else? More profuse thanks? A wish goodnight?

"Well... Good night, *sir*," she finished lamely, studying her slippers. It was maddening to be unable to see his eyes and predict what he thought or wanted. She lifted her head and leaned in closer, wanting to grasp the last chance of taking in his dark, slightly herbal scent, hoping the movement would go unnoticed by him.

That seemed to be his cue. She could feel it on some instinctive level she'd never before encountered, the heat of realization flaring across her chest and into her lower

abdomen. He took one step forward, then two, until their faces were mere inches apart. So close to him, Hermione wondered how a man physically below his prime could still give off such heat and energy. She sucked in a breath and licked her lips, praying fervently to each and every deity whose name she could recall that his movement held some significance.

Slowly, drawing out her anticipation, he lowered his lips to meet hers. They were warm and dry, and he tasted of chocolate. She gasped against his mouth and stiffened, hating herself for her uncertainty and inexperience, but it hardly seemed to faze him. She could feel his lips move slightly, as though he'd smiled despite himself, before his hands descended on hers and he backed her firmly against the wall, every inch of her pinned by his body.

Hermione relaxed into him, melting with the awe that anything could feel so good. He deepened the kiss, grinding his lips slightly more roughly against hers, and she moaned and pressed forward to meet him. The way he moved his hips firmly into hers made her dizzy. Somehow, despite the fuzziness of her arousal, she managed to extricate her hands from his and brought them up to his shoulders, running them along his arms to feel the tension in them. She heard his breath hitch, and then he shifted against her, running his right hand along the contour of her body.

"Miss Granger," he murmured, his voice low and gravelly, "perhaps..."

"Hermione," she murmured, twining her fingers in the short hairs at the nape of his neck. She pulled lightly at them, experimentally, and he closed his eyes in pleasure. "Please call me Hermione." Her breath came in almost ragged gasps.

"Hermione," he amended, one skillful finger tracing the shape of her hip and dropping dangerously toward her legs. "I believe..."

Hermione arrested any second thoughts he might have had with another, even more passionate, kiss, moaning his name reflexively when his fingers began to part her robe.

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"Damn it!"

She sat bolt upright in bed, quite suddenly, immediately conscious of the slick perspiration that covered every square inch of her body. Her breath still heaving, she collapsed back against her pillow and stared out the window. It couldn't have been more than six o'clock in the morning. Struggling to regulate her breath, she peeled off her damp pajama top and removed her legs from the tangled bedcovers. The heat seemed to radiate off her in waves.

Thank goodness Ginny wasn't there to witness her discomfiture. She'd had graphic dreams about him before...or what she'd thought were graphic dreams...but they'd never progressed much beyond the general area of her upper body. Hermione had been almost unable to imagine what his fingers would feel like against and between her legs because even in consciousness she flushed so deeply, and was so blatantly affected, that she couldn't afford to indulge in the thought. What she'd just felt as his fingers had traced their way over the thin fabric covering her legs, pausing so obviously against the heat of her, was the furthest her dreams had ever ventured.

It was only a matter of time, she thought with a groan, before she was having full-blown sex dreams about him...and with her luck, Ginny would be present to enjoy the entertainment.

Despite Ginny's absence, Hermione still felt an acute flash of mortification. Coupled with the desperate ache in her abdomen, the result was nausea. Rolling over onto her stomach, she flipped over her pillow and sought refuge in the opposite, cool side, relishing its relief against the hot skin of her face.

She couldn't believe the extent to which her imagination...or, perhaps more accurately, her libido...was able to blow even the most innocuous social interaction out of proportion. Snape had indeed agreed to accompany her to the kitchens, but he hadn't walked her back to her room, and what had transpired during the scant half-hour they'd spent together had been nothing so scandalous. She'd expounded awkwardly but determinedly on her plans to try at least three of the recommended ingredients, dedicating especial detail to her belief that a combination of two in particular might prove most effective. Snape had paid her the startling courtesy of remaining totally silent. He hadn't appeared to be judging her in the slightest, though Hermione was too suspicious by half to believe that he'd completely approved of her plan and hadn't thought it at least somewhat too ambitious for her limited education.

If he had any lingering doubts as to the validity of her hypotheses, however, he hadn't voiced them. He'd simply stated, tonelessly and quietly, that he would brew two more batches of the healing potion on consecutive evenings that week and that he expected her to be present to assist with the process and the addition of the new ingredients. Hermione had nodded eagerly and offered to make the trip to Hogsmeade herself the following weekend to pick up the third item, which he'd immediately stated that he did not have in stock. The fact that it would mean spending Valentine's Day browsing an apothecary hadn't even crossed her mind.

"That will not be necessary, Miss Granger," he'd replied simply, rising from his chair and leaving his hot cocoa untouched. She, on the other hand, had been nervously stirring patterns in hers with a cinnamon stick since the moment they'd entered the kitchens and been beset by cheerful house-elves happy to cater to their whims. "I shall procure the items myself. I will expect you at my lab Monday evening at eight o'clock."

Hermione had paused in her ministrations and held the cinnamon stick in sugary, slick fingers. "I thought you said you wanted to start on Tuesday, sir."

"Detention, Miss Granger. Be grateful I have reduced your sentence from three evenings to one."

And with that he'd turned on his heel and left her alone to gulp down her cocoa, confused and on edge, the hot liquid burning her dry lips.

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Even scrubbing the cauldrons didn't seem like much in the way of punishment. Hermione was too distracted by the fact that Snape had been within arm's reach for the past hour and a half. The physical act of restraining herself was exhausting.

Ginny had had her fun theorizing all the dirty jobs and positions he might have dreamed up for her, but Hermione had merely laughed as she had changed into casual clothes, slung her robe over her shoulder, and headed toward the dungeons for her detention. It was an unusually warm day outside, and the ambient temperature in the castle had risen as well. She'd found herself pushing up the sleeves of her blue jumper and pulling her hair off her flushed neck before even knocking on his door.

The scrubbing would have done her in altogether if she hadn't been so preoccupied with watching him. As she cleaned equipment the Muggle way, washing and rinsing with a delicate cloth, he disdainfully tested the third-years' potions, leaning over the sink next to the one at which she toiled. She couldn't permit her observation to be noticed, so she restricted herself to occasionally glancing at him out of her peripheral vision, alternately amazed and amused by the wealth of reactions that crossed his face at the simple task of grading student assignments.

*What must it be like to be a teacher?* she wondered. She'd read and witnessed his work; she knew that, under other circumstances, healthier and better circumstances, he'd have been revolutionary in his field. Teaching duties alone hadn't impeded those aspirations, but the war, and his obligations to both sides, had surely taken over his life. She longed to know what he'd loved, what he'd worked on, before his own desires had been subjugated for the greater needs of others. She'd kept a closer eye on the major Potions journals since her fourth year in the hope of seeing something to which he'd contributed, but she knew it was expecting too much given the life he'd been leading.

An unpleasant fizzing broke through her concentration. Glancing to her right, Hermione saw that the potion Snape had been testing had bubbled over in its vial, creating a foul-smelling, putrid froth. Wrinkling her nose, she stepped delicately to the left and shot him a sympathetic smile. Snape did not return the smile, but his eyes lingered on hers a moment longer than their usual dismissive glance.

"I recall making that potion, sir," she ventured with a nod in the direction of the mess that had begun slithering its way viscously down the sink.

"And do you recall my specific instructions to avoid this unnecessary unpleasantness?" He disposed of the remaining potion and vial, then paused to make an angry red

slash in his grade book. Hermione's heart went out to him. He needed recovery and rest, and he certainly didn't need to spend what energy he possessed on the menial task of grading third-years' abysmal failures.

"I believe you told us to be sure we thoroughly ground the beetle wings before adding them in the fifth step." She set the cloth aside and swiped the back of her hand across her sweaty forehead. She had a momentary self-conscious twinge in her stomach at the thought of how he must view her...sweat-streaked, covered in water and cleanser, practically panting...but he didn't look unperturbed himself. His skin glowed with perspiration, and though he hadn't removed his frock coat, he'd pushed back the sleeves.

"Explicitly," he said, voice seeming to caress the word. Her sight was arrested by the dusting of black hair along his forearms. Neither sparse nor too thick, she found herself fascinated by it. The boys her own age had barely a dusting of such hair, and she remembered vividly its distribution over his body. In a different situation, outside the sterile and clinical atmosphere of the infirmary, the emphasis it lent to his chest and the way it trailed toward his hips would have stolen her breath.

Hermione realized too late that Snape was observing her with a peculiar intensity. She'd spent too long daydreaming, and he'd become suspicious. "I remember Neville using the wrong instrument," she said hastily, grasping for the first memory she could trawl of that long, miserable Potions period during her third year. "I tried to help him, but by then..."

"They had been improperly sheared." Snape nodded shortly, his eyes once again on the student assignments. "Mr. Longbottom's... attempt... provided a most spectacular explosion when I later tested it."

"Explosion? Really?"

"When improperly sized, the wings cannot macerate appropriately in the base before they are treated secondarily." His voice grew sharp. "I expect you to recall such things, Miss Granger. We did spend a rather sizable lecture on the theory."

"Yes, sir. But I could swear that I gave Neville some of my ground wings to put in the base so that he wouldn't have problems later... Oh, Neville." She sighed and hung her head. "He added them both, didn't he? He made it worse by mixing the two forms, and that would have made the base unstable..."

She looked at her teacher, who, for the first time she could remember, had a smile in his eyes. His lips hardly curved, but the black pools softened somewhat, and she realized with shock that they were not black but a beautiful, rich dark brown, changeable in the faint light of the classroom.

"Neville," she said with an exasperated sigh, unable to vocalize any other thought rationally. Snape, his movements unceasing, watched her for a moment.

"You sound as though you now regret aiding him, Miss Granger."

"Yes!" she exclaimed unnecessarily loudly. "I'm sorry, sir, it's just... I spent a long time on those wings!"

A definite smile tugged at the corners of his lips. "I do not doubt it, Miss Granger. If it is any consolation to you, I did and still do deem you single-handedly responsible for Mr. Longbottom's managing to pass my classes...in every year."

She blushed. "I shouldn't have interfered so much. Neville might have been good at Potions, and I couldn't keep my hands to myself. I thought I knew better than he did every time, and maybe I really didn't. Maybe he'd have managed to get through and improve on things if I'd left him alone and attended to my own business."

"That is the danger of a laboratory," Snape murmured neutrally. "It is difficult to become accustomed to performing well-established procedures in a different manner, or even watching another person do so. Scientists both Muggle and magical tend to become, to the detriment of their fields, overly reliant on their own practiced methods."

"They find it difficult to adapt and modify, you mean?" she asked, thinking, quite to the contrary, of Harry's Potions book in sixth year. Snape, by his early moniker, had been anything but predictable and mired in routine.

"Very much so."

"But not all people can be like that," she protested. "I saw Harry's Potions book during sixth year...the one that you used...and your modifications were very original, sir. I didn't understand the theory behind most of them, but you weren't at all stuck in your ways, so to speak."

Snape was silent for a long spell. Hermione, fearing she'd pressed too far in bringing up any aspect of his adolescence and arguing with his professional wisdom, fought the urge to smack her head against the faucet. She ranted at herself, mentally chastising, until he spoke again.

"The difference lies in a student's willingness and an instructor's approach." Having finished with his current vial, Snape marked down the student's grade and picked up another, his movements so fluid that her own halted while she watched him. "Improvisation is the mark of great understanding, true, but it is not something in which obedient students generally indulge. I had a great deal of experience developing and trying alternate methods because I was not the most... obedient student."

Hermione was grinning despite her desire to remain serious and respectful. "Even in Potions? Sir?" she added hastily.

He nodded shortly, and though his eyes remained on the potions before him, she thought she saw the telltale gleam of amusement enter them. "Especially in Potions."

She laughed appreciatively, but her smile faded when she looked down at her hands and thought of the harried, desperate hours she'd spent poring over her Potions textbooks. Year after year she'd read and reread chapters, studying and reviewing, seeking to understand and anticipate. Year after year she'd told herself that she would finally impress him and gain his approval and his praise. High marks had never sufficed; she'd burned to have some kind of recognition from him, a remark that wouldn't contribute to her usual feelings of hapless fumbling and, at best, half-formed comprehension.

"Is that the mark of true talent in Potions?" she asked in a small voice, and Snape's hands stilled. "Understanding well enough to improvise? Not having to be so afraid of making a mistake because you don't understand it that you can't bring yourself to do anything other than what your instructor specifically stated?"

"In a way."

She was surprised by the lack of judgment in his voice, so she dared to look up. He hadn't turned to face her, but the set of his shoulders was somehow more relaxed, more approachable. "You are not an untalented Potions student, Miss Granger. I sincerely hope you possess the maturity to realize that my objective observation does not constitute a blanket statement regarding your abilities in all disciplines."

"Yes, sir."

"And it is," he continued, his fingers deftly writing in his grade book, "objective."

Hermione felt perilously close to tears, so she chose not to speak. She'd thought herself capable of moving past what had happened months ago, and she felt that she'd accepted his assessment of the extent of her Potions aptitude, but to address it with him made her feel dangerously out of breath. She felt almost dizzy with relief when, upon resuming her cleaning, she realized that he'd finished with his grading and was preparing to leave.

With her head bent, scrubbing industriously, she almost missed his low voice as he paused behind her. His right arm hemmed her in from the side, its long fingers poised gracefully against the countertop. Hermione forcefully resisted the urge to gasp aloud when she turned her head to be confronted with his shoulder, so close as to seem imposingly, intoxicatingly large.

"You have, Miss Granger, more talent for Arithmancy than I could hope to achieve with years of the most intense study."

She didn't know if she'd merely imagined the way his breath actually struck the skin at the nape of her neck. He walked away swiftly, his footsteps staccato against the stone floor. Hermione prayed he hadn't seen her shiver.

## Fourteen

Chapter 15 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

AN: I just wanted to say thanks to everyone who's reading again. My hiatus from writing involves a long story in which my brother compromised, unsuccessfully tried to repair, and then thoroughly destroyed my old computer. I've been relying on university computer labs for a year, and I've been unable to find the time and privacy to write in them. I was too afraid to even go to my usual fanfic-related sites, to be honest. Feel free to be justifiably angry with me and stop reading if you deem that an insufficient excuse.

But for those of you who do continue to read...or, I should say, have resumed reading...thanks so much for your kind words. I sincerely hope there will be no more interruptions!

~Lisa

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It was still difficult not to fall into her old habits. Sitting at the dinner table Tuesday evening, the other Gryffindor seventh-years chattering incessantly around her, Hermione felt none of their happiness, nor their enthusiasm. After a grueling Potions class during which Snape had treated her abominably, she found that it was impossible to keep her thoughts from straying toward the Potions master and whether she would ever be capable of gauging his true feelings. Recalling his biting commentary on the final product she and Ginny had turned in made her grit her teeth in anger.

She knew that she ought not to hold his behavior against him. He'd spent years treating many students cruelly, students whom he might otherwise have tolerated, all for the sake of playing a role; she didn't doubt that he sometimes slipped back into that persona without realizing it on a conscious level. Yet after what she'd thought was a promising breakthrough the previous evening...Snape had *complimented* her, of all things...he'd shown all the understanding and compassion of a snarling bear, albeit with more restrained and dramatic delivery.

Ginny seemed to notice her introspective mood, but she was too absorbed in a conversation with a Hufflepuff boy to pay Hermione much attention. It didn't bother Hermione. It afforded her the chance to observe her instructors and classmates in an attempt to coalesce her stray thoughts. She longed for some form of sense.

Ginny was ever and always devoted to Harry, but it didn't prevent her from enjoying the occasional flirtation with a Hogwarts boy, especially present and rising Quidditch stars. She leaned toward him momentarily, flashing him a winning smile, and Hermione saw the boy blush obviously and pause in his tale. Ginny utilized the lull in talk to sip at her goblet of water and treat the table to an unobstructed view of the beautiful emerald bracelet Harry had given her for Christmas, all expensive silver and brilliant gems against her slender porcelain wrist. A few other girls shared envious glances and looked at her with some antipathy. The Hufflepuff boy simply reddened even more unattractively and gulped some pumpkin juice, sensing that his tenuous hold on the beautiful star of the Gryffindor Quidditch team was drawing to an all-too-premature end.

It wasn't unforgivable vanity that caused Ginny to behave as she did, though it was understandable that other girls might view her that way. Hermione knew that they viewed her first and foremost as a threat, and the accusations of vanity and self-absorption, unfounded or not, piled on from there. Hermione had never begrudged Ginny her harmless flirting, one of the few distractions available to her to enjoy, and that kept her head above water when the winter grew interminable and her classes became difficult. Ginny had begun lately to seem more and more inspiring, someone who could handle the challenges and issues Hermione still often found intolerable. Where Ginny slipped on a piece of jewelry to fondly remember her lover and bolster her spirits before making her way confidently to the dinner table, Hermione still hid in unflattering clothes and struggled daily to simply be herself rather than give in to the old unnamed despair.

She'd never thought of herself as an inherently antisocial person. Certainly she didn't think she was a misanthrope, but the company of others was so frequently difficult for her to endure. Her mood was bad, thanks in part to Snape, she knew, and self-pity would help her to achieve nothing; but she'd invested her anticipation and her heart so deeply in her project, in her desire to excel academically and to help her professor, and she was beginning to sincerely doubt whether she could tolerate the manner in which he insisted on working together. She knew that a consummately professional woman would have long ago accepted that Snape treated her terribly in class and with a little more respect in private, viewing it as simply a professional hurdle to be overcome like any other; but Hermione, caught in equal parts between her desire for intellectual achievement and her desire to forge some kind of bond of friendship with her professor, found it exhausting and wrenchingly confusing. Consumed with self-doubt, she had no friends other than Ginny to speak with.

They annoyed her, at times...the other Gryffindors. She wondered if, in actuality, it was the barbed and nasty side of Snape with whom she could most identify during the long periods she spent at the table in her classmates' company. She wanted to see every side of him, to get to know the man who could possess a personality so bewilderingly complex but maybe, someday, treat her as an equal; the mere glimpse she'd had of that side of him the previous night had left her breathless and speechless when she replayed in her mind the scene between the two of them.

Glancing up at the head table, Hermione was dejected to see that he still hadn't arrived in the Great Hall. She sipped listlessly at her pumpkin juice, wanting someone with whom to share her moments of confusion, those times when she looked at her peers and found herself struggling in vain to find any common ground. Their conversations alternately bored and exhausted her. With Harry and Ron, the talk consisted of nothing but sports and physical self-improvement, interspersed with talk of girls, girls, and more girls when Ginny and Lavender were absent. It was threatening and disheartening to realize that men could not only have such egotistical pride in their appearance but could also be so intolerant of girls who didn't push themselves to the same extent.

At the Gryffindor table, while the pumpkin juice was refilled and the sweets began to appear, the talk shifted from one discipline of study to the next without warning or pattern as the seventh-years bragged about their academic achievements and their boundless knowledge. They visibly and blatantly sought to show up one another's accomplishments, and it sickened Hermione. She found herself tuning in to a discussion of Transfiguration and wondered why people who would generally display no interest in a topic felt the need to expound like pedantic experts when faced with someone else who genuinely cared for it. She wondered if the instructors behaved in the same way or if time and maturity led them to understand that there was more to life and its enjoyment than hearing one's voice asserting that there was no one smarter or more knowledgeable.

Overcome with fatigue and irritation, Hermione stood suddenly, leaving her dinner mostly untouched. Ginny glanced over at the sound of her discarded silverware striking

the wooden table and swallowed her pudding with a delicate look of concern. "You okay, Hermione?" she called as the sixth-year Hufflepuff, who clearly still felt that his seat next to her entitled him to monopolize her attention, snapped his jaw shut and glowered uncharitably in Hermione's direction.

"Fine," she called neutrally, brushing nonexistent crumbs from her robe. "I have to go change before my evening brewing session. I'll talk to you later tonight."

Worry flashed in Ginny's soft eyes, but she accepted Hermione's response with a nod and returned her gaze to the Hufflepuff. He lost no time in reiterating his glowing description of his latest triumph on the Quidditch field. Unreasonably disgusted, Hermione left the table.

She made her way to her rooms and changed her clothing, telling herself all the while that the mark of an adult was not the ability to weather any situation unaffected but to accept the feelings it dredged up and press on anyhow. She was positively dreading having to see Snape, whose mood had probably not improved since Potions class. The thought that he might have obtained a meal for himself from the kitchens, stolen a couple hours' rest and recuperation in private, and improved his outlook on her and on the evening crossed her mind only transiently. She snorted at herself and left her room, cloak in hand. Upon reaching the dungeons, she found herself almost appreciating the clammy air and silence. Perhaps this, and not the library, was where she belonged when she felt the need to take refuge from her exasperating fellow students. A small room with an enchanted ceiling, cool walls and a large armchair might be just the ticket.

Feeling a headache coming on, Hermione paused outside the laboratory and knocked three times softly. No response followed, but she waited the requisite several minutes to be sure that Snape hadn't merely been placing a stasis charm on a potion before abandoning it to answer the door. She was accustomed to him charming the door to admit her, or calling out at the very least, but she wasn't about to incur his wrath with impatience.

Hermione knocked again, and an ominous silence followed. A tight feeling began to creep through her bowels. She knocked again, urgently, without waiting to give him a chance to respond. Finally, desperately, she pushed open the door. It swung open with no resistance, a sure sign that it had been unwarded at some point during the day and Snape had not returned since. All required ingredients for the potion lay neatly on the nearest workbench; the cauldron had already been prepped and set in place. The Potions master was nowhere in sight.

"Sir?" she called, trying to keep her tone from sounding frantic. She didn't believe herself to be early, but there were plenty of plausible reasons why Snape...unfailingly punctual though he normally was...might be running late. She made a cursory pass through the entire laboratory to search for anything amiss, but her growing hysteria wouldn't permit her to linger any longer. She deeply feared that something had happened to him and needed to find him. The urge sat heavily in her throat.

Praying fervently that he wouldn't expel her for trespassing on his personal living space, Hermione walked quickly through the tapestry that acted as the separatory piece between the laboratory and hallway running past his living room. She hardly noticed its soft touch against her cheeks. The store room was locked and warded; she could feel the thrum of magical energy, as strong as ever and totally impregnable. Hermione moved straight into the living room and gave a startled cry when she saw him in front of the fireplace, his robes and limbs splayed across the dark beige carpet like the crushed exoskeleton of a large, skinny black spider.

"Professor!" she called, dashing over. Dumbledore, she was relieved to see, stood sentinel in his portrait.

"Thank Merlin!" he called, in a tone of voice she'd never before heard from him, as he ceased his frantic pacing. "I've been trying to find someone who would stand still long enough for me to ask for help! You must find Poppy at once."

"How long has he been like this?" she cried, falling to the floor beside Snape and pressing her fingers to his temples, then his wrist. His pulse was detectable but faint and erratic. All the color had drained from his face, leaving a lingering, greenish-blue hue that made bile rise into her throat. Some instinct whispered to her moments before Dumbledore supplied the words for which she'd been searching.

"There is no more time," he said, his voice broken. "I will go for Poppy again. You must help him, Hermione. He will stop breathing..."

"No, he won't," she said shortly, and she drew out her wand and began with the plethora of spells Madam Pomfrey had used over the years...spells to stabilize, spells to strengthen him, and, first and foremost, spells to ascertain the state of his breathing and regulate it. Years seemed to pass. She drew up in her memory the many pages of his medical records she'd pored over, hours' worth of clinical evaluations and emergency treatments, until the words shimmered before her in bright red letters that looked to be spelled in his blood.

Gradually, color reentered his face. When Hermione cast the final spell to return him to consciousness, he sat bolt upright, gasping violently for air. "Professor Snape," she tried to say, positioning her arms beneath his shoulders to support him, "you need to lie down. Please, don't move too much..." The scratchy wool of his frock coat abraded the exposed skin of her wrists and arms as he fell into her heavily. She winced at the feeling of his bony shoulders. "Professor Dumbledore has gone for Madam Pomfrey..."

All Snape could seem to do was cough. Finally, the spasms wracking him no longer, he sagged back to the floor. His breathing quieted. Poppy Pomfrey rushed into the room just as his eyes opened and he stared at her with consciousness and clarity for the first time. Headmistress McGonagall followed, her green skirts hiked up around her ankles to facilitate a faster stride. When the two women hastily knelt by his side, Hermione knew she ought to step out of their way and let them attend him, but she found she couldn't relinquish her grip on his shoulders. His solidity, however malnourished, reassured her.

Madam Pomfrey and the Headmistress wasted no time in Transfiguring a nearby armchair into a cot, to which Madam Pomfrey carefully but firmly strapped him before they began to levitate him slowly. Madam Pomfrey flicked her wrist toward a small urn-like receptacle on the mantelpiece, and powder whisked through the air. Hermione watched as the fireplace beside them burst to life with brilliant verdant flames, and they entered it hastily. "We shall speak with you later, Miss Granger," the Headmistress called over her shoulder, just before they disappeared through the wall of flame into the Floo network.

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Hermione returned to her room, shaking violently all the while. Dumbledore kindly followed her progress through the castle, hopping from portrait to portrait in order to accompany her. Hermione was touched that he'd chosen to remain with her rather than return to one of the portraits in the infirmary to watch the proceedings, but she was relieved when, upon opening the door of her room, she turned to the landscape in which he'd been standing only seconds before and found him vanished. *Presumably to give me some privacy*, she thought, rubbing at her suddenly blurry eyes.

It was the last coherent thought to pass through her mind for hours. She couldn't seem to stop shaking. Shaking, she walked numbly through her room and gathered up her pajamas, slippers, and bathrobe. Shaking, she made her way to the nearest girls' bathroom and submerged herself in a hot tub for an hour, her eyes and skin glazing over with steam and shock.

Shaking, she emerged from the water and towed vigorously at her pruned skin until it felt boiled and harsh. She methodically brushed her teeth, staring at the red, flashing blur of her toothbrush in the mirror. The face it passed across was pale and lifeless, with dark, swollen circles under its eyes.

Ginny was nowhere to be seen when Hermione returned to their room. She knew she ought to concern herself with her friend's whereabouts, but she couldn't seem to find the mental energy necessary to form the thought. Instead, she picked up a bottle of Ginny's rose-pink nail polish and applied the varnish to her toenails, needing to find solace in the stroking of another brush. The tears didn't start until the polish had dried and she'd crawled under her covers, still shaking.

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They didn't come for her until half past three in the morning. It had been approaching one o'clock when Hermione had finally stopped crying and fallen into a restless sleep. She was so deeply entrenched in her nightmares that Dumbledore's voice inserted itself into her dream, failing to bring her to consciousness for nearly a minute.

Rising foggily from sleep, Hermione turned to stare at the portrait above her bed. It was small and rectangular, a simple still life...or as still as Wizarding portraits could get...of a young boy and his pet dog. The dog was happily sniffing at Dumbledore, whose posture was slumped and expression haunted.



"Hermione," he said softly. "You're wanted in the infirmary."

"He's not...?" Her voice cracked and trailed off. She couldn't voice the word, but she doubted that there was any need. The expression in his eyes told her that it had been Dumbledore's greatest fear as well, probably for more hours, days, and years than she would ever know.

"No," he replied, his tone gentler. "He's recovering."

She nodded and rose, stumbling as she tried to come to her feet. She knew she ought to dress before allowing herself to be seen publicly, but somehow the effort and delay made her feeling of illness grow worse. She padded her way softly over to her shoes and drew them on with anxiety, not wanting to wake Ginny, who was buried under a pile of blankets. She snored lightly, undisturbed.

She pulled the door shut slowly, almost silently, behind her. As she drew her bathrobe on over her clothes, beginning her walk down the hall, Dumbledore's voice followed her from the landscape near the door. "Miss Granger," he called in an authoritative tone that made her instantly stop in her tracks. "Before you go..."

She shut her eyes in pain and turned to face him. She felt half dead and overwhelmed, and the thought that she hadn't yet experienced in her life a pain to rival Snape's only made her feel more heartsick for him. "Yes?" she replied, preparing herself for the worst news, short of death. Was he in a coma? Was his prognosis too poor to contemplate?

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, slowly. His eyes, which had been determined only a moment before, softened to their usual approachable baby blue, though they didn't sparkle. They held instead a reflective sheen she knew to be tears, and her own welled up automatically in empathy.

"Severus is not yet ready to hear everything from you," he finally said in slow, measured tones. "But if you were to tell him how concerned you are about him, personally, that might... help him somewhat. He needs to feel that there are reasons other than work and pride and spite for him to fight this pain and get out of bed in the morning."

The tears spilled over before Hermione could stop them, and she nodded and continued on her way. So Dumbledore knew. Didn't he always?

## Fifteen

*Chapter 16 of 29*

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

Madam Pomfrey had placed Snape in the very last bed on the right. The walk down the infirmary aisle seemed to be the longest of Hermione's life. Torches flickered ominously against the dim walls. In the day, filled with students who stopped by to seek remedies for their headaches, stomachaches, and Quidditch injuries, the infirmary bustled with life and activity. Even during the aftermath of the war, it had held a feeling of hope, blood-soaked but triumphant. It was only now, in the dead of night, when its utter calm felt so grim that it stole over her heart and chilled it.

She strove not to imagine terrible outcomes that would only upset her unnecessarily, but her mind couldn't contain its frantic speculations. He'd been ill for so long that it could only be a matter of time before his body began to give in. Hermione had never considered herself to be given to superstitions or spiritual beliefs, but she felt, on some instinctual level, that the desire for life had to be present in order for the body to meet the demands of healing spells and potions. What if, despite tireless hard work over the past weeks, he had simply ceased to want to live?

She scolded herself mentally. Betraying fear for his life would not aid the situation. The Headmaster...Albus...had given her a mission, and she was determined to see it through: she would make him understand, somehow, even through the most stumbling and inarticulate of words, how important he was to their community.

Reaching the end of the row, Hermione peered around the sheet divider that had been erected for privacy. Madam Pomfrey was leaning attentively over his bed, murmuring softly as she cast a spell. Her spectacles slid inexorably down her nose, and she pushed them up with an impatient hand as she rose and glanced over in Hermione's direction. Hermione, meanwhile, had immediately identified it as one of the first spells they'd discussed during his initial physical evaluation; dark, macabre color seeped through his body, the damage to the nerves innervating his organs frightening to behold. She sucked in her breath reflexively, and Madam Pomfrey gave her a wan smile.

"Hello, dear," she said softly, pocketing her wand. "I'm glad Albus managed to wake you. He's asleep right now, I'm afraid. We hoped he'd be able to remain awake long enough. He was asking for you." Her white gown, normally starched and pristine, was spattered with blood. Hermione couldn't imagine any situation that would create the particular gory pattern before her but Snape coughing, spluttering blood, and she became terrified.

She didn't know where to begin. Heart fluttering, she asked, "For me? Was he... when he was conscious, did he say...?"

Madam Pomfrey sighed. "Yes. He was quite vehement, though of course it's difficult to understand him. He is undoubtedly in pain. I think the damage to his lungs is becoming too extensive to..."

She curtailed the thought abruptly, gesturing at her soiled clothing, and Hermione saw the tears pouring down her face. Stricken, she allowed herself to boldly walk around Snape's bed and put her arms around the mediwitch. The strength and urgency with which the other woman gripped her, returning the embrace fiercely, were startling at first. Hermione realized with chagrin that so few people ever considered the constant emotional upheaval that characterized the professional lives of medical providers, Muggle and magical.

Madam Pomfrey sniffled, the sound ringing in Hermione's ear, and pulled away. Her tears gradually waned as they stood together in several minutes of companionable silence, regarding him as he slept. "I'm sorry," she murmured, wiping at her eyes. "That was inappropriate of me."

"Not at all. I'd like to sit with him, if that's okay," Hermione said quietly. Madam Pomfrey nodded slowly and patted her on the shoulder before drawing the sheet fully around them, affording Hermione and her professor what little privacy was possible in the infirmary.

Hermione sank gratefully into the chair beside his bed, pressing her fingers into her tired, parched eyelids. She'd been so close to crying herself, but it hadn't felt right: she'd needed to remain strong for Madam Pomfrey's sake. Now, alone with her sleeping professor, it was nearly impossible to keep the tears at bay. The torchlight seemed to lose itself in the caverns of his cheeks and the hollow of his gaunt throat; his skin looked dangerously pale, even beside the stark white of his gown.

Every labored rise and fall of his chest struck her in the stomach. His breathing, even through his nose, was raspy. For a moment she thought his inspirations were shallow enough that he would wake, but he continued to sleep, each movement difficult. Impulsively, she reached out and placed her hand over his, desperate to reassure herself that despite appearances, his skin was still warm with life. His hands were long, and elegantly formed, given their size; his brittle nails were nearly twice the size of hers. For a long moment she lost herself in contemplating his ring finger, then his thumb, wanting to trace the somehow beguiling half-moon shape of his fingernail. It was so innocuous, yet so forcefully male. She allowed her thoughts to delve deeper into fantasy, imagining his arms flesh-toned and once again corded with muscle, the bones of his wrists no longer so protuberant, his fingernails clean and pink and healthy, his hands capable of a strong grip.

Unconsciously, she'd begun to move her hand across his. His breathing halted. Hermione's did the same; she drew her hand back, her skin catching against the dead, dried flakes of his.

Terrified, she leaned forward, watching as his dark lashes fluttered against the parched, crepe-like skin around his eyes. They opened slowly and turned to regard her, but the movement lacked her usual power. She'd never seen him look bleary-eyed, a state she'd only ever associated with adults who were inebriated. She wondered for an agonizing moment if the nerve damage had finally begun to affect his brain as well as his limbs.

"Hello, Professor," she ventured softly. He made a brief movement with his chin, as though trying to rise, and then stopped. She noticed the dusky, shadowed growth of beard that had begun along his cheeks and above his lips and found it perverse and cruel that as the rest of his body died, his hair, fragile though it was, managed to grow on.

"Would you like some water?" she asked, wondering if he wanted to speak but had found his mouth too dry. He nodded, but without curtress. Feeling encouraged, Hermione grasped the glass of water Madam Pomfrey had left on his bedside table. She supposed that in deference to his superior position and pride she ought to ask him first whether he wanted her to hold the glass, but he looked so weak that she couldn't bear to bring it up in conversation. Instead, she waved her wand and brought the head of his bed very gently to an inclined position. With his upper body situated thus, he was able to accept the glass of water from her and drink himself.

"Thank you," he said between coughs, his voice almost indistinguishable from the wracking exhalations. Hermione was both heartbroken and floored. Her only solace lay in the fact that, once he withdrew it, there was no sign of blood on the hand with which he'd politely covered his mouth.

After a moment, he set the glass down, his hand slightly tremulous, and cleared his throat experimentally. Finding his tones stronger, he began, "I apologize for the fact that you were awoken so late, Miss Granger. I did not realize how much time had passed when I asked Albus to summon you earlier."

"Not at all." She yearned to know why he'd asked for her...her, of all people...but good manners compelled her to inquire first if he was feeling any better, as stupid as the question sounded when she'd voiced it aloud. Then, driven to honesty by her nervous need to prattle, she added, "I'm so sorry I didn't clean your laboratory, sir. I placed a stasis charm on the ingredients on my way out, but that's all."

To her amazement, Snape barked an anemic laugh. "It is of no consequence now. I must inform you, Miss Granger, that as a result of this evening's... episode... I now owe you a life debt."

Hermione's blood grew cold. The power and responsibility conveyed by those words in the Wizarding community were indescribable in magnitude. "... I don't understand, sir. After all, it was Madam Pomfrey who..."

"Madam Pomfrey did her utmost to stabilize and heal me, yes, but only after you had saved my life."

Words failed Hermione. Fumbling, she murmured, "I didn't realize..."

There seemed to be no expression on his tired face, and she couldn't imagine the debt in pride that the admission had created in him. After all he'd achieved, acting in a brilliant and peerless capacity during two grueling wars, owing his life not to either of his powerful masters but to an exasperating, eighteen-year-old Gryffindor know-it-all must be the very definition of unbearable for him.

Mortified, she burst into tears. It was foolish to bury her face in her robe, in hindsight, for that only soaked it and made her feel even more childish. Snape had jumped at the first sound of her sobbing and now stared openly at her, a dumbstruck expression on his face. Had she possessed the ability to see humor, or light, or any form of wry amusement, she might have laughed at the novelty of watching his amazement.

"I'm sorry," she gasped, choking. She couldn't seem to stop crying. Months of what she now recognized as a lethal combination of love, lust, and absolute, gut-wrenching fear boiled over into the most intense sorrow she'd ever experienced.

Finally, after she'd hiccupped self-consciously into her sleeve several times, Snape seemed to shake himself to his senses. "I am not worth your tears, Miss Granger," he said gravely. She tried to meet his eyes, but her vision was still too blurry to distinguish anything but the painfully thin shape of him beneath the gown and bedclothes. Somehow, it made the words easier to vocalize.

"Yes you are," she nearly shouted. Regretfully, she shook her head and stared at the floor until she'd managed to bring herself under control. Breathing raggedly, she swallowed hard and raised her head. He hadn't spoken again, but he was still observing her solemnly.

"You are," she repeated. "And I don't want your life on my hands. I don't want your life debt. I revoke it. I refuse."

Again, Snape laughed, though there was a bit more genuine bemusement in his current expression. "You cannot refuse a life debt, Miss Granger. Surely your voracious need to consume every written word placed before you has apprised you of that fact."

Hermione hiccupped again, thoroughly ungracefully. "Can't I return it?" She was afraid her voice verged on comical.

Snape chuckled, a wonderfully rich sound that seemed magnified by the austere stone walls, sinking languidly into her bones. "No. Such powerful manifestations of magical bonds do not operate in that way."

Hermione had never thought of a life debt as constituting a bond. Magical bonds, to her, were reserved for those creations of beauty and grandeur such as weddings and childbirth, the events that were not only happy occasions on an emotional level but truly physically life-altering. In considering a life debt, she'd always imagined a gruesome sort of servitude and an obsequious need to remain in the bearer's good graces from the point of its creation. It seemed, to her, a veritable hell.

"But how do you know the life debt even exists?" she wondered aloud. "Perhaps I didn't save your life. Perhaps that's just Madam Pomfrey's assumption when in fact..."

"There was no need for Madam Pomfrey to inform me of the fact, Miss Granger," he countered smoothly. "I knew the moment I awoke."

Rubbing at her moist eyes, thinking that she must look a flushed, splotchy fright, Hermione was forced to succumb to intellectual curiosity. "How?"

"I can feel it," he replied simply. She felt sucked into the intensity of his gaze. "A life debt is one of the rarest and most powerful forms of magic. I knew the moment you awakened me."

As the gravity of the situation settled onto her shoulders, Hermione nodded slowly. "... Well, thank you, sir. I appreciate your... informing me."

Snape was now staring at the wall ahead of him, seemingly lost in his thoughts. He nodded and reached again for the glass of water, his grip marginally steadier.

"I..." She took a deep breath, willing into herself a little more poise and control. "I didn't ask Madam Pomfrey how long she thinks you'll be in here, sir, but I'm happy to finish the potion myself tomorrow after my classes. And I could bring it up here for you to take if..."

"That won't be necessary," he replied, his voice suddenly flat.

"Of course, if you would rather wait until Saturday when we planned to add the third ingredient..."

"That will also be unnecessary, Miss Granger."

She closed her eyes, understanding dawning. "You don't want to keep trying, then?" She'd been afraid of this since the moment Albus had assured her he was still alive, if she were totally honest with herself.

Snape was silent for a long moment before replying, his voice haunted, "I am not otherwise a fatalistic man, Miss Granger, but there comes a time when one must accept that it is one's lot in life to die."

Hermione could feel the tears coming on again, so she bit her lip. Snape wouldn't meet her eyes. She wanted to rail at him and call him a coward, but he, of all people, was anything but. "Please don't give up," she whispered. "You're too young, sir."

Snape snorted. "So proclaims the eighteen-year-old."

"What does it matter how old I am?" she exclaimed, her control fraying. "You're still young. Anyone can see that. And even if you weren't, no one deserves to have their life brought to this kind of end. You've worked so hard for us, and you have years ahead of you to achieve anything, whatever you've always dreamt of being able to do when your life and time were finally your own."

She bit her lip again, fearing she'd overstepped her bounds. Snape didn't seem upset, however; an oddly poetic look had crossed his face as he again stared at the wall, contemplative. "Well put, Miss Granger," he finally conceded with a slight nod. "However, my physical state does not now, and may never, allow me to do as you've stated."

"Aren't you willing to try?" she pleaded. "It may work."

His head swiveled toward her. "If I refuse, will you call upon my life debt?"

Hermione felt her skin blanch. "No!" she gasped, horrorstruck. "I would never... Your life is your own, sir, and I respect that. I just want to make you understand what a terrible tragedy it would be for all of us if we were to lose you; and if this potion should work, if I knew in the aftermath that it might have been able to help you..."

"We all..." She wasn't thinking of any others. The love and concern of Madam Pomfrey, the Headmaster, Professor McGonagall and everyone else who had worked with and invested their hope in Severus Snape had faded from her mind. The manner in which they loved him wasn't hers, and she was at a loss to speak on their behalf when all she burned to do was say, simply and sincerely, *I love you*.

"We all want you here," she said finally, dreadfully afraid that the words were inadequate. "Truly, we do. We admire you and appreciate you more than you'll ever know. And if all you want for the rest of your life is to be left in peace to do your work, then, sir, believe me, we understand. Let us give you that chance." *Let me*.

Hermione had never seen her professor cry, but she was gratified...and heartened...to see a wistful look come over his harsh features. "Very well," he murmured, almost a croak. "You may complete the potion and bring it to me tomorrow."

"Thank you, sir," she whispered. An embarrassed and pregnant silent fell between them. Desperate to be of use, she handed him his water glass. As he raised it to his lips for the third time, she rose, feeling the fatigue and stiffness settling immediately over her limbs. "I should let you rest, sir. Please don't..."

Snape read her mind. "I have given you my word, Miss Granger. If you prepare the potion according to the specifications previously agreed upon, I will take it."

Weak with relief, Hermione simply nodded and left him.

## Sixteen

### Chapter 17 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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Eight o'clock arrived with a resounding ring from the large, ornate clock in Snape's private laboratory. Exhaling a gusty breath, Hermione smeared her hair back across her sweaty forehead and stared at the product before her, desperate to discern whether or not she'd succeeded in improving their formulation. She swirled the liquid gently, watching as it caressed the sides of the vial. Patterns were alternately created and destroyed as it reflected the ambient torchlight.

She doubled the intensity of her scrutiny; it revealed nothing. She sighed and bit into her bottom lip, worrying it as she held the vial between her fingertips.

"It may perhaps be my imagination, but I believe it is less pigmented than your previous batches. Were you expecting it to be so?"

Hermione could only shrug helplessly in response to the Headmaster's query. "To the best of my knowledge, the additional ingredients shouldn't have altered the pigmentation at all, but it may be due to the fact that it's more dilute." She pushed another stray curl back behind her ear and set the vial on the only workbench within arm's reach. Before commencing with the brewing process, she'd changed into dark jeans and a black tee shirt, but it didn't successfully hide the sweat and potions detritus that seemed to cover her from head to foot. She caught sight of what she suspected might be a portion of a spider leg adhered to the inside of her left calf and shuddered.

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. "Well, you can but try. That was quite an intense session, even for a student of your experience. It is fortunate that you're finished, my dear. We can't have you staying up too late when you have classes in the morning."

Hermione nodded, rising stiffly from the wooden stool on which she'd perched while attending the potion. She'd always found Snape's hawk-like observation to be disconcerting, but to be wholly in charge of the potion with no one to whom she could turn for physical assistance had been the most harrowing feeling of all. Dumbledore had interjected helpfully wherever and whenever he could, but it had been her hand and her hand alone that was available to perform the necessary wandwork.

"I do have an exam in Transfiguration tomorrow," she told Dumbledore as she stretched her arms above her head, wincing at the resultant creaking and cracking of her abused vertebrae. "I ought to get this to Professor Snape as soon as possible and do some review."

Dumbledore smiled at her and took his leave of the portrait. Hermione gave him a tired wave goodbye. She'd expected the past few hours to fly by in something resembling the manner of a movie montage as she chopped, ground, mixed, simmered, stirred, and triumphantly proffered to Snape their most efficacious brew to date. Instead, she'd been taxed to the very brink of her Potions ability, grown sweaty and anxious, and had the entire lab to clean...not to mention spider legs to remove from her jeans...before she could adjourn to the infirmary.

She undertook the task with renewed vigor once she'd imagined Snape lying back in his hospital bed, insufferably bored and in pain. She'd stopped by briefly between Arithmancy and Defense Against the Dark Arts in the hope of obtaining an updated prognosis from Madam Pomfrey, but the matron had been too busy with various minor injuries to speak with her. Sorely disappointed, Hermione had plodded through her remaining classes in an anticipatory haze, thinking only of the moment she would be able to escape to the dungeons.

She scrubbed industriously, ensuring that all of Snape's equipment was left in pristine condition. Before leaving, she found herself placing a reverent hand against one of the beautiful, polished work tables, allowing its perpetually cool surface to calm her skin. She loved his laboratory. Though she dreaded to think of him in pain, forced to give up his professional research, she tried to bolster her hopes by envisioning him as a healthier, hardier man, able to resume the experimentation that he loved. His Master's work, when she'd read it surreptitiously, had reflected a mind deeply enamored of the creative flow of research. His physical disabilities sickened her, but the thought of his mental faculties so hemmed in by years of exhaustion was, to Hermione, heartrending.

She shook her head forcefully and gathered up her things after casting a few hasty cleansing spells on her clothes and refastening the elastic band restraining her irrepressible hair. Dwelling on the unfortunate aspects of his situation would accomplish nothing. Exhaling and turning on her heel, Hermione headed toward the infirmary.

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The unusually dim lighting that greeted her as she stepped inside was her first warning that Snape couldn't possibly be in residence any longer. He'd been the only bedridden patient as of that morning, she recalled, hurrying down the aisle. She nearly tripped over her own feet in her haste to maneuver around the divider that remained erected beside what had been his bed; but when she turned the corner breathlessly, ready to hand him the vial, she found that the sheets had been changed and pressed for the next occupant.

Hermione frowned, her heart rate increasingly slightly. Had he worsened? Had Madam Pomfrey, lacking the wherewithal to continue treating him, sent him to St. Mungo's?

"Hello?" she called, trying to contain the wave of panic roiling through her stomach. "Madam Pomfrey? Hello? Where is...?"

"Goodness, my dear, you're here late," the mediwitch said, emerging from her office. She was, Hermione was rather surprised to note, wearing semi-casual clothes, a long skirt and a simple blouse. Her usual coat was nowhere to be seen. "I'm terribly sorry," she continued, wiping her spectacles on the soft material of her blouse and blinking rapidly at Hermione. "I'd only just put out the lights. I'm about to leave. Are you looking for Severus?"

"Yes," Hermione said immediately, her mind latching on to the other woman's effortless use of his given name *Severus*. She wanted so badly to be able to walk into a room and say his name herself, appropriately and unhindered by formalities.

"I discharged him about an hour ago," Madam Pomfrey elaborated, hands perched on her hips. Her nose was wrinkled in the early stages of irritation. "No one likes to be stuck in here, naturally, but he does get dreadfully restless. That man can be downright intolerable when he wants to be. Why don't you stop by his rooms? I suspect he's catching up with the work he's missed."

Hermione agreed that this was logical and headed for the dungeons once again, her pace hastened even more. The thought of entering Snape's chambers was no longer as bizarre and forbidding as it had once been, but it remained as thrilling. She knew she ought to keep her imagination under tight rein, but it was difficult not to entertain the delicious thought of him leaning back in his armchair, relaxed and seductive, fortified at last by the healing potion over which she'd slaved for hours.

*He's ill*, she reminded herself. She had to respect that, rather than get ahead of herself. Professor Flitwick had been all too happy to stop by earlier and repeat the incantations, but even he had seen fit to warn her not to invest too much hope in their efforts. She feared that her desperation, and perhaps a fair bit of delusion, was beginning to show on her face.

Arriving at his office, which she'd decided to check, she found it locked. Satisfied that she was committing no act of impropriety by calling at his private rooms, she hurried thence and stood before the door, steeling herself. She was just raising her hand to its surface when it flew open suddenly, revealing the startled but obliging countenance of one of the kitchen house-elves.

"Good evening, Miss!" the elf squeaked, cocking its disproportionately large head to the side. Hermione peered at the creature, obviously female, and was startled to realize that it was Winky. She was amazed by the graciousness with which the previously suspicious elf was treating her. "Winky is just giving Professor Snape his supper, but if you is wanting something as well..."

"No, no, that's fine," Hermione said with alacrity, peering past the elf into the hallway beyond. She couldn't afford to get tied up in conversation when Snape was probably awaiting the potion with increasing vexation. Shadows played across the richly colored floor, exactly as she remembered, and the faintest of breezes stirred the tapestry. She nervously took in the light emanating from his living room, obviously occupied.

"Is Miss sure? We has been very busy in the kitchens this evening making a wonderful roast..."

"I've already eaten, but thank you so much anyway," Hermione managed to say, biting her lip. Really, if she didn't learn to keep that unfortunate habit under control, Snape was going to become all too accustomed to the sight of her with chronically dry, ragged lips, hardly an inviting or attractive trait.

Winky persisted, speaking rapidly in her childlike voice. Hermione was just beginning to wonder how she would ever manage to extricate herself politely when Snape's voice rang out sonorously from the living room.

"Allow the student in, please."

"Yes, Professor!" Winky squawked, stepping aside to allow Hermione to pass. Hermione couldn't stand what she perceived to be the crushed look of failure marring the elf's features, so she leaned down and murmured to her softly,

"If you'd like to send over two servings of dessert later, I'd be happy to convince the professor to have something with me."

Winky's brown eyes grew enormously wide. "But Miss, Professor Snape is never touching sweets. He is very particular; he eats so little..."

"Then we must show him what he's missing out on, mustn't we?" Hermione returned *sotto voce*, smiling. Winky began to nod slowly, sensing the creation of a covert bond between the two of them.

"Yes, Miss," she agreed with a growing smile. "We is fattening the professor up a bit. He needs it, Miss."

Hermione nearly choked on the laugh that rose in the back of her throat. "Yes he does! Will you help me, Winky? Whenever the professor and I are together, we must be sure to get him to eat something. Do you think you can do that?"

"Oh, yes, Miss! Winky is sending over two servings of dessert later, Miss, just as you say, Miss."

"And be sure to make one of the servings extra large, Winky," Hermione whispered, craning her neck toward the living room. Somehow, the currents of warm air escaping from his fireplace actually carried Snape's rapidly mounting impatience.

Sure enough, Winky had barely a second in which to smile broadly at Hermione and vigorously nod her head before Snape called imperiously, "If you insist on being present in my residence, Miss Granger, do have the common courtesy not to skulk in shadows. What is it you want?"

Hermione hurried away, giving Winky a hasty little wave so as not to allow the shadow she cast along the corridor to reveal their sudden friendliness. Her eyes brightened by her secret mission, Winky disappeared.

Turning into the living room, Hermione beheld her professor seated in his armchair, the sleeves of his frock coat rolled up and a small glass of liquor within easy reach, precisely the tableau she'd imagined. He was also...she was profoundly relieved to note...tucking into a rather overlarge plate of roast beef, steamed vegetables, potatoes, and creamy squash soup. In the crackling firelight she could almost imagine him content and relaxed, even if not a happy person by nature.

"I'm so thrilled to see that your appetite has returned, sir," she ventured warmly, holding up the vial. "I've brought the..."

"I have no appetite, Miss Granger. It was simply an attempt to alleviate the stomach pains that seem to accompany every variant of this particular potion. Hand it over, if you please."

Trying not to feel stung, Hermione approached quickly and took a seat across from him. His gaze passed over her in only a cursory fashion, but she suddenly wished that she'd changed into more formal school attire. The firelight flickering along the exposed skin of her forearms made her feel tremendously self-conscious.

On further inspection, she noticed with chagrin that he'd been piercing and rearranging the food before him more so than actually eating it. "Have you eaten enough, sir?" she asked, momentarily withholding the vial. Snape's eyes narrowed.

"I have ingested as much as I wish to. I repeat, I will take the potion."

"I really think you should eat more, sir," she said, tucking the vial into her school bag, bulging with the aforementioned Transfiguration review materials, and withdrawing the parchment on which she'd been keeping her clinical notes. "In fact, Madam Pomfrey mentioned that I ought to have been keeping detailed records of your eating and drinking patterns anyhow."

If looks could exert physical force, Hermione was certain she'd have been pinned to the opposite wall like a helpless piece of stuffed taxidermy. Snape was now positively glowering at her, in between sending dark looks in the direction of her school bag.

"Madam Pomfrey means well," he ground out through clenched teeth, "but I haven't all the time in the world. I wish to take the potion and be done with it."

Mustering her courage, Hermione crossed her legs and leaned back into the unexpectedly plush surface of his sofa. "I'm afraid I have to insist that you finish your dinner, sir."

"Impertinent Gryffindor," he growled. "You will hand over the vial, Miss Granger, or I shall shortly begin subtracting House points."

"I'm adhering to Madam Pomfrey's express instructions, sir."

"Five points from Gryffindor."

"She was adamant that you need to keep up your strength."

"Ten points from Gryffindor."

"Nourishment is important, sir," she retorted, feeling her anger mount. She sounded condescending, she knew, and her tone bordered on insubordinate. She felt her face beginning to flush as she wondered whether he was thinking uncharitable...though rightly deserved...thoughts about her own level of nourishment. "You've clearly had a difficult time..."

"Fifty points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger. Would you care to make it one hundred?"

"I just want to be as thorough as we possibly can..."

"How many points are you willing to sacrifice?" His voice was so deep and quiet as to be nearly a menacing whisper. Hermione replied instantaneously and with a bravado that shocked even her.

"All of them."

Snape closed his mouth, his lips twisting in an unattractive sneer.

"I'll send Gryffindor into debt if I must, sir, and risk the others' displeasure. I'll earn them back with the most vile detentions you can come up with. I don't care. If all our hard work is to pay off and allow you to heal, then you must eat something. Please."

The ire drained from him slowly, visibly. The long, sallow fingers that had been twitching in his lap slowly resumed the action of lifting food to his mouth with his fork. Hermione felt her mouth split into an enormous smile, amazed that she'd won the argument.

"If it helps, sir," she added wickedly, "you can feel free to curse me between bites."

Snape stopped in mid-chew, and she wondered if she'd finally crossed the line, but he simply shook his head in exasperation and then swallowed. As the food incrementally disappeared from his plate, Hermione's feeling of victory multiplied. The silence stretched between them until he'd literally scraped the plate clean with his fork and leaned back into his chair, crossing his arms.

She gulped and reached for the vial. He'd won, really: she'd forced him to eat, but she was positive that his watchful gaze had taken in the way she'd traced the shape of his shoulders and chest with her eyes.

*Damn*, she thought, furious and mortified, as his own eyes crinkled slightly in amusement. Handing over the vial, she patiently recorded in her notes what he'd consumed as he uncorked, tipped back, and drank the contents.

"Does it taste any different?" she asked as tonelessly as possible, beginning with the requisite data collection.

"Mildly. The aroma differs as well."

Hermione looked up, slightly alarmed. "It does? Does that indicate contamination of some kind? I was very conscientious..."

"To the point of aggravation to any and all who helped you, I'm sure," he grumbled. "No, Miss Granger, it does not necessarily indicate contamination. There are interactions taking place in this particular formulation which were absent from the others. Some alteration in its taste and aroma is not necessarily indicative of errors or contamination."

Momentarily reassured, Hermione recorded his response and moved to the next question. "Since the previous batch, did you notice improvement ~~in~~any of your

symptoms?" She felt stupid asking the question since clearly the potion had not offered him much in the way of protection against his terrifying collapse and the resulting organ dysfunction.

"Yes."

She looked up, eyes wide and hopeful.

"I spent rather more time asleep."

Hermione's quill was poised mid-stroke above her parchment, dripping ink. She sat paralyzed until the very corner of his mouth twitched, and then he dissolved into chuckles.

"That really isn't funny!" she protested, but he quirked an eyebrow at her, and she was forced to crack a smile as well.

"The outcome of this venture may not be as positive as you've dared to hope, Miss Granger. You and I both know that. If I cannot laugh at my own expense..." He trailed off, shrugging.

"You had me going there for a minute," she told him, lightly scolding. "I was hoping you'd tell me there was some genuine improvement."

"Would it mean so terribly much to you if there had been?"

The quiet, intense quality of his question caught her off guard. "Of course," she exclaimed, the teasing undertones of her voice dissipating entirely. "I would be thrilled if I thought it helped you at all, sir."

Snape's gaze found its way to the wall just above her head. "Very well. If you insist on having all pertinent information...and I shall not be held responsible for how deeply you regret knowing this...then I am obligated to inform you that I have experienced some..."

Hermione raised her eyebrows, waiting for him to finish. He seemed to be struggling with the most appropriate euphemism, she realized.

"Physical improvements."

"In what way?" she asked briskly, preparing to group her observations loosely into organ systems, as Madam Pomfrey had instructed.

Snape glared at her. "Is that not sufficient cause for hope? Must I degrade myself further?"

"Sir, there's nothing degrading..." She choked. "Oh. I see. That is, *I think* I see. Would you... be willing to elaborate, or would you prefer to discuss this with Madam Pomfrey?"

Hermione thought she'd handled it about as well and as professionally as could be expected. She strove to keep her countenance neutral while her mind, dirty and disobedient as always, raced with the thought of what he might be alluding to. Madam Pomfrey *had* said that sexual health and energies were among the most transformative in the body. His collapse had been a gigantic setback, to be sure, but if he had noticed a lessening of his sexual dysfunction...

Might the long road to healing be within view?

Hermione blushed furiously and coughed. The tables, she was dissatisfied to note, seemed to have turned in her professor's favor; having said his uncomfortable piece, he was now watching her with speculative amusement.

"I have already informed her of the changes," he was saying. His tone was no different than if he'd been dictating the ingredients of a rudimentary first-year potion, but she sensed that he, too, was aware of the shared tension strung between them.

Hermione nodded, rather too emphatically. "Then I'm sure she'll keep me updated. She's been very good about it so far, updating my notes whenever you've contacted her. As for Saturday, I've already told her that I'll be sure to keep her apprised of the results once we add the final ingredient..."

She ducked her head, trying to put a halt to her rambling, and tucked her notes back into her bag. "I should go," she was saying, "to do some review for Transfiguration," when, with a delightful pop, two heaping plates of chocolate mousse appeared on the table before them.

Snape regarded his dessert with all the enthusiasm he would have shown for a plate of decomposing logs. Hermione, torn between the ardent desire to feed and strengthen him and the telltale heat and pulsing in her lower abdomen...she needed to escape his gaze, *immediately*...sat, rooted to the spot.

"A highly unusual occurrence," Snape remarked silkily, "the appearance of dessert in my quarters." Hermione's face flamed, and she feigned interest in retying the frayed laces of her shoes. "It is not something in which I usually indulge."

"Perhaps you ought to broaden your horizons, Professor."

"Perhaps you'd care for some dessert, Miss Granger."

Hermione met his eyes levelly, understanding the challenge. She thought that she and Winky had been relatively quiet, but clearly they hadn't been fooling anyone: he knew perfectly well that she'd arranged with Winky for the helpings of dessert to be sent to his room, and he wasn't about to eat unless she remained there, enduring the latent discomfort of his revelations.

"I think I could manage that, sir."

She picked up her fork slowly but refused to bring it to her lips until he'd taken his first bite. Later, pounding her head into the pillows in frustration, desperate to be able once again to concentrate unimpeded on her Transfiguration review, she would recall that the sight of his dark eyes dilated with the pleasure of eating dessert ought to be outlawed for the safety of witches everywhere.

## Seventeen

Chapter 18 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was

worth an attempt, in any case.”

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The crisp crunch of snow beneath her feet helped to wake Hermione as she trudged through Hogsmeade. The sky was a cold, overcast gunmetal gray, rather a disappointment to the happy couples hoping to celebrate their Valentine's Day in a picturesque setting, she was sure. If the groans and mutters at breakfast had been any indication, a fair number of students had decided to forgo the walk into Hogsmeade altogether, fearing that they would be caught in a nasty winter storm.

For Hermione, however, the potentially ominous sky was a mere afterthought. She was wholly focused on her impending purchase, the third and, she hoped, most efficacious ingredient to be added to the healing potion. Since leaving his rooms earlier in the week, she'd been unable to do anything but dwell on how pathetically all-consuming her lust for Snape had become. She needed to revert to the attitude she'd begun with: she was a dedicated student striving to secure for herself an apprenticeship, and helping her professor would be a pleasant side-effect.

She heaved open the heavy wooden door at the apothecary's and strode through, listening to the bell tinkling behind her, alerting all those present to her arrival. The towering shelves surrounding her prevented her from identifying the other patron until, approaching the counter, she found herself standing directly behind him.

Though other, less interested students might have easily overlooked it, Hermione would have recognized the forbidding black wool cloak before her in any venue, under any circumstances. She sucked in a breath and cringed, realizing how loud the inhalation had sounded in the otherwise silent room. Snape turned around slowly and regarded her with an initially malevolent eye, probably anticipating some sniveling second-year whom he could scare away with a single look.

“Good morning, sir,” she said amiably, trying to make up for her less-than-flattering reaction at being confronted with him.

He gave her a barely perceptible nod of greeting and returned quietly, “Miss Granger.” Hermione was pleasantly surprised that she even warranted a word from him. She felt convinced that even a couple of months ago he would have done nothing more than stare at her and turn away, irritated.

“You're here quite early, sir,” she remarked, glancing pointedly at the clock behind the counter.

Snape looked at her askance. “Like many of the faculty, I prefer to avoid the student crowds.”

Hermione nodded. “I can't blame you. Although I doubt many students come in here, do they?”

Snape conceded this with a terse shake of his head. Just as Hermione was about to search for another topic of conversation with which to mitigate the uncomfortable silence, the apothecary emerged from the back room with a small package in hand. He turned it over to Snape, who pulled out from his pocket a rather hefty sum of Galleons.

“Sir,” she said suddenly, “are you buying the—”

“I will speak with you when I have finished my transaction, Miss Granger. If you wish to make a nuisance of yourself, do so elsewhere in the store.”

Chastened, Hermione drew her winter cloak more tightly around her body and turned away, wandering behind the safety of a tall shelf. She'd been worried about the wisdom of him walking into town when he'd so recently been ill in the infirmary, scarcely able to breathe on his own. She'd thought he would spend his weekend recuperating in his room while she made the trip into Hogsmeade to make any necessary purchases before their previously agreed upon Tuesday brewing session.

And further—if she was honest with herself, which she wasn't inclined to do with him so close nearby—some delusional part of her had hoped that he would be touched by, or at least acknowledge, the additional work she'd been putting in during her weekends in order to help him. The project benefited her as well, to be sure, but she'd been going over and above the required work even for her habitually stratospheric standards.

Snape interrupted her musings by completing his business and exiting the store via the main aisle. She followed reluctantly, wincing when the bell tinkled and the large door escaped from her grasp, slamming shut with a resounding thump.

By now several feet away, Snape turned in his tracks to regard her. Hermione ran a nervous hand through her hair, conscious of the errant curls tangling with the pretty bronze hoop earrings Ginny had given her for Christmas. She'd put them on at the last minute before leaving a castle, really just on a whim, and hadn't foreseen the difficulty of walking through wind and snow.

She'd hoped to take flight as quickly as possible, but she was disappointed to see that her escape wouldn't be so effortless after all: he was headed not toward Hogwarts but deeper into town, in the direction of the bookstore she wished to visit. Deciding that building a tolerable rapport was preferable to walking awkwardly behind him, Hermione said quietly, “Mind if I walk with you, sir? I'm headed toward the bookstore.”

She expected him to display some sign of exasperation—a raised eyebrow, a slight twitch of his clenched jaw—but instead he simply nodded and replied, “That would be acceptable, as it is my destination as well.”

Hermione repressed an amused smile, wondering if he ever spoke in anything less than stiff, formal tones. “Are you feeling well today, sir?” she inquired. Hurrying to match her shorter strides with his, she spared herself a moment to admire the forbidding figure he cut even in the dim daylight, his unrelieved black clothing sharply delineated against their snowy surroundings.

“I am fine, Miss Granger.” He held his shoulders stiffly, and she realized that on only one previous occasion had they simply walked together, side by side. As their trek to the kitchens after he'd caught her out of bed had hardly been companionable, she couldn't very well expect him to ease quickly into the rhythm and comfort of walking alongside her.

Hermione waited for him to elaborate, but it soon became clear he didn't intend to offer anything further. She sighed, not bothering to hide her frustration with his reticence. “I didn't ask if you were fine, sir. I asked if you were *well*. I was hoping the potion might have resulted in further improvements.”

Her professor was quiet for a long moment before responding. Hermione's cheeks began to burn, anticipating another encouraging response but possibly also one that alluded to a sexual matter. Instead, he finally said brusquely, “As a matter of fact, I slept much more soundly and for a longer duration than usual. Does that satisfy your curiosity, Miss Granger?”

She beamed at him. “Yes, sir. I'm very glad to hear it. And have you had breakfast yet?”

Averting his eyes, Snape began muttering what sounded like distinctly unprofessional and uncharitable things about her annoying mothering instincts. Hermione said with affected brightness, “Sorry, sir, I didn't quite catch that. I asked if you've had breakfast yet...?”

“Yes,” he snapped, “I have had a morning meal. Does *that* satisfy you, Miss Granger?”

“I'll only be satisfied if you promise to have lunch and supper as well,” she told him firmly, “or I'll be forced to deliver them personally to your rooms. Madam Pomfrey wouldn't approve of any other course of action, sir.”

"Very well," he growled. "Merlin deliver me from the both of you. Insufferable, meddlesome witches..." Breaking away from her briefly, he ascended the few stone steps to the bookstore and opened the door, lighter than the apothecary's and with a much more pleasant, twinkling bell that responded to their arrival. Hermione waited for him to advance into the store, but he remained rooted to the spot, now frowning with obvious consternation. It took her a brief moment to realize that he was standing in the bitter wind not merely to glower at her but in order to hold the door for her.

"Oh—!—thank you," she said, startled and embarrassed. She'd had boys hold the door for her in the past, of course, but to stand there while a grown man stepped aside and held it for her sent an unfamiliar emotion racing through her chest. He displayed none of the fidgety, bouncing impatience of boys when they were simply discharging what they viewed as an obligation. His body was tall and still and his face expressionless, but his eyes locked with hers in a way that made a frisson of feminine awareness run down her spine. It made her feel good, and very adult, she had to admit, to have him perform the simple courtesy in such a polite and attentive way.

Thus Hermione entered first, her right shoulder brushing tantalizingly against the fabric of his cloak. She had to force herself not to pause in order to turn and admire him. Using her head start to ensconce herself firmly in the section dedicated to academic periodicals, she breathed deeply and tried to dampen her inappropriate ardor.

She wanted the quarterly *Transfiguration Review* and a few pieces on advances made at the Department of Arithmantic Studies at the Ministry of Magic. Once Snape had moved past her and continued on to the Potions section, she felt comfortable reaching for her fourth selection, a review of Wizarding universities in the British Isles with a focus on Arithmancy curricula.

There was something headily intimate about book shopping with Snape nearby, she reflected, moving slowly along the shelves. Bookstores and libraries already held a special place in her affections; she recalled the beginning of her sixth year when, upon scenting the Amortentia for the first time, she'd inadvertently revealed to her entire Potions class in a breathy voice her love of the aroma of parchment. Possessing the freedom to wander through a bookstore or library for hours on end, unfettered by assignments and schedules, was a delicious enough experience; to have Snape nearby, so readily accessible, so visible, made it almost unbearably erotic.

She scolded herself mentally. It wasn't right to stand there gawking at his back and shoulders as he walked slowly, purposefully, through the aisles; and it certainly wasn't right to imagine cornering him in the quietest, most secluded section of the store, grabbing him by the collar of his cloak, and pressing him against the shelves.

Hermione focused her attention sternly on the section before her. Undoubtedly she was the only person alive who lived such an antisocial and bookwormish lifestyle as to consider a bookstore an erotic milieu. Snape, she was sure, would be horrified by her thoughts were he privy to them.

Or would he?

She advanced around the corner, noting with relief that the magically enhanced size of the store was barely hinted at by its outside dimensions. There was plenty of space for her to keep her distance from her professor, who continued to make her heart skip, betraying her continued fantasizing. She'd never, come to think of it, seen him so relaxed as he was now, not even in his own quarters, and that in itself was incredibly sexy. The tension in his face and body gave way to a kind of languorous curiosity as he moved from book to book, occasionally running a long finger against the spine or tipping it out of its place to examine its front or back covers. Watching the graceful, almost worshipful way he caressed the velvety ancient bindings made her shiver.

He'd already made two selections in the Potions section and had moved on to carefully examine the Charms offerings, an observation which put a temporary halt to her mental drooling and amused her greatly. His silky voice delivering his first-year speech and decrying "foolish wand-waving" was never far from her thoughts. She had to bite back the urge to ask him how long-lived was his interest in reading about such foolish wand-waving activities.

Hermione watched with an increasingly fidgety, warm sensation flooding through her as he replaced the tome he'd been perusing and continued on to the next section. She was positive now that it wasn't simply her impression: he was doing precisely what she herself did, moving along at a leisurely pace and taking in everything for the simple joy of touching and experiencing new books, and that was the sexiest thing of all. She must have been staring after him a little too dreamily, for the middle-aged witch at the counter had looked up from the novel she'd been reading and was now observing Hermione interestedly with a slight, lopsided smile that sent her reading spectacles careening to one side.

Blushing, Hermione ducked her head and focused on the Potions texts, hoping Snape would not turn around to scorn her interest in a subject for which she had no innate talent. Instead, she was shocked to see him retrace his steps, reach out a questing hand along the top shelf, so high that she could barely read the titles of the volumes, and pull out a slim dark-gray text, which he handed over to her silently.

Unable to refrain from meeting his eyes and revealing her own shock, she found his expression difficult to discern. His face was relaxed and inscrutable, but his eyes were darker and more intent than she ever recalled seeing them. She took in the title of the book, *Unicorns and the Ancients*.

"You may find this intriguing."

Hermione swallowed and nodded, tightening her grip on the book as Snape made his way swiftly to the counter and paid for his selections. She was still consumed with reading the publication information on the first few pages when the bell announced his timely exit from the store.

Hermione exhaled the breath she'd been holding for seemingly ages and walked to the front counter in a sort of daze. She'd spent the duration of their time in the store supposing that *she* was the one watching *him*, but obviously he'd paid plenty of attention to her as well. What was more, she was now positive that it had been Snape who'd moved so soundlessly through the library that evening weeks before, leaving the small volume on the collection of potions ingredients for her to stumble across.

The witch attending the counter straightened her spectacles and flashed what Hermione thought was rather a mischievous smile, but perhaps it was simply her paranoia acting. After all, she figured she was at times a little *too* inclined to imagine in others the sudden realization of her feelings for her professor. It wasn't as though she'd been following him around with her mouth literally hanging open. This witch, however perceptive she might have been, couldn't possibly have known in the space of ten minutes.

"Gorgeous, isn't he?" she said with a wink, tallying Hermione's subtotal. Hermione froze in the act of retrieving her coin purse from her pocket, suddenly wishing she'd chosen to carry her Muggle handbag. Rummaging around in one's handbag was at times a God-sent deliverance from mortifying conversation.

"I beg your pardon?" she returned, striving to sound as arch as possible.

"Oh, I didn't mean to offend you. None of my business, love. Just thought I saw you admiring him." She gave a distinctly feline little smile. "I know I always do whenever he comes in."

"I assure you that you're mistaken," Hermione said coolly, handing over her Galleons. She kept her ears open to the sound of his inopportune return, but they were, for the time being, utterly alone in the store.

"Well, like I said, didn't mean to cause any offense. But just between you and me, I wish he'd come around more often. You know what I mean?"

Hermione grasped the parcel containing her books and allowed herself to soften. After all, who did she think she'd been kidding? She obviously wasn't fooling anyone.

"Well... Maybe I do. Just a little bit," she admitted, sheepishly.

The older witch grinned, running an ink-stained fingernail through her cropped dark-blond hair and raising an eyebrow. "You have a lovely day now. And if that gorgeous professor of yours happens to be in front of you on the walk back to school... Enjoy the view for me, hmm?"

Well aware that her face was flushing bright red, Hermione ducked out of the store.



# Eighteen

Chapter 19 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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Whether it was the effect of the potion alone or the combined effects of the potion and regular meals, Snape was *definitely* looking healthier, Hermione decided as Madam Pomfrey completed his comprehensive physical. Perhaps it was simply wishful thinking on her part, but his nerve damage appeared to have lessened. He also looked stronger, as though he'd gained some much-needed weight.

Hermione had to admit, selfishly and guiltily, that it made her feel better about having to resist the urge to gawk at him every time she saw him. Lusting after a man in constant physical pain had been bad enough; lusting after someone so obviously ill and malnourished had made her feel downright vile.

"He's really improving!" Madam Pomfrey murmured to her, clapping a congratulatory hand on her shoulder. "I won't say that it's a miracle or that he's going to be fully healed any time soon, but your potion seems to be demonstrating a definite ability to regenerate damaged nerves."

Hermione knew that this was a tremendous accomplishment in itself. Developing formulations capable of traveling the breadth and complexity of the nervous system to initiate the healing process had always been an exceedingly challenging and difficult dilemma in medicinal potions. She wondered, however, whether the nerve regeneration was simply causing more pain on top of the already unimaginable burden Snape carried every moment of every day.

"But is it lessening his pain?" she asked as Madam Pomfrey completed her notes, shrinking them and handing them over to Hermione. The mediwitch frowned slightly, the deep furrows between her eyebrows increasing.

"I don't know, dear, to tell you the truth. I'd encourage you to ask Severus yourself, but I'm not all that confident that he'll give you an honest response."

Hermione sighed. "He's hardly willing to tell me if he ate breakfast. When we were brewing a few days ago, I asked him if he'd had dinner, and it seemed to really anger him."

Madam Pomfrey again patted her on the shoulder, this time consolingly. "Don't take it personally, dear. Severus tolerates you with far more willingness than I've ever seen him tolerate *anyone*." Hermione's heart fluttered at this proclamation, but she strove to keep her features dispassionate. "I really mean that," Madam Pomfrey assured her, heading in the direction of her office. Hermione followed reluctantly and was relieved to discover, once they'd traversed the length of the infirmary, that Snape had changed swiftly and already absented himself.

The mediwitch bustled about, talking as she organized the clutter on her desk and prepared tea for the two of them. "As a matter of fact, Hermione, I must be honest with you: I'm astonished by how much Severus has opened up to you."

Hermione sipped ferociously at her tea, trying to hide her blushing face.

"When he arrived here, before you came, I asked him if he'd noticed any improvement in his sexual difficulties, and he told me he'd already reported it to you. I confess I was amazed." She sank gratefully into her chair and sighed, sipping at her own cup and pressing her fingertips briefly against her weary eyes. "I'm pleased that he's grown so comfortable with you. I've known...and treated...him for years, and getting information like that out of him has been like pulling teeth, as the Muggle saying goes."

Hermione gritted her own teeth, trying to nod understandingly. She had her suspicions regarding the etiology of Snape's sexual dysfunction. The simple act of thinking about it, however transiently, made her want to break into Azkaban and personally torture every known Death Eater in residence.

Madam Pomfrey was staring into her half-empty teacup pensively. "I remember when I first found out," she said softly. "I thought, for a moment after I told him what I suspected, that he might actually hit me. It was just foolishness on my part, of course...Severus is far too well-bred to even consider hurting a woman...but he just looked so angry and betrayed."

Hermione slowly took a seat across from Madam Pomfrey, heart pounding. She wanted so badly to understand the grimmest details of Snape's past...not so that she could become depressed and dwell on them but so that she could seek to understand, on at least some level, how to get through to him. "Professor Snape is a proud man," she began carefully. "I'm sure he didn't hold it against you. He was probably just..."

"Humiliated." Madam Pomfrey nodded. "I knew that at the time, of course. And I know I did a terrible thing when I announced it in front of both you and Filius, but really..." She trailed off, swallowing hard. "Hermione, I have to tell you"...she laid a hand over Hermione's, and her skin was soft but wrinkled..."I love him like a son. If I could get my hands on the men that did that to him..."

Hermione realized she was crying. Madam Pomfrey was as well, so she didn't bother to wipe away the tears. "Was he... that badly abused?"

Madam Pomfrey looked at her for a long moment, and Hermione feared that she'd gone overboard in broaching so forwardly the subject of Snape's past abuse. "I don't even recall what my notes contain anymore," she finally admitted, exhaling loudly and leaning back in her creaking chair. "I know I put in there that he was raped. I had to figure that out on my own, of course. He lets me examine him, but he won't tell me a damned thing."

"I don't..." Hermione struggled to verbalize how dumbstruck she'd been upon reading about the horrible physical punishments to which her professor had been subjected. "I assumed it was the rape that..."

"No. At least, not entirely. I suppose I wouldn't understand myself, but in truth I think it's more psychological than physical." Refilling her teacup, Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips and said, "There's no tasteful way to put it, so I've always avoided mentioning it around him, though more information would have been helpful. I treated the internal damage, of course, and physiologically speaking, he *should* be more than capable."

Hermione schooled herself not to appear inordinately interested, but in truth she was riveted and horrified. She'd thought predominantly of the unpleasant physical side-effects Snape had undoubtedly suffered, but she'd never considered how he must have felt in the aftermath, other than to imagine that his pride had been dealt a crippling blow.

"It's not just that he's proud," Madam Pomfrey confided, her eyes filled with tears. "He's always been so, so respectful of women...more so than any other boy I ever saw at

Hogwarts, let me tell you. And James Potter, well, I loved him like I loved all my charges, but I never did understand what Lily Evans saw in him." She shook her head, her eyes hazy, focused on another decade. "Severus loved her so much... It was obvious to the rest of us...especially Lily, I'm sure...but I don't think *he* really came to realize it until he was fourteen or fifteen, and by then there was so little chance for them to be friends.

"Lily was a kind girl, of course, but she had a temper on her. She tried to be patient with him, but he'd lost his temper with her so many times... Frustrated, I'm sure, that she couldn't see in him what he saw in her. I think he saw potential there, and she just viewed him as a project to be saved from the Slytherins." Tracing patterns in the cooling surface of her tea with a small silver spoon, Madam Pomfrey smiled wanly. "If she'd been more receptive, his life would have been so different... But after losing her, he was never the same. I know there were a few women, but I don't think he was ever serious about them. Sex is an escape for a lot of men, though,...at least in the physical sense...and I suppose there's a part of Severus that's no different."

Hermione had to admit that she hadn't been prepared for how much it would cut her, hearing that spoken aloud. She'd known he couldn't possibly be inexperienced; though she'd had but rare glimpses of the non-classroom facets of his personality, he was, despite his manners, accomplishments, and preeminent education, still a man, with the same hormones flowing through his veins that the rest of them possessed. And as the teasing witch at the bookstore had proved, he had a sexual magnetism that was far outside the norm but powerful nonetheless. Yet the thought of him touching another woman, even to satisfy the need for a distant, purely physical release, made her feel like she'd been gutted with a blunt knife.

"That was years ago, though," Madam Pomfrey continued. "Probably before he joined up with... well, you know. I know for a fact he never participated in anything with them willingly, not with those women being so... you know," she said again, inarticulately, and shuddered. "Unclean. And I've often thought about encouraging him to visit a well-reputed call girl, as crass as that sounds, just for sheer stress relief, but he always grew very stoic...you know that expression he gets, when he's so furious that he just shuts down...and refused, very politely but very angrily. I know he's proud, but what they did to him scarred him emotionally."

"Maybe with time...?" Hermione suggested hesitantly.

"I sincerely hope so. What he went through would have been traumatic enough for a woman, of course, but men are just... I don't know how to describe it, but I'm sure you know what I mean. I've always wondered if Muggle men are the same. The way they view their masculinity is a fragile thing, and I doubt he's seen himself as being capable of having a healthy and satisfying relationship with a woman for many, many years. I'm no Muggle psychologist, but I've no doubt that, like a lot of male rape victims, he was forced to seriously question the way women would view him and his sexuality if they ever found out." She drained the last of her tea, coughing before saying, "It's such a shame. Of all the men I've known...all the Hogwarts boys, like I said...Severus was always the one I thought would fall most deeply in love. He's not an easy person to get along with, as you know, but he's so loyal in his way, and the way he looks at women..."

"He would have treasured Lily Evans, really treasured her. Do you know what I mean? With some men...rare men, I think...you just get that sense that women are more to them than beautiful pieces of art or willing partners to take to bed. They're absolutely taken in by them, so charmed by all those little differences that make a woman a woman. That's Severus, at heart."

Hermione was floored. She was shocked, certainly, to hear Madam Pomfrey, normally the consummate professional, speaking so bluntly; but she was simultaneously entranced by the unexpected insight into her professor's mind. "So few marriages are even reciprocal, let alone that devoted and passionate, but she could have had that with him," Madam Pomfrey murmured regretfully. "Though I suppose you can't fault her for loving whom she did, but there's no doubt in my mind that Severus, if and when he heals and falls in love, will just worship her, like something precious that he wants to admire and protect." She gave Hermione a sad look. "He has that disposition, I think."

Hermione did as well. She wiped at the tears falling down her face and nodded, unable to speak of her absolute, searing need to be that woman.

"You really care for him," Madam Pomfrey said, cocking her head to one side. A probing tone had entered her voice that made Hermione's heart race in whirring alarm.

"Yes," she said, knowing there was little hope of avoiding the point. "I do. He's been wonderful to me and to my friends in his own way, and he's so smart and talented. I think it's a shame he's had his time and health robbed of him when all he's done for years is try to help."

Madam Pomfrey was silent, and Hermione felt as though she was gauging her response for hidden meanings. She suspected something, Hermione was sure...it was probably the only reason she'd been willing to reveal Snape's past in such intimate depth...but it didn't appear that she was going to become any more demanding, at least.

Sure enough, she stood and stretched. "Well, I must commend you on being an unusual young woman, Hermione, and I mean that in the most flattering sense. It's so refreshing to see a student who's bright enough and mature enough to move past his exterior and appreciate him for who he is." She put away their cups, glancing meaningfully at Hermione's bags. "You've the notes to look over for this evening. And I must congratulate you again on that latest batch. He didn't admit it out loud, but I think it's really improved his sleep and his appetite. He's put on just over ten pounds in the past two weeks."

Hermione couldn't prevent her face from lighting up with pleasure. "Really? I thought he looked better. That's wonderful to hear."

Madam Pomfrey nodded, a more modest but nonetheless satisfied smile crossing her own features. "It is indeed. I hardly remember anymore a time when he was truly healthy. He used to be quite strong and even athletic, but of course the stress and pain have been affecting his appetite for years now."

She held the door open for Hermione, giving her a small wave goodbye. "Have a lovely evening, dear. Do let me know if you intend to make any further changes before publishing. Septima's very excited about that paper."

Hermione promised as much, earnestly, before heading to her rooms with a lightness in her steps she hadn't felt in weeks.

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"So what's the evening Snape status?" Ginny asked several hours later as she waltzed into their room and began rummaging through her trunk. Hermione, immersed wholly in ***Unicorns and the Ancients***, looked up with a startled expression before saying hesitantly,

"I really shouldn't keep telling you this stuff, Gin. It's not very professional."

Ginny barked a laugh. "You know I'm not going to tell anyone, Hermione. But if it makes you feel better and more *principled*, just don't give me the details. He is feeling better though, right? He looks a lot better, like he's been eating more."

"He is," Hermione said, unable to keep the thrill from her voice. "Madam Pomfrey said he's gained ten pounds."

"Thank Merlin. He needed it! Everyone could tell he was really underweight." Ginny stood before the full-length mirror and activated its commentary with a wave of her wand. No longer silenced, the mirror piped up instantly.

"Lovely color with your eyes!" it cried in response to Ginny's dark-red dress.

"Yes," Ginny agreed musingly, "but not with my hair... Green, maybe?"

"Always the perfect color for redheads!" the mirror concurred. Ginny held up a short dress of green silk, and the mirror sputtered out rapturous compliments. Hermione groaned mentally and burrowed deeper into her covers, burying her face in the book. She couldn't understand how Ginny tolerated the stupid things; she'd always muted their fawning chatter, finding them insufferable.

Having settled on her ensemble, Ginny began to remove the plait from her hair, shaking out its beautiful waves. "So what about his other problems? Merlin, Hermione, did you die and get eaten by the bed?" she exclaimed.

Hermione peeked out from under the covers. "Would you shut that stupid, obsequious thing up? What's it saying now?"

Ginny silenced the mirror just before it could complete its ode to her earrings. Pulling on a pair of dangerously high-heeled boots and hauling out her cosmetics, she repeated her question with a salaciously raised eyebrow.

"I can't tell you!" Hermione protested.

"Fine. Can you at least tell me if it's good news or bad news?"

Hermione conceded, "It's good news."

"Thankfully! Now you just need to fatten him up a bit more and he'll be good to go." She grinned at Hermione as she deftly rouged her cheeks and stained her lips berry-red. Hermione was now positive that she was sneaking out of the castle for a rendezvous with Harry. Ginny was very feminine and far more glamorous than she, Hermione, by nature, but even Ginny didn't dress up quite so elaborately to visit female friends for late-night troublemaking.

"We shouldn't talk about him like that," Hermione said firmly, emerging fully from the blankets and propping her book up against her pillow. "It's not respectful."

"I'm not being disrespectful. I'm wishing him good health for your sake. The way you're drooling over him, you'd better hope that he's feeling well enough once something happens to give you a good time."

"What would I know whether it's good or bad? I'm the only virgin left in this castle over fifteen years old." Hermione knew there was some bitterness in her voice, as Ginny grew quiet and said solemnly,

"Don't tell me you're losing your mind and starting to regret that whole thing with Ron. We've been over this."

"Not at all. I simply regret following a man around like a lovesick puppy when I've no idea what he would want from me."

"You'll catch on fast," Ginny assured her, throwing on her warm winter cloak and wrapping her Gryffindor scarf around her neck. "Unless you were planning to make the first move."

"I wouldn't have the courage," Hermione admitted with a shake of her head. She closed her book with a rustle, and Ginny's eyes alighted on its cover.

"What are you reading?"

"Snape recommended it to me. It's about the history of unicorns and how ancient tribes discovered and used their blood and hair for magical purposes."

Ginny wrinkled her nose. "I'll never understand your love of history. But *Snape* recommended it to you?"

Hermione nodded. "We were both at the bookstore in Hogsmeade last Saturday morning, and he pulled it down from the shelf and handed it to me. He said he thought I'd find it 'intriguing.'"

"So he goes to the bookstore there?" Ginny was developing a wicked gleam in her eyes as she leaned against the foot of Hermione's bed. "Such a nice and convenient place for you to run into him. You just happened to show up the same time he did?"

Hermione shot her friend a warning look and breezed past the insinuation. "He seems to like perusing just like I do," she replied, regarding her book thoughtfully, tracing a finger along its slender spine. "I have a feeling he's read it himself. I didn't think much of it at the time...I just figured he meant *intriguing* as a synonym for *interesting*...but it really was an apt description because the author keeps belaboring how little we really know about the ancient tribes in Britain and Europe. There's a lot of unanswered questions about their interactions with unicorns."

"Such as?"

"Well, before I went to collect the unicorn blood, someone indicated a book for me to read from the library here. I'm fairly certain it was Snape. Anyway, it mentioned that as a part of courtship, a woman...a maiden...used to give unicorn blood to her betrothed to symbolize her devotion to him, and then he would give her something in return, but that book didn't specify what." Hermione tapped her finger on its cover, saying, "This one states that usually his gift to her was a plant."

"A flowering plant?"

"What else? To symbolize her blossoming womanhood and fertility, and to acknowledge that he views her as sexually desirable."

"How cliché." Ginny rolled her eyes. "I'll never understand the male obsession with female virginity. But it doesn't say what kind?"

"No...not thus far, anyway. Apparently it's controversial. Magical historians can't come to an agreement, other than to say that it's probably something very rare and hard to procure. I don't think the authors are going to mention a species."

"Which would mean, in this day and age, something expensive."

"Undoubtedly."

"Well," Ginny said gaily, "as fascinating as it is talking about the courtship rituals of ancient magical tribes, I've got to go. You're not going to sit in here all night and read that, are you? It's Friday night!"

"I can't put it down," Hermione admitted. "It really *is* intriguing. I wish History of Magic had focused on cultures and traditions that far back. It also mentions..."

"G'night, Hermione," Ginny called with another roll of her eyes, making her escape. Chuckling, Hermione returned to her book. She had a nagging feeling that her curiosity about the mysterious and beautiful plant symbolizing a man's acknowledgment of a girl's maturation into womanhood would remain unfulfilled.

## Nineteen

### Chapter 20 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was

worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

AN: I'll be increasing the rating now. I'm not saying that it's impending in this chapter, but the sexual themes may become more graphic from here on out. Consider yourself forewarned.

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The maddening sensation tickling at Hermione's nose woke her from a drowsy sleep. Reluctantly opening her eyes, she found herself staring up into a blurry auburn curtain that left her with a peculiar sense of *déjà vu*.

"Get up!" Ginny cried, and Hermione winced. She'd been up rather too late the previous night, voraciously consuming *Unicorns and the Ancients*. In point of fact, she'd been up rather too far into that *morning*, a habit in which she only indulged when she was desperately...and foolishly...unable to put down a book.

Ginny, however, wasn't giving her the option of waking gracefully and with minimal pain. She was practically bouncing in place, hair now flying wildly. Through the foggy haze of her fatigue, Hermione managed to process the fact that the other girl was wearing the same clothing in which she'd left the evening before.

Finally, she managed to drag herself into a sitting position with great effort. Squinting, she demanded, "What's so important that you had to wake me up at..." She glanced at the parted curtains on her window. "Merlin, Ginny! What is it, five?" Her brain struggled to determine how few hours of sleep she'd had. One and a half? Two?

"Nearly six," Ginny continued bouncing relentlessly, leaving Hermione with a sour taste in her mouth and a burgeoning urge to throttle her. Hermione couldn't tell if she was running on large amounts of sugar or pure adrenaline, but her energy was amazing to witness. "C'mon! We're going to Hogsmeade!"

Hermione was now fully alert. "Excuse me? It's not an authorized Hogsmeade weekend. And who the hell will be open at seven in the morning?"

"Yeah, but come on, no one here is going to know. They'll assume I'm out flying and you're tucked away in some twelfth-floor corner studying for Transfiguration on a Saturday...like you *often* do, I might point out."

Hermione felt her eyes narrowing and resisted the childish urge to stick out her tongue at her friend. What, precisely, was wrong with utilizing one's Saturdays to study? Saturday mornings were the quietest of all around Hogwarts.

"And anyway," Ginny continued in an indifferent tone, "what can they really do to stop us? We're both of age."

"I don't know, Gin. Professor McGonagall's going to get pretty upset..." Hermione was in the process of shaking her head when Ginny released an aggrieved, shrill whine.

"Hermione, come on! McGonagall doesn't even have to know. I'm *begging* you." Impulsively, she reached over and took Hermione's hands in her own, eyes shining. The slightly rough fabric of her gloves scratched against Hermione's fingertips.

Hermione, for her part, had never seen Ginny so worked up, so blissfully exuberant, and hypotheses began to circulate, half-formed, in her mind. "All right," she said grudgingly. "You're *sure* you can't just tell me now, whatever it is? You still haven't said what store you expect will even be open at this hour."

"I could ruin the surprise now," Ginny admitted with a wild grin, "but I'd rather tell you *and* show you in Hogsmeade. I've already made all the necessary arrangements; let's just leave it at that."

Hermione abandoned her previous thoughts, now stumped. Had Ginny smuggled something taboo as far as Hogsmeade? Something from Harry, perhaps?

She skipped showering but dragged a brush through the gnarled forest of her hair. From her Muggle handbag she dredged up a small pack of face wipes and ran one lightly over her skin before carefully applying some moisturizer to protect herself against the bitter winter wind. Pulling on a pair of warm, casual jeans and a soft long-sleeved tee shirt, she glanced out the window. One look at the swirling snow outdoors made her reach for a warmer second layer, followed by her cloak, scarf, and other outdoor necessities. Ginny hopped from one foot to another, impatient to be on their way.

Finally, after a suspenseful and agonizing trek through the castle during which both girls kept their mouths shut and their footfalls as muted as possible, they emerged from Hogwarts. Ginny's cheeks quickly grew ruddy from wind and anticipation. When they'd traversed a safe distance, she let out a delighted cry and twirled around, skipping forward joyfully.

"Are you on drugs?" Hermione demanded sulkily, her head pounding with the loud noise and lack of sleep.

"Harry proposed!"

Hermione realized suddenly that Ginny had, despite removing her outer layers, left her gloves on during the time they'd spent in their room. She now pulled off her glove and held the ring up for Hermione's eager inspection. Hermione grasped Ginny's finger gently, admiring the beautiful stone.

"A garnet?" she questioned aloud.

Ginny shrugged. "Diamond engagement rings are so... conventional. Harry and I aren't really conventional, you know?"

Hermione couldn't think of a way in which their relationship *wasn't* conventional. Their school lives, their friendships, and their extracurricular activities had always been highly unusual, but from the very beginning Harry and Ginny's had been a whirlwind romance straight out of the Marriage and Family Culture section of their History of Magic textbooks. It lacked for nothing: the worrisome speed of its progress; the passionate fights; the illicit trysts in the hallways and on the school grounds; and, above all, Molly Weasley's dictatorial insistence that sex and cohabitation wait until marriage lest Ginny garner an unflattering reputation.

"So you asked for a different kind of stone?" she asked, puzzled. She knew from her infrequent letters to Harry that Ginny had become increasingly voluble on the subject of marriage...though Ginny no doubt envisioned herself as simply planting the seed of the idea in his mind...but she was shocked to hear that he'd proposed. The idea that he would court potential disfavor by offering her anything other than a traditional diamond engagement ring, a custom Ginny knew he'd grown up recognizing as the ultimate display of devotion, startled her even more deeply.

"No." Ginny didn't appear to appreciate the subtly unappreciative undertones of Hermione's questioning; her pretty lips, their artificial stain having long since disappeared, turned in a small frown. "Why does it matter to you what kind of stone it is, anyway? It's my engagement ring."

"It doesn't!" Hermione said, backtracking hastily. "I was just curious. It's beautiful. So how did he propose?"

Ginny's good humor returned instantaneously. "He took me to dinner, and then we went for a walk, and we ended up back by the lake, right over there." She pulled her glove back on and pointed to a bare, spindly tree farther along the deserted shore. "We sat under there for a while and talked, and when I told him I'd better get back, he said he didn't want me to leave without this." And she waved her hand triumphantly.

"He wanted a longer engagement...he said a *year*, can you imagine?...but I really want to have things ready to go by July. We'll spend August away for our

honeymoon...what do you think of Spain? I've always wanted to go...and then I'll be back in time to start training in September."

Hermione wisely remained silent. She'd obviously been wrong about Harry's hesitation to commit to Ginny so completely, so she didn't want to toss any potentially unwelcome reservations into her friend's eager arrangement of ideas. "Spain is lovely," she assured Ginny in a heartfelt tone. "I've been with my parents."

"I thought so. I asked Harry, but he didn't seem to care. Of course, boys never do show much interest in that kind of thing, do they? He'll only care about the lingerie." Her eyes grew saucer-wide, and she grabbed Hermione's hands again, shaking them happily. "Oh, I can't wait for you to see the lingerie."

Hermione choked on her reply.

"I've got the most beautiful red satin picked out. Maybe a little obvious, but he'll love the gesture."

She continued chatting happily, and Hermione was left to wonder whether her newly emerging suspicions were correct. She was proved accurate when Ginny led her through an eerily empty Hogsmeade to Gladrags, where, to Hermione's utter astonishment, Lavender Brown had unlocked the front door and was beckoning to them with a waving hand.

"Don't be mad," Ginny whispered cajolingly. "You're going to be my maid of honor or whatever the Muggles call it. I promise. But she just got some great new job working for them, and I knew if I owled her she'd be able to open the store..."

"I'm not upset," Hermione told her...genuinely, she was pleased to find. Perhaps it was the natural effect of having spent so many hours consumed with admiring Snape, but the passing months had mitigated the ache of Ron's betrayal, leaving little more than a distasteful memory. Ginny opened her mouth to reply, but they'd drawn too close to Gladrags and Lavender's perch on the front stoop, so she shut it again.

"Come in!" Lavender called. "Hi, Hermione! I was hoping Ginny would bring you. The more girls' opinions we can get, the better!"

Hermione graced Lavender with what she thought was a sincere smile and followed Ginny into the store. She'd rarely been to Gladrags and had never cared for its ambience, affectedly feminine and rather too overdone. She sucked in a last greedy breath of unpolluted oxygen before she was surrounded by the cloying scent of essential oils and perfume. It wasn't the sickening miasma of some Muggle body sprays, but it wasn't Chanel, either.

"So, come in and have a look!" Lavender encouraged Ginny brightly. "I've brought some things from London, too. Did Ginny tell you I just got hired?" she called for Hermione's benefit as she wrapped an arm rather too familiarly around Ginny's shoulders and guided her toward the back of the store. "It's brilliant. I'm the top assistant to the manager in London, and I get discounts in all branches! Plus, if I do really well, I could be a shoo-in for the manager here!"

"Paris is my ultimate goal, of course," she said confidently with a slightly condescending tone that suggested she had trouble imagining Hermione could approach or appreciate her view of Paris as a fashionable Mecca. "But this would be okay as a sort of middle step. So," she said to Ginny, who was staring in wonderment at one of the gowns, "what do you think?"

Even Hermione had to admit that she found the cultural implications of what lay before her to be rather fascinating...and heartening. The offerings Lavender had placed on display varied from true Wizarding robes to purely Muggle gowns, strapless and halter, lace and tulle, exquisitely embroidered, to interesting hybrids of the two. Ginny was currently preoccupied with staring at one such creation, a strapless gown of satin overlaid by flowing material and cap sleeves with an open robe-style neckline that would undoubtedly show a generous amount of cleavage.

"Try it on!" Lavender coaxed, nudging Hermione. Confused, assuming it was her cue to be a true girl friend and chime in, Hermione echoed Lavender's suggestion, though less adamantly.

"All right." Ginny's eyes and cheeks were bright with pleasure.

Despite her misgivings about how quickly everything was happening, Hermione was thrilled to see her friend...her best friend, really, a girl with whom she'd shared such personal and privileged details...so obviously elated.

As there were no other patrons in the store during such an early hour, Ginny simply stripped down to her underthings before the two of them. Lavender immediately moved forward and began to assist her in donning the unwieldy yards of fabric, extravagantly complimenting Ginny's small, lithe figure and the way the soft cream of the gown highlighted the color of her hair. Hermione found herself nursing the suspicion that Lavender worked on commission.

"I love it!" Ginny announced, turning before the set of full-length mirrors to regard her form from all possible angles. A line of what appeared to be beads, sewn into a vine motif, trailed down her back to the floor, and she brushed a finger across them with a reverence akin to that Snape had demonstrated for the books Hermione had seen him touch. "Lavender, can you put it on hold or something? I've got to talk with Mum and Dad, but I'm sure Mum'll want to buy it as soon as possible. She'll die if I tell her about it and then someone else walks off with it. And she'll need to pick out her own, as well."

"Of course." There was an unidentifiable greed in Lavender's eyes, and she was clutching at one hand with the other. "And the other members of the wedding party? Is there anything you want to look at for them...?"

"Well, sure, you're going to be Ron's date, right?" Lavender relaxed and gave a self-satisfied nod. "So we'll make you a whatchamacallit. Help me out here, Hermione. The Muggle tradition with the other girls..."

"Bridesmaids," Hermione supplied, thinking of the last wedding of which she'd been a part. Her older cousin had married and generously bestowed upon her the position of flower girl, one she'd deeply coveted. She'd been seven years old at the time.

"Yes, that's it." Ginny was trying to extricate herself from the robe-gown. "A bridesmaid. I want it to be part Muggle because of Harry," she said to Lavender by way of explanation. "And Hermione will be the maid of honor. That's the right term, isn't it?"

"Yes," Hermione said quietly, wishing she could edge away from the other girls. She sensed that Ginny would want her to begin perusing gowns instantly, and she wasn't prepared to disrobe before Lavender. She'd progressed a long way in the healing process, but that particular part of the wound was still too raw to toy with.

"So you can look around and see what you want. And don't worry about the cost...Mum and Dad have been saving up since I was little!" Once again nearly naked, she placed her hands on her little hips and turned in an unhurried circle, taking in the various other items that were on display all around her. Hermione had, thanks in large part to Ginny's active coaching, succeeded in losing some weight over the past couple of months, but she still found herself hotly envying Ginny's effortless, self-conscious love of her own body. "Lavender, where's that red two-piece set, the satin one? I saw it in here a couple of weeks ago. I really need it."

It struck Hermione as an odd pronouncement. She'd thought Ginny had planned to save that particular surprise for the honeymoon, but the urgency in her face suggested she had a desperate need to have it in her possession quite soon. "I know that one," Lavender assured her, nodding vigorously. She disappeared into the next room and returned with the lingerie in question, causing Ginny to clap her hands excitedly. "We've got lots more where that came from, so don't hesitate to have a look 'round. Hermione, you want to see anything while you're here? I've got lots of burgundy," she offered, "just as pretty as Ginny's, there, but it's darker. It would go great with your hair."

Hermione felt herself flushing. "I beg your pardon?"

Lavender laughed. "You're too shy! C'mon, I'll show you."

Hermione bit back a gasp as Lavender grasped her hand and fairly dragged her into the next room, which turned out to be replete with underwear. No, Hermione corrected, underwear was too indelicate a term for the nearly incorporeal garments before her. Every possible shade and shape were accounted for, a spectrum that ranged from

luxe, feminine pastels to deep jewel tones that seemed to promise dark things, all in fabrics that begged to be worshiped and caressed.

Hermione found her reactions unsettling, to say the least. She was suitably horrified to be experiencing such a revelation in Lavender's presence, but there was no denying that while she'd never much cared what she wore on a day-to-day basis, the idea of stepping into such sensual pieces purely for a man's pleasure was intoxicating.

On a rational level, she supposed, it was impossible not to acknowledge that she would never have the courage to be seen in such a thing. She'd not yet mustered the courage to be seen naked by anyone of the male persuasion, and she couldn't really imagine pouring her hardly fragile form into such obviously fragile restraints; but she couldn't keep from wandering forward as if possessed and reaching out a hand to touch one particular set, a shimmering forest green with the most stunning, tiny pearls she'd ever seen, smoky gray and seductive, overlying the cups.

Behind her, Lavender trilled a laugh. "Trying to impress a Slytherin?" she teased.

Hermione tensed. She hadn't even connected the dominant color of the bra and panties to Slytherin House or any members therein; she'd been too overtaken by the resemblance of the fabric to the tapestry separating Snape's laboratory from his private quarters, that particularly sensuous material that evoked images of limbs tangling in a rumpled bed and never failed to make her weak in the knees.

"Nice choice," Lavender said, all seriousness. She moved forward slowly, and her features seemed to display some repentance, as though she'd realized that her teasing had only increased Hermione's discomfort. "Padded balconette in silk damask. Are you into lingerie?"

Hermione shook her head. "I just liked the material," she mumbled, backing away. She'd had a moment's absurd fantasy, but she hadn't the courage to wear the ensemble or the money to buy it.

"Every girl should be into lingerie," Lavender insisted. "Do you want to try it on?"

What Hermione wanted was for the two of them to stop putting up a pretense and admit openly that she couldn't pull off sexy clothing. Lavender continued, however, saying, "We've got the changing rooms back there, and the return policy is very generous. If you don't like it..."

"I can't afford it," Hermione said stiffly. Avoiding Lavender's gaze, she looked instead toward the room from which they'd come, where Ginny was likely prancing around in her own choice, loving what she saw in the mirror. "But thank you for showing me."

"Then let me get it for you."

Lavender's voice was so quiet and earnest that Hermione had to lean toward her for the words to be audible. "Pardon? I can't let you..."

"Please." Hermione had never seen Lavender so lacking in composure; her words were fevered and her eyes were large and anguished. "Hermione, I haven't been alone with you since... since what happened last summer. I know we've never been the best of friends, but I really do feel horrible about what happened. You have to know, Ron told me that the two of you were on the brink of breaking up anyway. And I know that doesn't excuse what I did, but..."

"Don't worry about it," Hermione said gruffly. "It's in the past. I don't..."

"You must hate me," Lavender whimpered, low enough to keep their conversation private from Ginny. "Please, let me do this for you. You'll be graduating soon, and I'm sure you've got other boys lined up who would appreciate it. Or I could fix you up! I know you didn't want me to do it at Christmas, but I would love..."

Hermione barked a laugh. "There are no others, Lavender, but that's not your fault. It's my own fault."

Lavender drew back, scanning Hermione thoughtfully. "You're much prettier than you think you are," she replied. "And I want to do this for you. New lingerie is a great way to boost your confidence. You might be surprised how quickly boys will notice even if they don't see it themselves."

Hermione remained skeptical, but she could feel herself softening. She had difficulty respecting Lavender after what had passed between her and Ron while he'd technically been her boyfriend, but somehow it didn't shock her that Ron would have wheedled her out of her clothes by downplaying the already tenuous connection still between them.

Finally, she gave in to the temptation. She doubted she and Lavender would ever be close, but she didn't want to blow off the possibility of a tentative acquaintance. What had happened with Lavender had exhausted her for reasons far more complex than the simple loss of Ron and what little comfort she'd drawn from that relationship. It had forced her to see other females as rivals, as potential impediments, opening up a grotesque world of competition and a hierarchy to which she would have much preferred to remain blind.

"All right," she conceded. "If you insist. But I don't want you to do it if it's really expensive..."

Lavender waved off her concern. "It's free. Fifteen free items during my first thirty days of employment. It's a miracle I haven't already picked them out, I know!" She laughed, and Hermione found herself relaxing enough to laugh with her. "I'll just bag it up for you and you can take it back to Hogwarts today."

She disappeared with the garments just as Ginny skipped into the room, fully dressed once again and carrying her own designated purchase. "Ready to go?" she asked cheerfully, and Hermione nodded.

## Twenty

### *Chapter 21 of 29*

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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Hermione truly believed herself to be happy for Ginny, but she was in a more contemplative than enthusiastic mood as she made her way back to Hogwarts. Ginny had opted to remain behind in Hogsmeade, so Hermione—making the most of her unauthorized time spent off castle grounds—had popped into the bookstore the moment it opened, spending the last of her pocket money on a new novel and several mediwizardry journals. She hadn't been sure whether she did or didn't want to see the friendly

middle-aged witch who'd teased her about Snape, but as it turned out, a young man had been in her place at the desk.

Something about the entire wedding situation felt off to Hermione. As she kicked at the drifts of snow before her, disgruntled, she was forced to admit that she felt increasingly disconcerted by it, but had someone demanded an explanation, she couldn't have provided one. To employ an expression she'd always felt was apt, she couldn't quite put her finger on it. She abhorred the frustrating feeling that one simple fact was eluding her, darting before her brain but refusing to allow her a clear glimpse of it—and its implications.

She had plenty of work awaiting her at Hogwarts to distract her from her brooding, fortunately. She had her university applications to complete and send out as soon as possible and her mediwizardry journals to read as a treat after that. It wasn't often that she had the money to spend on additional journals, but she'd been frugal about spending her Christmas gift from her parents, which had been a pretty significant sum, and so she'd had a delicious surplus of academic reading that term.

Walking into Hogwarts, she stopped and stared in the direction of the Great Hall. Every sane person in residence was currently straggling in for breakfast, having slept until nine in the morning. Hermione would likely have been among the latest arrivals if she'd had the opportunity to get as much sleep as she needed. Fortunately, the lack didn't seem to be affecting her concentration all that much anymore. Dwelling on Ginny's behavior and the fact that something about it seemed contrived was consuming all her attention.

She knew she ought to attend to her university applications, but she was rather hungry, so she ducked into the Great Hall. Instinctively, her gaze strayed to the teachers' table, causing her to immediately note Snape's absence.

Perhaps it was the bolstering effect of the lingerie she carried. Hermione needed to see him, to hear his voice and watch him eat a meal, to reassure herself of his continued improvements. She spared herself just enough time to dash to her room and put away the Gladrag's package—the idea of striding into his office carrying *that* made her feel even more out of breath than the many stairs she'd ascended—before making her way to the dungeons, one of the journals still in hand.

His office was empty and warded. He wasn't in his lab; she could tell by the thrumming that intensified as she approached, recognizing her as possessing the next highest level of authority. Hermione continued on to his private chambers and knocked boldly before she could give in to her nervousness.

Several moments passed before there was a response. A muffled clicking alerted her to the fact that the door had unlocked automatically. Terrified but interpreting it as a tacit invitation, Hermione pulled it open and peered inside.

The hallway was dim, but she could just distinguish his silhouette as he emerged from his storeroom, locking and warding it with a graceful flick of his wand. "Miss Granger," he greeted her. He hardly had to raise his voice for its low tones to resonate along the entranceway.

"Hello, Professor. I just wanted to make sure—"

"That I've eaten?" he supplied. She nodded. There didn't seem to be any sneer about the set of his lips. She made the split-second decision to take it as a good sign and press on.

"Yes, sir, and that you'll eat three meals today—at least three meals."

He halted approximately halfway between her and the living room entrance, his eyes unreadable in the shadows. "Will my word suffice, Miss Granger, or must I suffer your presence during my morning meal?"

She opened her mouth, but the words faltered. She wanted so badly to eat with him, to be with him, but she could think of no manner of reply which wouldn't betray the inappropriate eagerness of her feelings.

"Very well," Snape muttered, waving her in with a brusque hand movement. "I can see that I shall have to satisfy your concern in person. Have a seat, if you must."

Hermione flashed him a smile and closed the door behind her. She could see his sharp eyes catch sight of the journal she held, but rather than inquire as to its identity, he merely led her into the living room. A fire was already ablaze, and parchments were strewn across his table. He'd likely been in the process of grading when he'd gone to the storeroom to check on something that had suddenly occurred to him. She'd seen him do it several times while he surveyed her progress on the healing potion in the lab.

He was sipping from a cup of tea. Noticing her eyes on his beverage, he summoned one for her, and she took it silently and gratefully. Placing her journal on the table between them, she leaned back into the couch and sipped, closing her eyes in relief. The crushing fatigue she'd expected had yet to settle in, but a cup of tea was anything but unwelcome.

"What shall it be, Miss Granger?" He'd crossed his long legs, one at a right angle to the other, and balanced several parchments across them to resume grading. She found herself unaccountably fascinated by the simple black socks and leather shoes he wore, so different from the formidable boots to which his students had become accustomed. Like his generally relaxed demeanor and rolled-up shirtsleeves, they suggested that he hadn't planned on leaving his rooms for some time. Hermione was relieved that she'd stopped by to insist he eat something.

"It's your breakfast, sir," she replied mildly, already half finished with her tea. "I would never presume to give you orders." He must have noticed the small smile she wore because he barked a laugh before sipping again from his own cup.

"Impertinent," he chastised her, but there was no venom in his words, and several moments later he'd arranged for the house-elves to send along heaping plates for both of them and an enormous platter of fruit, a luxury Hermione had never witnessed at any of the House dining tables. Sensing her appreciation, he wordlessly lifted it and held it toward her so she could make her selection.

"Sir, I have a question for you," she said after he'd finished off a hefty portion of his breakfast. It was astonishing, really, to see him evince something approaching what she'd always imagined when thinking of a healthy male appetite. But then, Madam Pomfrey had mentioned that when in top form, he was a relatively athletic man. She inferred that to mean well built, and from the way he appeared to be gaining weight and muscle, she could believe it.

He sighed, leaning back in his chair and indulging in a vicious strike of his quill, the blood-red ink destined to make some poor fourth-year unhappy indeed. "If you must."

"Would you like me to keep researching modifications to the potion, or do you feel that this is..."

"The best I can hope for, Miss Granger? Is that what you are attempting to imply?"

"I don't want to stop helping you, sir, if you think there's more that can be done," she hastened to say. "Professor Vector and I are working on publishing a paper with the current results, but I have some time yet before I need to really worry about revising for N.E.W.T.s, and I'd be happy to keep working. I've brought along this issue in case you'd like to look through it and suggest anything..."

Snape had paused with his quill in midair. He then placed it down fully and clasped his hands together. He had a gaze that could be called intense during even the most fleeting of encounters. The way he pinned her now, levelly and uncompromising, made her acutely aware of every tiny muscle in her face and every breath she drew. She'd almost given in to the compulsion to bite her bottom lip when he spoke.

"You have, Miss Granger, in the space of less than three months, given me more respite from pain and greater reason to have faith in the return of my health than the combined efforts of the best Healers out there. I hardly dare to hope that anything further can be done, for I cannot imagine as it is that I shall ever be able to repay you your kindness."

Hermione had always suspected that if he chose to do so, he could use his voice to reduce a woman to tears of an entirely different sort. There was no blatant affection, but neither was there any reserve; it was the most respectful and admiring tone that anyone had ever taken with her. She swallowed hard, realizing that tears were pooling in her eyes.

"I'm glad it's helped you, sir," she replied softly, knowing that the words were inadequate. Her voice caught in her throat and came out squeaky.

"If you should wish to continue for your own purposes, then I would be willing to continue testing whatever product you develop. I shall not, however, personally request that you do anything further."

"Do you think, at this rate, that you'll ever feel normal again?" She wanted so badly to know what, for him, constituted normal before the pain and subterfuge had begun. It was entirely possible that he hadn't felt *normal*, felt healthy and vigorous and virile, since he'd been a teenager.

"I shall have to rediscover what 'normal' is, Miss Granger," he remarked with a wry smile, returning to his grading. "However, you have given me a stepping point, and that is far more than I deserve."

"Do you really feel that way?" she asked, horrified. She didn't want to push her luck—he'd been extraordinarily friendly and tolerant since she'd knocked on his door—but the idea that he viewed his recovery as anything short of absolutely deserved was appalling to her.

Snape looked up, genuinely puzzled. "Do I feel what, precisely, Miss Granger?"

"Do you really feel that you don't deserve to get better? That you don't deserve to feel healthy and move on with your life?"

He was silent and pensive.

"I'm not trying to pry, sir, really," she promised him wholeheartedly. "That's not what this—any of this—has been about. I know that you're a deeply private person, and I know that it took a lot for you to bare your past and your difficulties in this way. I have nothing but the utmost respect for you and for your privacy.

"But this—all of this—was the result of ill treatment. You didn't ask for it. You didn't *deserve* it." She paused, breathless. "I would feel that I'd failed in what I sought out to do if you honestly think that you don't deserve to be well again. You've just as much right as anybody to live a good life, and that needn't just mean sleeping through the night." She'd been rambling rather distractedly, but she forced herself to meet his eyes, pleading. "You should be able to pursue whatever your passions are, and play Quidditch, and get married and have children if that's what you want—"

She ground to a halt, seeing his chest shaking, barely perceptibly. He was laughing.

"Sir?"

"Quidditch, Miss Granger?" he inquired, amused.

"It could be one of your hobbies," she returned stubbornly. "A lot of wizards enjoy it. I don't know whether or not you played in school."

His eyes grew solemn. "I did not. By the time I was old enough to develop an interest, I had not the... influence to overcome certain prejudices."

"Harry's dad," she said flatly, knowing before she'd even spoken the words that she was right.

He inclined his head slightly. "Had I been chosen for my House team, many of James Potter's allies would have gone out of their way to make my experience less than enjoyable."

"Knock you off your broom is more like it," she muttered.

Snape ceased writing, watching her. She felt something shift in the air between them, as though he'd reached a conclusion only hinted at before, and then he put down his parchments altogether and waved his wand, banishing their plates back to the kitchens.

Hermione shifted in her seat. She found herself startled by the how hot she suddenly felt, as though the fire had doubled its intensity in the past ten seconds.

"I fear, Miss Granger, that Poppy Pomfrey has engendered in you belief of an innocence I don't possess."

She leaned forward to run a hand nervously over her jeans. "I don't follow, sir."

"You have worked largely with Poppy Pomfrey in this venture. She is an admirable woman and a talented mediwitch, but she is also biased in my favor as a result of treating many childhood injuries that were the... special attentions, shall we say, of James Potter and his cronies.

"I am not, however, without blame. I imagine, for example, that she did not tell you I gave up my life to join with the Dark Lord's forces willingly. I did," he insisted, his voice almost a hiss, "and I did it knowingly and deliberately, hardly the actions of an innocent man."

"I didn't say you were innocent," she said softly. "But I believe that you *are* remorseful."

"No amount of remorse will negate the fact that out of loathing for my Muggle father and in order to indulge a perverse childhood need for power, I allowed myself to be taken in by hateful and supremacist rhetoric."

"Is that why you did it?" Her voice was hardly a whisper. "Because you hated your father?"

A silent minute passed between them. She recalled Harry's descriptions of Snape's memories, the brief glimpses he'd had during his training in Occlumency. All had reflected a difficult and at times cruel childhood. Cruel treatment, it seemed, had been the recurring theme of Snape's life, braiding together years of struggle and misery. The best that the young Severus Snape had been able to hope for in return from other people was indifference. "I hated a great many people," he finally murmured in a steely tone, "my father among them."

"And Harry's mum?"

There. She'd said it. She couldn't bring herself to say the woman's name aloud. She connected it too indelibly with numerous *Daily Prophet* articles extolling her many virtues. It was impossible not to feel a jealous twisting in her gut when thinking of the myriad reasons any man, and especially Snape, would fall in love with Lily Evans before someone like Hermione Granger. It was sick and disrespectful, she knew, but the sensation was there nevertheless.

"Lily Evans was kind to me, one of few who were. I mistook that kindness for something deeper. She did not appreciate the additional sentiment."

Hermione nodded, unable to do anything but focus hazily on the floor. Shadows from the fire danced to and fro, and she found it difficult to fathom that it was scarcely ten o'clock in the morning. Outside, students would be plowing their way through the snow to fly on frozen broomsticks and skate across the ice, but there, in Snape's subterranean living room, she saw nothing in the shapes skirting across her vision but a beautiful, alluring woman who might monopolize his feelings forever.

"She did not," he finished, rising slowly to his feet to stand before the fire, "grow into someone with whom I was compatible. I would not have married her, if that is what your comment was meant to suggest."



"I didn't mean it in reference to Lily Evans, sir." Forming her mouth around those two words was more difficult than saying *oldemort* had ever been. She, too, stood and positioned herself in front of the fireplace, standing before him with her arms crossed over her breasts. "I meant that even if you did make mistakes, you're not a bad person at heart. You reacted poorly to a poor situation, and you've paid your dues. What you want—*whatever* you want—should be yours now."

"Is that so, Miss Granger?" He didn't remove his gaze from the fire. In his left hand he twirled his wand absently, the movement almost mesmerizing. His right forearm was draped across the mantel, opening his chest in a way that made her want to splay her hands across his body and run feverish kisses along the newly defined muscle of his shoulders.

"Yes." She had to marshal her thoughts and behave herself. She couldn't imagine him taking her to bed when she was still his student and he a well-respected, if less than beloved, teacher. "I didn't mean to be improper. I just said that because... it's what people do."

"That may be the case, but I am not the type of person for whom that is possible."

"I should think a man capable of loving a woman that devotedly is precisely the type of person for whom it's possible," she retorted without thinking. Unchecked, her mind envisioned him as a husband and father: anything but ordinary, to be sure, but he would be strong and intelligent and protective, and it was a terrible shame he couldn't see the fact.

He hadn't replied to her comment, and Hermione was waiting with bated breath. She'd never noticed the strong lines of his brow bones and how beautifully his eyebrows could express emotions other than fury and disdain. He'd drawn himself up to his full height, imposing beside her modest stature, but she refused to take a cautious step backward.

She didn't doubt, now, that he could see something of her feelings for him. It had to be painfully, pathetically obvious to him that the girl before him was enamored of him. She couldn't drag her eyes from him. They wanted to linger on the muscle now cording his arms, only hinted at beneath his formal shirt, and the color that had returned to his previously sallow complexion. She'd never realized how the light olive tones in his face and throat were brought out by the firelight.

Images of Lily Evans appeared, unbidden, in her mind. She wondered if Lily had ever, even for the most transient of interludes, moved past the lank hair, scowling features and unfortunate teeth to see the rest of him. Madam Pomfrey had said that he'd seen potential with her that she simply hadn't been able to picture. Hermione already knew she was hopelessly taken in by his intellect, but she couldn't imagine how one could not feel a physical attraction as well.

Her breaths were growing shallower. She wanted him to speak, to miraculously alleviate the tension so that she could stop focusing on everything she loathed about herself. She wondered whether he looked at her and wanted someone taller or shorter; someone whose arms were more delicate, with little wrists and hair straight and silky; someone with a tiny waist he could wrap his hands around as he kissed her.

He shortened the distance between them incrementally, with movements noticeable but not too overt. Hermione forced herself to put aside the self-defeating thoughts and lowered her arms, opening herself up to him. She couldn't prevent her gaze from straying to his lips as she waited in agonizing anticipation.

For a brief, searing moment, she thought he wanted her. She thought she saw his eyes move across the contours of her throat and breasts to her legs and up again as he shifted toward her. But then a small, pert voice rang out, frighteningly nearby, and she released an instinctive gasp.

"Professor Snape!" It was Winky, her large eyes concerned. "Is Winky to be sending over more food? You is under strict instructions from Miss Hermione and the woman in the white coat—"

Madam Pomfrey, Hermione surmised. She would have been amused if she hadn't wanted so badly to get her hands on a Time-Turner so he would have the opportunity to finish whatever she sensed he'd wanted to start.

"—to be eating big meals," Winky continued shrilly. "Is Winky to be sending some toast, maybe, or some more—"

"Miss Granger and I are finished," he replied gruffly.

Hermione winced at his snappish behavior; Winky was only doing what she herself had requested.

Hermione watched his eyes flicker to the far wall and then to the floor. She'd sought to detect some alteration in his usually imperious tone, desperate to know if he was as flustered as she felt, but he'd turned away from her and was rapidly crossing the room.

"Yes, Professor," Winky replied diligently.

Hermione released the breath she'd been holding when both the elf and Snape disappeared, only to find the Headmaster twinkling down at her from his portrait like a large, interfering, bearded star.

"Good morning, Hermione," he said benevolently. "And to Severus as well, though I confess I can't see him from this vantage point. Where has he gone, my dear?"

"I—I think he went to the storeroom," she told him, facing away in an effort to regain her composure. She raked her hands through her bedraggled ponytail and adjusted her clothes, anything to occupy her twitching, dissatisfied nerves. "How are you, Headmaster? I haven't seen you in some time."

"Please do call me Albus, Hermione. As I said before, there's no need for these formalities."

She already knew that he'd correctly guessed the truth of her feelings for Snape, so she wasn't surprised to see a small smirk crossing his lips as he watched her.

He was a kindly old man in his way, but he no doubt found her awkwardness a little amusing. "Ah, Severus," he called, "splendid to see you. So you've deigned to join us."

Snape had indeed reentered the room, carrying several issues of a highly reputable potions journal, a subscription to which Hermione had never been able to afford. She rather suspected that her application would be laughed at and promptly disposed of if she couldn't legitimately append 'Potions Mistress' to her signature. Potions researchers were a rare enough breed already, and only the *crème de la crème*, the masters and mistresses themselves, had access to the details of the most cutting-edge research.

Snape offered only a grunt in response to the Headmaster's friendly greeting before handing over the thick volumes to Hermione. She accepted the bundle excitedly, albeit incomprehendingly. "If you insist on researching further modifications, Miss Granger, I suggest you look through these. In particular, the second issue focuses preponderantly on medicinal potions." He must have felt the Headmaster's—Albus'—eyes on him, for he turned to face the portrait and demanded, "Must you eavesdrop on every conversation in which I take part, old man?"

"I was simply asking Hermione how she's faring," Albus exclaimed in mock hurt. "Really, Severus, you wound me. N.E.W.T.s are approaching, and I am allowed, after all, to have an interest in my former students' performances and wellbeing—"

"Yes, Albus, but do try not to annoy her unduly," Snape interrupted him, pulling his frock coat off the back of his armchair and slipping into it on his way out of the room. "I cannot claim an overabundance of women willing to suffer your inanity in order to help me. Good day, Miss Granger."

She hadn't been afforded the chance to glimpse his face as he said the words, but the grudging admiration in his voice was all she needed to hear. Albus watched her with joy evident in his eyes as she stared at the journals that now begged to be read, replaying the moment in her mind. He'd finally—after all her research and toil, all the heart-wrenching conversations, and the struggle to find a sense of maturity—revealed that he could view her, in some small way, as a woman.

# Twenty-One

Chapter 22 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

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She awoke with the lingering perception of heat. The dream itself had been brief and blurry, with few vivid impressions other than the richness of his voice and the slightly rough feeling of his skin as he ran his mouth over every inch of her body. Through the hazy images still imprinted on her mind, she remembered a blazing fireplace, perhaps the one in Snape's quarters, and the feel of a soft blanket being wrapped around her in the aftermath of intense pleasure. The recollection of callused fingertips stroking the sensitive skin of her inner thigh was enough to make her shudder.

By the time she gasped and awoke Sunday morning, sitting upright in her bed, Hermione recalled mostly the heat. She threw off the covers and took deep, gulping breaths of cool air. For a foolish and desperate moment, she even entertained thoughts of throwing open the windows and allowing the cold winter air to gush in. Anything had to be better than the betraying, stifling flush currently consuming her.

A quick glance at the windows confirmed that it was earlier than she'd have liked to be awake. Though she sometimes succumbed to laziness over the weekends and slept too long on Sunday mornings, she was generally in bed no longer than nine hours, and after her little adventure into Hogsmeade with Ginny the previous day, she knew that she would regret not having caught up with her sleep debt.

Still, there was nothing to be done. Instinct told her that a return to sleep would be nearly impossible, and even if she did, it would be too much to hope that she might resume the delicious dream in which she'd been immersed earlier. In order to forget him...or at least to cease to imagine him in such an inappropriate manner...she had to turn her mind to work.

Rising purposefully, she rushed through her habitual morning shower and tamed her hair as best she could. Having returned to her room, she settled herself in a sitting position on her bed and regarded the potions journal Snape had provided her the previous afternoon. She'd already glanced through it briefly and made a rough outline of the last few modifications she desired to be made to the potion, but she would have to run them by Professors Vector and Flitwick first. The spell work would be fairly elementary compared to the complex incantations she'd already performed under Professor Flitwick's benevolent guidance, but its effects would be short-lived at best. He would have to demonstrate for her how to withhold the final words until just prior to Snape's ingestion of the potion.

Two hours later, having refined her equations to her satisfaction, Hermione traipsed down to the dungeons with her papers clutched excitedly in her hands. Her hair had long since come loose from its bindings, and she felt a light sheen of sweat covering her forehead, the result of the continued flashes of her dream running through her mind's eye. Every so often a gossamer strand of sensation would find its way down her spine and curl into the small of her back, and she knew it was a reimagining of the path his warm lips had followed.

Resolutely ignoring what she must have looked like running through the halls wild-haired and lightly sweaty from her fantasizing, Hermione instead sought to occupy herself with envisioning the final eradication of Snape's symptoms and his return to absolute health. She approached his laboratory first but found him absent. His office and quarters were equally deserted.

Puzzled and more than a little disappointed, for she'd had an entire speech prepared and had been mentally rehearsing it with gusto, she found herself turning aimless circles before the door to his rooms as she deliberated. Should she wait for him? It might seem rather strange and desperate. She wondered with a flash of aggravation whether he was intentionally avoiding her. It was undoubtedly wishful thinking to assume that something revelatory, something tremendously intimate, had been about to occur between them before the fireplace, but she could feel in her gut that the air had shifted markedly between them. It had taken on a heavier significance, one stretching beyond mere student and teacher, and perhaps he didn't yet want to tolerate her presence once again.

Dwelling on the possibility that he might be actively eluding her only made Hermione feel sick to her stomach. She returned to her room and resolved to send the papers to him by owl. Opening the door cautiously in case Ginny had returned, she found that, indeed, the other girl lay asleep in bed; her hair was matted, and her eyes were smudged with dark, streaky makeup.

Hermione was frankly shocked. She'd never seen Ginny, who typically adhered to a lengthy evening skincare and hair regimen that made Hermione's own seem nonexistent, looking so unkempt. She toyed briefly with the idea of waking her up and expressing her concern but decided that it would be unwise to wake someone so visibly exhausted. Chalking it up to a possibly wild night with Harry, she tiptoed past Ginny to gather up her school bag and quills before retreating to the library, where she hoped to find some privacy in which to pen her letter to Snape.

A part of her had been chanting the hopeful mantra that she would find him in the library, but such a fortuitous occurrence wasn't to be had. Hermione was met only with Madam Pince's stinging glare when she rushed into the room rather too haphazardly, bag bouncing with audible thumps against her hip. The older woman immediately hissed at her, and Hermione flashed her an apologetic smile before retreating to her usual spot in the far corner. In addition to the tranquility she was guaranteed there, she could seat herself amidst plenty of overstuffed, comfortable chairs and large, beautiful windows that served to flood the room with whatever meager light the Scottish winters afforded.

Determined not to waste valuable parchment on multiple failed attempts as she had the last time she'd written him, Hermione pulled out a single piece and pensively considered the best way to put her thoughts to paper.

**Professor Snape,**

***Enclosed I have provided for you the final modifications I wish to make to the potion. Should you find these satisfactory, please let me know as soon as possible, as I will have to make arrangements with Professor Flitwick in order to learn the required spell work. In the meantime, I shall speak with Professor Vector to be sure that the Arithmantic basis of the alterations is sound.***

***I sincerely hope that this letter finds you in continually improving health.***

A moment's rash boldness overtook her as she debated the best possible signature. Signing it simply ***Yours, H. Granger*** and reflecting with a small sigh that they were probably the most accurate words she'd ever written, Hermione sealed the missive and nodded to herself in satisfaction. She was improving: it had taken her less than five minutes to self-confidently communicate her meaning. Regardless how strongly the urge overtook her, she was not about to sit there and fret over his reaction.

After all, she'd written only the truth. Whether or not he chose to act accordingly would be his decision.

With a genuinely happy smile, bewitched by the thought of other, longer interludes in front of his fireplace, Hermione set off to speak with Professor Vector and visit the Owlery.

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"Cheers!" Ron hollered enthusiastically, raising his steaming mug of hot chocolate. Lavender giggled and wrapped her arm around his shoulders, tangling her fingers in the loose threads of his sweater.

Ginny's response, Hermione noted, was somewhat belated. The other three had already clinked mugs before she lifted hers, a distracted look in her usually soft eyes. Hermione was surprised by the subdued behavior from a girl who normally took such pleasure in her Thursday evenings, allowing herself a bit of fun and a relaxed Friday. She had no idea where Ginny had been since her last class had adjourned...she suspected the Owlery...but she'd been absent from their room essentially all day before bursting in at nine o'clock to announce, in an oddly strained and stiff voice, that Ron and Lavender were there to visit.

Hermione had dutifully followed her to the kitchens, rather surprised that Headmistress McGonagall had allowed the impromptu visit. It soon became apparent that it was Trelawney...claiming to have foreseen both their arrival and the good news they bore, of course...who had been responsible for admitting Lavender into the castle grounds. Ron had simply followed at her heels while Trelawney babbled about Lavender's aura, if Hermione's guess was accurate.

The four now sat in the kitchens, celebrating Ron's giddy announcement that he'd asked Lavender to move in with him. Hermione had been confused at first by Ginny's reticence, but she expected that it had something to do with Molly Weasley's reaction...or lack thereof, in Ron's case. She'd always been more lenient when it came to the behavior of her boys, and Hermione couldn't blame Ginny for feeling miffed by the obvious double standard at play. If Ginny had even hinted at the intention to reside with Harry in Grimmauld Place alone, just the two of them, wholly unsupervised, her mother would have thrown a veritable fit.

"We're looking at places near Diagon Alley, actually, and Dad said he thought he might have some contacts for us," Ron said, shooting Ginny a puzzled look. "Gin? You okay there?"

"I'm fine," she said crossly.

"We already told Harry, of course. I 'spect he'll be thrilled to have me out of his house so he can get you all to himself." He grimaced, drawing his lips together thinly. "As much as it pains me to say that out loud about my baby sister, I'm sure it's true."

Hermione laughed, and Lavender joined in. "Harry knows better than to expect that you'll leave him in peace," she told him, stirring her hot chocolate to cool it. "He knows you're far too protective of Ginny, all of you."

"It's true," Lavender agreed, nodding. Her hair had been piled in an interesting formation on top of her head, and it waved precariously with the movement. Knowing herself to be fashion-ignorant, Hermione decided to give Lavender the benefit of the doubt and assume the bizarre arrangement was stylish. "We're dreading telling the others. Percy'll have Harry's hide."

"Percy won't care," Ginny said immediately, her tone verging on sullen. "He's got his own life to worry about. Mum's the only one who'll care."

Ron winced again. "Yeah, Gin, we gotta talk about this. She's not going to be crazy about the two of you living together alone before the wedding, and Harry was telling me that it's going to be a while yet..."

"He what?" she demanded, eyes flashing.

"He said it could be a longer engagement. Something has to be done so that the two of you aren't alone all the time or Mum'll curse me into the next world. Say, Hermione, could you live with them?" he suggested, brightening.

"You're asking me to be the third wheel while two fiancés are shackled up?" She found the thought horrifying. She loved her friends dearly, and she admitted to being able to tolerate Lavender, but she'd hoped to distance herself from them somewhat once she graduated Hogwarts. She, Harry and Ron had begun growing apart some time ago; her recent thoughts had only been of keeping in regular contact with Ginny.

"Well, it won't be forever. Or were you going to stay here to start your apprenticeship?"

Hermione sighed. "It's complicated. I want a degree in addition to the apprenticeship, so I may be living on a university campus the first couple of years. I have to figure out where I'm going before I can hammer out the details."

Ron arched an eyebrow and whistled. "You want a degree too? But I thought getting an apprenticeship accomplished the same thing."

"Not quite," Lavender clarified, leading both Hermione and Ginny to raise their eyebrows. "What?" she demanded, doing her best to look huffy. With the milk foam clinging to her lips, she didn't quite manage it. "I know a bit about this stuff from when I wanted to study Divination."

"You wanted to stay in school?" Ron hooted skeptically. "You hated schoolwork!"

Lavender thumped him on the shoulder and turned to Hermione, looking sincerely interested. "You want the degree so that you can do research and theory, and the apprenticeship helps with teaching, right?"

Suitably impressed...but striving not to show it...Hermione nodded. "Essentially. I can't say for sure what the requirements are in other disciplines, but it's virtually impossible to gain acceptance in the theoretical Arithmancy community and publish papers without a solid background that includes a degree. Apprenticing with an instructor or practicing Arithmancer will help strengthen my qualifications to practice it and consult with other researchers, and, of course, to teach."

"And you're doing the degree first?" Ron gulped the last of his hot chocolate. "Blast. I was really hoping you'd live with Harry and Gin. We'll have to make other arrangements."

"Why don't you stop arranging my life, Ronald, and allow me to sort it out myself."

Hermione had never heard Ginny's voice so low and snakelike. She looked positively murderous, and Ron backed off instantly, holding up his hands to protect himself.

"Merlin, Gin, I didn't mean anything by it! No need to look like you're going to hex me. You want to deal with the fallout at home, fine. You and Harry can handle Mum and Dad. Lav and I are moving in either way." He ran a hand affectionately across Lavender's back.

They passed the next fifteen minutes in strained conversation. Ginny remained largely silent, allowing Hermione and Lavender to keep a stilted rhythm going, mostly small talk, inquiring about the other's work. Hermione apprised them of Snape's progress, and both Lavender and Ron did their best to look pleased at his improvements, but Hermione could tell their hearts weren't much in it. They seemed to be genuinely happy for her in regards to the success of her project, however, and Ron promised to pass on the good news to Molly and Arthur. She appreciated the gesture.

Eventually, she grew weary of the pouting disapproval radiating from Ginny, who hadn't stirred beside her except to release exaggeratedly large sighs and look pointedly at the doors. Hermione wondered if she was anxious to return to the Owlery to send off yet another message to Harry. If the sudden lack of free parchment in their room and Ginny's feverish, secretive writing were any indication, she and Harry had been communicating prolifically in the five days since he'd proposed.

"So," Lavender said as she and Ron rose from their seats, "you girls have any plans for this weekend? A Hogsmeade trip?"

"Not this weekend," Hermione replied firmly. She hadn't meant to convey any irritation...she'd forgiven Ginny for the enforced march to Hogsmeade the previous Saturday...but she felt her friend stiffen beside her. "Next weekend is a Hogsmeade weekend, though, I believe. But I really can't go anywhere this weekend: we've a huge Potions exam to study for."

"You can tell Snape's back in top form, eh?" Ron joked. "Torturing the students like always. Well, we ought to be off, Lav. Bye, Hermione. See you, Gin."

Awkward hugs were offered all around. Oddly enough, the only seemingly affectionate embrace was the one Lavender impulsively gave Hermione, who froze initially, startled, but recovered her senses quickly enough to place her hands around the other girl's back and wish her congratulations. When she pulled away, Lavender allowed her hands to linger on Hermione's shoulders a moment, searching her eyes. Hermione was about to open her mouth and ask the other girl if something was wrong when Lavender said with smiling, crinkled eyes, "So did you put your gift to use yet?"

Hermione flushed and shook her head. "No. But I will for graduation. I promise."

"You'd better!" Lavender admonished as she pulled on her winter cloak. "Clothes like that are meant to be worn and admired, not sit in your underwear drawer."

"What?" Ron demanded, looking flummoxed. "What's this about graduation? And *why* are we talking about Hermione's underwear?"

"You aren't. It's none of your business; it's a girl thing." Lavender prodded him gently with his cloak, which he obligingly pulled on. "Bye! We'll see you soon!"

Ginny fled the room directly after them, red hair flying, in an obvious fit of pique. Baffled and concerned, Hermione wandered after her.

## Twenty-Two

Chapter 23 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

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"Congratulations, Miss Granger!"

Mugs of butterbeer were lifted all around. Even Snape, Hermione was shocked to see, acceded to Professor Vector's request, intoning his congratulations along with the others. Professor McGonagall, in particular, looked as though she was thrilled to be out of Hogwarts Castle and on the town, enjoying a drink with her colleagues and students.

"Thank you," Hermione mumbled, her cheeks ablaze. She sipped quietly at her butterbeer, reveling in the pride and satisfaction washing over her in waves. Somehow, despite the many times she'd been convinced failure was just on the horizon, she'd succeeded not only in accelerating the healing process for Snape but also in gaining acceptance to university in London, after which she would begin an apprenticeship with Professor Vector at Hogwarts.

It was, she reflected, the single most wonderful day of her life. Surely nothing, not even marrying or having a child, could compare with the elation she now felt. Her future—more than that, her *dream job*—was a virtual guarantee.

"Such a lovely evening," Professor Vector remarked, leaning back in the booth. They'd managed to squeeze the three women in one side while Snape and Professor Flitwick occupied the other bench. Hermione nodded in agreement with her instructor's words, finding that she was rather amused by the contrast between Snape's large, imposing form and Flitwick's diminutive stature. She managed to stifle a giggle and decided she should cut herself off after her current mug.

"I had no idea that Mr. Potter was brining Miss Weasley here this evening." The Headmistress' gaze, ever watchful, had alighted upon the slim form of a red-haired girl several booths down and her dark-haired male companion, who was facing them.

Hermione had noticed Harry and Ginny immediately upon their arrival. She'd been suspicious of Ginny's whereabouts the past two weeks, and her absence that day had only made the burgeoning feeling of dread in her stomach multiply and take over. Ginny's behavior had been increasingly erratic, and Hermione didn't know to what, or whom, she should ascribe it, other than Harry. Ginny had skipped several classes, sleeping late into the day and then disappearing in the evening, only to return at an absurdly early hour in the morning.

"I'm glad to see her here, actually," Professor Flitwick squeaked, closing both of his tiny hands firmly around his mug. "I am rather... concerned about Miss Weasley, to be honest. She missed several of my class periods this week, as well as several of your class periods, Severus, correct?"

"Indeed." Snape lifted his eyes from the wall he'd been observing, and his gaze met Hermione's. She tried not to flinch, instead burying her face in her mug of butterbeer. Short of a brief and wholly professional reply to her owl in which he'd stated that he found her modifications perfectly satisfactory, he hadn't offered a single word to Hermione outside of class. Her attempts to remain behind, lingeringly placing her quills and parchment away and cleaning her supplies, had always failed; he'd stalked out of the room abruptly or busied himself with grading, and she'd been left to assume that she was to finish her work and leave on her own time.

Hermione was struggling not to feel rejected. She knew, however, that she had to be patient. He'd felt something that afternoon two weeks ago in his quarters—~~she~~ *she* knew he had—but as Madam Pomfrey had warned her, his feelings and abilities where women were concerned were in dire need of patience, compassion, and rehabilitation. She longed to pull him aside and whisper frantically to him, beg him to end her suffering and confirm for her that he'd felt it too, but she couldn't. Even if she hadn't wanted to push things too quickly, she was still his student.

The sound of Professor Vector's short slurp brought Hermione back to the present. "Wouldn't you agree, Hermione?" she was saying.

"I'm so sorry," Hermione said immediately. "I'm afraid I... wandered off there for a moment. What were you saying, Professor?"

"I was asking if you've found Miss Weasley's behavior to be rather bizarre of late," Professor Vector clarified. She didn't look annoyed, Hermione was relieved to note. Instead, she flagged down a few more butterbeers from Madam Rosmerta, offering one to Hermione, who declined with a polite shake of her head. "It's not fair for us to

push our noses in the students' personal lives, but it's hard not to be concerned when they display such sudden changes in character. And if even Severus agrees..."

Snape glowered at her. "I am not wholly unobservant, madam."

Professor Vector grinned wickedly. "But you are *wholly intolerant* of Weasleys, *sir*."

Snape pressed his thin lips together disapprovingly. "Miss Weasley has never exactly epitomized the dedicated student, though she is"—he raised a finger to forestall Professor Vector's objections—"a vast improvement over her siblings."

"I suspect even *you* would cower if she turned a Bat-Bogey Hex in your direction, dear boy," Professor Flitwick said with a chortle. "I wouldn't speak too ill of Miss Weasley within her hearing."

"She's rather too consumed with berating her betrothed at the moment, I imagine," Snape replied, taking a languid sip of his drink. Hermione had been surreptitiously inspecting the liquor all evening, and had finally concluded that he was a man who enjoyed his brandy.

"What's this you say?" the Headmistress demanded, placing her mug of butterbeer down a little too forcefully upon the table. "Is she to marry Mr. Potter?"

"I ran into Arthur Weasley in London this week," Snape murmured, leaning back and crossing his arms over his chest. Hermione noticed with glazed eyes that the muscle he'd begun to gain over the past few weeks appeared to be sticking to his frame; he looked filled out, healthy, and undeniably virile. "He informed me that Miss Weasley owed her parents with the news."

"Did you know about this, Miss Granger?" Professor Flitwick asked her with a startled and shrill voice.

"Ye-es," Hermione said hesitantly. "Is there a problem?"

"I can understand that they might get a bit carried away in the throes of romance, but a recent engagement is no excuse for missing classes," Professor Flitwick explained, draining the last of his drink. "I meant no offense, my dear. I'm terribly fond of both of them, but I cannot condone gallivanting off together during the middle of the school day—"

"If indeed that's what they've been doing," Professor Vector interjected, her lips pursed thoughtfully. "They don't look so cozy now."

Hermione had noticed the same thing since laying eyes on her friends. Ginny's posture conveyed barely contained fury; she was rigidly sitting in her seat, feet planted firmly, arms crossed. Hermione couldn't see her face, but she could easily read the message her shoulders sent: she was regarding Harry as though just waiting to strike, both verbally and physically.

What followed immediately afterward, therefore, didn't shock her in the least. Ginny stood bolt upright and hurled the remainder of her drink in Harry's unsuspecting face. He, in turn, grew beet red with mortification and hissed in a tone audible to the entire building, "*Ginny, sit down!*"

"No!" she screamed at him, fists clenched at her sides. "*I knew* you would do this to me, Harry James Potter! *I knew you would back out!*"

"Back out?" he yelled, rising to his feet to bear down over her. "*Back out?* It was your bloody idea in the first place! If you'd just been willing to wait a few more years—"

"I don't have years!" Ginny screeched. "Are you out of your mind? I see how you look at other girls! I waited *years* to get you to notice me, Harry. Do you think I'd be stupid enough to stand by while you ruined everything?"

"But you didn't have to insist on marriage!" he bellowed. "I wouldn't even have proposed if you hadn't given me an ultimatum! It was meant to be a—a promise ring, not a commitment *now*."

The entire restaurant had quieted, every patron watching them with breath held and gaze rapt. Hermione felt the sinking sensation of understanding. Ginny's odd behavior, her alternating sullenness and absolute exuberance, her insistence on quick wedding preparations and her indignant response when Ron had mentioned that Harry felt otherwise—it all fell into place with an ominous thud.

"I can't believe you!" Ginny was screaming. She'd moved out of her seat and was standing practically in the middle of the room, an accusatory finger pointed stiffly in Harry's direction. "*You* proposed! *You* chose it! *You* said you wanted to do it! If you didn't want to—"

"What *choice* did I *have*? You threatened to leave me!"

"Then you should have let me!" she shrieked. "You should have just let me go! I thought you loved me! I've been *such a fool*, thinking you loved me all this time when you were content just to get sex from me! Did you honestly think that this was all I wanted? That I was just going to sit at home and wait for you to come back from touring like some dutiful little whore? I want my own life, Harry! And I want a *husband*! I want someone devoted to me!" The malice in her eyes was frightening to behold; they glittered darkly as she berated him. "You're pathetic, Harry James Potter. You're immature, you're selfish, you're egotistical. Has it completely escaped your attention that the rest of the world doesn't operate this way? That not everything can revolve around what *you* want for the rest of your life?"

Ginny seemed to have run out of breath. Tears were coursing down her face. Through muffled sobs, she could continue only brokenly. "I can't believe this. I can't believe all the time and effort and faith I put into you. And for what? This isn't how people who are in love are supposed to act, Harry. This isn't what they're supposed to do." Her arms flew up, gesticulating toward the table where Hermione sat, frozen. She'd been earnestly praying that Ginny hadn't yet noticed her presence. "Merlin, Harry. You're so selfish. You haven't done anything for me that wasn't to get what *you* wanted. Hermione—" She choked on her next statement as though it had suddenly made clear to her the true depth of her disillusion. "Hermione's been in love with Snape for bloody *years*, and look what she did. She healed him! She gave up everything this year to heal him, just to see him feel better. *That's* love. *That's* devotion. What have you ever done for *me*, Harry? Do you even know what love is supposed to be?"

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Hermione wanted to feel pity and sympathy for her friend, but when she finally mustered up the courage to identify the emotions suffusing her body, there was only cold, pure hate. Every gaze in the room, including Snape's, had locked onto her with palpable force; but Ginny, too consumed with crying and continuing her tirade, never even noticed.

Hermione closed her eyes, trying in vain to shut out the clamor. She wanted to open them to her safe place, to that corner of the Hogwarts library where she'd known only peace and safety. Instead, she could feel the stiffness cording the Headmistress' arms beside her and the shocked exhalation that shook Professor Vector's normally hearty frame.

She opened her eyes and knew with crystalline surety that she was going to vomit. She barely managed to mumble "Pardon me" to Professor Vector before tripping over the other woman's lap and stumbling out the door. It wasn't until the cold air made contact with the skin of her throat that she came to her senses and realized she was still clutching her mug of butterbeer.

She set it beside her and leaned against the welcoming solidity of the building, sliding forlornly to the ground. Her alarm had been for nothing—the nausea was passing—but she was profoundly glad to have made her escape. Of all the ways in which she'd imagined Snape discovering her secret, all the ignominious circumstances she'd known could arise as a result of her indiscretions, she'd never considered this.

She'd wanted him to have the security to make the first move. If anything was to happen between them, she knew—she ~~new~~ knew with a certainty borne of weeks of poring over his medical records, itching for any and every glimpse into his damaged psyche—that it would have to be done on his time and under his terms. His decimated ego couldn't take anything else. He couldn't view the situation as under any influence but his own.

Clapping a hand to her mouth, she forced herself to breathe evenly. What was he doing in there? Was he sitting there fuming? Barking at everyone who dared to stare at him? Making eyes at him in the private confines of his own rooms was one thing, but this was absolute public humiliation. This was the nakedness and the publicity that he'd always shunned when the press had tried to lay bare his love life and his obsession with Lily Evans.

And now he would know precisely where her interest in Lily Evans lay. She allowed her head to fall forward into her cupped palms, groaning. Now Hermione Granger would be nothing to him but a reckless, imprudent, stupid Gryffindor clumsily trying to gather information. All her kind words, all her assurances, all her sincere questions about his life and his health would seem like bumbling attempts at espionage to satisfy the illicit yearning of a schoolgirl crush.

She squatted by the building in mounting terror, her heartbeat and breathing having become so excessively desperate that she'd nearly reached a state of hyperventilation. Finally, after what felt like eons, she heard the telltale creak of the door opening.

Hermione veered to the side, bashing her head painfully against the stone wall. Suppressing a groan, she rose stiffly to her feet, praying that they would hold her. The combined effects of embarrassment and butterbeer rendered her unsteady as she stood.

She'd hoped briefly and fervently that it would be simply some unrecognizable patron emerging, a complete stranger, but of course it was him. It was dusk, and the normally soft and seductive indigo tones of the enveloping night only enhanced the hard expression on his face and the depthless anger in his eyes.

"Professor," she croaked, "I am so—"

He turned on his heel and began to head back toward the castle. "Do not speak to me, Miss Granger."

"But sir—" She couldn't think about what would happen in the future. The mere thought of their acquaintance ending so painfully and prematurely, there beside a nondescript pub on a Hogsmeade weekend, drove a hot and unrelenting blade into her bowels. "Please, just give me a moment to explain."

He whirled where he stood, and his hand shot forward as though to grab her by the shoulder and shake her. He brought himself under control at the very last second, withdrawing his hand. "I will not repeat myself again, Miss Granger. Do not speak to me."

"I'm sorry," she gasped, tears pooling in her eyes. "I'm so sorry. I would never have chosen for you to find out that way. Please believe me."

"What I believe," he whispered, his voice lethal and silky, "is that I have been proven correct. I knew that you could not be counted upon to keep the private information in this little venture to yourself. I imagine that in addition to sharing the sordid details of your wholly inappropriate little delusion with your friend, you have also made her privy to the many indelicacies of my past over these months. Am I accurate in that assessment, Miss Granger?"

Hermione choked on her reply. She wanted to tell him no, but it would have been a lie. She'd shared many, many things with Ginny that she shouldn't have; the truth of her lust for Snape and the conflict of interest it presented in pursuing a project that demanded total clinical detachment was only the beginning.

"Sir," she pleaded, her voice cracking, "I can't lie to you. I did... Yes, I told Ginny things I shouldn't have, things that *couldn't keep to myself* because the thought of what you've suffered over these years was killing me."

"Spare me your pitiful justifications, Miss Granger," he sneered. "I have no wish to be on the receiving end of your perverted little mothering complex."

Hermione recoiled as if he'd struck her. "That's not it at all," she whispered, her teeth chattering as she drew her arms around herself, still crying. "Please *please* don't think that all of this was done out of—of—an ulterior motive. I wanted an apprenticeship, and I wanted to help you. There was no—"

"There was gross misconduct from the very beginning, Miss Granger!" he thundered, advancing toward her menacingly. "If you think that this is anything other than an absolute betrayal of professional and academic integrity, you are sorely mistaken. I have no wish to listen to further excuses."

Hermione bit her lip, trying to stifle a whimper. She'd lost him, she knew, but having to witness him slip away and recede into the night until his body became an incorporeal dream was more than she could bear.

"Then I demand that you listen," she managed through a tightly clenched jaw. "I invoke your life debt, Severus Snape."

He froze in his tracks. An odd, icy-blue glow seemed to emanate from the very ground beneath their feet, rising in luminescent waves to form an enfolding aura around their bodies. She could feel the sheer force of the ancient magic binding them, holding him to her will at penalty of death.

Hermione walked around him slowly, staring at the tracks her boots left, her entire body trembling with the knowledge of what she was about to do. When at last she stood before him, her chest scant inches from his, her eyes searching his face, she'd managed to find the words.

"I have been in love with you, Professor, for as long as I can remember," she murmured. Tears obscured her vision, which was probably a blessing; she couldn't clearly see the way he was grating his teeth with suppressed rage. "In reality, I suppose it was somewhere around fifth or sixth year. I don't expect you to understand or respect the way I feel because it's a betrayal of my status as your student, and I know that. But I can't let you leave here tonight—" She threw out an arm despairingly, trying to convey to him the terrible sadness that overcame her at the thought of their last real conversation concluding on a lonely street, bitter and without witness. "This can't be it," she begged him. "But if it is, if it must be, then I need you to know that everything I've done has been from the honest desire to help you. Even if I'm not the one with whom you regain your strength and your passion for life, then let's both walk away from here tonight knowing that what we accomplished wasn't sullied by perversion, or whatever it is you imagine I'm feeling."

His expression remained unreadable. Hermione, having started, couldn't seem to control the flood of words demanding release. She clutched a hand to her chest, partially to warm her shaking body; but partially, too, she sought to assuage the debilitating ache that had lodged itself in her heart since the first time she'd seen him wincing with that perpetual, unyielding pain. To be denied the chance to ever see him recover fully was a brand of justice far crueler than Hermione could endure.

"And if you have to dwell on the impropriety of my feelings," she sobbed, "then don't twist them into something unrecognizable. If you can't let me be proud to have loved someone I admire and respect so much, then at least spare me the need to loathe myself. Because no matter how much *you* loathe me, no matter how disgusted you are at the idea that someone who's less than beautiful and virtuous could want you so badly, I need you to know that this wasn't something repugnant. If I pried—if I asked too many questions about your past and about Lily Evans and all the things you didn't want brought up—it's because I'll be damned if I can understand how a woman could look at you and see a man who's anything less than amazing."

She took a step toward him, her eyes still brimming with tears but her words fierce. "Sir, you can hate me all you want, and there's not a thing I can do about it; but don't twist this into something I should be ashamed of because I can't do that. You can fail me in Potions, and you can confine me to my rooms, and you can blacklist me from every library and every classroom in every institution of learning, but you *can't* take away from me the fact that I can see potential here, between the two of us.

"I won't let you," she finished on a whisper.

Her energy abated suddenly. As though sensing the finality of her words, the magic released them both. Hermione almost staggered under the bizarre loss of sensation. His autonomy returned, Snape favored her with only a condescending stare before walking past her without turning back.

# Twenty-Three

Chapter 24 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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Weak light filtering through the curtains over her window roused Hermione from a fitful sleep. Finding her face pressed uncomfortably into her pillow, she rolled slowly onto her back and rubbed at her cheeks to restore circulation. Her mouth was dry and tight, her eyes strained, and her mind still groggy.

Two weeks had passed since Ginny had blurted out her deepest secret. The truth of her feelings for Snape had been simultaneously shameful and cherished. The uncontrollable desire to see him and hear his voice had been her *raison d'être* after returning miserably to complete her final year, growing into an obsession which she freely admitted verged on the unhealthy. Yet she stood by what she'd declared to him in the frigid Hogsmeade night: no matter how inappropriate he and society might deem it, she refused to punish herself any further for her feelings. She hadn't chosen to love him any more than she'd chosen to spend the past three years of her academic existence skulking around hallway corners with a racing heart, desiring the sight of him but fearing that the slightest contact might betray her. It wasn't the sort of existence anyone, regardless how lovelorn, would have chosen.

Of that, Hermione was certain.

It surprised her to find that Ginny's absence from their room had produced the more acute ache immediately following the incident in the Three Broomsticks. Hermione had no idea when the other girl had entered the room for the final time to retrieve her things...perhaps she'd requested that a house-elf perform that chore...but Hermione had seen her for only the briefest moments over the past couple of weeks. Her absence from Potions had so alarmed Hermione that she'd spoken to the Headmistress, who had merely stated that Ginny had agreed to accept a lower grade in all of her classes in exchange for a couple weeks' respite from full-time school duties. Though she knew that most instructors would make allowances for students who'd recently suffered through emotional difficulties, she was amazed that Snape, undeniably the strictest at the school, would bend his attendance rules in the slightest.

Without Ginny nearby to lend a sympathetic smile and bolstering squeeze of the hand, Potions had become a refined form of torture. The subtleties of the dance that was playing out between Hermione and her professor were exhausting. She couldn't look him in the eye...not even for a moment...without tears being compelled to form; he steadfastly refused to look in her direction at all, gritting his teeth audibly when he passed her work station. She'd subsisted only on the sound of his voice while fighting the longing to look at him, *any* part of him, to see how he fared.

Hermione was positive now that he wasn't going to contact her with regards to the final modified potion. When a week had passed without a request from him that she brew it and perform the incantations in his presence, she'd paid a visit to Professor Flitwick, fully expecting that without the buffer of a dozen other students in the room he would chastise her for being part of Ginny's inappropriate display. Instead, she'd found him receptive to her suggestions and sincerely sympathetic towards her. Having obtained the affirmation from Professor Vector that her calculations were sound and brewed the potion entirely on her own in one of the dungeon laboratories Snape rarely frequented, she sought out Professor Flitwick. The Charms instructor had donated nearly three hours of his time to ensure that she cast the incantations correctly. The vial now sat on her desk, held in a faint, glowing light that indicated an advanced form of stasis, waiting for the right words to unleash its efficacy.

She'd intended, upon returning to her room with it clutched in her sweaty palm, to proffer it to Snape somehow. She doubted that she would be able to get anywhere near his private rooms...he'd probably altered his wards so that her mere proximity would send out an alert...but she'd considered asking someone to act as courier. Even Professor Vector, she suspected, would be willing to do so if she were to ask.

The decision was a difficult one. Hermione had relapsed into a ferociously antisocial lifestyle, remaining in her room or wandering the castle grounds when she wasn't occupied with classes. She didn't fear the others' reactions any longer, which she knew to be progress; she'd decided months ago that the opinions of her peers and the other professors should not sway her in her decision to think and feel in whatever way came naturally to her. But the thought of running into Snape, of succumbing to the literally physically debilitating pain that gripped her abdomen when she imagined him genuinely hating her, kept her sequestered in her room, safe from prying eyes.

A soft but insistent tapping at her window made her sit up stiffly and groan. Noticing Ron's owl dancing impatiently in the cold, she threw aside the bed covers and padded to the window, her toes curling instinctively away from the cold stone floor and thin rugs overlying it. Dancing herself by the time she reached the window, Hermione thrust it open only long enough to accept the parcel and hand the owl a small bit of a biscuit, the remnant of her midnight snack. Regret flooded through her as she lifted the food, realizing in just how many ways she'd regressed since Snape had rejected her following her difficult pronouncement.

The owl took flight, and Hermione shut the window and retreated to her bed. Shivering, rubbing her hands together to generate heat, she picked up her wand from her bedside table and cast a warming charm over her body. Burrowing beneath the covers further insulated her. When her shivering had ceased, she broke the seal on the parchment Ron had sent her and read it warily, already suspecting its contents would be well-intentioned but unwelcome all the same.

**Hermione,**

***Though I realize you're probably sick and tired of us interfering with your school work, Lav insisted I write you to invite you over this evening. We're finally moving into our new flat; it's right near Fred and George's shop, actually, which should make for an interesting time. Lav refuses to let me unpack with her because she's convinced I'll break something. As if I didn't pass Transfiguration and learn how to shrink and restore stuff same as her.***

***...She's laughing at me right now, if you can believe it. Only a truly cruel girlfriend laughs when you tell her how much she's hurt your feelings. Am I right?***

***Anyway, you really should make an effort to come over here this evening. I'll make something (I can cook, I swear) since you two will be unpacking. I told her McGonagall wouldn't let you leave, but she got it into her head that she could get you special permission, so she went to Mum and Mum owed McGonagall, and now it's all set. You're to go to her office this afternoon around four, and she'll let you Floo over for the evening. I'm sure she'll set a curfew, but get away before she can impose it if you can!***

***Speaking of Mum, she told us what happened with Ginny and Harry. I admit that my first reaction wasn't exactly charitable (there goes Lav, laughing again), but really, Hermione, Snape? I suppose I can get used to it if he's really what you want, but I can't imagine he'll ever deserve you. Ginny's really broken up about what happened; I honestly think she misses you more than Harry, but she's convinced you'll never forgive her. I told her I know you better than that and you'll forgive her eventually, but I'm sure it will take some time. I won't presume to tell you what to do either way, but if you decide you want to get in contact with her***

**and have a third person around to break the ice, just let me know. You really are her best friend now. We'd all hate to see that change.**

**Okay, I have to go. Lav's demanding use of the kitchen table for unpacking stuff. So head over to McGonagall's office at four, and we'll see you later. Don't even think about coming up with an excuse, or I'll charter a special ride on the Hogwarts Express and come kidnap you myself.**

**Love always,**

**Ron & Lavender**

Hermione leaned back against the headboard of her bed, reflecting that at least there were some small mercies in life. Less than a year before, she'd been unable to imagine seeing Ron's and Lavender's names together in any context which wouldn't make her see red. Now it was oddly comforting to think of seeing them together, playful and loving, promising acceptance of her, even if socializing wasn't the most tempting of prospects.

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Lavender put the final picture in place, and Hermione glanced over her shoulder to obtain a better view. The fireplace in their apartment wasn't especially impressive, but the mantel was crafted of beautiful dark wood, and the gold picture frames Lavender had placed along it served to enhance its natural sheen. In the photo, she had her arms wrapped around Ron, and both were smiling and waving as their hair blew in the wind. It had obviously been taken at a Quidditch match, though Hermione was at a loss to determine where. Judging by the glowing expression on Ron's face, his team had won by a landslide.

"Thanks again for helping me out," Lavender said enthusiastically, flashing Hermione a bright smile. Her habitually well-coiffed hair was slightly haphazard in its braids, and her clothes were smeared with dust, but she looked busy and happy.

Hermione nodded. "No problem. It was kind of you to think to include me."

"You may want to wait until Ron serves us dinner before you thank me," she murmured with a grin. Hermione chuckled and nodded in agreement. "Really, though, I thought it would do you some good to get out of the castle. I realize you and I aren't the best of friends, but I kind of figured that after what happened you and Ginny wouldn't be on speaking terms."

Hermione gritted her teeth, staring resolutely at the wall above Lavender's head. "No," she admitted, unable to prevent a certain iciness from entering her tone. "We're not."

"I'm sorry," Lavender said hastily. "I didn't want to bring it up in order to upset you. It's just... Merlin, Hermione, I feel like Ginny and I inadvertently conspired to make this past year as miserable for you as it could possibly be. I wanted to make it up to you."

Hermione allowed herself a moment to regard Lavender, really examine her, with no restraint. It was difficult to get past the image the other girl projected most of the time, and Hermione suspected it would always be hard to tolerate the fashionable, almost snobbish quality she affected in others' company. But she knew that Lavender didn't intend it to hurt her, and so she had to move past it if Lavender's overtures of friendship were going to be allowed to blossom into more than a mere casual acquaintance.

"Well," Hermione said softly, "you *did* buy me lingerie. I guess I'm squared away with you, anyhow."

Lavender smiled. "I'm sure Ginny would buy you a thousand pieces of clothing if that's what it took. She was over here last night, crying her eyes out. I was surprised, actually: she and I aren't exactly good friends."

Hermione didn't care to speak on Ginny's behalf in a manner that would sound as though she was spreading gossip, so she allowed Lavender to continue. "I know she doesn't like me; I've just been hoping that she'll see how much I love Ron and we can move past it. A lot of her hatred seemed to be for your sake, of course, but I figured that if you could forgive me..." Here she halted, her eyes growing wide. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be presumptuous. I suppose you'll never really *forgive* me, but I thought that if you could move past it..."

"Yes, it's in the past," Hermione agreed neutrally. She reached out to adjust one of the picture frames and then wiped her hands nervously against her skirt to smooth out a nonexistent wrinkle. "But it took me a long time to reach this point, and I anticipate it will be similar with Ginny. I realize she didn't deliberately and maliciously hurt me, but what she did was... inexcusable."

Lavender flopped down into one of the comfortable armchairs and began the arduous process of untangling and redoing the plaits in her hair. "But what I did was also inexcusable. I think you're naturally a much more forgiving person than you give yourself credit for."

Hermione was grateful for Lavender's large, attentive eyes and unthreatening posture. There was nothing overtly judgmental in the methodical way she watched Hermione while combing her fingers through her hair; the eye contact between them was purely casual. Deciding to test the waters and determine just how comfortable a friendship with Lavender could be, she nodded and confessed aloud, "I really do want to forgive her, but she wouldn't have had the knowledge to announce what she did if I hadn't been terribly unprofessional in my dealings with Professor Snape this past year. I should never... Even if I'd broken down and admitted to her that I was...am...attracted to him, I should never have told her everything else, and he inferred from what she said that I'd told Ginny everything."

"Everything?" Lavender asked, surprised. "I mean, you told us a few things when he was making progress, but I didn't think it was unprofessional of you."

"I told Ginny a great deal more. I told her information that... Well, perhaps her mum knew from talking to Madam Pomfrey, but it wasn't my place to reveal it. I betrayed him, far more than she's betrayed me, and on some level I know that in order to forgive her for what she said I would have to forgive myself for getting entangled in this in the first place."

"And you can't," Lavender surmised gently.

Hermione shook her head miserably. Lavender opened her mouth with the intention of replying, but Ron chose that moment to stride briskly into the living room. He had a slight jaunt in his step and a pile of Galleons in his large left palm.

"I'm headed out to get some supper," he announced. "What do you ladies want?"

"You told me you would cook! Go back in the kitchen and whip something up, or there'll be hell to pay," Lavender goaded him.

"You probably wouldn't be willing to eat my cooking anyway," Ron retorted, "and *I* know Hermione wouldn't. Right, Hermione?"

Grinning, Hermione crossed one leg over the other and said teasingly, "I can't say I'd have that much faith in you, no. I've seen you in your mum's kitchen, and there's not much to inspire faith."

"See?" he cried, gesticulating in Hermione's direction as Lavender continued to admonish him. "No wonder I have such low self-esteem. How can I be expected to perform well under these negative conditions?"

"Oh, shut up," Lavender grumbled, rising to her feet and stretching luxuriously. Her hair, now redone, swung from side to side in the manner of a pendulum as she walked over to him, grabbed the money from his palm, and rose on her tiptoes to kiss him in one fluid, practiced movement. "If you're not going to cook, then make yourself useful and deal with the clothes lying around in the bedroom. Hermione and I will go for a walk and pick up some supper."

"Are you sure?" But Ron was already halfway to the bedroom, obviously eager to be freed of the chore. "I wouldn't have known what to get anyway..."



"I know that all too well," Lavender assured him with a teasing but affectionate smile. "We'll take care of it and be back in an hour or so."

Hermione rose to her feet, pleased to find that she was relieved at the prospect of getting outside. She'd spent countless hours over the last couple of weeks studying and reading, and even she had been bound to hit her limit after a while. An interlude in which to stretch her legs and go outside sounded wonderfully rejuvenating. It was heartening to think that she was beginning to find herself craving exercise when denied it.

The girls donned their warm cloaks and pulled on knit gloves. Hermione's sported her Gryffindor colors, while Lavender's were a rich combination of purple and dark brown which Hermione recalled seeing advertised in Madam Malkin's when she and Ginny had ventured there to look at wedding gowns. It seemed ages ago that Ginny and Harry's engagement had been seemingly mutually desired and on solid ground. But therein lay the unpleasant truth that Hermione's subconscious had suspected all along: it had never been on solid ground in the first place.

After trooping down the stairs, the girls set off at a brisk pace through the streets of Diagon Alley, a light, misty spring rain accompanying them. Lavender chattered excitedly about this and that: her job, the new boutiques she'd seen popping up in the neighborhood, and a dark green dress she desperately wanted Hermione to try on. "I know you're more the academic type," she said to Hermione, insecurity entering her voice, "and that you probably think of me as being terribly vain and superficial, but shopping really *can* be fun, even for you."

Hermione didn't bother to deny the accusation. There had been and likely would continue to be occurrences when she couldn't help but view Lavender in precisely that light. Still, honestly compelled her to speak up. "I do enjoy it sometimes. It's just that I was a little embarrassed to be looking at lingerie in front of other people."

"I could tell." Lavender grinned wickedly. "Girls like you *need* lingerie so you'll act as sexy as you deserve to. You really do sell yourself short when you...Oh, look!" she cried, pointing her finger and jumping exuberantly.

Hermione, startled by the sudden shift in conversation, jumped slightly as well. Before them stood a small brick shop specializing in Divination materials. Its current specials, as advertised in its front window, included fully half the book stocks on clearance and a new brand of Hungarian crystal balls previously sold exclusively to registered Seers.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione, but I've *got* to see these crystal balls," Lavender said, gripping Hermione's hand in her own small, warm one. "But I promise I'll try not to spend too much of our supper money on one."

Hermione privately doubted that a month's worth of supper money would be sufficient to purchase such an exorbitant and foolish artifact, but she put up no verbal protest. Instead, she allowed Lavender to drag her into the shop, which smelled, predictably, of strong tea and incense. The shopkeeper, who was, thankfully, not at all reminiscent of Sibyl Trelawney, greeted them with a friendly little smile as she reshelved books.

Lavender happily traipsed off in the direction of the crystal ball display, leaving Hermione feeling aimless. Estimating that she had at least ten minutes to spare while Lavender drooled over expensive equipment, she fixated on the books, walking at a leisurely pace down the first two aisles of bookshelves. They were crowded with musty tomes, and bins standing in the center of the aisles blocked her path, filled nearly to overflowing with those books the shopkeeper most desperately wanted to be rid of.

Noting that most were Divination titles and not interesting in the slightest, Hermione had just begun to enter a state of ennui when her eyes caught on a title mentioning exotic plants, buried deeply in one of the bins. It peeked out from between the confines of the other books, tempting her but aggravatingly beyond access. Curiosity piqued, she shuffled the books around, cursing when several fell to the floor with resonant thuds. Scrambling to place them back in the bin before the shopkeeper appeared with her smile having transformed into a reproachful, Pince-like glower, she finally managed to extricate the title of interest and flip open the cover.

A minor explosion ensued, dust motes flying in all directions. Stifling a sneeze in the sleeve of her cloak, Hermione had to spend a moment tending to her itchy nose before returning her gaze to the title page. The book did indeed focus on exotic plants, but it wasn't exclusive to Divination. She paged through, instantly appreciating how the plant species were listed alongside their uses in many disciplines. Potions took up a large portion of the book, and so she flipped to that section interestedly. It wasn't until she reached the section on love potions and began glancing idly through the footnotes that she gasped and raised a hand reflexively to her mouth, feeling as though she would suddenly suffer from another coughing fit.

"What are you looking at?" Lavender sidled up to her, her hands empty. Hermione had barely a moment to register surprise that Lavender wasn't going to waste Galleons on a ridiculous crystal ball, for she began to cough again.

"I found..." Her shoulders shook as she dissolved into coughs. "I'm sorry. I'm just... surprised. I read something in a book months ago that I've been wondering about ever since."

"About what?"

"About unicorn blood." Hermione ran an ink-stained fingernail over the yellowed page before her, scratchily underlining the species of flower she'd thought never to discover. "About the virgins in ancient tribes who would collect unicorn blood as gifts for the men who wanted to court them and eventually become their husbands. In return for their gifts, men gave flowers."

"Really?" Lavender raised an eyebrow, a contemplative look on her face. "Seems a poor return for such a valuable gift to me."

"That's just it...it had to be very special flowers, sometimes nonnative and requiring dangerous journeys into other lands to obtain them, in order for the girl to consider them worthwhile. Those that were native species had to possess a certain mystique and were worshiped for their particular symbolism of femininity and blossoming womanhood, and in courtship they represented male desire of femininity. But I couldn't find any mention of the actual flower, and everything I read pointed to magical historians having given up trying to determine the specifics ages ago."

"And you've just found them?" Lavender had begun absently lifting and examining the books in the clearance bin. "The specific details, I mean?"

"Yes." Hermione stared at the book before her. "Apparently they're also ingredients in obscure love potions. Nowadays they're called lady's-slipper orchids, and they look like this." She pointed to the illustration, which, on the faded and crinkled paper, certainly could not have done the flower justice. It looked, in fact, rather nondescript, yet it didn't dull Hermione's thrill at having finally solved the mystery.

"I hope it's much more impressive in real life," Lavender joked. "Still, I suppose it's romantic, symbolizing femininity and all that. It certainly is a fitting name, isn't it?"

Hermione nodded and kept one finger buried in the book, marking the page depicting the lady's-slipper orchid as she reluctantly closed the front cover. She felt an unaccountable disappointment at the thought of being parted from the book. She supposed that some naive part of her had invested too much thought and fantasizing into the symbolism underlying her procurement of unicorn blood for Snape, though she strongly doubted that he shared in her fascination with the ancient rituals that would, hundreds of years before, have bound them in the suspense and the flirtation of courtship.

"Why are you so fascinated by it, if you don't mind my asking?" Lavender had begun to follow Hermione, who was making her way purposefully to the front desk while rummaging around in her pockets.

"It's just a small fancy of mine," Hermione told her, laying the coins on the table. The shopkeeper nodded and thanked her politely, handing back her change, which Hermione pocketed quickly. Lavender had a small, enigmatic smile on her face as she followed her out of the shop and onto the windy street, but she waited several blocks before speaking up.

"That potion you made for Snape..." She was striving for nonchalance, but her true motive was almost ludicrously obvious. "Wasn't unicorn blood one of the ingredients? Or perhaps Ginny was misinformed..."

"Yes." Blushing, Hermione tucked the book closer to her chest. "It was the reason I started looking into rituals employing unicorns and unicorn blood in the first place." She would not...would *not*, she told herself vehemently...reveal to Lavender the depth of her absurd, saccharine fascination with the romance of men, women and courtship rituals. "But I think this book will be an excellent academic reference. In fact, the authors cite a lot of very interesting studies..."

"Hermione," Lavender said with a girlish giggle, throwing her head back, "you have a crush! Probably even more than a crush. You're crazy about the man. I get it. I may not understand it, but I'm not going to judge you for it." A mischievous look had entered her eyes, as though she could predict precisely what Hermione was imagining.

Hermione was silent, having been overcome by the thought of Snape's dark eyes and the way his hands could worship and caress her sensitive skin like the delicate petals of a flower.

## Twenty-Four

Chapter 25 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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For the first couple of weeks, self-loathing had prevented her from indulging in any hope. No happiness whatsoever had been allowed by Hermione to penetrate the fog of shame and doubt she'd carried on her shoulders as she trod through the castle hallways. It felt like she'd existed in a void, with only the memory of the illicit fantasies that had acted as a form of necessary subsistence for her previously.

In truth, Hermione had no idea how she'd been capable of shutting them out, given the degree to which the heady dreams of him had begun to pervade her life. After discovering the book, though, everything had changed. One simple thought of his fingers on her skin had brought every desire rushing back to her; the sting of his rejection no longer kept them at bay. She lay in her bed that evening feeling pensive and restless, inexplicably so, and when she dreamed that night, she blamed it wholly on the lingerie.

There had really been no call to wear it, of course, but for some reason she'd been unable to resist. She'd toyed with the need for it while washing her face, brushing her teeth, and plaiting her hair into a manageable braid down her back. A few wisps escaped and swung before her face, which she blew out of the way as she walked back to her room, consumed with thought. The portraits regarded her smugly, and she knew that the gossip of what had passed two weeks before must have spread like wildfire. She doubted Ginny had been the one to talk about it at school given how remorseful Ron and Lavender claimed her to be, but there had been the odd student or two present at the Three Broomsticks. Plenty of gleeful recollections were to be had, Hermione was sure.

Stepping into her room, she realized that the lingerie was calling her name. It beckoned her from the chest of clothes in which she'd hidden it, and suddenly the thought of trying it on while she had a private weekend evening to herself was unbearably tantalizing.

After Snape's sound rejection of her, Hermione had been unable to imagine putting the fabric against her skin without crying uncontrollably with desiring him. It was curiosity more than anything else that had prompted her to think about it, born of Lavender's surprisingly nonjudgmental view of her feelings for Snape. The disgusted pronouncement she'd half expected from the other girl...that he wouldn't ever want someone like her...hadn't been voiced aloud. Instead, Lavender had been all the more vocal in her insistence that Hermione should indulge in, and enjoy, the bolstering of her confidence that lingerie could bring. It had warmed her to have another girl's opinion proffered in a way that felt very genuine, if a little teasing, and her confused feelings over Ginny's absence had resurfaced.

Upon returning to her room, she'd rummaged around in her clothes chest until she unearthed the sensuous dark garments. She held them loosely between her fingers, one in each hand, almost expecting them to become animate and voice their strenuous objection to being placed on her body. She'd therefore firmly refused to look in the mirror, instead proceeding with haste before her unexpected levels of courage evaporated. Shedding her clothes, almost trembling with the anticipation of the fabric against her skin, Hermione drew on the bra and panties. In the chill air of the room, she could practically see her breath creating clouds that blurred the dim light.

She rubbed at her arms to discourage gooseflesh while drawing them on, first biting her lip at the whisper-light glide of the panties, then gasping at the unabashed and overt way the bra cradled and lifted her chest. It presented for view and admiration the sort of seductive figure she'd never dreamed she could achieve. She'd thought at first that Lavender's assertion that wearing lingerie could actually increase confidence was a bit farfetched, but as she mentally drew on clothes over her body, she found that she liked the feeling it could produce. The lingerie would be invisible under her clothing but very much noticeable to her. She stood a little taller, jutted out her hips a little farther, and found that she could somehow feel the valley between her breasts and the dip of her waist even without drawing a finger across them.

Walking across the plush carpet, Hermione discovered that the natural sway the garments induced was very different from her usual walk. Yet it was *hard* to walk more slowly and with a slight glide that served to enhance their silky feel against her skin.

Resolved not to be embarrassed by her fascination with her own body, Hermione crossed the room and slid beneath the warm covers of her bed. She extinguished the light and lay back, staring at the ceiling while taking inventory of the feedback from her nerve endings. The sensation was strange but not unwelcome; the fabric still seemed to hug and caress her without hemming her in at all. The juxtaposition of showing off and feeling naked was an odd thing to which to grow accustomed, she thought, but it was definitely not unpleasant.

It wasn't long before her thoughts headed inexorably in his direction. In the dark, the edges of her imagination had always been prone to blurring, but while the rest of the world slipped away and lost definition, he would become crystalline and beautiful. A vivid picture would spring into existence, capable of assuming physical substance and seeming to radiate the heat, intelligence and sheer power she associated with the real man himself. She could envision the exact angles carved into his face, the shape of his lips with their mere hint of sensuality, and the precise tone of his skin. His strong eyebrows and the fine web of lines that encircled them, lines of years and experiences she couldn't even begin to fathom, were somehow just as achingly handsome to her.

Her mind wandered from the physical dimensions of him to the way she felt in her garments, the irrepressible desire she had to press herself against him and thrill in the hard planes of his chest against the soft curves of her own. It was impossible not to feel as though she would self-combust with the need to know what he wanted and fantasized about in a woman. Would he have seen the heat in the images she called to mind? She thought breathlessly of running her fingers slowly down his abdomen, driving him half mad by playing with the buttons of his shirt before wrapping herself around him and opening her body up to his touch.

Though it made her fantasies all the more inappropriate, Hermione had been incapable from the very beginning of envisioning their most heated trysts occurring anywhere but his laboratory. Of *that* she ought very well to be ashamed, she knew, for it was the very symbol of his authority over her; yet somehow it was so representative of him

as a person, of what he'd loved and relied on during his profoundly unhappy life, science and art in a delicate balance, that she couldn't shake it from her mind. Gradually, she'd learned simply to embrace it, and now it took no effort whatsoever to fall back into her habitual pattern of imagining herself perched precariously on the edge of his desk, papers scattered with abandon as she wrapped her legs around his waist and gasped while he ran his hands and lips along the petal-like skin of her throat.

In her mind's eye his hands presented a contrast against her garments that was incredibly, almost gut-wrenchingly arousing. The deep green made his skin appear burnished, darkly masculine against the porcelain of her arms. He would trace the straps of her bra and dip his fingers and lips into the hollow between her collar bones. Then, slowly removing the bra, he would run his fingers lightly along her inner thigh, awaiting her ultimate permission while murmuring into her ear the places in which he would touch her when he no longer had to restrain himself...

Hermione arched in bed, the verisimilitude of her wild imaginings becoming too much to resist. There had been very few occasions when she'd allowed herself to seek climax to the thought of him, but once the need had been planted, nothing else would suffice. She ran her hands desperately over her body, the muscles of her stomach tightening with anticipation. Engaged fully, she moaned softly and gave herself up to the images such that they were no longer a hypothetical desire but the very fabric of reality.

She encircled his neck and shoulders with her arms, feeling the sinewy strength cording his upper back, tracing the tips of her fingers along the borders of his shoulder blades. He loved that, growling lightly as wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her in place, tugging insistently at the waistband of her panties. Feeling terribly coquettish, Hermione pressed her chest to his and wiggled against his pelvis as he drew the fabric over her legs. She could feel him surge toward her and grinned when he almost glowered at her in frustration.

He was a fascinating study; she wondered if all men were the same. While on, her lingerie was a source of deep arousal. One look was enough, at times, to make him forget the remainder of the world and teeter precipitously on the edge of losing control. Once off, however, her garments were tossed aside with total disregard as he raked his eyes over her body. Before him she was totally unself-conscious, secure in the knowledge that they wanted one another despite what the rest of the Wizarding populace might have thought of their looks, their comportment, or their respective stations.

She cherished the moments he first entered her as though each one were their initial fevered coupling, the landmark of their first discovery of the other's body. It was horrendously clichéd, she knew, but there it remained, the thrill and the need, alive and well despite the many times he'd had her and the various isolated, dusty places they'd secreted themselves be alone and satiated.

He rocked her back against the desk, gently at first but with rapidly increasing insistence. Hermione squeezed her legs tightly around his waist, urging him on with no real verbalization but the almost incessant moaning she could never seem to suppress when with him. Reclined against the papers scattered across its surface, her mind a fuzzy struggle of arousal, approaching ecstasy and the niggling worry of whether the inkwell was inching too close to bare skin, she closed her eyes and bared her chest to him.

He had an almost voracious need to lick and kiss and touch her skin, and she never ceased to thrill in indulging him. More than any other body part, more than the affectionate way he caressed her neck, cupped her waist, and grasped with evident delight at the swell of her hips, he looked on her skin with that purely male reverence for softness and femininity.

She leaned back until her spine protested, but the pain hardly registered. The delicious, low thrum of pleasure was multiplying, spreading its heat through her center and along her welcoming nerves to her fingers, toes and lips. She leaned forward to kiss him impulsively, sinking her teeth lightly and tantalizingly into his lower lip before removing her hands from his shoulders and placing them behind her, bracing herself to collapse, spread across his desk with her back flush against the cool wood. Thus positioned, the angle at which he could drive into her made her scream as her orgasm came on suddenly and demandingly.

He was never long to follow. She watched hungrily, unable to discern anything but his silhouette with the breadth of his body eclipsing the faint light of the room. Much of the time he kept his eyes closed, and she loved that, but when she came, he would watch the way she writhed as though memorizing the minutest of her movements. Hermione couldn't imagine her life without these moments when they locked eyes, riding out her orgasm together and prolonging that somehow wonderfully agonizing instant before the stroking of her muscles brought on his own.

The two Hermiones surged upward together, one to embrace her lover and the other to dolefully gasp his name as she lay alone in bed.

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After a poor night's sleep, Hermione had formulated a tentative plan. She lingered in the shower, knowing full well that she was procrastinating but unable to prevent anxiety from hindering her movements. Finally, after pulling back her hair and drawing on her clothes, she felt the remotest sense of calm. She hadn't spoken with Professor Vector on a personal level since the incident; they'd only crossed paths in class, and briefly afterwards, when the other woman kept her apprised of the progress their article was making in the world of academic peer review. Hermione was proud of herself for her accomplishment; the mere fact that an article with a student's name had been accepted for review was tremendously rare.

But she mourned the easy camaraderie she and her Arithmancy professor had begun to develop over the months in which they'd worked together. Septima Vector was an unusual woman, one who could teach effectively and console even more so, and Hermione had never thought to become so comfortable with one of her instructors. McGonagall could be a pleasant sort of person on the whole, but she was prickly where personal matters were concerned and was much older than Hermione besides. Poppy Pomfrey was amicable enough as well, but Hermione had avoided her judiciously, afraid that the mediwitch would berate her for betraying the professionalism and spirit of her task.

Breakfast did not appeal to her in the slightest. She sensed that introducing food into her roiling stomach would have been unwise. Instead she traipsed along to Professor Vector's office, hoping that she might be there grading papers. It was a slow Sunday morning, after all, and the castle remained tranquil while most students slept, showered, or lounged lazily in their common rooms.

She was not in luck, it seemed. The door to Professor Vector's office was closed and warded, and she hadn't posted any note stating that she would be returning soon. Dismayed, Hermione tucked the vial of potion into the pocket of her robes and allowed her feet to carry her around for another half an hour while she debated.

She had to get the potion to Snape. What he thought of her wasn't likely to change, irrespective of her declaration of devotion, and winning his sexual attentions hadn't been the objective of her project anyhow. She might spend the remainder of her long life craving him with the intensity of a drug, but she had to know that she'd succeeded in what she'd sought to do, and that was to heal him, finally and entirely.

Resolutely, she located the nearest staircase and began descending through the levels of the castle. Ignoring the curious whispers and disdainful expressions of the inhabitants of the portraits she passed, Hermione strode through the dungeon halls with confidence...until, that is, she drew near to Snape's private laboratory and heard voices carrying rather too far.

"Your personal life is of no concern to me, Miss Weasley," he was saying. She didn't need to see his face to know that he was sneering imperiously; his voice dripped with enough condescension to convey that all too clearly. What left her paralyzed in a small side hallway, seeking solace in the shadows, was the fact that Ginny was not only there but speaking to him in a rapid-fire tirade.

"How many times do I have to tell you, *Professor*? I couldn't care less what you think of me. If I choose to call out my ex-fiancé in front of an entire restaurant, it's my damn decision!"

Hermione envisioned Ginny's hair swinging back and forth emphatically with the tempestuous movements of her hands and head. She never had learned to control her temper. Hermione had learned that the hard way.

"But what I did to Harry is bad enough without having to find out from one of my friends that you accused Hermione of selling your secrets around the castle like some cheap gossip!"

Hermione was thunderstruck. She'd thought Ginny would be understandably oblivious to any consequences of her actions but the immediate ruination of their friendship. How could she even have known what Snape had said that night if she hadn't been present to witness it? No one had.

*Lavender*, Hermione thought suddenly, pressing the palm of her hand against her lips to silence the reflexive gasp that rose in her throat. Lavender must have told Ginny about their conversation the previous evening. She'd have owled her, most likely after Hermione had bolted down her dinner and rushed back to the castle, and told Ginny about Hermione's heartrending guilt over Snape's accusations.

"It is not my wish to discuss with you what Miss Granger and I said," Snape snapped at her. "The fault lies with her improper conduct..."

"You just can't stand to have someone call you out on your constant martyr act, can you?" Ginny spewed hatefully. "Merlin knows I can't see whatever it is Hermione sees in you, but you're the luckiest man alive, Severus Snape, and you're too damn proud and *stupid* to see it. But I don't want to give you the satisfaction of walking around thinking that you can court sympathy because Hermione told me *everything* about you. You can't. Hermione expressed reservations about telling me your history, and you know what? She didn't have to. Madam Pomfrey did enough of that with my mum, and that's how I know.

"So if you want to place blame somewhere," Ginny concluded waspishly, "talk to your beloved mediwitch who can't keep her mouth shut. But even she doesn't truly deserve blame. You expect too much of people, and then you have the gall to act all self-righteously disappointed when they fail you. You're even more blind than I thought if you imagine that anyone else in this world can lock themselves up so fully that they don't need to discuss the terrible things that happened to you and find the comfort of *another human being*. You're the only one cold and inhuman enough to do that."

"One hundred points from Gryffindor," Snape hissed, his composure stripped. Hermione had never heard him so desperate, not even in the worst throes of pain. "Care to go for two hundred?"

"Go to hell." Hermione heard the approaching click of heels and knew that Ginny had walked out on him. His door slammed a moment later as he retreated to his laboratory, and Hermione shrank back into the shadows, praying Ginny wouldn't notice her.

It was the potion that gave her away. Hermione hadn't anticipated that Ginny would need further illumination, but the other girl whispered, "*Lumos*," and passed by shortly thereafter. The incandescence from her wand struck the vial of potion and was refracted in its depths, sending a telltale bluish-purple ray across the hallway to strike the mossy surface of the opposite wall.

"Who's there?" Ginny demanded, turning her light in Hermione's direction. She looked terrible: her eyes were baggy and bloodshot, and her clothes were rumpled. She looked, in fact, as though she hadn't slept or showered in days, and her usually beautiful hair was pulled into a stringy ponytail and tucked into the collar of her overlarge robes.

"Hi, Gin," Hermione said softly, caught in her light beam. Ginny's eyes widened as she took in the sight of Hermione, caught in her light like a terrified animal, clutching the vial of potion to her chest as one would a talisman. Her lip quivered for the briefest moment as she opened her mouth to reply, and then both girls burst into tears.

## Twenty-Five

### Chapter 26 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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Hermione had known that the past few weeks of Ginny's life had been unpleasant...heartrending, even...but she had never imagined that the girl she could not help but consider her best friend had been so absolutely destroyed. From the moment her arms went around Ginny's shoulders, the redhead seemed to lose whatever minimal energy had been holding her body upright. She collapsed into Hermione, her wet face pressing against Hermione's neck, her body shaking with sobs.

Through the blur of her own tears, Hermione managed to drag both of them out of the dungeons. They made for the nearest exit, which happened to be one of the lesser-used back doors near the kitchens, and burst out into the unforgiving daylight. Spring was making its imminence known only weakly, and both girls shivered, compounding their trembling.

"I'm sorry," Ginny was gasping. The effort necessary to staunch her tears and sobs in order to articulate words looked painful. She kept clutching at her throat, wheezing for air. "H-H-Hermione, I'm s-s-so s-sorry."

"I know," Hermione whispered, hugging her tighter. She stroked Ginny's hair, greasy at the roots and broken with dryness at the ends. Her first impression had likely been accurate: Ginny hadn't showered in days, and her clothes smelled musty and unwashed. "I know," she continued soothingly, biting her lip in the hopes that she herself could stop crying. "I know. It's okay."

"I m-miss you," Ginny cried, shaking her head so forcefully that her forehead collided sharply with Hermione's collar bone. "I th-thought... I thought Harry would be the worst, but I *miss* you..."

"I miss you too." Hermione placed steadying hands on her shoulders and drew Ginny gently away from her. In separating, the two girls had a moment to take in the sight of the other. Hermione expected there to be some kind of remorse, the lingering ache of knowing that while she could forgive Ginny for what she'd wrought, she could certainly never forget; Snape, of all people, wouldn't let her. And yet she felt nothing when gazing upon Ginny's face but a consuming pity, and she pressed her fingertips to Ginny's forehead, brushing away the mess of hairs stuck in the tracks of her tears.

"You must hate me." Ginny's lip continued trembling, and she drew her arms defensively across her chest. Hermione noticed that she had shoved her wand in her pocket so hastily and absently that it was nearly falling out, and as she reached down to adjust it, Ginny howled again. "I can't believe... what I said. I wasn't thinking. I didn't even... I didn't think."

"I assumed that," Hermione murmured and gave her a wry smile. "I was giving you the benefit of the doubt."

"Oh, Merlin, Hermione." Ginny's face crumpled again, and Hermione instantly regretted trying to interject some humor. "I never would have done that to you deliberately. I

swear to you on... on Dumbledore's grave, I never would..."

"I know. I didn't think that you said it deliberately. I know you were upset. I can't imagine how outraged I would have been if Harry had..." She shut her mouth and raked her eyes across Ginny's face, searching for the signs of a total implosion of spirit.

But at the mention of her ex-fiancé, Ginny seemed to draw herself up straight for the first time and regain some composure. "The prick," she breathed venomously. "The absolute ass. I should never have said that about you and Snape, but he made me so...so..." She clenched her teeth shut so forcefully that Hermione feared blood might appear on her lips. "I was stupid. I thought he wanted to marry me and that he was just too scared, and I figured if I guided him... But I didn't guide him," she admitted shamefacedly, rubbing her hands across her eyes to dam the fresh tears. "I pushed him. I'm such a fool."

"You were wrong to do so," Hermione admitted quietly. She found she didn't have the energy to dissemble; being forthright with Ginny, now of all times, about her opinion of the other girl's behavior seemed the soundest course. "But I can understand why you did it. Harry's always been flaky and relied on other people to help him push through. I can see why you would have thought he wanted it and just wasn't really sure how to bring it to fruition."

"Yes!" Ginny cried despairingly, tossing her hands up as though to implore some unseen deity. "Thank you! Someone understands! I can't believe you of all people..." She trailed off miserably and turned ninety degrees, staring into the Forbidden Forest. Eventually, seeming to rally her courage, she said quietly, "He was cheating on me, you know. That's what he told me right before I... went berserk. He said he'd been doing it for over six months and thought that if I was serious about wanting marriage or nothing, I needed to give him at least a few months to be open to sleep with other women. That's what he said, too...*sleep with*. Not date or see or consider. Just sleep with. I've spent how many years of my life wanting him, dating other boys and wanting *him*, and he can't manage to refrain from having sex with anything female that looks at him twice."

Hermione thought of Ron and voiced the thought she'd kept to herself for so many months. "I think some boys...some young men...need sexual attention the way we need their assurances that they love us. It's what gets them through the hard parts of a relationship. Maybe it is, to them, *the* relationship, and without enough of it they begin to think they deserve to find it elsewhere, like it's their rightful due regardless how they obtain it."

Previously she'd been loath to inflame Ginny by saying something so unflattering about Ron. She was vastly relieved to see Ginny begin nodding her head slowly in agreement, sagely, even, as though between her own experience and Hermione's words she'd begun to view an entirely different plane of human existence. "I guess you might be right," she conceded. "Are they all like that?"

"No," Hermione replied, unhesitating. She didn't know how she knew it instinctively, but she did. "I think they all need sexual attention more than we do, like a form of subsistence, but we're not so different, in the end. We both need to know that we're entrusting ourselves to someone who cares. It's just that you and I need words, and commitments, and maybe marriages. They seem to need something physical."

"I needed something physical," Ginny whispered morosely, staring at her feet. "But only with one person."

"Harry will too, eventually." Hermione hoped that she wasn't placing too much faith in Harry, whom she'd previously thought to be everything Ron was not, an upstanding young man who had his difficulties but could be trusted to keep his relationship faithful and secure. "You'll see. He's still young. Look at Ron...he's totally committed to Lavender."

"How can you forgive him?" Ginny was shaking her head. "I can't believe my own ignorance. All the time you and Ron were fighting, I thought...honestly, I admit it, even though I know you'll hate me...that you couldn't possibly have loved him enough to act so hurt. He did a terrible thing, but I thought at the time, 'Oh, she should be over it by now. She's just enjoying the self-pity.' But now I can't see how you could ever have forgiven him. I can't figure out how you can even *look* at him."

Hermione smiled wanly, drawing her robes closer to her body and brushing away an errant curl that had migrated its way into her puffy eyes. "I couldn't at first. I went through stages. At first I couldn't think about him without loathing him. Eventually that gave way to knowing that I could have been a better girlfriend and wasn't faultless; it made me feel guilty, and it took you and everyone else to pull me out of it."

"You did nothing!" Ginny exclaimed insistently. "*Nothing* to deserve that."

"But he deserves someone who wants him in a way that I never really did," Hermione pointed out gently, "and although he went about finding her in a way that was totally wrong, I can't begrudge him that. You deserve someone who will commit to you, and I would be willing to bet my graduation gift from my parents that Harry's going to find in that other girl exactly what he deserves: someone who sleeps with him and everyone else as well, without a care in the world for what they'll do to their health or whom they'll hurt."

"I hope she does catch something," Ginny muttered ungraciously, tugging her hands through her tangled, dirty hair. "Something foul. I suppose that makes me a terrible person."

"No," Hermione replied, smiling indulgently. "It doesn't make you terrible. It makes you a person, like you said. It makes you human. All I could think about the first few weeks after catching Ron and Lavender was how nice it would've been to have sent Crookshanks in there first to leave a few memorable punishments on Ron's bum."

Ginny burst out laughing, doubling over at the waist to contain herself. Hermione chuckled too, pleased at having been able to share her dirty little uncharitable secret with someone who would fully appreciate it. She let Ginny laugh until the laughter had given way to sobs, and the sobs themselves eventually gave way to hiccups, harsh and miserable.

"We should get inside," she said quietly. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you need to shower."

Ginny snorted. "What other way could I take it? It's my own fault...I haven't been able to sleep or shower or eat or... anything, really."

"Shower," Hermione said vehemently. "Please. You may be dwelling on Harry, but that's no excuse for smelling like him."

Ginny grinned wickedly. "I should tell him you said that."

"I make no secret of the fact that I find his tendency to skip showers unpleasant," Hermione countered, hauling open the heavy door to the castle and ushering her friend inside. "I wouldn't be surprised if Ron did the same...until Lavender came along, of course."

"It's a male tendency," Ginny agreed, sniffing. "Or a young male tendency, anyhow. Most older men seem to have learned..." She cringed. "I'm sorry. I suppose you don't need me to remind you what Snape smells like, do you?"

"Not at all," Hermione said with a sigh. "Something mossy, maybe a little citrusy. Perhaps it's his soap."

"Well, it's not his shampoo."

Hermione poked Ginny in the ribs and was gratified to hear her give a genuine laugh in response.

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After luxuriating in the shower, Ginny came knocking at her bedroom door. It was their room, really, as Hermione reminded her when answering her knock, at which Ginny blushed and shook her head. "I'm sure you don't want me to move back in after all that. I'm better off where I am."

"No, I want you to move back in," Hermione said firmly. She was sitting cross-legged on her bed, quill poised over a parchment containing her Arithmancy assignment. "It's

been terribly lonely since you left, and Lavender's hardly a proper substitute."

"No," Ginny agreed, and a strange look crossed her features. "Although she's not so bad, really, once you get serious with her."

Hermione nodded in understanding.

"But I can't expect you to forgive me," Ginny protested, her voice still thick with unshed tears. "If it weren't for me, you and Snape might stand a chance. You might..." She stopped as Hermione began to shake her head sadly.

"He has to come to me," she explained regretfully. The ink from her quill had begun to pool darkly on her parchment. She hastily returned it to the inkwell on her bedside table and set aside the parchment, stretching out her stiff legs.

Ginny sank onto the mattress of her own bed and began to comb through her hair, wet but shiny and lustrous once again. "What do you mean?"

"I can't go to him. I could never make the first move. I'm just not... Well, I'm not so old-fashioned that I think women shouldn't be allowed to express interest in a man first, but I just couldn't do it myself. It's not what I want."

"You don't think he would have come to you eventually?"

Hermione sighed. It felt blissful to be able to discuss him with no overhanging guilt. She had nothing to lose now, no relationship to betray. He'd severed forever the tenuous connection they'd forged through pain, sympathy, and mutual academic toil; there was no reason for her to hold back in confessing to Ginny what had passed between them in his quarters only several weeks earlier.

"He would always be embarrassed," she concluded, satisfied to see that Ginny's eyes had grown wide and her mouth hung open in shock. No doubt she was dumbstruck by the thought of the acerbic Potions Master letting down his guard even briefly. To imagine his eyes softening as he leaned over a young woman with every visible intent of kissing her simply befuddled the mind.

"Just because he was embarrassed in front of Winky doesn't mean he would always be embarrassed," Ginny argued. "She's not human, to begin with, and he's only ever ordered around the house-elves like the servants they are. From what you're saying, it's more likely he was embarrassed by *you*."

Hermione frowned. "How so?"

"You made him react! He's always so unreadable, unless he's mocking you or furious with you. Don't you think that after so many years of being attracted only to a woman who's been dead since he was a teenager it must be hard"...she grinned and paused..."for him to deal with his reaction to you?"

"You think I aroused him?" Hermione was quite pleasantly overtaken by the thought.

"Of course! He was going to kiss you."

"I *thought* he was going to kiss me. That impression could have been completely inaccurate. Maybe he was going to lean over and tell me to get out of his living room and stop pestering him incessantly about his eating habits."

Ginny shook her head, her glorious hair finally clean and smooth. "I don't buy it. He was turned on, and he was going to kiss you. He *wants* you...you know that now...and I screwed up everything." She pawed listlessly, like an unhappy cat, at her hairbrush where it lay on the bed.

"If he really wants me that badly, perhaps he'll get over it and say something eventually," Hermione mused. She didn't put much faith in the possibility, but all the same she drew the vial out of her pocket and twirled it in her fingers, admiring the richness of its many commingled colors. "I still have to give this to him. Perhaps he'll say something."

"If he doesn't, I just want you to know that it's not you. I know you're sitting there thinking that it's ultimately due to the fact that you're ugly, or undesirable, or not smart enough, or something equally absurd." Ginny was staring at her earnestly. "It's not you, Hermione. He wanted you, and he probably still does. It was me."

Hermione shrugged, taking a moment to enjoy the smooth sensation of her fingertip gliding across the beautifully cut glass of the vial. "Perhaps. It doesn't matter now; we'll never know."

Ginny thoughtfully watched the progress of her fingers across the vial. Then, standing abruptly, she crossed the room and lifted it from Hermione's fingers. "Come on. Let's go."

Hermione glanced up, startled. "I beg your pardon?"

"Let's go. You're going to take this vial to Snape, and then we're going to leave the grounds. There's something I want to show you."

"I can't..."

"Yes, you can," Ginny interrupted. "I've told him everything he needed to hear. Merlin knows half the castle probably heard as well. I don't doubt he's sitting there in his study, all greasy-haired, hating me and hating Madam Pomfrey. The one person he's probably *not* hating is you, so it's now or never." She thrust the vial back into Hermione's right hand and grasped her left with her own, tugging determinedly.

Hermione didn't resist. Allowing her hand to grow pliant, she rose and stumbled toward Ginny. "All right. I do want him to have the potion whether or not he can stand the sight of me for the remainder of his life. Where are we going afterwards?"

"Just focus on getting him to open his door," Ginny teased gently. Hermione nodded and pressed her fingertips against her tired eyelids. A worrisome montage of the many undesirable reactions she faced from Snape had begun to flash before her eyes. Under Ginny's watchful, guiding gaze, she left her room to make her way tiredly down to the dungeons.

She wasn't at all surprised to find that the wards protecting his rooms were thrumming with an intensity she'd never before experienced. It hadn't struck her until that very moment how thoroughly representative a witch or wizard's spellwork was of their mindset at the time, but the traces of magic left an almost palpable sting of anger as she approached his door. Cringing, she doused the light emanating from her wand and raised her hand to knock, half expecting that she would be tossed violently upward and away by some great ethereal slap intended to protect its conjurer.

The heavy wooden door struck sharply against her knuckles, but no retaliation followed. Hermione stood utterly still, feeling the sweat leave her clammy palms and work its way down the vial to pool where its base made contact with her wrists. She was petrified by the thought of facing him but simultaneously driven to nausea by the thought of denying him the final potion and, with it, the opportunity to heal his lingering maladies.

She'd just begun to fear that she would put on an inadvertent and wholly pathetic show of fainting at his doorstep when the door creaked open slowly. She almost quirked a smile, thinking that he would try to hide behind its shadow like a shy child, but once he realized who stood before him, Snape threw the door open forcefully.

"Yes?" he ground out. She took in the disarrayed state of his hair and concluded that he'd been anxiously running his finger through it. It was a mannerism she suspected few had witnessed in Hogwarts' reclusive Potions instructor. She herself had been given scant few opportunities to watch him indulge in the nervous tics that marked him not as a cold and unrelenting force of authority but a human man insecure and on edge.

Hermione realized that she hadn't thought to rehearse her speech on her way to the dungeons and spent a moment in dizzy shock. Finally, having decided that being straightforward and concise was her best hope to transfer the potion to him before he slammed the door in her face, she proffered it plainly and with no words at all.

It had previously been hidden from his view in the shadows of the door separating them. His eyes alighted on it now and narrowed, and for a moment she swore the hard façade wavered as he calculated precisely what it was and why she'd been motivated to bring it to him. "The final product?" he finally surmised, his voice deep and businesslike. "You surprise me, Miss Granger. It must be your vaunted and foolish Gryffindor courage that led you to think I would find the sight of you anything but unpleasant."

She could only nod, her lip quivering. Perhaps it had been sheer stupid bravado on her part to assume that she could even come within the proximity of his rooms, but she was profoundly glad she'd done it. To her intense relief, he reached out a long hand and enclosed the vial in his fingers. Hermione let it go, praying that it wouldn't slip from his grasp from all the moisture imparted by her nervous palms.

"I hope..." She was terrified to realize that the words had come from her own mouth. "I'm sorry, sir. I realize that we have only a few weeks left of the school year, but I hope that this will help you. And I *am* sorry... for everything."

In speaking, she'd been impelled by his harsh, disapproving scrutiny of her to look downward. As she drew her lips shut and exhaled a painful breath, she looked upward, wondering if it was to be the last time they would make eye contact outside the rigid confines of his classroom. She wanted so desperately to drink him in, enjoying the sight of him, indulging the naïve hope that still flourished in her heart that this final formulation would restore to him full vitality.

Snape's eyes were unreadable, his face a mask, but she saw his knuckles tighten to whiteness as they gripped the vial and wondered whether it was fury or regret that she'd elicited. Deciding that it was the most poignant, if anticlimactic, end for which she could hope between them, Hermione turned on her heel and walked away with a steady gait. She felt his eyes upon her back for some time until, looking over her shoulder in tearful regret, she found that the light from his quarters had receded into total darkness.

## Twenty-Six

Chapter 27 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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Hermione had little time to dwell on the throbbing ache of her retreat from Snape's rooms, for Ginny allowed her barely a moment to compose herself before whisking her out the door. They strode briskly to the very edge of the castle grounds, where, pausing, Ginny began to twirl an arm around Hermione's waist.

Hermione realized belatedly that she must have jumped, as Ginny giggled suddenly. "Calm down. I'm just going to Disapparate us."

"*Where* are we going?" Hermione demanded for the umpteenth time. Her skin still tingled with the self-consciousness that marked recent contact with Snape, and she found herself feeling disinclined to wander at length in a populated area. She sincerely hoped Ginny hadn't got some crazy idea into her head about immersing the two of them in an environment filled with other boys; Hermione was far from ready for *that*.

Ginny adjusted her arm to fit more snugly around Hermione and closed her eyes to begin the process. "Somewhere Harry and Snape won't be able to make us miserable," she said determinedly, and Hermione surmised from the aggravation in voice that she, too, wasn't feeling especially charitable toward the male sex at the moment.

"Such a place doesn't exist," Hermione muttered darkly. But she duly pulled her hat more tightly over her head, clenched her fists, and allowed her friend to transport the two of them to Diagon Alley, whereupon she turned confused eyes on Ginny. Before them stood a nondescript brick building with a suspicious absence of Muggle passersby.

Assuming the building was unplotable, Hermione separated from Ginny and passed laboriously through the front gate. The lingering nausea made her steps somewhat stumbling and erratic. "What do you think?" Ginny asked, and Hermione turned slowly to see the other girl gesturing upward. The windows were covered in a light layer of grime, but everything else appeared to be relatively well-kept.

Hermione scuffed her shoe against the weeds growing across the lovely little stone path leading up to the door. "I think I'm confused," she replied at length, her brain racing dizzily. "Why are we here?"

Ginny grinned broadly, an infectious sight, and ushered her forward with an excited stride. "Have you thought about where you'll live while attending university?" Hermione saw her reach into the pocket of her cloak and withdraw her wand. At a murmured word, the front door slid open obligingly, and Ginny bounded up the steps, stopping just short of entering to graciously allow Hermione to precede her.

"I... Well, I assumed I'd return home for the summer and then move into a residence on campus..." Hermione narrowed her eyes suspiciously at Ginny's ever-increasing smile.

Ginny then shook her head forcefully, red hair flying. Hermione pursed her lips and opened her mouth to demand once and for all why she'd been dragged to London, but Ginny wouldn't have it. She placed small, warm hands on Hermione's shoulders and looked earnestly into her eyes. "What if you were to live with me?"

Hermione stared at her, scanning her expression for some sign of humor belying her sincerity. "I practically had to force you to move back into my room!" she exclaimed. "You tried to dissuade me from it!"

"I know..." Ginny was now practically bouncing in place, "...and I can't believe that you're willing! Look, Hermione," she wheedled, "I'm desperate. As soon as Harry and I split up, I knew I had to make some alternate arrangements. I want to be close to the Ministry: they're notorious for calling students into headquarters at all hours, day or night, for training drills, and I need to be nearby.

"I've positively fallen in *love* with this place, and I rather rashly put down the security deposit before I found out how little my living stipend is actually going to be. I was ready to give it up, but with someone else to share the rent... Well, *please* just humor me for ten minutes and see for yourself."

She stood aside, and Hermione tamped down her better judgment, convincing herself to lift a foot into the foyer. Immediately, she found herself gasping and brushing stray hairs from her eyes to take in a better view. The entrance was surprisingly opulent given the building's innocuous exterior, and like many magically enhanced buildings, it was far larger than she'd anticipated.

The marble-topped sideboard to her right caught her attention; it glistened richly, and she could envision it topped with keys and a welcoming vase of flowers. She poked her head curiously into the powder room farther along the wall and found it to be tastefully done in deep browns and creams. "Is this... Would we be renting the entire place?"

Without waiting for Ginny's response, Hermione allowed herself a single, tantalizing moment to imagine the possibilities of the house. The two girls would have plenty of space; the formal living area opened to the left and featured wide, bright windows with two comfortable sofas and a gorgeous fireplace. Before she became conscious of her movements, she'd slipped out of her shoes and was sinking her toes appreciatively into the plush carpet. The window seat was streaked with rays of sunlight whose warmth was almost palpable. The pillows and blankets heaped decadently across it beckoned her to recline into their depths with an enormous book.

Hermione forced her attention back to Ginny, who'd begun delivering the details at an astonishing pace. "That's the beauty of it!" she was insisting in a racing voice. "The old lady who's renting it out will *only* rent to girls...says she doesn't want kids in here to wreck anything valuable, which mostly restricts potential tenants to students, and she doesn't trust any of the young wizards who've applied. I found her through the academy; her husband was an Auror, and she still donates money and volunteers to put on social activities for the trainees. Apparently, she just took over managing it, and she's simply desperate to start getting some decent income from it." Ginny stood in the center of the living room and sighed expansively, crossing her arms in contemplation. "I just *love* it here. Don't you? It makes me imagine a life without Harry."

Hermione nodded in agreement; it was indeed enchanting. Happily wiggling her toes against the sensuous carpet one last time, she wandered through to the smaller, informal lounge that had been converted on three sides to the library. Gasping with delight at the wooden floor and truly impressive floors-to-ceiling bookshelves, she ran a hand across their glossy surfaces and bit her lip.

"I knew this would be your favorite." Ginny lounged against the doorframe, smiling. "Check out the kitchen. Even you and I may be able to get by without house-elves."

Thus Ginny followed her through the remaining rooms on the ground floor, seeming to radiate gratified happiness with each delighted gasp and cry Hermione emitted. When they finally made their way upstairs, trailing their fingers along the silky wood of the banister, Hermione was struck by the sudden change in atmosphere: whereas the ground floor had boasted tall ceilings and a multitude of space and light, the upper floor was intimate and shadowed.

At the head of the stairs, the hallway bifurcated. She stood in place and looked to Ginny for direction. "Try the right," Ginny said, and Hermione did as she was told, her bare feet padding with the softest thumps down the hallway. Ginny followed behind her, murmuring quietly, and the tapestries hung along the wall began to transition from drab blacks and browns to beautiful, deep jewel tones in red, green, and indigo.

Hermione shot Ginny a look, and the redhead smiled mischievously. "Just trying to give it some Hermione ambience," she insisted innocently. Hermione barked a laugh. She was already fully overtaken by the house...headily so, in fact. It didn't require any further modifications of its atmosphere to secure her approval.

If she'd had any doubts, they were dispelled when she entered the sumptuous bedroom and found an attached bathroom. "There's an identical set-up at the other end of the hall," Ginny explained. She hovered politely outside the door, allowing Hermione to enter it as though it were already her own domain. Hermione sensed that Ginny wanted her to truly gather a feel for the place and its limitless potential. "She's already had it converted for roommates," Ginny elaborated. "It would do for a family, I suppose, but she was pretty clear that she doesn't want any kids in here. She said she'd be a little more flexible about boyfriends," she added with a husky laugh.

Hermione ran a hand over the bed cover, relishing the caress of the soft fabric against her skin, and closed her eyes. Wordless magic had yet to become simple or second nature to her, but elementary Transfigurations of objects and décor were well within her capabilities. The coverlet changed instantly to suit her preferences. Satisfied, she turned to look across the bed toward the opposing wall and found a generously built armoire and beautiful, delicately molded vanity. They elicited a pleased gasp from her and warranted further exploration.

"I knew you'd go for the old-fashioned room," Ginny teased her from the hallway. "Check out your bathroom! We saved the best for last."

Hermione embarked happily on that task. As with those at Hogwarts, the bathroom was deceptively small considering the enormous bathing tub it contained. She was accustomed to large baths set into the floor, but the sunken tub before her sparkled in tones of rose-gold, its sheen making her shiver pleasantly. Everything was stunningly beautiful, but she couldn't help feeling the house was an unrealistic, unreachable fantasy.

"So?" Ginny asked softly. Solemnity had reentered her voice, along with a slight hesitation. Both girls were now invested in the dream of renting a home together, but Hermione genuinely dreaded to ask the price. "What is your financial situation going to be?" she continued, twining one hand nervously around her other wrist as she circled the tub to face Hermione.

At the time she'd received her acceptance letter to the university she'd so desired to attend, Hermione had found their offer of fully waived tuition and a living stipend to be indescribably generous. Now, however, she feared it would fall far short of the standard of living before her. Swallowing hard, she turned her eyes from the gleaming marble tub and named the figure to Ginny, who let out a delighted cry.

"I think I can convince the old lady to do it," she said breathlessly. "You'll have to come with me to meet her, but McGonagall will let us arrange that, I think. She'll probably be so happy to see us together again that she'll let us do anything."

Hermione passionately hoped that would be the case. As they reluctantly left the house, she found her spirits had lifted considerably. Judging by the spring in her companion's step, Ginny was beginning to find herself feeling similarly, her illusions of a life with Harry beginning slowly but inexorably to wane. Hermione knew that she would move past Harry...she had an indomitable spirit when it was put to the test, a fact she'd proved repeatedly and tirelessly over the course of their acquaintance.

Hermione wasn't yet certain that the same could be said for her own future. It wasn't only the mounting need she felt for human contact in the form of a large, warm, and welcoming male body; a life without regular glimpses of Severus Snape's face sounded to her like the very definition of hell. But Ginny's enthusiasm had sparked in her the kind of independence she hadn't felt in some time. If she had to try to move on, to move through the mundanity of daily life without his voice to thrill her, she would do it competently and comfortably.

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Once she'd begun to muster the slightest enthusiasm for her future, the weeks commenced passing at a pace that threatened to make Hermione's head spin. Though she deliberately strove not to dwell on what, if anything, Snape thought of her...and her appearance...each time she passed him in the hallway, she couldn't stomach the thought of leaving Hogwarts without proving to him, once and for all, the full breadth of her capabilities.

The last couple weeks of the term found Hermione studying for her N.E.W.T. exam in Advanced Potions with an intensity that even she, with her effulgent reputation, had never before managed. The library had ceased to offer her the sanctuary she required; the interminable buzz of other students' chattering had begun to make her itch to cast some curses. Frequently, she found herself throwing Ginny from their room with the threat of nasty and obscure hexes, desperate to achieve absolute tranquility as she revised her notes and recited formulas.

"Want to force me?" Ginny had shot back pugnaciously the first time Hermione had yelled at her. "I'm the future Auror! Let's see what you've got."

Hermione had rolled her eyes and feigned throwing her pillow at Ginny, who'd grinned and left anyhow. The relaxed post-war admission standards of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, coupled with her extraordinary combat record, ensured that Ginny had no further worries. Provided that she graduated, her future was secure. Hermione knew that Ginny reasonably expected her eligibility for entrance would be sealed by above-average, if not stellar, N.E.W.T. scores in at least five subjects, and that Ginny was confident her absence of several weeks would not destroy her chances of graduating. At the rigid insistence of the Headmistress, the other instructors had been most accommodating.



Hermione lacked such assurances. Nightly, she sweated through terrifying images and words of rejection. She was determined not only to keep her conditional acceptance to the university's prestigious honors program but, in the process, to shatter all previous Hogwarts records. It had been her goal since entering the school, and with O.W.L. scores that had caused more than a few instructors to shake their heads in astonishment and admiration, she had confidence that the possibility of leaving behind an unequalled academic achievement was well within her reach.

What she'd never before considered was how powerfully Snape's presence would affect her concentration. Through the crushing self-consciousness she felt in his presence, Hermione found herself managing desperately to derive pleasure in the barest glances. It was involuntarily done on her part; she would have liked nothing more than to keep her eyes glued on her work.

Unfortunately...or perhaps fortunately, depending upon how one viewed the situation... years of infatuation had finely honed her senses. Sitting in the Great Hall, she was aware of the most incremental turn of his head and fretted about whether he might be turning to observe *her*. Walking into the teachers' lounge to ask Professor Vector a question, she needed only the briefest glance through her peripheral vision to identify his outline. His silhouette had, in fact, become burned into her brain with arousing vividness. She knew the precise length of his arms, and, by virtue of the few times he'd stood before her in his shirtsleeves, the width of his chest and the leanness of his hips.

When the day of her Potions N.E.W.T. exam arrived, Hermione was at a loss for a coping mechanism. She knew that as long as her brain functioned, she would be drawn unwillingly to him, imagining exactly how his lips would feel tracing the contours of her neck and shoulders. Thus she found herself forced to ration her greedy glances, reserving them for the moments when he walked past her and stood at the front of the room, observing the progress of the other students.

As he paced restlessly past, obviously discomfited by the presence of the Ministry representatives in his personal domain, she would glance furtively at his back. The strength he'd gained was now obvious in the way he carried himself, and when he folded his arms across his chest in the classical gesture meant to dominate and intimidate, she saw only the tempting contour of the muscle in his arms. The glowers he shot at them no longer affected her. Hermione wondered if she'd become desensitized to his anger, having borne its greatest onslaught that night outside the Three Broomsticks.

And so while the other students cringed at his criticism and returned sheepish gazes to their cauldrons, she found herself captivated by the most innocuous of his gestures. He brushed a finger absently across his cheek, and the barely audible rasp of his fingertip against the afternoon's shadow of facial hair made her heart race. When he scrawled a note on his desk, the circumference of his wrist caught her breath. Compulsively, she glanced at her own, slender and white, and mentally whispered a fervent prayer to whatever deity resided above that someday, somehow, his hand would cover her own. She craved more than the simple brushes of contact afforded to her; she wanted his skin against hers, the heat of his body not just seeping but flooding into her.

Hermione bit her lip and shook her head, reeling in the risqué thoughts. Her cauldron demanded her attention. Beside her, Ginny stared sullenly ahead. Her absence from the last few weeks of class virtually guaranteed her inability to pass the Potions N.E.W.T. with an Exceeds Expectations, but Snape had, according to Ginny, preposterously refused to excuse her from sitting the exam. She was still convinced of her ability to obtain five Exceeds Expectations in other subjects, and Snape's demand that she attend had put her out of sorts. Every so often she jerkily stirred her cauldron and glared balefully at whatever was reluctantly congealing within.

By the time they'd finished and begun the considerable task of cleaning their equipment, the Ministry representatives were smugly packing up their sheaths of parchment and preparing to leave. As they opened the gigantic classroom door, Hermione heard the sound of a feminine voice carrying down the hall. Professor Vector hastened in a moment later, pausing to apologize to the Ministry employee whom she'd nearly bowled over in her haste.

"Hermione!" she exclaimed, her hands clasped together with evident pleasure. "I'm not interrupting your work, am I?"

Ginny, having waited to confirm that her presence was no longer needed, gave Snape one last withering glare and stalked from the room. For his part, the Potions master merely replied, "Miss Granger has finished with her exam," and returned to the vial of product he'd been examining with a condescending sneer. Hermione felt a wave of sympathy for the poor student who'd toiled for nearly six hours to hand in such a result.

"Good, good," Professor Vector said, clapping. "Hermione, I have the most wonderful news. I've submitted your final report about the progress with the healing potions to several prestigious journals, and one has agreed to publish it! The two of us will be listed as co-authors, and Severus, Poppy and Filius will of course be credited as contributors. It's a terrific achievement for someone your age, truly superb."

Hermione felt her cheeks flushing. "Thank you," she said, a lump growing in her throat. "That was very kind of you. You didn't have to..."

"I was happy to, my dear!" Professor Vector was bubbling over so thoroughly with excitement that she reached out a hand to squeeze Hermione's shoulder. "I'll let you know as soon as they reply to me with more details. There's always a dreadful lot of revision to be done when publishing studies like this, especially when they have portions ongoing. By the way, I assume you've given Severus the final dose?"

She looked curiously between the two of them, and as her eyes flicked from Hermione to Snape and back again, some of her enthusiasm seemed to melt under the force of the tension strung between them. It was now the inescapable side-effect of placing the two of them in the same room, and it was unbearable even to others.

Hermione, noticing Professor Vector's flagging spirits, recovered and began nodding vigorously. She felt as though her negativity and Snape's acerbity had suddenly sapped all pleasure from the room. "Yes, I did give it to him," she confirmed, and Professor Vector's smile returned.

"Excellent!" She turned her gaze to Snape, who was now placing the vial distastefully on his desk. "You'll contact her then, I assume, Severus, when you're ready to take it? If you haven't already, that is."

"I beg your pardon?" Snape replied silkily, and Hermione wanted to slap herself. She'd entirely forgotten, in her clumsy need to apologize to him for his inadvertent public humiliation at the hands of Ginny and herself, that she needed to tell him that the dose had yet to be activated.

"To activate it," Professor Vector clarified. "The potion requires spoken enchantments to be activated. I gather from Filius that Hermione has been thoroughly trained."

"I forgot," Hermione blurted, and Professor Vector's eyebrows creased in confusion. "To tell Professor Snape," Hermione clarified, stumbling over the words. "I...I forgot to tell Professor Snape, when I gave him the potion, that I need to activate it. That he needs to contact me." She clamped her lips shut, convinced that she'd just spoken simultaneously the most idiotic and least articulate words of her life.

"You *will* contact her, then, won't you, Severus?" Professor Vector was now halfway to the door, obviously growing impatient to move ahead with her busy daily schedule. Snape simply nodded, and seemingly satisfied, Professor Vector disappeared.

Hermione slung the strap of her book bag over her shoulder and turned toward the door, her body hunched, her cheeks still burning. She supposed it was theoretically possible for her to make a greater fool of herself in front of Snape, but after the totality of the past few weeks, it was beyond her to fathom just what that level of mortification would entail. Figuring that she had nothing else to lose, she turned at the door of the classroom and said, "Professor Snape, please do let me know... That is, give me a sign when you'd like me to activate the potion for you. I hope everything that's happened won't cause you to doubt its potency. Professor Flitwick was very confident that it would have the best results yet."

Snape released the quill he'd been holding and drew himself to his full height. His presence in the room felt magnetic to her, drawing her eyes to all the parts of his body that propriety demanded she overlook. Somehow, in blurring his features slightly, the distance between them as he looked up at her made his emotions more readable and accessible on his face.

Lingering on the slant of his eyebrows, Hermione could perceive in his eyes that despite the revelations Ginny had presented him, his opinion of her remained conflicted. She wondered with a dull ache just what it would take to prove to him that she could acknowledge the mistakes of young adulthood without losing sight of the admirable woman she *knew* she could become. She opened her mouth, floundering to express that need, but he interrupted her.

"I shall bear that in mind, Miss Granger," he said neutrally, his face impassive once more. As the fifth-years began pouring in to prepare for their O.W.L. exam, their nervous energy flowing past her with a sudden jolt, Hermione lowered her head and left the room.

## Twenty-Seven

Chapter 28 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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Hermione bit her lip in consternation, resisting the urge to adjust the strap of her special bra for the umpteenth time. She had to stifle a nervous giggle when she realized that she'd been thinking of it thus since buying it from Lavender: her *Special Bra*. With her matching Special Underwear, she'd strode out of her room that morning feeling jaunty and invincible. Graduation had arrived, and in her determination to walk across the outdoor stage with a reason to be proud of herself, she'd shattered even her own hopes for N.E.W.T. scores. In fact, only one other person in the past forty years had equaled her in both number of subjects and average percentage.

Two days prior, when Headmistress McGonagall had told her that that person was Severus Snape, a wry laugh had escaped Hermione's lips. The Headmistress had paused in sipping her tea and studied her with an almost pitying expression, a pleasant change from the scrutiny to which she'd subjected Hermione since being apprised of the inappropriate feelings that had blossomed over the past several years. The fact that such illicit and fantastical imaginings had been conducted under her watchful gaze had undoubtedly disturbed her deeply, and Hermione had felt a pang of regret for the loss of trust in a once-meaningful acquaintance. She could only hope that unlike Snape, Professor McGonagall hadn't lost all respect for her as well.

Hermione had simply nodded, thanked her for the congratulations she'd offered, and left her office. Before everything that had happened...before the letter of recommendation that failed to come to fruition; before the potions and the long nights spent toiling in the lab, swallowing the desire that flashed through her with every electric connection of their gazes; before Ginny had blurted out her most tender secret to an entire restaurant...she supposed that on some subconscious level she'd been hoping to earn Snape's respect with her N.E.W.T. scores. It would be her final triumph, an accolade he couldn't possibly deny her even if he spent her seventh year deriding or utterly ignoring her performance in his class.

It stung her to realize that she was so deeply in love with him she might, if some greater power had made the diabolical offer, have traded the most prestigious and peerless academic honor for one more kind word from him. But such thoughts only sapped her integrity. She had little of it left, having thoroughly and unprofessionally betrayed him, but what she had, she clung to tightly and desperately. Thus, she'd resolved two nights before as she lay in her room while the happy parties raged in all four Houses, drying confused and aching tears, that it was time to start trying in earnest to let him go. The day of her graduation would be about *her* and her alone. Whatever Snape thought would no longer affect what it meant to be Hermione Granger. She would shake the Headmistress' hand, smile at the attendees, and receive her diploma unperturbed, and she would do it in her Special Underwear.

The raucous sound of bellowing Weasleys yanked her fiercely back to the present. Shaking her head, Hermione glanced at the girl to her left, who'd been staring up at the impossibly blue sky for the better part of fifteen minutes, looking dazed. Hermione could empathize: their entire situation seemed to have taken on the unreal quality of a beautiful, blurred movie montage; the years and the people flashed past in her mind's eye like so many scenes from a wild, unfathomable script, and she found tears welling up as she considered the course her life had followed over the past eight years. She had so very many things to appreciate, so many people for whom to be grateful, and plenty of it, she told herself firmly, *did not* depend on Severus Snape.

Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic, delivered the address. His words had the intended effect, arousing nostalgia for her youth while tugging at her heart in remembrance of those who'd been lost. Hermione was surprised to find, as Shacklebolt effusively thanked the families for turning out in droves to witness their children's graduation, that she didn't regret her parents' absence more. She'd invited them, of course, but they had simply sent along an obscene amount of money as a gift and wished her the best of luck. They'd promised her more when she began university in the fall and requested that she visit them instead.

For a wild, spiteful moment she'd hated them. She'd flirted with the idea of demanding as much as she could get out of them, but then she'd quickly let it go, setting aside the letter. It was, if anything, a clear indication to her that her impressions of them the following summer hadn't been remiss; in saving their lives, she'd induced in them drastic changes, even if not in any obvious, external way, and they were no longer the people she'd once known.

The Weasleys more than made up for them, she decided, smiling as Molly, who was seated with her husband, Bill, Charlie, Harry and Ron at a group of chairs thirty yards or so to her right, dabbed at her overflowing eyes with a patched yellow handkerchief. Even from such a distance, Hermione could clearly discern the reflective tracks of tears working their way down the lined, motherly face. Arthur's movements were suspicious as well...a twitch of the nose, followed by a flick of the cuff of his robes toward his face...but if he was indeed crying, he was determined to wipe his eyes more surreptitiously than his wife. Periodically, Molly's sniffles actually became audible to the students. Hermione heard Ginny, seated several rows behind her, emit a mortified groan when her mother inadvertently released a sob followed by a ringing hiccup.

The girl next to Hermione...she couldn't remember her name; she'd learned so few of them, since they were not in her year...sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. She, too, seemed to have brought herself forcefully back to the present. Her foot had begun jiggling back and forth, and she was clearly impatient for the ceremony to conclude. Hermione was torn between wanting to escape the hot sun and wanting to prolong her last moments of young adulthood. After all, Wizarding children were considered to age at a much faster rate. She knew that while a Muggle university student would still be considered young, she would be viewed in the eyes of the Wizarding community as an accomplished and ostensibly functional adult from the moment she shook the Headmistress' hand.

The thought both thrilled and terrified her. She wanted maturity, to be sure; she wanted to dive right in and tackle everything from top to bottom...pursuing her university studies and eventual apprenticeship, forging a professional working relationship with Professor Vector and her colleagues in the field of Arithmancy, and helping to run the household she and Ginny were going to share. She had moments of rash impulse in which she imagined herself curled up in the lovely window seat in the flat, eating a steaming, homemade meal and solving the world's most perplexing problems with dizzying Arithmantic analysis. She had the energy for it; she had the *drive* for it; she was ready and itching with anticipation, and she would have said as much to anyone who'd asked her.

But they hadn't because they had damn well identified the other motivation that lurked within her eagerness. Cynically, she wondered if they'd already stigmatized her for it. She wanted to shake the Headmistress' hand and make her way back to her seat, walking with poise past the Hogwarts faculty, because she wanted Snape to be present at her entrance to adulthood. She wanted him to bear witness to that moment when the dynamic would necessarily change between them, when she became the adult who would pursue an intellectual path every bit as challenging and respectable as his.

Everyone knew it. She'd seen it in the eyes of the faculty, who were seated at the very front, directly before the Headmistress' podium, ideally situated to congratulate the

students as they received their diplomas. Earlier, filing past them, everyone lined up neatly in alphabetical order to exit the castle and take their seats, Hermione had studiously avoided Snape's dark eyes, wanting to preserve her immunity to whatever might lurk there.

Simultaneously and critically, the other teachers' gazes had sized her up. They'd taken in the sleeker hair, which Ginny had styled for her into soft waves using a generous supply of Sleekeazy and pulled back with a beautiful decorative comb. They'd taken in the creamy lipstick she wore, a sudden impulse buy after she and Ginny had signed the lease on their new flat, along with the expensive leather pumps, an unexpected graduation gift from her only aunt, her father's sister. They'd taken in her new dress robes, enviably soft silk in a striking dove-gray. They'd taken it all in, and Hermione knew they wouldn't appreciate the hair and the clothes and the lipstick for what they were, her burgeoning desire to experiment with a more mature, confident femininity. With the exception of Professor Vector, judgment...unflattering, harsh judgment...had seemed to flash in their eyes as they snidely concluded that she'd been seized with one last, feverish opportunity to impress him.

Had she? Watching the foot of the Hufflepuff next to her jiggle hypnotically, Hermione honestly didn't think she had. She wanted to be an adult, true, but she also wanted to be a woman, and therein lay the motivation for the heels, and the lipstick, and the beautiful clothes. Though no one else was privy to it, the soft fabric currently sculpting her breasts and whispering along her hips reminded her at every moment of the way her body had changed, and she was tired of regretting those changes. Hiding beneath layers of baggy clothing was the self-destructive behavioral strategy of her past. Hermione Granger would never be flashy or glamorous, but she craved to express class and pleasure, that stark, forthright beauty that marked the consummate professional. That, she decided, was what she'd accomplished.

As Minister Shackbolt's speech drew to a close, the attending parents and family clapped enthusiastically. Hermione wondered for a tense moment whether Harry and Ron, who were sniggering as Molly blew her nose wetly into her handkerchief, would set off one of the twins' more flamboyant creations to mark the occasion. The glances they shared seemed more subdued, however, and Hermione suspected that any conspiratorial endeavors between them had been instantly put on hiatus after the debacle at the Three Broomsticks. In the aftermath, it had undoubtedly have been terribly difficult for Harry to show his face at the Burrow. Hermione had been amazed to see him at all, having assumed for weeks that he would be too embarrassed to show his face.

"Can we *start* now?" the girl next to her whispered tartly. Apparently, Hermione's slow march as she moved to take her place behind the row of students preceding her had been too slow for the Hufflepuff's liking. Unruffled, Hermione progressed forward at a steady pace. The students dutifully lined up, sorted out a few last-minute misplacements, and worked their way to the podium. Scarcely visible over the crowd due to his diminutive stature, Professor Flitwick stood beside the Headmistress to announce in endearing squeaks the name of each student as he or she moved to shake the Headmistress' hand.

When her turn came, Hermione was gratified to hear a deafening roar of applause. Harry and Ron howled appreciatively, and she willed herself not to blush as she smiled and waved in their direction. The thought of turning toward the faculty nauseated her, so she moved quickly to stand before McGonagall.

"Congratulations, Miss Granger," the Headmistress said. Hermione had expected the increased reserve that had colored their every interaction since her secret had become known, but for that moment only, it seemed to have vanished. The formidable Transfigurations professor almost appeared as though she had to restrain herself from doing more than pat Hermione affectionately on the shoulder.

When his turn came, Professor Flitwick handed her the diploma and hugged her warmly, a fact that both shocked and thrilled her to the point of tearing up. "Well done, Miss Granger," he said, tears in his own eyes as his voice carried over the crowd, hushing their cries. Molly Weasley let loose with a new round of sobbing as Professor Flitwick gripped both her shoulders and faced her with a bright smile. "Well done indeed!"

Hermione knew she was blushing now, but she couldn't quell it. "Thank you, sir," she murmured, reciting mentally *I will not cry. I will not cry.* "It was such an honor, truly."

"The honor and the pleasure were all ours, my dear," he exclaimed, gesturing toward the faculty.

Hermione turned slowly, surreally, to find that they had all risen from their chairs and were applauding her with fervor. Tears spilled over from her eyes as she gave them a grateful smile, inexpressibly relieved that on some level they still respect her; they did not, perhaps could not, *hate* her. In unison, they nodded in recognition, of her thanks and of her tireless hard work, continuing to applaud as she made her way back to her seat. Hermione had no idea what had warranted the special attention, whether it was solely her N.E.W.T. performance or her determination to overcome the trauma of the war and return, alone, to complete her studies, but it hardly mattered. It was, irrespective of their reasoning, a moment she would cherish for the rest of her life.

She covered the distance back to her seat nearly in slow motion. As she passed by Snape, who was seated on the aisle, she swallowed the urge to look up and meet his eyes. He, too, had risen to applaud her, and Hermione knew she ought not to expect more from him. She focused instead on clapping heartily for the other students, and the remainder of the ceremony positively flew by. Before she knew it, Hermione found herself struggling to breathe in Arthur Weasley's embrace.

A flood of red hair soon engulfed her on all sides. When Arthur finally released her, Molly moved in next. Then Ron scooped her up, enfolded her in a bear hug that Lavender joined in as well. "Congratulations!" they chorused, bouncing in place, and Hermione laughed dizzily. Disentangling herself from Lavender's gauzy scarf and brushing a stray hair from her eyes, she took in their bright faces with a deep satisfaction warming every part of her body. There was no lingering jealousy, and she was thrilled that they'd taken the time to wish her well.

"We're so proud of you, Hermione!" Ron kept repeating, shaking his head. "I don't know how you could come back to... to all this. I could never have done it, 'specially without Harry, and with Dumbledore gone... But we knew you could do it!"

"We had no doubts," Harry concurred, green eyes watching her somberly. He was the only one not visibly vibrating with excitement, and Hermione could sense his anxious desire to maintain as much difference between himself and Ginny as possible. Ginny, for her part, was being passed like a virtually weightless doll between Charlie and Bill, who'd turned their attention from scowling at Harry in order to fawn over their baby sister.

"So what are you doing for the summer?" Lavender asked, toying idly with her scarf. "Ginny told me you two are renting a flat in London! She said it's convenient for her since it's..."

"What?" Harry interjected sharply. "You're renting a flat with Ginny? How does she have a flat lined up already?"

Hermione had to bite back the uncharitable reply that rose to her lips when she saw the hurt in his eyes; she was sorely tempted to point that he evidently hadn't had much difficulty in getting other women lined up. "In London," she replied with a reproachful look, conscious that an icy edge had entered her voice. "She needed a flatmate, and it's perfect for me because it's close to campus."

Harry seemed to debate with himself for a moment. But, having picked up on the warning tone, he backed off and settled for a nod. "I hope you two have fun living together," he offered cautiously, and she gave him a small smile, relieved that he knew better than to raise a topic guaranteed to spark an argument.

Charlie and Bill ambled over, and Harry's eyes immediately sought his shoes for some intensive contemplation. Ginny had disappeared, but they were content to hug Hermione and wish her congratulations. She thanked them and had just begun inquiring after their jobs when someone in the vicinity of the castle cried a word that vaguely resembled her name. Hermione ignored the sound at first, assuming she'd heard incorrectly. When Bill abruptly ceased talking and nodded to someone over her shoulder, however, she knew that it had definitely been her name.

Pivoting on her heel, she was startled to take in the sight of Ginny running wildly toward her, arms flapping as she tripped over her flimsy heels. She practically skidded to a halt in order to refrain from crashing into Hermione too hard as she panted, "Come quickly!"

Hermione put out her arms to provide a buffer for the unavoidable impact. "Ginny, wha...?"

Hermione didn't manage to finish forming the words before Ginny's hands were clasped almost painfully around her wrists. "Come quickly! In the Great Hall...on the table...for you..."

Alarmed, Hermione began a mad dash for the castle doors. Ginny, despite being in better physical shape, was already tired and lagged behind. Hermione was terribly

confused, unsure what she would find and whether the object that would greet her would bear tragic news about someone, possibly her parents.

Manners momentarily discarded, she barged past the crowd milling about the entrance to the Great Hall and tore past the students surrounding the Gryffindor table. Once there, she drew to an ungraceful stop, eyes widening. There, placed directly in the center of the Gryffindor table, was the most magnificent gift she had ever received. Her mouth worked soundlessly, much as a fish's would, and the Headmistress, who was inspecting the gift with visible confusion, finally turned around and took notice of her quiet bafflement.

"Hermione!" she exclaimed, motioning for Hermione to move forward. "Do you know who sent this? What is it? It is clearly marked with your initials, and furthermore, it is placed quite deliberately at your usual seat..."

Hermione barely registered the words issuing from the other woman's mouth. Stepping forward, pressing a hand against the painful stitch in her side, she sought to regain her breath while drinking in the sight of it. The ceiling of the Great Hall reflected the flawless skies to be found outside, and the warm magical sunlight fell in a most flattering way along the sensual curves that met her eyes. From a stunning center of fuchsia and canary yellow, radiant pinks streaked outward in impossibly soft waves. Hermione's breath caught in her throat again, and she reached out a tremulous fingertip to stroke its surface.

"Really, Miss Granger, this is most irregular," McGonagall remarked, formality reentering her voice. "I confess I am somewhat at a loss to understand how any of your Muggle relatives could have got past us to put this in the Great Hall. Yet it is hardly a traditional gift from a witch or wizard!"

"But it is," Hermione whispered, thinking of one particular wizard as she curved her palm gently, lovingly, to caress it.

"I really *must* insist that you tell me what it is, then," Headmistress McGonagall barreled on.

"It's a..." But someone else was quicker, their voice rapturous with appreciation.

"...a lady's-slipper orchid!"

## Twenty-Eight

Chapter 29 of 29

"She had no idea how to build a life for herself without first discovering who she really was and what she desired. It was worth an attempt, in any case."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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Professor Sprout had entered the room suddenly, led by Ginny, who was still somewhat red-faced from the combination of sun and exertion. "Oh, my!" she continued, chubby hands clasped delightedly in front of her chest. "And what a magnificent specimen! Miss Granger, where ever did you *get* this?" She stepped forward to run her fingertips lovingly over the surface of the petals, and Hermione had to quash an irrational surge of territoriality.

Opening her mouth to provide Headmistress McGonagall with an explanation, Hermione found she couldn't actually speak. Her brain was too busy racing, reliving fragments of the past months. She shut her eyes and felt a flood of desire as the images streaked past.

She recalled his movements first, his quick, smooth strides through the classroom, the hallway, and most vividly, through Grimmauld Place. The repertoire of scents and sounds that he brought to mind astonished her. She could hear the sizzle of food from the kitchen and Molly Weasley's shouts in the background while Snape murmured with Remus and Sirius. She'd always wanted to touch him, to reach somehow down the stairs and past the other two men to make contact with his lips as he enunciated even the simplest of words.

His hair came second: the soft, sensual way it had lain against his skin when longer. But she preferred it now, for she could more clearly see the sharp angle of his jaw and the strength in his neck and shoulders. She recalled how thin he'd been during the first examination, how the pillow in the infirmary had scratched with audible brittleness against the dry, broken strands. With renewed health and vigor had come visible improvements in his hair and skin. And somehow—her abdomen constricted longingly at the thought—the streaks of gray at his temples were more handsome to her than any sign of more youthful virility.

She remembered the sound of his breath as he'd inhaled the frigid air of the Forbidden Forest, staring down at her while his hands brushed against her gloves. Perhaps it was foolish of her—perhaps the cold had adversely affected her brain—but Hermione could recall few occasions on which he'd looked better. The moonlight suited him, enhancing the mystery of his eyes. Only in the firelight of his quarters had he looked even sexier, the flickering warmth bringing out the olive undertones of his skin, so different from her own blue-porcelain.

Ten seconds passed, then twenty. Embarrassed to have been daydreaming about him in such pathetically florid terms, she became uncomfortably aware that the Headmistress was still staring at her. Hermione couldn't fathom how she would take care of such a beautiful plant with only her elementary Hogwarts education in Herbology; but judging by the admiring light in her eyes, Professor Sprout would probably be amenable to assisting her.

She wanted to dash immediately for the dungeons to satisfy her burning need to know whether this glorious gift was his sign. Would he finally request that she activate the potion? And if it was, indeed, a sign, was it merely a request for the final dose and a token of gratitude for the many formulations? Or was it something wonderfully, heavily more significant?

"I believe," she said in as confused and speculative a tone as she could manage, cocking her head slightly to the side, "that it may be from our new landlady. She did seem very grateful when we signed the lease..." She shot Ginny a meaningful look. The other girl's eyes widened perceptibly, but she recovered quickly and began nodding her assent. "Didn't she?" Hermione pressed.

"Most definitely!" Ginny concurred, still nodding. She'd put perhaps a bit too much eagerness into the reply, for Molly Weasley, who'd followed her daughter into the castle, narrowed her eyes and began to glance toward Hermione.

Deciding that Molly was showing signs of being entirely too perspicacious for her liking, Hermione averted her eyes and turned back to face the Headmistress. "Then it's probably intended for Ginny as well. I *did* rather loiter with her, asking questions and talking about graduation the other week, and she was very excited to hear about my plans for university, so I imagine she remembered my name before Ginny's and simply had it delivered to me..."

"Would it be all right if I put it in the greenhouse for the time being?" She aimed the question to both Professors McGonagall and Sprout. She was waiting with painfully bated breath for Molly Weasley to intervene and decry the flimsiness of her explanation. When the Weasley matriarch remained shockingly silent, Hermione continued, "I've very little experience with orchids, although I did recognize straightaway that it's *some* species of orchid. You said it's a... a what, Professor? A lady's slipper?"

Ginny snorted as if to say, *Who are you kidding?* Hermione swallowed hard and had to admit that the derision wasn't unjustified. She'd read the book she'd found in Diagon Alley so many times that she'd all but taken to sleeping with it under her pillow. Ginny had spent far too many nights watching her page through it, mumbling about lady's slipper orchids and whether there was some chance—any chance—that Snape had given her *Unicorns and the Ancients*, the text that had sent her on the quest for the mysterious flower, with intentions that exceeded the purely academic.

"Yes, yes, a lady's slipper," Professor Sprout confirmed. "A wonderful and very potent species, figuratively as well as magically—"

"So I can put it in the greenhouse, then?" Hermione barged ahead. She felt terrible for interrupting so rudely, but the very last thing she needed was the Herbology instructor enlightening the crowd—who were rapidly amassing around the table to coo over the flower—as to what the lady's-slipper orchid represented when gifted to a young witch.

"Provided that Professor Sprout is agreeable—" the Headmistress hedged. Fortunately, Sprout quickly stepped in and began chattering about the best possible place for ideal lighting and moisture levels. Profoundly grateful, Hermione agreed to allow her professor to take it off to the greenhouses and perform a thorough professional inspection before allowing others to enjoy it.

"Truly a magnificent specimen!" Sprout could be heard reiterating as she Levitated the stunning flower out of the Great Hall. Several women, unfamiliar to Hermione, whispered delightedly and followed in her wake. "Grown by Muggles too, of course, but they simply have no appreciation for its deep symbolism..." she explained to the women, bright-eyed and visibly thrilled.

Hermione exhaled too loudly, feeling the heat in her face slowly ebbing. Symbolism, indeed.

"I think Hermione and I should probably go write a thank-you and owl it to Mrs. Bridges," Ginny piped up suddenly, brightly. Molly Weasley still looked unconvinced, but she agreed that it was the proper thing to do. Ginny wasted no time in once again grabbing on to Hermione and dragging her away, this time ostensibly toward the Owlery. It wasn't until they were safely out of sight of the other celebrants that Ginny crashed to a halt and hissed, "*What were you thinking? Mrs. Bridges?*"

"I..." Hermione paused, floundering mutely. She knew damn well it had been a horrendously weak excuse, but their elderly landlady had been the first innocuous and magical person *not* present at the graduation ceremony to pop into her befuddled head. "The thing is, it might be from—"

"I bloody well *know* who it's from!" Ginny growled, red hair flying as she threw her hands up in the air. Hermione cringed. "I can't believe you couldn't come up with something better than *that!*"

"Well, I drew a blank..."

"The Brain of Gryffindor *drew* a *blank*. Merlin save me," Ginny grumbled, pressing her hands into her eyes and muttering about some very macabre hexes and punishments. "Do you have any idea what my mum'll do to me if she finds out I helped you do *anything* with him, esteemed Brain of Gryffindor?"

"I have to go talk to him!" Hermione implored. *Please* just keep up the pretense and go to the Owlery. You can say that I got sidetracked picking up a book in the library in order to learn more about caring for orchids. Madam Pince'll never tell them otherwise—she won't even speak to them willingly—and it's a perfectly believable explanation given my predilection for—"

"Unlike the one you just gave!" Ginny interjected sourly.

"Just give me half an hour. *Please*, Ginny."

Hermione was moments away from falling to her knees and begging when Ginny gave a flustered nod and capitulated. "Fine, fine, go see him—but be quick!"

Quick didn't begin to describe her pace as she took off for the dungeons.

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"That was bold."

They were the only words that came into her mind as she looked at him, reeling from the implications of the fact that she now stood in his private quarters a graduated young woman. They were presumptuous words, and they caught in her throat as she entered his living area, noting the unusual lack of papers or books on the coffee table and his writing desk.

He turned only incrementally in her direction, one hand resting heavily against the mantel of the fireplace. No visible form of entertainment lay within sight. It appeared that he'd been standing thus since returning to his rooms after the ceremony.

That Snape had even allowed her to enter his rooms amazed her. She'd expected him to regret the blatant manner in which he'd chosen to bestow the gift, if he was indeed her benefactor. The door had been left ajar, however; he'd obviously known that she wouldn't be able to resist seeking him as soon as possible.

"I confess I had a moment of doubt," he replied softly, running a finger absently across his chin. Hermione noticed the suspicious lack of Albus' knowing twinkle from any portrait in the room and wondered if he'd paid them the respect of deliberately absenting himself. He had to know all too well what Snape had done. What had he said about it before her arrival?

"Yet clearly it has served its purpose." He straightened in place, regarding the wall opposite him with a distant expression. "You asked for a sign, Miss Granger." He still hadn't turned to face her directly. He finally did so with arduous slowness, crossing his bare forearms over his chest and leaning back against the mantel, observing her with a look that was half wariness and half hunger.

Hermione stifled a gasp. She'd never seen his face become so nakedly open to scrutiny. Worry lined the curve of his lips, and his eyes roved back and forth, obviously searching hers for signs of uncertainty or regret. "I must apologize for suspecting, however briefly, that the indubitable Hermione Granger might not have done her homework all those months ago," he continued, some hint of his habitual silkiness reentering his tone.

He was teasing her, she realized—there was no bite to the remark—and it felt delicious.

"Well..." She blushed and crossed her own arms, feeling a slight tremor run through her spine. He'd unbuttoned the first several buttons of his dress shirt, and he was unfurling his shoulders to regain his full height. "It took me rather more than one book... But I..."

The wordless intensity with which he watched her reactions unnerved her. Willing herself not to convey any flagrant discomfort by wringing her hands, she settled for examining her fingernails as she mustered the strength to speak again. She longed to ask him what she'd wanted to know since the day he'd handed her *Unicorns and the Ancients*; she settled for a bare whisper: "Does it signify what I hope?"

"I should think I ought to ask that of your presence here," he murmured, moving away from the fireplace and around the couch to approach her. She wondered how she'd

ever ascribed to him any snakelike behavior when his movements were that of a wolf, sinewy but economical, with long, loping steps.

*He's testing me*, she thought, noting how, rounding the sofa and entering the open room, he began to move with quicker, domineering strides. To an outside observer there would have been few overt changes in his steps, but Hermione had the benefit of comparatively great experience. Reclusive as he was, very few people had seen the manner in which he comported himself outside the classroom. It was not, she understood instantly, the professional approach of a teacher toward his student; he paused before her and looked down into her eyes in the way a man does a woman, seeking permission. For what, Hermione didn't know, and the possibilities made her breathless.

"Yes," she whispered. "That's why I'm here. I thought..." The truth hovered on the tip of her lips, but she couldn't bring herself to give it voice. "...that you wanted me to activate the potion," she finished, unable to keep disappointment from coloring her tone. She'd hoped for far, far more, and he knew it. "Professor, I—"

She flinched, realizing how bitter the title tasted in her mouth. Her desire to call him something more intimate had multiplied to astronomical strength in the thirty minutes since she'd graduated, consuming every conscious thought. "I hope that you'd like me to activate the final dose. But I was also hoping... That is, I'd like..."

But she snapped her jaw shut, realizing she couldn't be that bold. Some deep-seated hesitation drew her back, and she recalled her conversation with Madam Pomfrey. It had been a revelation for her: it was more than mere female intuition which led her to believe he had to feel in control. It was an age-old dance, she supposed, inviting him in, subversively controlling the situation by making herself appear vulnerable. She'd expected it to feel more compromising, or somehow more shameful, than it actually did.

Instead it felt warm, thrilling, like her nerves sang a sublime chorus when they registered the proximity of his face and shoulders so near to her. "I would like to take the final dose of the potion, Miss Granger," he confirmed, his voice almost too quiet for her to hear. "But I also want," he intoned softly, his inflection somehow incredibly sensual, "the two of us to be friends, in which case I believe it is appropriate that you address me as Severus. Would that be acceptable to you?"

She was torn. To call him Severus was an indescribable privilege, but to be his friend, and only his friend, would destroy her utterly.

She strove to keep her disappointment transitory, but he must have seen the crestfallen expression flash across her face. He chuckled richly in response, inducing a shiver that passed clear from her temples to her toes, and held a hand forward. Hermione accepted it with confusion, having become convinced the moment the words had left his lips that he didn't want her sexually.

He curved his fingers around hers, large and warm, and she met his eyes again. What she saw there made the concept of nonverbal communication suddenly and achingly real. Though she'd thought it impossible, his eyes were their darkest yet, rims of bitter chocolate around intense, shimmering liquid black. The arousal evident in their depths immediately began to dispel her worries.

When he ran his thumb along the delicate bones of her wrist, they evaporated completely. Hermione fought to keep from trembling. He noted her reaction; for the first time since she'd entered his rooms, his lips curved with the barest hint of masculine satisfaction "I confess also," he murmured, solemn once again, "that I am deeply apologetic for what I said to you in Hogsmeade. I am sure you recall the evening in question."

"You don't have to apologize," she insisted forcefully, shaking her head. Ginny's painstaking efforts to restrain her hair were quickly coming undone with the movements, more and more tendrils falling to contact her shoulders. "What I did was a betrayal of your trust and absolutely unforgivable. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

That he remained, on some level, hurt by her behavior was all too obvious. Yet he continued without hesitation, "I am equally to blame, Miss Granger. I placed a terrible burden on your shoulders, just as I have on Poppy Pomfrey's for more years than I care to recall. Rather than hold you culpable for the need to speak of that burden with others, I shall count myself fortunate that you found it possible to feel any compassion for me at all."

"How could you doubt it? After all the work we've—" Tears sprang into her eyes, and she had to resist the urge to jerk her hand away from him in order to brush them from her face. They pooled on her lashes, warm and heavy, and she blinked hard, embarrassed.

To her utter astonishment, Snape—Severus—slowly lifted his left hand and brushed away the tears on her cheeks with more tenderness than she'd ever seen employed in a human gesture. Her eyes must have grown even wider, and the silence between them thrummed with the need for action.

"I would be honored to be your... friend." She was secretly pleased with how husky the words sounded, emitting from her suddenly dry throat. Something flashed in his eyes, instinctual and almost predatory, and she saw him draw his shoulders minutely away from her. Wondering if she'd pushed too far, or if he expected her to apologize further, she hastened to add, "And I'm terribly sorry about... what Ginny Weasley said. I hope it won't come between us."

"On the contrary," he murmured. "It may make what I must say next considerably easier to articulate."

Hope welled in her chest as he resumed stroking his thumb over her wrist. Hermione would never have imagined that the light friction of his slightly callused fingertip caressing the thin skin of her hand could be so unbearably erotic. "Yes?" she prodded, feeling a sudden need to gulp. She was afraid that her voice might have emerged a girlish squeak.

"Honesty compels me to admit, Miss Granger, that my reaction to Miss Weasley's announcement was in part defensive, as I am..." The sight of him at a loss for words stole her breath. "I find myself... admiring you rather more than is appropriate given our respective positions."

Hermione couldn't restrain herself—she laughed delightedly. "That argument ceased to have standing with me approximately"—she glanced at the clock above the fireplace—"thirty-four minutes ago, *Severus*."

She was free to infuse his name with the full dose of pleasure it had secretly inspired in her for so many years. It was liberating, this new license to caress it and appreciate it aloud. He swallowed hard, and Hermione reveled in a flash of purely feminine power, emboldened by the knowledge that he had—in his terribly sexy, reserved, Snapelike way—confirmed reciprocating her attraction.

Wickedly, imagining the ferocity of his reaction if—*when*, she corrected herself gleefully—he would finally behold her in her Special Underwear, she leaned closer to him and murmured softly, "I believe it is now appropriate for you to call me Hermione."